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SYNTHESISING A CONTEXT-SPECIFIC APPROACH TO NATIVE
AMERICAN NARRATIVES: AN ANALYSIS OF PHILOSOPHIES OF
KNOWLEDGE AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN
NATIVE AMERICAN AND ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

by Anne Louise Kirby

Submitted to the University of Wales
in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Swansea University

2005



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In memory of Louis Owens

In the Great American Indian novel, when it is finally written,
all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts.

Sherman Alexie, "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel"

Pour out your cup. Hold it out empty. Fill it with stories.

Joseph Bruchac, *Our Stories Remember*

ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers the tension between Native American and academic philosophies of knowledge and its implications for Native American literary and film criticism. Native American epistemologies tend to value knowledge that is experiential, implicit and reflected upon over a long period within a culturally meaningful environment. Academic epistemologies tend to value knowledge that can be fixed and communicated unambiguously in research papers. The research analyses the potential and limitations of three existing critical frameworks – “interruptive storytelling,” “conversive,” and “tribal-specific,” within a cross-cultural context, and considers which elements of each method might contribute to mediating between Native American and academic philosophies of knowledge. The “interruptive storytelling” approach exposes the interlocutor’s preconceptions and the limits on their understanding, initiating an “internal” dialogue that frustrates closure and mimics the openness of Native American narratives, but requires a level of reflexivity difficult for “outsider” researchers to achieve. The “conversive” approach seeks meaningfulness within the interconnections between all elements of the universe and democratizes the critical process by undermining academic authority, but fails to acknowledge the rights of Native storytellers to limit access into their narratives. The “tribal-specific” approach inhibits the imposition of Eurocentric critical theories onto Native American texts, enabling narratives to be evaluated within a framework determined by tribally-specific aesthetics, but has limited potential in cross-cultural environment. By combining the most useful elements of each approach and applying them to context-specific readings of the films of Victor Masayesva and George Burdeau the research synthesises a new flexible critical approach that considers narratives not only within the context of their production, but also the context of their performance and enables the development of “reflexive resonance” in researchers that respects tribal epistemologies while conforming to standards of scholarly research.

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The Human Studies Film Archives, National Museum of Natural History

The Museum of the American Indian, New York

The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center

And especially to my parents, for providing me with somewhere to live and endless cups of tea...

... and Satbeer, for being an oasis of calm.

INTRODUCTION

They live such simple lives, don't they?

Audience member at screening of *Atanarjuat*

In the autumn of 2001, I attended, at the Taliesin Cinema on the campus of the University of Wales Swansea, a screening of Zacharias Kunuk's (Inuit) film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001).¹ *Atanarjuat* is a full-length feature, filmed entirely in the Inuit language, Inuktitut (with subtitles), and portrays an epic story of love, hate, jealousy and murder in a traditional Inuit community. The screening had been advertised in the local press and was sold-out, every seat was filled. The narrative was complex, multi-levelled and challenging, as the feud between childhood friends Oki and Atanarjuat culminated with Atanarjuat fleeing for his life, naked across the ice. Kunuk's film, notes Michael Bravo, "deftly bypasses" the legacy of the endless mediation of Inuit culture through anthropology, ethnology and travelogues, articulating "its own fluid and precise aesthetic, demonstrating that Inuit culture has in its oral traditions all the narrative technique and linguistic apparatus of a Homeric epic."² As the movie ended and the audience were standing up and gathering their coats, a man in the row behind me said to his friend, "They live such simple lives, don't they?"

¹ Zacharias Kunuk (director), *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, (Igloolik, Nunavut: Igloolik Isuma Productions, 2001, in co-production with National Film Board of Canada); The tribal affiliation of Native individuals mentioned in this dissertation, where available, will be given in parentheses immediately following the first mention of their name in each chapter. As some tribal cultures have historically been referred to by various names and spellings – for example Chippewa, Ojibwa, Ojibway, Anishinaabe, Anishinawbe – I will, where possible, use the name and spelling generally preferred by the individual in question when describing their own tribal affiliation.

² Michael Bravo, "And Evil Came to Stay," *Times Higher Education Supplement* (15 March 2002).

“They live such simple lives, don’t they?” This casual remark cuts to the heart of what many Native American observers feel about the way their cultures have been understood, or misunderstood, by academia.³ This is not to say that all scholars working in Native American studies, or any of its various tributary fields such as anthropology, ethnology, ethnic studies and literary studies, have characterised Native cultures as primitive or simplistic (although some surely have). Rather, it is to point to the observations made by many Native people as to how some non-Native researchers and scholars have been unable or unwilling to step outside of their conceptual boundaries, to see beyond whatever preconceptions about American Indian cultures they have brought to their research. Like the man in the cinema in Swansea, unable to see past his anthropologically influenced preconception of the “simplicity” of Inuit lives, many Native people have felt that non-Native researchers entering their communities have seen what they wanted, or expected to see, and written what they wanted to write, according to dominant Western paradigms of truth and knowledge.

In the field of Native American studies, this tendency has a number of specific manifestations, which may be usefully divided into two broad categories. First, observers such as Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., Louis Owens (Choctaw-Cherokee), Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) and Ward Churchill (Keetoowah Cherokee) have identified a tendency for scholars to be influenced by the evolving but particularly durable stereotype of the Native American over five centuries of contact (which as

³ Throughout this dissertation, I will use variously the terms “Native,” “Native American,” “American Indian,” “First Nations,” “indigenous,” “aboriginal” and “Indian.” Where possible, I will use tribal affiliation when referring to individuals or specific tribes, with “Native American,” “American Indian” and “First Nations” used when speaking generally. See Michael Yellow Bird, “What We Want to be Called: Indigenous Peoples’ Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Identity Labels,” *American Indian Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 1-21 for a fuller discussion of this controversial area.

Vizenor has argued, may affect the boundaries of Native Americans' own self-conception as well as those of non-Natives).⁴ Owens notes the power of the “entropic myth” surrounding the signifier “Indian,” a myth that, according to Owens, has largely arisen in response to various European-American concerns – land acquisition, assimilation, culture loss, guilt, environmentalism, New Age religions – over five centuries of colonisation, that has resulted in discourse about Native American remaining largely in non-Native hands.⁵ Second, and forming the main focus of this dissertation, are the more abstract problems relating to what, within specific Native American and academic cultural environments, is understood by “knowledge” and the methods for obtaining, reflecting upon and disseminating knowledge in a given community, what may be referred to broadly as philosophies of knowledge.

This dissertation will analyse the relationship between Native American and academic philosophies of knowledge in three stages. First, it will examine the characteristics of Native American and academic philosophies of knowledge and their problematic relationship to one another. Second, it will focus upon three specific approaches – “interruptive storytelling,” “conversive” and “tribal-specific” – proposed for overcoming this problematic relationship and will explore the potential and limitations of each strategy in relation to reading Native American narratives. Third, it will synthesise a new flexible critical approach that utilises the most

⁴ Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians*, rev. and expanded from the 1992 ed. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998).

⁵ Owens, *Other Destinies*, 226.

valuable elements of each of the three approaches within a context-specific framework and apply them to readings of works created by two Native American filmmakers, Victor Masayesva (Hopi) and George Burdeau (Blackfeet).

A fundamental element underpinning this dissertation and discussed throughout is the concept that readings of Native American narratives must be context-specific, which I define as encompassing not only the context of production of a given narrative but also the context of its performance (including the private reading of written texts). As a non-Native scholar, then, one of the context-specific parameters that influences all the readings attempted in this dissertation is that of cross-cultural communication. The implications of cross-cultural communication, and its limitations, thus constitute a central element of my analyses.

Many Native American scholars argue that Native American history, literature and culture has been subjected to a kind of academic colonialism and thus, as Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) observes, academia generally represents a highly contested space for Native Americans being “the place most fraught with conflict over the intellectual justifications of imperialism as well as intellectual resistance to those same justifications.”⁶ Anna Lee Walters (Pawnee/Otoe-Missouria), referring to the field of history, argues in favour of Native peoples’ sovereign right to “interpret events and time in their worlds according to their own aesthetics and values... even when this interpretation is different from that of mainstream history.”⁷ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Lakota) objects to the tendency, as she sees it, in literary criticism to

⁶ Daniel Heath Justice, “We’re Not There Yet, Kemo Sabe: Positing a Future for American Indian Literary Studies,” *American Indian Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 256.

⁷ Anna Lee Walters, *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1992), 86 quoted in Craig S. Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 9.

“attempt to claim authority over [the Native American literary voice].”⁸ Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngati Awa/Ngati Porou), writing from a Maori perspective, argues that, “Research has not been neutral in its objectification of the Other. Objectification is a process of dehumanization. In its clear links to Western knowledge, research has generated a particular relationship to indigenous peoples which continues to be problematic.”⁹

Thus, the relationship between academic and Native discourses, according to scholars such as Cook-Lynn, Owens and Walters, can be characterised as replicating and sustaining five centuries of dominance by a white cultural majority over a marginalised and silenced Native minority. This perceived encouragement and perpetuation of a colonial relationship engenders a second, less obvious source of conflict. It creates an environment in which, at the risk of generalising, a diverse array of indigenous worldviews, grounded in orality and tending towards fluidity, openness and provisionality, are distorted to fit within an authoritative European-centred framework that values written texts, definitive answers, closed meanings and finality.

Because academic discourse has historically occupied a more powerful position than Native discourse, Native discourse has often been perceived as having been distorted when interpreted from within a European-centred framework. Native American narratives and academic texts appear so polarised, inhabiting opposite extremes of a theoretical spectrum of discourse, that they are nigh on irreconcilable. The apparent incompatibility of Native discourse with academic study is such that

⁸ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, “Literary and Political Questions of Transformation: American Indian Fiction Writers,” *Wicazo Sa Review* (Spring 1995): 50.

⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Zed Books; Dunedin: University of Otago, 1999), 39.

even critical frameworks borne out of post-positivism and postmodern re-evaluations of notions such as truth and veracity are perceived by some commentators as, at best, inadequate and, at worst, an extension of colonial practices that merely exchange one set of Eurocentric assumptions for another.¹⁰

Thus, it is evident that many Native people have concerns about the ways in which academia and Native America have interacted, and continue to interact. In response to such concerns, consideration of epistemological problems has become an integral feature of many academic studies of Native American narratives and I would go so far as to argue that the epistemological question has become an essential component of any scholarship dealing with Native American narratives.

Craig S. Womack (Creek-Cherokee) notes that Native cultural production has often been “rendered to the realm of problem (like the Indian problem, we have the translation problem)” when scholars should be examining their own approaches.¹¹

Brill de Ramírez concurs, stressing the necessity for scholars to focus not only on the content of their analyses but also on the scholarly methodologies they use to perform those analyses.¹²

The implication in Womack’s and Brill de Ramírez’s observations may be that it is simply no longer ethical to write about Native American literature, or oral tradition, or film, or poetry, without reflecting upon these issues. The task of “understanding” and “interpreting” Native texts must become inextricably intertwined with reflexive questions about the methodology and assumptions inherent in Western academic discourse. Implicit in the central argument of this

¹⁰ See for example Womack, *Red on Red*, 3 and Thomas King, “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” *World Literature Written in English* 30, no. 2 (1990): 10-16.

¹¹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 64.

¹² Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999), 74.

thesis – that context and audience are crucial to understanding Native texts and that scholars must consciously locate themselves within the specific context and audience that exists between Native storytellers and academics – is a challenge to the very conceptual methodology upon which the notions of scholarly objectivity and value-neutrality are based.

Over the past few decades, a wealth of literature has appeared that problematises the relationship between Native America and academia, deliberating on how this relationship may or should affect the choices made by scholars working in any of the various fields encompassed under the rubric of Native American studies. This dissertation centres on the potential and limitations of cross-cultural communication as an approach to the epistemological challenges confronting scholars working in the field of Native American literary and film criticism. Some of the studies that have highlighted these issues have gone one step further and proposed possible methodologies for “doing” Native American studies intended to defuse the power imbalance occurring when a so-called “dominant” culture imposes its interpretive framework on a so-called “marginalised” culture.

For example, in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*, Greg Sarris (Kashaya Pomo/Federated Graton Rancheria) proposes a methodological shift away from what might be termed as traditional scholarly objectivism towards a more intersubjective, or cross-cultural, approach that explicitly accounts for and records a scholar’s interaction with a text.¹³ Brill de Ramírez, in *Contemporary Native American Literature and the Oral Tradition*, calls for scholars to reject an authoritative, interpretive approach to Native American

¹³ Greg Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

literary criticism and instead endeavour to enter into the “story worlds” of the literary works they study as a means to engage experientially with a given narrative.¹⁴ In *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, Womack argues in favour of the development of tribally specific critical methodologies arising out of the philosophies of knowledge inherent in a given tribe’s oral tradition.¹⁵ Proponents of such methodologies, particularly Sarris and Brill de Ramírez, seem to be suggesting that scholars of Native American narratives should eschew their traditional apparatus of objective, semi-scientific, “value-neutral” language and instead immerse themselves in intersubjectivity, reflexivity and autobiographical reflection.

Bearing in mind such calls for greater reflexivity, this thesis will explore the potential, on both a theoretical and practical level, for using intersubjective, cross-cultural communication as a means to bridge the apparent philosophical gulf between Native American and scholarly discourse. Academia has always been a highly contested territory for Native Americans, but now Native America, for better or worse, has now become a highly contested territory for scholars.

Part I of this dissertation consists of Chapter 1, “Philosophies of Knowledge in Native American and Academic Contexts,” in which I contextualise in detail the epistemological debate surrounding the relationships between Native American and academic discourses by closely examining their respective features and the problematic relationship between the two. The chapter concludes by summarising the various approaches to Native American Literary criticism and its current status, with a specific focus upon the three overlapping and interdependent categories into

¹⁴ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 14.

¹⁵ Womack, introduction to *Red on Red*, 1-24.

which Arnold Krupat argues the majority of contemporary Native American literary criticism falls – cosmopolitanism, indigenism and separatism.¹⁶

Part II focuses on three works of literary criticism that propose methodologies for bridging the gap between Native and academic philosophies of knowledge, one example from each of Krupat’s categories – cosmopolitanism, indigenism and separatism. Each example is analysed in detail, examining both its potential and limitations for interpreting Native American narratives within a cross-cultural environment. Two major areas of focus provide the framework for each analysis. First, I analyse the effectiveness of each methodology as employed by its author in overcoming the epistemological tensions between Native American and academic discourse. Second, I explore the transferability of the methodology to other scholars, with particular attention to whether or not Native scholars are privileged over non-Native scholars in the practice of a given methodology and the implications of this for the promotion and development of cross-cultural discourse. Subsequent to each of these chapters, I engage in a reading of a Native American narrative – fiction, drama or poetry – as a means of exploring on a practical level the potential and limitations of each interpretive strategy previously only discussed on a theoretical basis. These readings begin the process of synthesising the most valuable elements of each interpretive strategy and the development of a context-specific critical approach to Native American narratives.

Chapter 2 deals with Greg Sarris’s “holistic” approach, referred to in this dissertation as an “interruptive storytelling” approach. This is an example of a cosmopolitan perspective, sometimes also referred to as a mediative or mixedblood

¹⁶ Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters: Native American Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 1-23.

approach. In this chapter, I will analyse Sarris's book *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, in which he develops an interruptive strategy of cross-cultural communication between academics and Native narratives that mirrors the "interruptive" talk and storytelling of the late Cache Creek Pomo basket weaver and medicine woman Mabel McKay. Sarris argues that in order to avoid imposing Eurocentric cultural frameworks upon Native texts, scholars should shy away from seeking a universal understanding of a given text and instead focus upon acknowledging and accounting for their own interaction with a text, in order to promote an ongoing cross-cultural communication and the recognition of one's own cultural limitations. Sarris's methodology, I will argue, is largely effective as practised by Sarris himself in the sense that it circumvents the closure valued in academic research and substitutes instead a satisfying experiential aesthetic, through storytelling, that promotes an ongoing cross-cultural dialogue. However, at times, Sarris's methodology fails to emphasise his own preconceptions, especially when applied to narratives that do not mimic the overtly "interruptive" style of Mrs McKay's discourse, thus implying that it is an appropriate methodology under certain conditions only.

Sarris's strategy is also problematic in terms of its transferability to other scholars, especially non-Native scholars, because of its emphasis on the inclusion of the scholar's autobiography as part of the process of acknowledging limits and preconceptions. The effectiveness of this process, I will argue, relies on Sarris's status as a Native scholar or, more specifically, his uncomfortable borderlands position between his Pomo heritage and academic vocation, and thus is of limited practical value to other, especially non-Native, scholars.

Following this chapter is "Synthesising a Context-Specific Approach I," in which I provide a reading of Thomas King's (Cherokee) novel, *Green Grass*,

Running Water, his short story, “One Good Story, That One,” and his radio show, the *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*, which, I will argue, as overtly interruptive texts, are particularly suited to an “interruptive storytelling” reading.¹⁷ A great deal of critical work has already appeared in relation to King’s novel, and here I use an interruptive storytelling approach to challenge the assumption implicit in much of that literature that King’s interruptive joking acts solely as a means of encouraging readers to cross borders and penetrate ever deeper into the narrative. Rather, an interruptive storytelling reading reveals that this is border crossing of a strictly limited type, and that King’s jokes function as much to keep readers out of the story as to draw them in.

Chapter 3 analyses the model of “conversive literary scholarship” proposed by the non-Native scholar Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez. Very little critical attention has thus far been paid to Brill de Ramírez’s attempt to democratise Native American literary criticism within a cross-cultural context. Her volume *Contemporary American Indian Literature and the Oral Tradition* is analysed here both as an example of an indigenist perspective and of an attempt by a non-Native scholar to bridge the gap between Native and academic philosophies of knowledge. Brill de Ramírez’s strategy takes as its major focus an indigenist perspective that posits the special and unique status of Native knowledge – which Brill de Ramírez refers to as “conversive” – defined in terms of a centring, healing force located within the interrelations between all elements of the universe. In a conversive context, meaningfulness can be understood solely in relational terms and scholars must

¹⁷ Thomas King, *Green Grass, Running Water* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993; reprint, New York: Bantam Books, 1994; all subsequent references are to the Bantam Books edition); Thomas King, “One Good Story, That One,” in *One Good Story, That One* (Toronto: HarperPerennial, 1993), 1-10; Thomas King, *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour* [audio cassette] (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2001).

consciously enter into the narratives they study and attempt to understand them experientially, rather than functioning as external arbiters of meaning. Brill de Ramírez's methodology provides an effective strategy for non-Native critics wishing to approach Native American narratives from an intersubjective perspective and is particularly appropriate in terms of its reproduction, within the narrative-scholar relationship, the interactive relationship between storyteller and storylistener.

However, I will argue that Brill de Ramírez's strategy is limited in two important respects. First, although the conversive readings she provides of specific literary works are insightful they constitute only a tiny proportion of her book, which is otherwise taken up with more conventional "discursive" argumentative narrative, the very type of narrative she is claiming to be moving away from. This, I contend, represents a failure to effectively bridge the gap between Native and academic philosophies of knowledge, most particularly in the way in which knowledge is disseminated, a difficulty made more difficult to surmount because of her position as a non-Native scholar, meaning that she lacks the cultural privilege afforded to Native writers such as Sarris. The second limitation relates to the requirement that scholars must fully enter into the "storyworlds" of the narratives they study. This condition is problematic both in its assumption that (1) freedom of access to Native American narratives by non-Native academics is always desirable and/or ethical; and (2) that Native storytellers do not possess the tools to effectively obstruct access to their narratives by outsiders, an assumption that relocates power and agency back in the hands of scholars. This chapter also links Brill de Ramírez's indigenist strategy to Sarris's more cosmopolitan approach by introducing the argument that Sarris's interruptive strategy may be used in conjunction with other theoretical frameworks,

such as conversive literary scholarship, as a means to define under which particular context-specific conditions a given strategy is appropriate.

“Synthesising a Context-Specific Approach II,” provides a reading of three plays by Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway), *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock*, *Someday* and *alterNatives*.¹⁸ I will argue that Taylor’s three plays occupy places along a conversive-interruptive continuum, with *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock* most suited to a conversive reading, *Someday* to an approach that combines elements of both approaches and *alterNatives*, being almost wholly interruptive in its orientation. These differences enable me to develop my argument that a context-specific approach is necessary and that no one-size-fits-all approach to Native American literary criticism is appropriate for all narrative, even works created by the same author. Furthermore, in my analysis of *Someday*, I begin the process of synthesising a context-specific approach, combining those elements from interruptive storytelling and conversive literary scholarship that are most valuable in a cross-cultural reading of this play.

In Chapter 4, I analyse Craig S. Womack’s *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, in which he argues in favour of a tribally-specific approach that manifests indigenous peoples’ sovereign right to interpret their own literatures on their own terms. Womack explicitly rejects the cosmopolitan or mediative approach to Native American literary criticism, which, he argues, assumes a one-way movement of knowledge wherein Native worldviews are essentially static and prone to contamination by European influences, rather than recognising the adaptive and dynamic characteristic of Native cultures. Recent critical work on Womack has tended to interpret his approach as one that excludes the possibility of cross-cultural

¹⁸ Drew Hayden Taylor, *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock and Education is Our Right* (Calgary, Alberta: Fifth House, 1990); Drew Hayden Taylor, *Someday* (Saskatoon and Calgary: Fifth House, 1993); Drew Hayden Taylor, *alterNatives* (Vancouver, B.C.: Talonbooks, 2000).

communication but I argue that the term “separatism” is in fact a misnomer when applied to Womack’s methodology, which can be more usefully defined as a “tribal-specific” approach. A tribal-specific approach offers significant possibilities for cross-cultural readings that utilise philosophies of knowledge inherent in specific tribal oral traditions. For example, the gap between experiential or implicit knowledge gained through a lifetime of immersion in a given oral tradition and the explicit knowledge valued in academic research may be bridged through the identification and practice of specifically tribal strategies of reflecting upon and disseminating knowledge.

Following this chapter, “Synthesising a Context-Specific Approach III” provides readings of the poetry of Joy Harjo (Creek), Nia Francisco (Navajo) and Luci Tapahonso (Navajo). I begin with a tribal-specific reading of Harjo’s poem “New Orleans,” building on the reading provided by Womack in *Red on Red*, and examining the potential usefulness of a tribal-specific reading in a cross-cultural context.¹⁹ I then open out the discussion to include a consideration of Harjo’s *Secrets from the Center of the World*, a book of prose poems accompanied by Stephen Strom’s photographs of Navajo land.²⁰ This is a work that is both conversive, in that a Creek poet’s words and a non-Native’s photographs combine to speak to the beauty of Navajo land, and tribal-specific, in that its meaningfulness arises specifically out of inextricable relationship between Navajo mythology, philosophy and landscape. Francisco’s *Blue Horses for Navajo Women* and Tapahonso’s *Sáanii Dahataat: The Women Are Singing* are then discussed, in terms of their conversive links to each other and to Harjo’s poetry, but also in a tribal-

¹⁹ Joy Harjo, “New Orleans,” in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1997), 42-44.

²⁰ Joy Harjo, *Secrets from the Center of the World*, photographs by Stephen Strom (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989).

specific sense, highlighting how meaningfulness in Francisco's and Tapahonso's poetry arises out of their immersion in Navajo philosophy.²¹ What I hope to demonstrate here, is that by synthesising conversive and tribal-specific approaches, cross-cultural interpretations of Native poetry can be contextualised, through the use of tribal-specificity, allowing them to remain open in a way that avoids the "fixing" and "closing" of knowledge that may occur in conventional literary criticism. This section also highlights a weakness in interruptive storytelling, demonstrating that it is difficult to apply in cases where narratives are not overtly interruptive but rather seek to draw the reader into the story.

Part III of the dissertation moves beyond the theoretical discussion and attempts to put the various methodologies into practice, within the specific context of a cross-cultural reading undertaken by a non-Native scholar. In Chapter 5, I undertake comparative analyses of film and videos directed by Victor Masayesva and George Burdeau, using each of the three strategies previously discussed – "interruptive storytelling," "conversive," and "tribal-specific" – and consider the advantages and disadvantages of each method respectively. In this chapter, I further explore the idea of formulating context-specific methodologies and discuss how the three methodologies might be synthesised in order to create a flexible critical approach that can be customised according to the conditions under which a given narrative is both produced and performed, or interpreted.

Very little scholarship focusing on critical approaches to Native American film has been produced, largely because the majority of scholarship has justifiably focused on highlighting the underexposed work of Native filmmakers rather than on developing theory. In this chapter I will argue that the flexibility of a context-

²¹ Nia Francisco, *Blue Horses for Navajo Women*, illustrated by Wallace Begay (Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1988); Luci Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataat: The Women Are Singing* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993).

specific approach that incorporates elements of “interruptive storytelling,” “conversive” and “tribal-specific” can be applied just as effectively to film and video as to written and oral literatures. By analysing a number of films created by Masayesva and Burdeau respectively, I will show how synthesising a flexible, context-specific approach enables scholarship to be customised, thus negotiating the problematic relationship between Native and academic epistemologies by incorporating the dynamics of that relationship within a given interpretation. By examining the development of Masayesva’s and Burdeau’s film-making respectively I will demonstrate the value of a context-specific, flexible approach as a means to consider each film narrative in a way that is appropriate to its individual production and performance.

Throughout this dissertation, I seek to delineate the boundaries of cross-cultural conversation, to uncover not only its illuminating potential in terms of bridging Native and academic philosophies of knowledge, but also its limitations. It is worth noting that I employ terms such as “limits” and “restrictions” not necessarily in a pejorative sense but rather with the assumption that limits can sometimes be a good thing – that there are places within Native American narratives where scholars cannot or should not venture.

In the previous two decades, a great deal has been written discussing the epistemological and political tensions inherent in the relationship between Native and academic discourses. Scholars including Vine Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux), Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Devon A. Mihesuah (Choctaw), Angela Cavender Wilson (Dakota), Michael Dorris (Modoc) and Donald L. Fixico (Creek/Seminole/Shawnee/Sac and Fox), to name just a few examples, have all contributed, from varying perspectives, to the debate on how Native American narratives – be they historical,

cultural, literary, political or otherwise – should be approached in the academy.²²

Many of these scholars have made suggestions about what scholars – Native and non-Native – should and should not do when conducting research into Native America. What seems to me to be missing from much of the literature is a serious consideration, beyond the ideal, of what scholars, especially non-Natives, can actually hope to *achieve*, as opposed to what we would *like* to achieve.

This dissertation contributes to the literature on Native American literary and film criticism in three distinct ways. First, I analyse in detail the potential and limitations of three proposed approaches to Native American literary criticism, examining how they might be used specifically in the context of cross-cultural critical endeavours. Second, having analysed the potential and limitations of each interpretive strategy, I use it to develop a reading of Native American fiction, drama or poetry, as a means of further identifying the its potential and limitations, but this time in practice rather than theory. This practice-based analysis is developmental, with each new interpretive strategy being considered in the light of previously discussed strategies, in order to discover how they might inform one another and how they might be synthesised to create a new, flexible approach to Native American critical theory. Third, having completed this developmental synthesis of interpretive strategies, I apply it to a discussion of Native American film and video, providing a further examination of flexible, context-specific interpretive strategies in practice and

²² See, for example Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Avon Books, 1969); Vine Deloria, Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum, 1997); Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, “How Scholarship Defames the Native Voice...and Why,” *Wicazo Sa Review* (Fall 2000): 79-92; Devon A. Mihesuah, ed., *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Devon Abbot Mihesuah and Angela Cavender Wilson, eds., *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Michael Dorris, “Native American Literature in an Ethnohistorical Context,” *College English* 41, no.2 (October 1979): 147-62; and Donald L. Fixico, *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World: American Indian Studies and Traditional Knowledge* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

also contributing to the as yet underdeveloped field of critical approaches to Native American film.

The most appropriate conclusion that can be drawn from this examination of the potential and limitations of “interruptive storytelling,” “conversive literary scholarship,” and “tribal-specific” approaches to interpreting Native American film and literature in a cross-cultural environment, is that there exists no one overriding answer. There is no one grand theoretical paradigm that overcomes all of the issues raised in relation to interpreting Native American narratives from a cross-cultural perspective. Rather, given the broad range of cultures and experiences under consideration, the methodological tools employed for each reading should be specific both to the given text and to its performance in a given context. Synthesising just such a context-specific approach is the principle aim of this research.

PART I.
OVERVIEW: DEBATES AND CONTEXTS

CHAPTER 1

PHILOSOPHIES OF KNOWLEDGE IN NATIVE AMERICAN AND ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), *Ceremony*

But, warriors, a good story, however ancient, is always new, and the more frequently it is told, the more attractive it becomes, and is destined to never be obliterated from the memory in which it lives.

Alexander Posey (Creek), *Chinnubbie and the Owl*

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the possibilities for synthesising a new critical approach to Native American literature that responds to the context-specific parameters of a given narrative. In other words, I will explore the idea that critical frameworks for interpreting Native American literature need to account for and converse with not only the site of production of a narrative, the cultural milieu from where the narrative originated, but also the site of its performance, the cultural milieu within which the narrative is being interpreted. The second site in terms of scholarly interpretation of Native narratives will, by definition, be academia.

In such an environment, the relationship between Native American and academic discourses becomes an imperative dynamic in any scholarly reading of

Native American narratives, with potentially profound implications for the interpretation and translation of Native philosophies of knowledge into an academic arena. In this chapter, I will contextualise in detail the epistemological debates surrounding the relationships between Native American and academic discourses by closely examining their respective characteristics and their implications for the relationship between the two discourses, with a specific focus on what is understood by “knowledge” and the approved methods for obtaining, reflecting upon and disseminating knowledge within each cultural environment.

My intention here is to provide contextualisation not only for Native American discourse but also for academic discourse. Discussing only the characteristics and features of Native American discourse has the effect of centralising Western discourse by implying that its theories require no explanation and, as such provides a naturalised paradigm against which Native American discourse may be measured, a position that could be perceived as reinforcing old colonial patterns of dominance, marginalisation and Otherness. As Craig S. Womack (Creek-Cherokee) points out, difficulties in translating Native cultural production have too often been assumed to be the result of a problem inherent in the literature itself, when, as both Greg Sarris (Kashaya Pomo/Federated Graton Rancheria) and Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez note, scholars have failed to consider the limitations of their own methodologies.¹ Failing to account reflexively for the characteristics and values of academic discourse permits its underlying conceptual frameworks to remain unspoken, unchallenged assumptions and prevents scholars from accounting for the ways in which they, as Sarris phrases it, “position the

¹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 64. See also Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* and Brill de Ramirez, *Contemporary American Indian Literature and the Oral Tradition*.

mirror,” over the texts or narratives they study.² Thus, I will treat both modes of discourse as particular types of narratives operating within specific cultural contexts. The term discourse is most often understood in relation to academia in the sense of a thesis or dissertation but I draw no distinction between this and the more literary definition. Academic discourse, I am arguing, consists of narrative, conversation and utterances of a culturally specific kind, no more or less than any other type of discourse.

The chapter begins by summarising the features and functions characteristic of Native American discourse, or storytelling.³ I will explore how the various characteristics of Native American oral storytelling traditions and of written traditions originating from within cultures where the oral tradition remains vibrant, constitute a philosophy of knowledge that, at the risk of generalising, values knowledge that is implicit, experiential and requires reflection over a period of time. Following this, I will briefly examine the characteristics of academic philosophies of knowledge, suggesting that in this arena knowledge that can be fixed and explicated is accorded greater value. The relationship between academic and Native philosophies of knowledge and its implications for academic research into Native American narratives is then discussed in detail. The chapter concludes with a review of various theoretical approaches to interpreting Native American narratives and a brief survey of recent publications proposing strategies for writing Native American literary criticism, with a specific focus on what Arnold Krupat identifies as the three

² Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 120.

³ Sarris, writing about the Cache Creek Pomo basket-weaver and Bole Maru Dreamer Mabel McKay, identifies as a locus for cultural interaction not only Mrs McKay’s narrated stories but also her *talk* generally, including all speech categories such as gossip, idle chatter and responses to questions, as well as non-verbal communication. It is this broad notion of “storytelling,” as the spoken or written articulation of a cultural language and worldview rather than a medium for transmitting fictions that predicated my use of the term. Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 4, 18.

main categories into which the majority of contemporary Native American literary theory falls – cosmopolitanism, indigenism and separatism.⁴

Native American Storytelling and Philosophies of Knowledge

To generalise about Native American literatures, histories or experiences is an undertaking fraught with potential pitfalls. The very term “Native American” (or “American Indian,” or “Native,” or “First Nations,” or “indigenous”) is in itself a generalisation that implies a degree of cultural uniformity spread across what is an extremely diverse group of cultures encompassing a myriad of languages, social structures, histories, religions and worldviews. There are, of course, similarities between different tribal cultures’ experiences of colonisation, but even in this area there exist considerable variations, for example between tribes that have retained their ancestral lands and tribes that were removed, or those where tribal languages are still widely spoken and those where the language has been lost. However, as Dee Horne notes, the very term American Indian literature, or Native American literature, implies, falsely, that a homogeneous body of literature exists.⁵

It is perhaps more appropriate to refer to “Native American” narratives in tribally specific terms, e.g. “Okanagan storytelling,” “Yaqui oral tradition,” or “Abenaki poetry.” The importance of such culturally specific contexts to the meaning and function of Native American narratives is, in fact, a central argument underpinning this dissertation, which I will discuss, in some detail, in Chapter 4, in relation to Womack’s call for Native American literary separatism.⁶ However, while

⁴ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 1-23.

⁵ Dee Horne, *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature* (New York and Washington, D.C: Peter Lang, 1999), xiii.

⁶ Womack, introduction to *Red on Red*, 1-24; Krupat, *Red Matters*, 8.

bearing in mind the diversity of cultures under discussion and the problems inherent in generalisation, I wish, for the purposes of clarification, to make some general observations about cultural discourses grounded in an oral tradition.

Common characteristics of oral storytelling include, but are not limited to:

(1) syncretism, or the fluid incorporation of components from other cultures and traditions; (2) a strong inclination towards humour, word-play and punning; (3) the telling and re-telling of stories, with variations appropriate to the particular context and circumstances of their telling; (4) the absence of an individually defined author and an emphasis on communal and collaborative texts; (5) the articulation of a more inclusive spectrum of cultural interconnectedness than is characterised by Western categories of “fact” or “history” and “fiction” or “myth” and; (6) a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between storytellers and audiences.

Oral traditions, as Elaine Jahner has pointed out, are “epistemological realities,” which “reflect particular ways of knowing.”⁷ Storytelling has a number of significant and interrelated functions in tribal cultures. It is an important method of cultural transmission, providing a medium for passing on traditions, history, tribal memory, and ways of knowing from one generation to the next. Storytelling is often instructional – a non-intrusive way of teaching or reminding members of the community of the “rules” of conduct in that community. Equally significant is the “healing” or ceremonial purpose to storytelling, where stories function both a source for survival and a strategy for coping with adversity. Storytelling, as Angela Cavender Wilson (Dakota) has explained, also has significant role in creating social cohesiveness by providing “a sense of identity and belonging, situating community

⁷ Elaine Jahner, “A Critical Approach to American Indian Literature,” in *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*, ed. Paula Gunn Allen (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1983), 223, quoted in Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 5.

members within their lineage and establishing their relationship to the rest of the natural world.”⁸

Storytelling in the oral tradition is an intrinsic feature of many Native cultures and plays a fundamental and continuing role in contemporary indigenous societies. In cultures where oral tradition remains vibrant, spoken stories are invested with a power and significance far beyond that which is generally recognised in cultures where written literature is most valued and where stories are most often understood in terms of usually fictional narratives intended primarily for entertainment. For example, Womack notes the power of language not only to *evoke*, but also to *invoke*.⁹ Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) notes that “a storyteller was an artist, an imaginative person. He brought himself into being and his listeners into being with his imagination.”¹⁰ Similarly, Jeannette C. Armstrong (Okanagan) emphasises the power and responsibility of storytelling and language in an oral culture: “To speak is to create more than words, more than sounds retelling the world; it is to realize the potential for transformation of the world...I am the word carrier, and I shape-change the world.”¹¹ Sarris echoes Armstrong when he writes that “words and stories [can] poison the healthy, heal the sick, empower lovers, [and] transform the world.”¹²

⁸ Angela Cavender Wilson, “Power of the Spoken Word: Native Oral Traditions in American Indian History,” in *Rethinking American Indian History* ed. Donald L. Fixico (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 111. See also Fixico, *The American Indian Mind*, 21-39 and Angela Cavender Wilson, “Grandmother to Granddaughter: Generations of Oral History in a Dakota Family,” in *Natives and Academics*, ed. Miheesuah, 27-36.

⁹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 197.

¹⁰ Gerald Vizenor, interview by Laura Coltelli, ed., in *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 164.

¹¹ Jeannette C. Armstrong, “Land Speaking,” in *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*, ed. Simon J. Ortiz (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 183.

¹² Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 127.

It would be a mistake to assume that oral traditions constitute a “simpler” storytelling environment than written literary works. In terms of the articulation of complex and nuanced ideas, storytellers, as verbal performance artists, have at their disposal a wealth of visual, aural and oral techniques enabling them to deliver their stories in a manner that fully engages their audience, entertainment value being an important facilitator for the instructional functions of storytelling. The anthropologists Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim observe sophistication in both heterology and heterophony, with storytellers representing characters “as conversing, playing word games, using slang, making speeches, praying, chanting, or singing... in appropriate (or markedly inappropriate) social situations,” as well as being adept at deploying “as great a density of contrasting voices as any novelist.”¹³

These qualities, which, according to Livia Polyani have often been associated only with written literature, enable oral storytelling performances to be sophisticated in both a performative and a psychological sense.¹⁴ Armstrong, for example, describes the ability of Okanagan storytellers to “move the audience back and forth between the present reality and the story reality,” explaining that stories used for teaching in Okanagan culture “must be inclusive of the past, present, and future, as well as the current or contemporary moment and the story reality, without losing context and coherence while maintaining the drama.”¹⁵ Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway) points out that a single, seemingly simple story, could incorporate “metaphorical, philosophical, psychological implications,” so deeply complex that

¹³ Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim, eds., introduction to *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 17.

¹⁴ Livia Polyani, “Literary Complexity in Everyday Storytelling,” in *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*, ed. Deborah Tannen (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1982), 155.

¹⁵ Armstrong, “Land Speaking,” 194.

they may only become apparent after a lifetime of listening to various retellings of the same story.¹⁶

Humour is an important tool in the repertoire of Native American storytellers, as well as a common feature of Native cultures generally. Clearly, a humorous story is likely to be more entertaining, but humour has other purposes and functions. Shared humour contributes to the social cohesiveness of a community, but may also be used as a form of social control and instruction, delineating acceptable behaviour in a given community. As Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki) comments, “Joking and teasing might be used to remind someone of their place in societies... which place great value on equality.”¹⁷ Taylor agrees, explaining that in some Canadian Native cultures, teasing functions specifically as a “great social adjuster,” in a process referred to by some academics as “permitted disrespect.”¹⁸

The appearance of trickster figures in many oral traditions is a further example of humour as a method of teaching individuals not only about socially appropriate behaviour but also about avoiding dangerous situations and obeying one’s parents.¹⁹ Many Native commentators such as Tomson Highway (Cree), Thomas King (Cherokee) and Drew Hayden Taylor, have also pointed to humour as medicine, a “survival strategy” for colonised peoples. “If life is so bad,” says King,

¹⁶ Drew Hayden Taylor, “Alive and well: Native theatre in Canada,” in *American Indian Theater in Performance: A Reader* ed. Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye T. Darby (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 2000), 256-257.

¹⁷ Joseph Bruchac, *Roots of Survival: Native American Storytelling and the Sacred* ((Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1996), 54. See also Joseph Bruchac, *Our Stories Remember: American Indian History, Culture, and Values through Storytelling* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003), 90-111; Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 148-168.

¹⁸ Drew Hayden Taylor, *Funny, You Don’t Look Like One Two Three: Furious Observations of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway*: (Penticton B.C.: Theytus Books Ltd, 2002), 48.

¹⁹ Bruchac, *Roots of Survival*, 54.

“you either kill yourself or you laugh. Colonized people see humour as a strength, as a medicine.”²⁰

The sophisticated potential of oral storytelling techniques is evident in other ways. Many observers, for example, have noted the tendency in Native American oral traditions to fluidly incorporate, adapt and subsume elements of stories from other cultural traditions.²¹ Christopher Balme, writing about post-colonial theatre in general, identifies syncreticity as a “central component” of the “communicative structure” of colonised peoples.²² The syncretic impulse in oral storytelling, according to Louis Owens (Choctaw-Cherokee) mirrors the “adaptive, dynamic nature of American Indian cultures,” and is a “quality requisite for survival.”²³ Playwright and theatre director Elizabeth Theobald (Cherokee) agrees, pointing to the creative and artistic potential of the syncretic process, “A good joke, a good story, a form borrowed from somewhere - these can also be Native art if it is put through the hands and the eyes of a Native person.”²⁴ In other words, the endurance, or, to borrow Vizenor’s neologism, “survivance” of Native cultures over several centuries of colonisation can be attributed in part to the capacity of oral traditions to continually renew themselves by syncretically adapting new elements from the

²⁰ Thomas King, quoted in John Stackhouse, “Comic Heroes or ‘Red Niggers’?” *Globe and Mail* (9 November 2001), available at <http://www.globeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/printarticle/gam/20011109/FCSTACY>, accessed 26 May 2002.

²¹ LaVonne Brown Ruoff, “American Indian Oral Literatures,” *American Quarterly* 33, no.3 (1981): 327.

²² Christopher B. Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 3.

²³ Owens, *Other Destinies*, 9-10.

²⁴ Elizabeth Theobald, “Their Desperate Need for Noble Savages,” *The Drama Review* 41, no. 3 (September 1997): n.p., available via <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/executive>, accessed 10 April 2003.

literatures and cultures of other Native and non-Native groups.²⁵ As Vizenor observes, “If a culture lives, it changes, it always changes. If a people live, they imagine themselves always and in a new sense.”²⁶

The dynamic ability to continually adapt and renew through syncretism points to two significant characteristics of Native American oral culture – the shared communal and cultural context within which the stories originate and the interactive relationship between the storyteller and his or her audience. As Louis Owens has observed, the idea of a “single author” as the “creative center” of a text would have been a concept alien to pre-contact Native oral traditions: “For the traditional storyteller, each story originates with and serves to define the people as a whole, the community as a whole.” Owens explains further that, “Within the oral tradition literature is authorless,” and that “the emphasis in such storytelling falls... not upon the creative role of the storyteller but upon the communal nature of the stories, with the ‘outcome’ of each story already being known to the audience.” Although Owens is quick to point out that the lack of an individual as the “originating source” of a story “does not preclude the essential adaptation and evolution of each story as it is told” by an individual storyteller, the storyteller is essentially the conveyor, not the originator of the story.²⁷

So closely do the stories of an oral tradition inform, and are themselves informed by, a culture, that it is as an integral part of that specific cultural discourse from which they originate that they achieve their greatest power and significance.

Angela Cavender Wilson likens oral tradition to a web woven from the many strands

²⁵ Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 15. Vizenor’s use of “survivance” suggests to me a celebration of the active persistence of an indigenous presence rather than the relatively passive act of “survival.”; Ruoff, “American Indian Oral Literatures,” 327.

²⁶ Vizenor, interview by Coltelli in *Winged Words*, 172.

²⁷ Owens, *Other Destinies*, 9-10.

of different stories: “The individual strands are most powerful when interconnected to make an entire web... Each of our stories possesses meaning and power, but is most significant when understood in relation to the rest of the stories in the oral tradition.”²⁸ Filmmaker, photographer and writer Victor Masayesva, Jr., (Hopi) also likens the oral tradition to a web, emphasising what he sees as the “cobwebby” (*wishapiwta*) quality of oral tradition, where immersion in an oral tradition is not only “the accumulative experience of one individual,” but “gets passed on to everyone with whom he or she comes into contact, clinging like sticky cobwebs.”²⁹

When stories that form part of a tightly woven web of cultural context are performed, according to Dell Hymes, “performer and audience [share] an implicit knowledge of language and ways of speaking.”³⁰ This shared cultural consciousness, in fact, goes much further than a mutual understanding of “ways of speaking,” and points to “ways of knowing” that differ significantly from that understood in cultures where written literature is most valued. For example, as Deborah Tannen has explained, oral stories, though they may be performed many times over by the same storyteller, are not memorised but, rather, are recreated each time by layering “formulaic phrases” onto the basic framework of the plot. Significantly, although such phrases, proverbs and sayings are held to be “the repository of received wisdom,” the meaning is understood to reside not in the words of the phrase itself, but in the shared cultural knowledge signified by the phrase.³¹ The formulaic phrase,

²⁸ Wilson, “Power of the Spoken Word,” 108.

²⁹ Victor Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism,” in *Magnetic North*, ed. Jenny Lion (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 230-231.

³⁰ Dell Hymes, *In Vain I Tried to Tell You: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 6.

³¹ Deborah Tannen, “The Oral/Literate Continuum in Discourse,” in *Spoken and Written Language*, 1-2.

in other words, functions as a synecdoche for a greater whole of cultural context that requires no explicit analysis from the storyteller. By conveying meaning in this way, the meaning or truth of the story resides not in the words used to tell it but in the telling-listening experiences of shared cultural knowledge between the storyteller and the audience.³²

As Franci Washburn (Lakota/Anishinaabe) explains, when both storyteller and audience are from the same culture, “the particular cultural information embedded within the story,” is easily accessible to all and thus does not require explanation.³³ Navajo poet Luci Tapahonso explains that in Navajo culture, “the function of stories is to entertain and... they usually involve some teaching as well as the exploration of possibilities, besides which they all require a vivid imagination and a non-judgmental mind-set. Therefore, one may get caught up in the story, on some level becoming a part of it, and even more intensely so as it is retold at another time.”³⁴

Donald Braid argues that experiential knowledge constitutes “both the sense of experience as a resource of accumulated wisdom and the sense of experience as an ongoing interpretive process.”³⁵ Braid’s definition is crucial in understanding the ongoing accumulation of wisdom through storytelling in many orally informed cultures. Many American Indian storytellers specifically avoid explaining the meanings of their stories, conferring the responsibility upon their listeners to find

³² Shirley Brice Heath, “Protean Shapes in Literacy Events: Ever-shifting Oral and Literate Traditions,” in *Spoken and Written Language*, ed. Tannen, 91-92.

³³ Franci Washburn, “The Risk of Misunderstanding in Greg Sarris’s *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 79.

³⁴ Luci Tapahonso, introduction to *Blue Horses Rush In* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1997), xiii-xiv.

³⁵ Donald Braid, “Personal Narrative and Experiential Meaning,” *Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 431 (Winter 1996): 6.

their own meaning in the story, sometimes after repeated tellings and listenings over a lifetime. As Brill de Ramírez notes, storytelling in the oral tradition “although meaningful, is nevertheless aporetic, leaving the listeners... to find the truth and meaning for themselves.”³⁶ Both Wilson and Taylor observe that the process of acquiring the shared cultural knowledge that Washburn refers to is a complex and often lifelong process. According to Wilson, the teachings or messages contained in stories “are not easily deciphered, even for those within the culture,” and it may take years, or even a lifetime, to understand the full meaning and implications of story.³⁷ Taylor points out that because stories are told to both children and adults, as young audiences grow older they can “tap into a whole new understanding of the story,” like peeling away an onion “to get to the core of the story.”³⁸ Peggy V. Beck and Anna Lee Walters (Pawnee/Otoe-Missouria) explain that, “Native American sacred ways limit the amount of explaining a person can do. In this way they guide a person’s behaviour toward the world and its natural laws.” They continue, “Many Native American sacred teachings suggest that if people try to explain everything or seek to leave nothing unexplored in the universe, they will bring disaster upon themselves, for then they are trying to be like gods, not humans.”³⁹

The S’Klallam storyteller, Roger Fernandes does provide explanations for the meanings of his stories, but, even then, these meanings are not fixed or closed, but are rather offered as a way of reminding his listeners, especially in a cross-cultural

³⁶ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 145.

³⁷ Wilson, “Power of the Spoken Word,” 112.

³⁸ Taylor, “Alive and well: Native theatre in Canada,” 256-257.

³⁹ Peggy V. Beck and Anna Lee Walters, eds., *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*, with Nia Francisco, redesigned edition (Tsaile, Ariz.: Navajo Community College, 1996), 4.

storytelling environment, of the wisdom in the stories and to encourage them to continue to seek meaning for themselves. He writes:

In sharing my insight into a story I remind the audience that each of them may intuitively find other meanings and that none of them are “wrong.” I try to examine two or three stories in this manner (I call it “Going Joseph Campbell” on a story) so the audience gets a sense of the idea that stories convey meaning, and then tell a couple more without examination. As long as they might begin to regard stories as teachings and gifts of wisdom passed down to us through all our ancestors. I also remind them that I have told these stories sometimes hundreds of times and that a story’s full power is only registered (not necessarily understood) after repeated tellings.⁴⁰

Also of crucial importance is the responsibility attached to knowledge acquisition, explication and dissemination. Womack notes that in many American Indian cultures “knowledge for knowledge’s sake means little.”⁴¹ Beck and Walters explain that, “In order that knowledge did not get separated from experience, wisdom from divinity, the elders stressed listening and waiting, *not asking why*.”⁴² Thus, the importance of the relationship between storyteller (the information conveyer) and the audience (information receivers) becomes even more significant.

Indigenous storytelling practices are thus deeply informed by a sophisticated awareness not only of how language – words and stories – influences our perception of the world around us but also of the ways in which stories circulate within and across communities. So dependent upon the intricate web of cultural context are the stories from an oral tradition that they are best understood, as Larry Evers and Barre Toelken have observed, not as “discrete texts,” but rather “as personal experiences

⁴⁰ Roger Fernandes, personal communication.

⁴¹ Craig S. Womack, review of *Indi’n Humor: Bicultural Play In Native America* by Kenneth Lincoln, *American Literature* 66 no. 1 (March 1994): 204.

⁴² Beck and Walters, *The Sacred*, 48; emphasis in original.

within culturally meaningful settings.”⁴³ The meaning of a story is not only contained within the words employed to recount it, the events it describes or the performance of the storyteller, but through the experience of the shared cultural bond between the storyteller and his or her audience.

The audience, therefore, plays a crucial role in oral storytelling performances. The performance of a story is a reciprocal creative process occurring between the storyteller and his or her audience in which all participants - the storyteller and the audience - are jointly responsible for constructing the meaning. As suggested above, context is of essential importance in understanding and interpreting the meaning of a storytelling performance. A storytelling event in which the storyteller and audience are all members of the same social or cultural group, sharing a set of culturally specific interpretive strategies for negotiating and understanding a story, will function in a completely different way than a storytelling event in which one or more members of the audience are outsiders. An outsider may lack, for example, important historical, cultural or geographical knowledge that is crucial to the meaning of the story but which is normally left unsaid because it is assumed that members of the social or cultural group will already be privy to such knowledge. In such instances, a storyteller may feel compelled to make certain changes to a story, explaining or translating elements of the story that will be obvious to “insiders” but a mystery to “outsiders.” Alternatively, the storyteller may choose not to make such changes, reinforcing the social bond between himself or herself and the audience by keying unspoken codes to shared cultural knowledge not made explicit to outsiders. Thus, Native American storytelling and philosophies of knowledge in the oral tradition are dependent on the shared relationship between storyteller and audience,

⁴³ Larry Evers and Barre Toelken, eds., introduction to *Native American Oral Traditions: Collaboration and Interpretation* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1991), 8.

what Gregory Bateson refers to as the “metacommunicative” relationship between them, whereby the shared but unspoken body of cultural knowledge speaks to the relationship between storyteller and audience.⁴⁴

Storytellers who wish to convey Native stories in media other than oral tradition face difficult choices. As Louis Owens has pointed out in relation to American Indian novels, “every word written in English represents a collaboration [with the colonising culture] ... as well as a reorientation... from the paradigmatic world of oral tradition to the syntagmatic reality of written language.”⁴⁵ Similar reorientations and collaborations occur during the creation of indigenous film texts. Victor Masayesva observes that, “Each new medium of conveyance... poses a tremendous challenge to the tribal person.” Storytellers must decide what “is so important that it must be shared” and, assuming their chosen audience includes those outside of their specific tribal culture, how best to express their knowledge so that it will be understood by the broader community.⁴⁶

For Native writers and filmmakers, it is a challenge to translate the dynamism of oral storytelling performances into media that are usually perceived, to varying degrees, as fixed and static and, with the exception of theatre, physically distanced from their intended audience. Recreating the collective nature of oral tradition in modes of transmission such as the novel, where an identifiable author and an implied audience not necessarily cognisant with the historical, geographical and cultural contexts of the story are the norm, represents a significant challenge to Native storytellers.

⁴⁴ Gregory Bateson, quoted by Deborah Tannen in “The Oral/Literate Continuum,” 2.

⁴⁵ Owens, *Other Destinies*, 6.

⁴⁶ Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism,” 229, 237.

This change in relationship between storyteller and audience – from one in which storyteller and audience have face to face contact and shared cultural knowledge to one in which the audience is abstracted – temporally and physically displaced from the storyteller – is compounded by what is generally a dichotomous view of the ways in which oral and literate traditions function.⁴⁷ Wallace Chafe argues that typical “involvement” with and “detachment” from the audience for oral storytellers and writers respectively has profound implications for the form and structure of narratives in general. For example, in an oral storytelling environment, the form of the narrative is, as noted above, essentially experiential, the physical presence of an audience compels the storyteller to convey “what he or she has in mind in a way that reflects the richness of his or her thoughts – not to present a logically coherent but experientially stark skeleton, but to enrich it with the complex details of real experiences.” Writers, however, according to Chafe, generally focus less on “experiential richness” and more on producing a “consistent and defensible” text that will “stand the test of time” when read by different individuals at different times and in different places.⁴⁸

Native American writers wishing to translate the dynamism of the oral tradition into written literature must, then, invent ways of writing that overcome this perceived dichotomous rift between oral and literate tradition, to recreate the interactive relationship between storyteller and audience. On the other hand, the visual literacy of film narratives occupies an interesting middle ground straddling the conceptual border between the author-originating narratives of written text and the

⁴⁷ Heath, “Protean Shapes in Literacy Events,” 91.

⁴⁸ Wallace L. Chafe, “Integration and Involvement In Speaking, Writing, and Oral Literature,” in *Spoken and Written Language*, ed. Tannen, 45.

“authorless” communal and collaborative texts of oral literature.⁴⁹ The process of making a film, for example, is essentially a collaborative and communal enterprise and one that obviously has potential for the expression of “experiential richness” over “logical coherence.”

This kind of negotiation between oral and written traditions is evident in a number of films and written texts produced by Native Americans. A well-known example would be N. Scott Momaday’s (Kiowa) *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.⁵⁰ Momaday juxtaposes – in more or less distinct paragraphs – oral tradition in the form of stories and collective tribal memories, Momaday’s personal testimony in the form of his journey in search of his Kiowa tribal heritage, and non-Native voices in the form of anthropological or historical accounts of the Kiowa. Other Native storytellers use different methods of reconciling oral and literate traditions. In *Write It on Your Heart*, Harry Robinson (Okanagan) blends elements of oral and written literature, creating what Thomas King refers to as “interfusalional” literature, characterised by an “oral syntax” that encourages the reader to read aloud, thus recreating the oral performance and the interaction between storyteller and audience.⁵¹

Unlike written literature and film, theatre, according to Drew Hayden Taylor, is a logical extension of the oral storytelling process, a natural transition of the “journey” travelled by an audience under the guidance of a storyteller, onto the stage. Furthermore, Taylor observes, theatre enables playwrights to write more or less in

⁴⁹ Owens, *Other Destinies*, 9-11.

⁵⁰ N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, illustrated by Al Momaday (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969).

⁵¹ Harry Robinson, *Write It On Your Heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan Storyteller*, comp. and ed. Wendy Wickwire (Vancouver, B.C.: Talonbooks/Theytus, 1989); Harry Robinson, *Nature Power: In the Spirit of an Okanagan Storyteller*, comp. and ed. Wendy Wickwire (Vancouver, B.C.: Talonbooks, 2004); Thomas King, “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” 13.

the same way that people talk and thus not be beholden to the grammatical rules of literate tradition.⁵² Diane Glancy (Cherokee) observes that Native theatre combines shadow and real worlds, boundary crossing, voices and interactions and is “a new oral tradition with breath that is the condition of performance.”⁵³

However, the storyteller-audience relationship in theatre differs from the storytelling environment in oral tradition in several key respects, for example, in the transition from intimate, family-based groupings to larger, culturally diverse audiences. Taylor recalls a performance when a predominantly white audience sat uncomfortably through the first half of one of his plays, peppered with politically incorrect humour about Indians, only beginning to enjoy the humour when the presence of amused Natives in the audience provided the non-Native members of the audience with “permission” to laugh.⁵⁴ Theatrical didascalia – glossaries, forewords, stage directions and ethnographic material, for example – enables dramatists to illuminate culturally specific elements for non-Native audiences, reconciling the gap between an intimate audience with a shared yet unspoken cultural knowledge and a culturally “alien” audience consisting largely of non-Natives.⁵⁵

Given the prevalence of humour in Native oral traditions, it is not surprising that humour is a frequently occurring feature in other storytelling forms adapted by Natives. In addition to the functions of humour noted above, for storytellers working in film, written literature and theatre, humour has a number of supplementary purposes. The use of humour makes it easier, for example, for difficult subjects to be

⁵² Taylor, “Alive and Well,” 256.

⁵³ Diane Glancy, “Further (Farther): Creating Dialogue to Talk about Native American Plays” in *American Gypsy: Six Native American Plays* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 200.

⁵⁴ Taylor, *Funny, You Don’t Look Like One, Two, Three*, 90-93.

⁵⁵ Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage*, 7.

broached, especially in a context where the majority of audience members are not Native and might find it difficult to accept criticisms of European American policy, actions and attitudes towards Native peoples. For example, in Drew Hayden Taylor's film *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew*, which explores humour in Canadian aboriginal communities, the comedian Don Burnstick (Cree) describes humour as an "invisible cultural bridge" between Native and Caucasian audiences. He continues, "Yeah, we're different but let's laugh, you know... with the redskin thing, it's a racist word one-time, probably still is, but what I did, I jumped into that racism, that stereotype and twisted it and made it funny." Stand-up comedian Don Kelly (Ojibway) often begins with a joke in which he explains that his "Indian" name translates as "Runs-like-a-girl," relaxing his audience with non-threatening humour before moving onto a series of jokes that deal with the more serious consequences of racism and colonialism.⁵⁶

Thus, humour can diffuse racial and cultural tensions by giving non-Native people the opportunity to laugh at or with Native people without fear of accusations of political incorrectness or prejudice, as in the example by Taylor given above. Humour, then, provides a way of re-creating the storyteller-audience interaction from oral tradition in various forms of contemporary media. However, as well as being used as a tool for recreating the storyteller-audience relationship, humour can also be used to privilege Native audiences over non-Native audiences, reinforcing cultural boundaries and social cohesion through the use of "in-jokes" that will not be "readable" to outsiders.

Some writers, artists and filmmakers choose not to attempt to reconcile oral and literate traditions. Victor Masayesva's films *Hopiit* and *Itam Hakim Hopiit*, for

⁵⁶ Drew Hayden Taylor, *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew* (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 2000).

example, filmed entirely in Hopi and lacking any kind of contextualisation for non-Hopi audiences, privilege instead a Hopi audience, and reflect back onto a non-Hopi audience a sense of otherness that is more often projected onto Native cultures by the European-American majority.⁵⁷ Similarly, the Navajo (Diné) poet Rex Lee Jim has produced a volume of poetry entirely in the Navajo language without translation.⁵⁸

As noted above, it is problematical to infer from these examples a universal “Native American philosophy of knowledge,” or even a universal model of Native American storytelling, because of the distinctness of tribal cultures and the tribally-specific ways in which bodies of knowledge are sustained, interpreted and disseminated. I will discuss the issue of tribally-specific philosophies of knowledge in detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, but for the purposes of illuminating the potential difficulties arising between Native American and academic epistemologies it is perhaps helpful to summarise some of the general trends that may be surmised from the various examples given above.

“Meaning” in Native American discourse, whether in stories transmitted through the oral tradition, or in contemporary media, is dependent on the exact context of the exchange between knowledge-giver and knowledge-receiver. Moreover, this knowledge, even when highly complex and abstract, tends to be negotiated experientially, by individuals within socially cohesive groups, such that knowledge dissemination becomes a culturally charged shared experience. This, in turn, emphasises the communal ownership of knowledge and the individual responsibility attached to knowledge acquisition and dissemination. Meaning is

⁵⁷ Victor Masayesva, Jr., (director) *Hopiit*, (IS Productions, Hotevilla, Arizona, 1980); Victor Masayesva, Jr., (director), *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* (IS Productions, Hotevilla, Arizona, 1984); Elizabeth Weatherford, “To End and Begin Again: The Work of Victor Masayesva, Jr. (Video Artist)” *Art Journal* Vol.54 12.01 (1995): n.p., available via <http://elibrary.com>, accessed 25 September 2001.

⁵⁸ Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo, eds., introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writing of North America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 25.

often aporetic, with the complexity and significance not necessarily explained by the knowledge-giver at the time of transmission, but requiring possibly extended periods of reflection on the part of the knowledge-receiver in order for the information to become meaningful. In other words, in Native American philosophies of knowledge it is not only the destination but also the journey that matters.

Academic Philosophies of Knowledge

Generalising about non-Native philosophies of knowledge is equally as dangerous as generalising about Native knowledge although, again for the purposes of clarifying the epistemological tension arising between Native and academic philosophies, I will have to indulge, briefly. However, I would stress that whatever generalisations one can make about academic knowledge cannot necessarily be inferred to apply to European and other Western cultures outside of the academic domain. In this section, although I will be discussing certain general characteristics of academic discourse, especially those that have been highlighted by Native scholars as being problematical in relation to Native discourse, I wish to emphasise that these features should not be taken to represent non-Native discourse as a whole and are, in fact, illustrative only of a specific set of learned cultural rules regarding knowledge that operate within academic environments. These “rules” regarding knowledge in the academy do not necessarily translate to European America and Europe generally. Neither do they necessarily represent the ways in which individuals, even scholars, understand and negotiate knowledge outside of the academy.

Sarris argues that the kind of critical thinking taught to students in universities is “a set of [dominant] cultural norms associated with modes of a specific and culturally based type of critical thought, and the subjects examined are those

within a given knowledge base established and maintained in very specific ways.”⁵⁹

Sarris is correct, of course. Academic discourse does constitute “a culturally based type of critical thought” and is “established and maintained in very specific ways.”

As Sarris also notes, in academia survival is dependent upon specialised knowledge.⁶⁰

However, as Richard Rorty has pointed out, notions of “science,” “rationality,” “objectivity,” and “truth” are tightly interwoven in Western scholarly understanding of knowledge.⁶¹ This perception is inherited from the Enlightenment, resulting in a hierarchical system that ranks science as the highest form of knowledge, whereby knowledge is arrived at through rational argument. This hierarchy, based on empiricist and positivist epistemologies, draws a clear distinction between science, which is viewed as “genuine knowledge” and other belief systems such as “myth” and religion.⁶²

Because, again according Rorty, “science is thought of as offering ‘hard,’ ‘objective’ truth” and truth is conceived of as a “correspondence to reality,” then those working in the social sciences, such as anthropologists, and the humanities, such as literary critics, must “worry about whether they are being ‘scientific,’ whether they are entitled to think of their conclusions, no matter how carefully argued, as worthy of the term ‘true’.” One way, he argues, for humanists to overcome this insecurity is to mimic scientific discourse and propose hypotheses that can be verified (or falsified) using objective and reasoned arguments. This

⁵⁹ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 153.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶¹ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 35.

⁶² Ted Benton and Ian Craib, eds., *The Philosophy of Social Science: The Philosophical Foundations of Social Thought* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 13.

“scientific” model for arriving at the “truth” is one of the key features of academic discourse in virtually all disciplines.⁶³

Tony E. Jackson concurs, arguing that the model of “establishing claims” in the disciplines of both science and literary criticism is almost “universal.” Papers presented in both disciplines generally consist of “an introduction in which you lay out some issue or question... a body or middle that considers in a systematic way some significant evidence in relation to the issue or question, and... a conclusion of some kind.”⁶⁴ According to Jonathan Gottschall, literary scholars have long been troubled by an inferiority complex brought about by centuries of skulking around in libraries, reading and making insightful but essentially useless comments about novels, while scientists “brilliantly [illuminate] the most persistent mysteries,” of the universe. This inferiority complex, “a secret monster gnawing at the self-regard of literary studies,” has resulted in “frantic groping [for] some ‘central hypothesis’ or ‘coordinating principle’ that will bring coherence, power, and renewed prestige to literary study.”⁶⁵

This tendency to seek out what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as “grand narratives” is also present in the field of history.⁶⁶ Gilbert and Tompkins point out that western or academic understanding of history has “generally figured as true, immutable, and objective” in dialectical opposition to fiction, characterised as

⁶³ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 35.

⁶⁴ Tony E. Jackson, “‘Literary Interpretation’ and Cognitive Literary Studies,” *Poetics Today* 24, no. 2 (2003): 192; See also Michael A.R. Biggs, “The Rhetoric of Research,” in *Common Ground Proceedings of the Design Research Society International Conference at Brunel University*, ed. David Durling and John Shackleton (Stoke-on-Trent: Staffordshire University Press, 2002). Biggs clarifies that “Research is systematic in the sense that it is *comprehensive*” (115; emphasis added).

⁶⁵ Jonathan Gottschall, “The Tree of Knowledge and Darwinian Literary Study,” *Philosophy and Literature* 27, no.2 (2003): 261-262.

⁶⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, introduction to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiii-xxiv.

“untrue, changeable, and subjective.” History, they argue, “validates a project” in a way not ascribed to fiction and since the “truth value... of orthodox history derives from the contingency of its closure in written form, such history characteristically privileges the tests of literate societies while discounting all other narratives by troping them as fiction... dismiss[ing] as less significant all methods of ‘story-telling’ but their own.”⁶⁷

One result of this tendency towards closure, the search for a grand hypothesis, in literary criticism is what Patrick Hogan terms as the practice of “confirmation bias,” which he describes as a “universal tendency to seek out and to recognize evidence supporting strongly held beliefs, while failing to seek or even to recognize evidence contradicting those beliefs.”⁶⁸ Tony Jackson concurs, arguing that critics (himself included) propose hypotheses that they then seek to confirm “one way or another” in their chosen texts.⁶⁹ Michael A.R. Biggs argues, further, that in the arts scholars operate within an episteme “from which we are conceptually unable to escape. It is therefore meaningless to apply a coherence test since within an episteme nothing will ever be incoherent.”⁷⁰

These trends are evident in what is generally understood to be valuable knowledge in a scholarly research environment. Biggs, referring to guidance issued by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) and the Research Assessment

⁶⁷ Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 107.

⁶⁸ Patrick Colm Hogan, *Philosophical Approaches to the Study of Literature* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), 336, quoted by Tony E. Jackson, “‘Literary Interpretation’ and Cognitive Literary Studies,” 200.

⁶⁹ Jackson, “‘Literary Interpretation,’” 200. This is in marked contrast to the procedures of testability and falsifiability that are employed in the natural sciences as a means to test hypotheses (199-200).

⁷⁰ Michael A.R. Biggs, “Learning from Experience: Approaches to the Experiential Component of Practice-Based Research,” in *Forskning, Reflektion, Utveckling*, ed. Håkan Karlsson, (Stockholm: Swedish Research Council, 2004), 14.

Exercise (RAE) in the United Kingdom, defines one criterion of good research as generating “answers/solutions/responses that are useful to us.” This does not, he qualifies, necessarily mean that these answers must be “true.”⁷¹ Neither, I would add, does this definition necessarily imply that the results of research must be useful to the *subjects* of that research.⁷² In order for knowledge to be useful, in an academic context, it must also be communicated, disseminated and made available to others. Thus, for knowledge gained from research to be communicable it must, then, be made explicit and unambiguous.⁷³

This brief account of academic philosophies of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences highlights in particular those characteristics of academic discourse that Native scholars find problematical in terms of its relationship to Native discourse. It is possible, from the outlines given above, to draw a somewhat oppositional comparison between academic and Native discourses. In later chapters, I will explore the possibility that academic and Native philosophies do not, in fact, occupy such seemingly opposite poles of a theoretical spectrum of discourse, that they are, in fact, reconcilable. However, for the purposes of contextualising the debates around Native and academic epistemologies and understanding more fully the objections raised by so many Native scholars it is useful for the time being to

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² See, for example, Devon A. Mihesuah, remarks posted to the H-AmIndian Discussion Logs in response to the question, “To What Extent Do Scholars Have a Responsibility to the Indigenous Communities They Study and How Can They Fulfill [sic] this responsibility?” 16 April 2003. Available at <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-amindian&month=0304&week=c&msg=a8TjTxcvFfWtkUJiKsuJeQ&user=&pw=>. Mihesuah states: “Degrees, grants, fellowships, awards and book contracts have been bestowed upon hundreds of scholars who write about Natives and there is no question that many scholars prosper from their work, while for the most part the subjects of their studies do not... what, exactly, are the missions of these Native studies programs? Do they exist to educate interested students about the realities of Native life and to collaborate to find solutions to myriad troubles faced by Native America, or do these programs exist to create jobs for those literature, history, policy, anthropology, psychology, humanities and religion professors who “study” Natives but won’t lift a finger to help them?”

⁷³ Biggs, “Leaning from Experience,” 13-15.

stick with these definitions. Thus, in the academy, according to the characteristics outlined above, knowledge is generally subject to grand hypotheses, which may override local context and, because of the need to communicate research to others, need to be presented in a way which is fixed and unambiguous. In Native philosophies of knowledge, however, meaning tends to be context-dependent, experiential and ambiguous, requiring lengthy reflection on the part of the knowledge-receiver and, as such, cannot easily be extracted from its context.

The Relationship between Academic and Native American Philosophies of Knowledge

A number of issues problematising the relationship between academic and Native discourse have been raised by scholars such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Lakota), Devon A. Mihesuah (Choctaw), Greg Sarris, Vine Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux), Craig S. Womack, Donald L. Fixico (Creek/Seminole/Shawnee/Sac and Fox) and Angela Cavender Wilson. Charges levelled at the academy include (1) that scholars attempt to impose Western conceptions of truth, objectivity and veracity onto Native texts that are grounded in very different ways of knowing; (2) that the seemingly objective, value-neutral language that academics are trained to use decontextualises Native stories by encouraging scholars to ignore their own subjective interaction with the texts and gives an air of finality to an account that is essentially provisional; (3) that the cultural translation of oral tradition into written texts decontextualises stories, stripping them of value and meaning, and confers upon the scholar the power to recontextualise the stories according to their own agendas and; (4) that scholars often fail to account for their own presence in the storytelling event and the ways in which this presence impacts upon the specific context and therefore the meaning of the story.

The principal reason for such tensions is located in the differing philosophies of knowledge circulating within academic and Native cultural communities. Anne Waters (Seminole) notes that American Indian philosophy “embodies epistemologies and metaphysics totally different from what has come to be known as ‘Western’ thought,” and suggests that Native and academic epistemologies of knowledge provide a distinguishing boundary between Native and Western thought.⁷⁴ She writes:

Western philosophy cannot accept that there are some things that cannot or should not be known because Western philosophy operates by a fundamental belief that more knowledge is better, and all knowledge is propositional type. Indian philosophy, on the other hand, entertains a way of knowing by direct access, or awareness of experience, i.e. an integrated “how-to” knowing.... The knowing is in the performance, or ceremony.... Indian knowing is not propositional knowledge that can be had about the ceremony.... To know is to *synthesize* the information in living... one must be very old and accumulate much information before wisdom, or the synthesis of that information, occurs.⁷⁵

Tuhiwai Smith notes that Western ways of knowing have been institutionalised as superior to indigenous ways of knowing, and that establishing what she terms as the “positional superiority of Western knowledge,” has been implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the development of Western educational philosophies from the Enlightenment onwards.⁷⁶ Cook-Lynn remarks, with reference to studies of American Indian literature, that the academy “flaunts the right to institutionalize knowledge in accordance with its own American literary canonical interests,” and, as such, “is very nearly unacceptable to Indian Nations.”⁷⁷ Donald L.

⁷⁴ Anne Waters, ed., introduction to *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), xv-xvii.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁷⁶ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 59-65.

⁷⁷ Cook-Lynn, “Literary and Political Questions of Transformation,” 51. See also Fixico, *The American Indian Mind*, 105-123, for a discussion of the development and current status of Native American studies in U.S. institutions.

Fixico raises the issue of cultural patrimony in academia and notes that non-Indian scholars have made their livings out of writing about Indians and received plaudits for becoming “Indian experts,” to such a degree that it has become an exploitative practice. Fixico asks the crucial question, “What have [non-Indian scholars] given Indian people in return?”⁷⁸

The institutionalising of Western philosophies of knowledge as superior to indigenous philosophies of knowledge has serious consequences for the study of Native American discourse because of the difficulties facing even well-meaning scholars who tend to interpret Native American discourse within their own academic cultural mindsets.

Brill de Ramírez, for example, notes that scholars have a tendency to read, understand and evaluate narratives within theoretical frameworks that privilege Western ideas of knowledge and meaning and therefore may not be appropriate for accessing meaning in narratives grounded in alternative ways of knowing, leading to possible misunderstanding and misinterpretation. This difficulty is compounded by the privileging of the critic’s voice in written criticism achieved at the expense of American Indian voices in the narrative that are silenced or marginalised, or serve only to authorise the critic’s own conclusions.⁷⁹

A number of Native commentators have argued that Western scholarly tendencies to promote the belief in a grand narrative dates back further than the enlightenment and is, in fact, a product of the Judeo-Christian worldview. This is the idea that there is only one truth, only one way of knowing, and that, as the late

⁷⁸ Fixico, *The American Indian Mind*, 126.

⁷⁹ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 1, 70. See also Sarris *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 123-128 and Dennis Tedlock, “Interpretation, Participation, and the Role of Narrative in Dialogical Anthropology,” in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, ed. Mannheim and Tedlock, 253-254.

Michael Dorris (Modoc) phrased it, “Europeans alone” know what this is. Thus, according to Dorris, “to admit that other, culturally divergent viewpoints are equally plausible is to cast doubt on the monolithic center of Judeo-Christian belief.”⁸⁰

Tomson Highway puts it succinctly, describing Western scholarly tradition as “the Genesis to Revelations” method of doing history.⁸¹ By interpreting indigenous history within a framework defined by “the Genesis to Revelations” method, “indigenous history,” according to Penny van Toorn, becomes a “contradiction in terms” because the “storied construct” of European and Euro-American history is defined “precisely in terms of what indigenous cultures lacked.”⁸²

Michel Foucault has observed that “one ‘fictions’ history starting from a political reality that renders it true.”⁸³ The “political reality” that Western scholars have traditionally started from in terms of “fictioning” a history of Native America is one where Euro-American discourse has not only marginalised American Indian cultures but has also invented a replacement cultural image, reflecting its own concerns and desires, to substitute for the American Indian identities it has attempted to evict. The invented Indian of the European American imagination has, ironically, formed a crucial component of the dominant discourse’s own identity metanarrative. As both Louis Owens and Robert Baird have explained, the invented Indian functions not only as a justification of colonisation and/or genocide – rationalising European occupation of a “virgin” land (un)inhabited by “savage” Indians – but also

⁸⁰ Dorris, “Native American Literature in an Ethnohistorical Context,” 147-62.

⁸¹ Tomson Highway, “Nanabush in the City,” interview with Nancy Wigston *Books in Canada* (March 1989): 8, quoted in Marlene Goldman, “Mapping and Dreaming: Native Resistance in *Green Grass, Running Water*,” *Canadian Literature* 161/162 (Summer/Autumn 1999): 30.

⁸² Penny van Toorn, “Stories to Live In: Discursive Regimes and Indigenous Canadian and Australian Historiography,” *Canadian Literature* 157 (Autumn 1998): 42.

⁸³ Michel Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy*, ed. Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979), quoted in van Toorn “Stories to Live In,” 42.

as a tool through which, by appropriating and becoming the Indian of their own imaginations, Euro-Americans can establish and validate an intimate relationship with the “virgin” space they have occupied and which is so integral to their own self-conception.⁸⁴ Thus, from a postcolonial perspective, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue, “historical objectivity” is nothing more than a myth itself.”⁸⁵

The problem with the Western “grand narrative” methodology, according to Wilson, is that it denies the possibility of other “truths”, assumes that only a theory, testable and provable by scientific method, has any veracity and fails to acknowledge “that there may be more than one ‘right’ version.”⁸⁶ As a result epistemologies, or theories of knowledge, that subscribe to different notions of truth, reality or history tend to be marginalised and regarded as having less authority than the “scientific” version valued in scholarly discourse. Cook-Lynn, discussing indigenous autobiography, criticises scholars “who ‘seek truth’ through scientific methodology demanding that ‘memoirs’ be factual and truthful,” pointing out that those who remain open to “new epistemologies” may “understand the act of remembering in a variety of different ways, [and] find the works useful as a way of ‘knowing,’ rather than a way of ‘truth.’”⁸⁷

The problem for scholars is that generally agreed research criteria demand the ability to explicate knowledge unambiguously. As Conkling points out, “in the sciences [and by implication the humanities in which, as noted above, truth claims

⁸⁴ Owens, *Mixedblood Memories*, 42-47; Robert Baird, “‘Going Indian’: *Dances With Wolves*,” in *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the American Indian in Film* ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 153-169 for a discussion of this phenomenon.

⁸⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 356.

⁸⁶ Wilson, “Power of the Spoken Word,” 113.

⁸⁷ Cook-Lynn, “How scholarship defames the Native Voice...and Why,” 85.

are based on a scientific model]... to say that one knows a law or a theorem but cannot state it is unacceptable.”⁸⁸ Thus, a seemingly unbridgeable chasm arises in terms of conducting scholarly research into American Indian literatures, whereby the scholar is placed into the ethically dubious position of having to attempt, in order to meet generally accepted research criteria, to explicate and therefore freeze, or make static, accumulative, experiential wisdom that is constitutive of an individual’s lifelong dynamic relationship with a given culture.

The tension between the two types of knowledge – the experiential, accumulated wisdom characterised in oral tradition and the explicit, unambiguous knowledge necessary in an academic domain – is, I am suggesting, at the heart of the problem of interpreting and representing American Indian narratives in scholarly works. Beck and Walters note that, “in ‘Western civilization,’ the trend had been to separate knowledge from the sacred.”⁸⁹ Cook-Lynn notes that, specifically in relation to “informant-based” Native biographies, that ambiguity, “the essential ingredient of art, literature, *and humanity*” is often sacrificed in favour of a Western oriented understanding of “truth.”⁹⁰ Vizenor notes an essential impulse behind anthropology and Western scholarship in general towards “stasis,” the desire to impose “a single idealistic definition of tradition [upon] tribal culture[s].” Vizenor refers to such static definitions as “terminal creeds” and believes that they are particularly damaging to Native American peoples whose cultural survival has been dependent on an ability to absorb and adapt new elements.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Robert Conkling, “Expression and Generalization in History and Anthropology,” *American Ethnologist* 2, no.2 (May 1975), 240.

⁸⁹ Beck and Walters, *The Sacred*, 47.

⁹⁰ Cook-Lynn, “American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story,” in *Natives and Academics*, ed. Mihesuah, 123.; emphasis in original.

⁹¹ Vizenor, interview by Coltelli in *Winged Words*, 172.

Biggs notes that experiential knowledge tends to occupy a lesser status within academic domains, an attitude inherited from the Greek philosophers, with the result that experiential knowledge has “been marginalised and thought to be imperfect or second-rate in comparison with intellectual pursuits.”⁹² Interestingly, Biggs, inadvertently replicates the assumption of lesser status for experiential knowledge by characterising the explicit, unambiguous knowledge valued in research as “cognitive” (knowing, perceiving, thinking), which, in turn implies that experiential knowledge does not involve a cognitive process. This dichotomy perhaps arises because Biggs is discussing practice based research in the arts and not knowledge grounded in oral tradition. It should be apparent by now, however, that the kind of experiential knowledge disseminated through storytelling in orally informed cultures is at least as complex as the kind of explicit knowledge disseminated through academic research. Both explicit, unambiguous knowledge and implicit, experiential knowledge are “cognitive” but the route to cognition is radically different.

Hexter defines experiential knowledge as that which is known “not with [the] discursive intellect but with [the] whole person.”⁹³ Biggs provides a more complex definition, identifying three principle types of experiential knowledge – that which is explicit and can be expressed linguistically, that which is tacit, including “an experiential component that cannot be efficiently expressed linguistically,” and that which is ineffable and cannot be expressed linguistically.⁹⁴ Thus, even where a scholar wishes to incorporate an experiential element into his or her research, Biggs

⁹² Biggs, “Learning Through Experience,” 8.

⁹³ J. H. Hexter, “The Rhetoric of History,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 6, ed. David Sills (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 370, quoted by Conkling in “Expression and Generalization,” 240.

⁹⁴ Biggs, “Learning Through Experience,” 6.

notes a representational problem in that experiential knowledge often cannot be expressed linguistically, resulting in “semantic ambiguity.” This ambiguity increases relative to the complexity of a given experience, to the degree that highly abstract concepts of the kind that may be experienced through lifelong cultural immersion in tribal storytelling, rely “on the suspension of semantic analysis.” However, as Biggs further notes, “It is the aim of research to be unambiguous. Therefore identifying and pointing to experiential feeling is at the margins of possibility.”⁹⁵

Thus, even were scholars to accept on equal terms indigenous ways to truth and knowledge, expressing those truths and wisdoms in a format acceptable as communicable research is highly problematic. A number of Native and non-Native scholars have observed that the stylistic conventions of academic writing, where objective and value-neutral language and distance are valued, encourages a “monologic” interpretation of narratives that excludes interaction and therefore Native voices. Creation of distance is, according to Rorty, inherited from the “objectivist tradition” and “centers around the assumption that we must step outside our community long enough to examine it in the light of something which transcends it.”⁹⁶ However, objective, distanced language tends to conceal the process of inner dialogue undertaken by the academic in order to reach the point at which they were at when a particular paper was written, implying an air of finality and authority to an account that is essentially provisional.

As the anthropologists Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim, among others, have pointed out, “objective” academic writing tends to be presented as the analysis by a scholar of a text somehow separate from the original narrative produced by a

⁹⁵ Biggs, “Learning from Experience,” 10; emphases added.

⁹⁶ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 22.

storyteller, author, or filmmaker, when in fact both the initial text or performance event and the subsequent analytical discourse are part of the same process and are both joint constructions of all the participants. Not only does this process obscure the voices of the Natives, who are jointly responsible for the construction of the encounter, it also drowns out the voices of “a multiplicity of other voices” including “those of the writer in an earlier role as field-worker, or those of alternative interpretations or rival interpreters.”⁹⁷ Thus, not only is the scholar drowning out the voices of the Natives involved in constructing the speech event, he or she is also drowning out his or her own “inner voice” and the dialogic process, the interaction between the many voices involved in the construction of discourse, is artificially concealed. This is particularly ironic in the case of Native discourse because it is that very reciprocal relationship that is so important in discourses grounded in oral tradition.

Tedlock and Mannheim’s observation is also extremely significant in terms of negotiating the epistemological tensions between Native and academic discourses because it clarifies that the most significant difference between Native and academic epistemologies lies in their respective modes of transmission. The process of knowledge acquisition within an academic domain, like Native knowledge, is experiential and subject to reflection over a period of time. Tedlock argues that although all ethnographers “engage in hermeneutical dialogues with the natives, and... shift to an internal dialogue when they puzzle over their memory of what the natives said, or else their recordings or field notes” very often in written ethnographies “the only kind of dialogue... is one in which the natives speak briefly,

⁹⁷ Tedlock and Mannheim, introduction to *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, 3.

on cue, and in support of the views of anthropologists.”⁹⁸ The result of this, according to Tedlock, is that academics reserve the intellectual domain and the power to decide “meaning”, “truth” and “value” for themselves, concealing the intents and voices of natives.⁹⁹

The stylistic conventions of academic writing are designed to filter out the experiential, ambiguous elements of the process, enabling scholars to report only their final conclusions. This is problematic because, as David Murray argues, the conventional objective style contributes to the silencing of Native voices. The objective language of academic discourse, he points out, functions as a “rhetorical strategy” that flattens out the “dialogic” relationship between the Native and the scholar into a smooth, monologic text.¹⁰⁰ The result of this process is that scholars may inadvertently erase traces of Native voices interacting with the scholars by representing the personal experience of the scholar as an objective statement of truth. In other words, the use of “objective” language in academic discourse written about Native texts “smooths out” dialogic discourse and conceals the interaction between Native storyteller and academic story-receiver, casting them respectively into the polarised roles of “text-producer” and “text-interpreter.” It is worth quoting Murray in full on this point:

The constitution of the stance of objectivity... has been shown to be a rhetorical strategy, which involves the turning of personal into impersonal, the erratic and discontinuous dialogue of fieldwork into the smooth, monologic, written text.....The writing subject creates himself implicitly in his writing as an objective “man of science,” by constituting his object of study (the people and their ways) stripped of the subjective and personal

⁹⁸ Tedlock, “Interpretation, Participation and the Role of Narrative,” 253.

⁹⁹ Tedlock and Mannheim, introduction to *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ David Murray, *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), 132.

engagement and dialogue by which he gained what is now presented as knowledge.¹⁰¹

Another significant consequence of filtering out dialogue in scholarly writing is that it enables the scholar to ignore context and, as I and so many others have argued, context is key to understanding the relationship between storyteller and audience. By projecting a falsified objectivity onto an account of a storytelling event, a scholar is removing herself or himself from the specific contextual location that gives the storytelling event its meaning and value. By doing so, the scholar creates the false impression of stepping outside of the specific audience of which she or he is a member, at which point the storytelling event becomes decontextualised and devalued. Objective and distanced criticism encourages scholars to ignore the context of a given performance, specifically the consequences of the critic's own presence as audience member or reader, for the meaning of the narrative. As Sarris puts it, the critics "remove themselves from the present of the occasions of their interaction with whatever they encounter and create in their reports a world from which they attempt to separate themselves and purport to understand and describe plain as day."¹⁰² Most critics, according to Sarris, "do not record their dialogue or even the nature of the dialogue they may have had with what they are reading [or otherwise encountering]. Instead, they report the outcome, what *they* thought and concluded."¹⁰³ Thus, the encounter between critic and narrative is "one-sided and represented textually so that it stays that way."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 129.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 128; emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 129.

This is particularly problematical in terms of the interpretation of orally informed discourses within an academic domain because, as Sarris points out, “the context of orality covers the personal territory of those involved in the exchange, and because the territory is so wide, extending throughout two or more personal, and often cultural, worlds, no one party has access to the whole of the exchange.”¹⁰⁵ By treating a narrative as if it is “complete, self-contained, a thing to dissect rather than to have a relationship with” the narrative is potentially doubly decontextualised because both the context of its production and the context of its performance may be overlooked.¹⁰⁶ Critical writing not only closes – “fixes or makes permanent” – a narrative that is by nature dynamic and open, but also represents as an objective truth one person’s necessarily subjective interpretation of another person or culture’s narrative.¹⁰⁷

Sarris further notes that critics sometimes fail not only to see the limitations of their own scholarship but also to acknowledge the consequences of that scholarship “in a historical and political realm.”¹⁰⁸ Critical activity, according to Sarris, is dependent upon the critic’s own “knowledge base and belief system,” and on its associated forms of presentation and explanation. Ironically, however, the belief system and form of presentation and explanation dominant in the academy is one that traditionally values objectivity and distance. As a result, conventional academic discourse based on the hypothetical-deductive model has limited potential for exposing not only its own “intrinsic limits” but also the critic’s bond to a specific

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

cultural and political reality.¹⁰⁹ A mode of critical discourse that privileges distance and objectivity does not exist in a political and cultural vacuum but is embedded in and legitimated by its own complex historiography. A belief in the sanctity of objectivity, in other words, is paradoxical, because a belief system that values objectivity is not itself objective. Sarris goes so far as to argue that “[objective] critical thinking” is “taught as a normalizing device,”¹¹⁰ and, consequently, critics are not encouraged to “see beyond the norms they use to frame the experiences of others” thus perpetuating a system that “excludes difference, culturally or otherwise.”¹¹¹ Sarris argues that the “guise of objectivism” permits critics the “authority” to interpret and represent others according to the critic’s own terms, “an attitude often affiliated with hegemony and empire.”¹¹² Once narratives produced outside of the dominant culture have been strategically “detached from the site of their production [and performance]” – decontextualised through the process of objective criticism – they can be recontextualised according to the critic’s own framework and are thus “made safe, intelligible on the colonizer’s terms.”¹¹³

The use of objective language and the need for communicability results in a tendency to remove stories from their cultural context, consequently stripping them of the many interconnected layers of shared historical, geographical, and cultural knowledge that confer value and meaning. In the process of translating an oral story, poem, or song, from a Native language into a colonial one and from a dynamic verbal transmission to a static written one it is removed from the “web” of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 68-69, 153.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 153-154.

¹¹² Ibid., 109.

¹¹³ Ibid., 90.

interwoven stories and knowledge that constitutes a particular oral tradition and becomes isolated and decontextualised, an inanimate object instead of a dynamic entity with “a power and a spirit” of its own.¹¹⁴

By stripping the story of context, it becomes, in effect, a “blank canvas” investing the academic as the arbiter of meaning and value, with the power to analyse or (re)construct the story according to his or her own agenda and assumptions. John Miles Foley describes this practice as one of a scholar “impos[ing] an external frame of reference,” and, in the process of textualising the narrative, reducing it to a “dim shadow” of its original self, stripped of “all the performative parameters (voice, music, gesture)... the interactive audience and its participatory influence... the network of indigenous-culture knowledge and belief.”¹¹⁵ The result of scholars’ failure to acknowledge their own situatedness in translating and analysing oral storytelling performances is that the process of “edition and translation” that transforms the storytelling performance into a product for consumption either by other academics or the general public is overlooked and the final product that is presented as an “authentic” version of a Native text is actually nothing of the kind.¹¹⁶

Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) agrees that scholars and students often fail to see limitations of their own objectivity, noting a tendency for European American students of Native literature tend to perceive themselves as being “well-intentioned, benign, culture-free [entities]” who are “devoid of cultural influence and social privilege based on skin color.” As such, these students see themselves as outside both the “*real* audience” for such literature and the “oppressive system” to which the

¹¹⁴ Wilson, “Power of the Spoken Word,” 111.

¹¹⁵ John Miles Foley, Foreword to *Native American Oral Traditions: Collaboration and Interpretation* ed. Evers and Toelken, vii-viii.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vii.

writers are responding and thus remove themselves not only from the storyteller-audience relationship but also from the privileged colonial context within which they are approaching the literature.¹¹⁷

Vizenor argues that Native American written literatures have been “overburdened with critical interpretations based on structuralism and other social science theories that value incoherent foundational representations of tribal experiences.”¹¹⁸ Vizenor criticises literary scholars for “[separating] tribal stories with morphologies and genre representations,” and into categories grounded in colonial perspectives that “have more in common with political theories in the literature of dominance than with the wild memories and rich diversities of tribal and postindian literature.”¹¹⁹ Cook-Lynn argues that Native American literature has been “the captive of western literary theory,” while Womack notes that much Native American literary criticism proceeds on the assumption that “the Indian discovered the novel, the short story, and the poem only yesterday.”¹²⁰

However, perhaps the discipline that has been subjected to the most sustained criticism for its approach to Native America is anthropology, a practice described by Cook-Lynn as “always the handmaiden to colonialism,” and by Vizenor as “an extension of the cultural colonialism of Western expansion.”¹²¹ Vizenor explains further his view that “everything in anthropology is an invention and an extension of the cultural colonialism of Western expansion,” and that “anthropologists believe

¹¹⁷ Justice, “We’re Not There Yet, Kemo Sabe, 258-259.

¹¹⁸ Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 75.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹²⁰ Cook-Lynn, “Literary and Political Questions of Transformation, 51; Womack, *Red on Red*, 3.

¹²¹ Cook-Lynn “How Scholarship Defames the Native Voice,” 81; Vizenor, interview with Coltelli in *Winged Words*, 161.

they are right and what they have methodologically constructed is true because of the socioscientific method. I, on the other hand, think that their methodology is narrow, bigoted, and colonial, however objective they pretend to be.”¹²² As he explains further in his essay “Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games”:

Cultural *anthropologies* are monologues with science; moreover, social science subdues imagination and the wild trickster in comic narratives... anthropologies are remains, reductions of humans and imaginations to models and comparable cultural patterns – social science is institutional power, a tragic monologue in isolation.¹²³

In other words, not only does social science promote the preservation of power within colonial institutions such as universities, it also tends to be monologic which, in Vizenor’s opinion, is antithetical to tribal cultures which, grounded in oral literature, are essentially dialogic in nature. Social science, then, according to Vizenor, “is language closure, a monologue in theoretical contention.”¹²⁴

However, it is perhaps within the disciplines of anthropology and ethnology – partly as a response to such criticisms and partly as a result of the “crisis of representation” engendered by the turn to postmodernism – that the most discernible re-evaluation of the legitimacy and methodology of objective, science-based paradigms has taken place.¹²⁵ This re-evaluation at first entailed a phenomenological critique that acknowledged the importance of dialogue and intersubjectivity in the field, but which continued to hierarchise the relationship between field and disciplinary discourse, in which the “natives were cast in the roles of producers of

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Gerald Vizenor, “Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games,” in *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 187.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 194.

¹²⁵ Murray, *Forked Tongues*, 132.

texts... while the interpretation of these texts was reserved” for the scholar.¹²⁶

Following on from the phenomenological critique of anthropology, according to Tedlock and Mannheim, came a more radical dialogical critique that rejected the privileging of the disciplinary voice, locating it within a multivocal discourse where it “[became] provisional right on its face rather than pretending to finality.”¹²⁷

As Sarris notes, social scientists such as Stephen Tyler have suggested, and ethnologists such as Dennis Tedlock and Barre Toelken have taken, a more reflexive turn, beginning to consider “what lies beyond the spoken word, beyond their perceptual range as listeners and readers, and what that larger context says about their position as literate speakers and writers for and about oral traditions.”¹²⁸ Such scholars, like Sarris, acknowledge the “limits and dangers” of objectivism and emphasise the importance of context in cross-cultural encounters, arguing that scholars participating in such exchanges must engage in reflexive and polyvocalic critical activity that accounts for their “conclusions... their notions of truth and knowledge, and for the political and historical consequences of their work.”¹²⁹

The increasing awareness of dialogue as an alternative epistemology extends to other disciplines, including literary criticism, challenging the “opposing categories of subjective and objective and the rhetorical forms which accompany them.”¹³⁰

Thus, anthropologists and ethnographers have been at the forefront in attempts to

¹²⁶ Mannheim and Tedlock, Introduction to *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, 2.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹²⁸ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 5, 39-40, 122.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³⁰ Murray, *Forked Tongues*, 126, 133.

explore new epistemologies and ways of reflexively and dialogically recording their interaction with the Native narratives.¹³¹

The work of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has been of fundamental importance to the development of greater intersubjectivity in anthropological and ethnological, to the degree that his theories now constitute a ubiquitous present in much contemporary Native American critical theory. Bakhtin suggested that discourse is “heteroglossic” (many-voiced), consisting of interacting and juxtaposing “utterances” each of which is “the product of the interaction of the interlocutors... [and] the whole complex social situation in which it has occurred,” creating new hybridised “languages,” or voices, that, in turn, enter the complex interrelationship that produced them.¹³² In this sense there is no original discourse, only the acceptance, rejection and remoulding of ideologically and historically saturated past utterances.

This process of perpetual interchange and reworking of past utterances, named “dialogism” by Bakhtin’s translators, functions in two distinct ways. Authoritative discourse, such as religious or scientific language, operates in what Bakhtin described as an “externally persuasive” fashion, whereas other, non-authoritative modes of discourse are “internally persuasive.” “Internally persuasive” conversations provide the context for negotiating new dialogues and accepting, modifying or rejecting the ideas expressed by the other participants, after a period of reflection. These responses, whatever they may be, then become part of the ideology that each participant carries forward to his or her next “conversational encounter” (be

¹³¹ See, for example, See also Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), Vincent Crapanzano, *The Fifth World of Enoch Maloney: Portrait of a Navaho*, (New York, Viking, 1969) and *The Fifth World of Forster Bennett: Portrait of a Navaho* (New York: Viking, 1972) and Dell Hymes, *In Vain I Tried to Tell You*.

¹³² Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 260-292.

that another storytelling performance, reading a novel, watching television). The “many voices” that constitute a dialogical encounter encompass not just the current participants, but each and every previous interlocutor those participants have encountered, as well as their own “inner voice” as they reflect on past and current dialogues.¹³³ Although Bakhtin’s focus was the novel, the relevance of his ideas to the relationship between Native American and academic philosophies of knowledge are clear. Bakhtin described the exposure of “forgotten contextual meanings” in conversation through the process of dialogic exchange:

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is, meanings born in the dialogue of past ages, can never be stable (finalised, ended once and for all) - they will always change (be renewed) in the process of the subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context).¹³⁴

The challenge for practitioners in the various fields of Native American studies, and for which Bakhtin’s theories provide the epistemological groundwork, is to find ways to record such “forgotten contextual meanings,” so that they can be “recalled and invigorated in renewed form,” in the course of a scholar’s engagement with a given Native narrative. In this way, as Sarris has noted, narrative and scholar become mutually informing, precipitating an ongoing process of cross-cultural communication and reciprocation in place of epistemological models that impose static and closed interpretations upon texts.¹³⁵

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin quoted by David Shepherd, “Bakhtin and the Reader,” in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, eds. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 97.

¹³⁵ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 87, 128.

Sarris notes that practitioners in the field of literary criticism have thus far found it more difficult to engage with Native narratives in a dialogic and reflexive way than have anthropologists.¹³⁶ However, David Bleich's conception of "intersubjective reading" is similar to recent anthropological theory in that it recognises "culture," "meaning," or "knowledge" to be a joint construction of both the "informant" and the scholar. Bleich proposes that intersubjective reading begins with "recognizing the community" or "thought collective" within which individual readings occur.¹³⁷ This is an important point for scholars of Native literature who wish to develop critical frameworks that enable them to acknowledge explicitly their own position and responsibilities as a co-participating audience member in a storytelling event. Furthermore, according to Bleich, individual readings should be "studied relative to one another in that group" rather than to "an assumed standard of interpretive correctness." Most importantly, group members should include what Bleich terms as "interpersonal history" - "the feelings and memories of social experience" - which become "meaningful only in regard to the present circumstance of public presentation and sharing of readings."¹³⁸ However, the "intersubjective reading" that Bleich is suggesting, while interesting, is of somewhat limited use in the specific context of academic writing about Native texts because it is designed primarily for use by reading communities in the classroom and family and is not, by definition, "susceptible to fluent presentation in a treatise format."¹³⁹ In other words, Bleich's model of intersubjective reading, while encouraging readers to engage with texts in a reflexive and dialogic manner, does not provide the tools to bridge the

¹³⁶ Ibid., 122-123.

¹³⁷ David Bleich, "Intersubjective Reading," *New Literary Theory* 27, no. 3 (Spring 1986), 418.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 419.

representational gap between negotiating a narrative experientially and writing about that experience in a format that conforms to the requirements of written academic papers that research be communicated unambiguously. This is supported by Sarris's observation that Bleich argues in favour of an intersubjective approach to reading while himself employing the kind of "conventional argumentative narratives" that "undermine not only a record of a scholar's interaction with a text" but also "the scholar's autobiography" which, in Sarris's view, ought to be an integral constituent of the intersubjective reading process.¹⁴⁰

In addition to dialogism, the questions raised by postmodernists offer possibilities for the development of Native American literary theories that subvert conventional academic conceptions of "truth" and "knowledge," most notably in the work of Jean-François Lyotard. According to Lyotard, "objective" or "scientific" knowledge has relied on grand narratives or metanarratives *about* knowledge, such as the Enlightenment narrative of "human liberation through knowledge" for its legitimation.¹⁴¹ Thus, it has "always been in conflict with" what is termed "narrative" or "storytelling" knowledge which, because of what Brian McHale refers to as its "deep complicity with our social construction of reality," is self-legitimizing, or locally determined.¹⁴²

Lyotard is not the only scholar to relate postmodern concerns directly to the problem of cultural narratives. Cognate with Lyotard's conception of "objective" and "narrative" knowledge is Rorty's understanding of the two principal ways in which "reflective human beings" try to contextualise their existence, either by

¹⁴⁰ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 6.

¹⁴¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 7, 60.

¹⁴² Brian McHale, "Telling Postmodernist Stories," *Poetics Today* 9, no. 3, Aspects of Literary Theory (1988), 547.

expressing a “desire for solidarity” and “telling the story of their contribution to a community,” or by expressing a “desire for objectivity” and “[describing] themselves as standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality.”¹⁴³

According to Lyotard, scientific and narrative forms of knowledge exist within separate and conflicting frameworks and “it is therefore impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa.”¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, the historian and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn has questioned the usefulness of imagining “that there is some one full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to that ultimate goal,”¹⁴⁵ indicating a move away from the “One Truth” grand narrative criticised by Highway and Dorris.

The idea of a “social bond”, a community consisting of the author and his or her readers is key to understanding Lyotard’s locally-conferred legitimation of knowledge. For examples, in “little narratives,” the “meaning” of the text is a joint construction of all the interlocutors. Lyotard’s observation implies that perhaps the postmodern paradigm provides an arena in which other paradigms, such as metanarratives and “little narratives,” science and story, traditionally thought to incommensurable with one another, can be reconciled. Although he explicitly states that scientific and narrative knowledge are incompatible and cannot be used to validate one another he actually implies the exact opposite of this by suggesting that confidence in the grand narratives that have previously been used to legitimate

¹⁴³ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 21.

¹⁴⁴ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 26.

¹⁴⁵ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 38.

scientific discourse has been eroded and scientists have had to resort to seeking legitimation locally, within a social bond formed between interlocutors in a scientific “collective.” The language games used to construct the “pragmatics” of self-legitimation may be different from those used in non-scientific discourse but the implication for the traditional “oppositional” conception of scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge are clear.¹⁴⁶

For example, scholars such as Jerome Bruner have sought to bestow on narrative knowledge as a “mode of thought” an authority epistemologically and ontologically comparable with the “empirico-logical mode of science”.¹⁴⁷ Steve Woolgar has gone so far as to argue that “there is no essential difference between science and other forms of knowledge production” and that “science cannot be distinguished from non-science by decision rules. Judgements about whether or not hypotheses have been verified (or falsified)... are the upshot of complex social processes within a particular environment.” In other words scientific discourse is beginning to become *locally* legitimated within the “culture of the laboratory setting”.¹⁴⁸ The implications of the postmodern move away from grand narratives to locally conferred legitimation of narratives for the study of Native American storytelling are clear, because the very existence of such epistemological debates demonstrates that the tools for approaching Native American narratives from a more

¹⁴⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 23, 60; McHale, “Telling Postmodernist Stories,” 546.

¹⁴⁷ McHale, “Telling Postmodernist Stories,” 547.

¹⁴⁸ David Herman, “Sciences of the Text,” *Postmodern Culture* 11.3 (2001), n.p., available at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v011/11.3herman.html.

experiential perspective, what Elaine Jahner terms as “reflexive resonance,” are already present.¹⁴⁹

However, it must be stressed that postmodernism generally is also a deeply problematical concept for many Native Americans, largely because of its decentring tendencies that undermine the possibility of a Native centre. As Womack has pointed out, postmodern approaches have a tendency to deconstruct and decentre identity, “including the legitimacy of a Native perspective,” and thus have limited usefulness for previously marginalised groups, where a more useful focus might be to reinforce, reassert and re-centre their existing bodies of literature.¹⁵⁰ Womack cites Abenaki poet Cheryl Savageau’s sceptical assessment of postmodern approaches to history: “It is just now, when we are starting to tell our stories that suddenly there is no truth...If everybody’s story is all of a sudden equally true, then there is no guilt, no accountability, no need to change anything, no need for reparations, no arguments for sovereign nation status, and their positions of power are maintained.”¹⁵¹

Postcolonialism, also, would seem to offer a potential arena for developing Native American critical theory, that redefines the relationships inherent in the colonist-coloniser dichotomy. However, as Louis Owens points out, Native American discourses have thus far been served poorly by postcolonial endeavours. In Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, for example, Native American literature

¹⁴⁹ Elaine Jahner, “Trickster Discourse and Postmodern Strategies,” in *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald Vizenor* ed. A. Robert Lee (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000), 38.

¹⁵⁰ Womack, *Red on Red*, 6.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

is dismissed as a “sad panorama produced by genocide and cultural amnesia.”¹⁵²

Equally disturbing, Owens notes, is the absence even of any mention of Native American writing in Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Write Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*.¹⁵³ One of the problems relating to postcolonial theory and Native American literatures, notes Owens, is that,

America never became postcolonial. The indigenous inhabitants of North America can stand anywhere on the continent and look in every direction at a home usurped and colonized by strangers who, from the very beginning, laid claim not merely to the land and resources but to the very definition of the natives.¹⁵⁴

The situation is no better from a Canadian perspective. Thomas King argues that the key terms underpinning postcolonial theory – pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial – suggest an “unabashed ethnocentrism and well-meaning dismissal.” As such, postcolonialism assumes that the starting point for any discussion of Native literature is the arrival of Europeans in North America, that the conflict between coloniser and colonised is the “catalyst” behind the production of contemporary Native literature. This critical framework functions to cut Native people off from their traditions of continuity and change that were vital forces before colonialism “ever became a question,” and continue to be so. By reducing Native literature predominantly to “a construct of oppression,” the term postcolonial, King argues,

¹⁵² Louis Owens, “As If an Indian Were Really an Indian: Native American Voices and Postcolonial Theory,” in *I Hear the Train: Reflections, Inventions, Refractions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 210, citing Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 304.

¹⁵³ Owens, “As If an Indian Were Really an Indian,” 210; Owens, *Other Destinies*, 7; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back*.

¹⁵⁴ Owens, “As If an Indian Were Really an Indian,” 214.

while striving “to escape to find new centres... remains, in the end, a hostage to nationalism.”¹⁵⁵

In view of its emphasis on the relationship between text and audience and the act of reading as an active process that constructs meaning, reader-response theory would seem to provide a possible alternative methodology for approaching Native American narratives. Although reader-response theorists differ in their conceptions of the reading process some, Wolfgang Iser in particular, have proposed theories of reading that seem to mirror the interactive process between storyteller and audience so significant in stories originating in oral traditions. Iser writes that, “Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient.” The story, or “message” as Iser terms it, is “transmitted in two ways, in that the reader ‘receives’ it by composing it.” This composition is achieved when the reader mentally “bridges the gaps” “between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment... The gaps [in the text] function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves.”¹⁵⁶ Blaeser, for example, makes effective use of reception theory in her book-length study of Vizenor, arguing that his work represents a “simultaneous involvement with tribal oral tradition and reader-response aesthetics,” and that through his use of “multiple forms of ambiguity or indeterminacy... Vizenor strives to compensate for the inadequacies of written language by involving the active imagination of the reader in discovering the unwritten elements of his work.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ King, “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” 10-12.

¹⁵⁶ Wolfgang Iser, “Interaction between Text and Reader,” in *Readers and Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennet (London and New York: Longman Publishing, 1995), 20-31, 20-29.

¹⁵⁷ Kimberly M. Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1996), 12-13.

Other scholars, however, raise the objection that reader-response theory tends to treat the “text” as a disconnected entity divorced from its original storytelling context and thus, as Donald Braid notes, “does not directly deal with the dynamic and emergent qualities of oral performance.”¹⁵⁸ As Iser himself observes, the major difference between reading and social interaction is that there is no face-to-face contact in a reading environment. Thus, he concludes, “a text cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with....The reader... can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate are his views of it.”¹⁵⁹ As a result, reader-response theory overlooks the possibility of the author’s or storyteller’s agency in the interactive relationship between text and reader. The result of this is that a disproportionate amount of power and authority in interpreting the text is transferred to the reader and therefore, while a reading may be interactive it is not reciprocal and the traditional polarised position of the Native as text-producer and the scholar-reader as text-interpreter is sustained. This has led some scholars such as Brill de Ramírez to reject reader-response theory as a means to mediate American Indian literatures, despite its emphasis on discovering meaning through the engagement of the reader with the text because, as she concludes, reader response theory privileges the individual subjectivity of the reader over and above a network of intersubjective relations.¹⁶⁰

Contemporary Approaches to Native American Studies

In 1983, Paula Gunn Allen edited *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*, a series of essays offering suggested course outlines and

¹⁵⁸ Braid, “Personal Narrative and Experiential Meaning,” 7.

¹⁵⁹ Iser, “Interaction Between Text and Reader,” 22.

¹⁶⁰ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 84, 130.

curricula for teaching American Indian Studies programmes in Universities, to

“make available needed critical and pedagogical approaches.”¹⁶¹ Allen notes the principal objectives and aims of the volume as follows:

1. To integrate American Indian literary traditions into the study of American literature at every level. We believe that American literature has drawn heavily on American Indian literature and philosophies...
2. To provide tools to broaden the scope, insights, and approaches of criticism. The writing of literary criticism is a dynamic process; the study of literatures that differ in aesthetics, structure, and style can offer new insights into the aesthetic and expressive dimensions of human experience, and these insights can expand our understanding of the varied modes of human consciousness and the alternatives for living that these differences imply.
3. To enrich university curricula by increasing the number of courses offered and by expanding the content of existing courses to include American Indian materials.
4. To acquaint scholars with the multitude of possibilities for further research presented by American Indian literature. Much necessary research remains to be done in this area.
5. To provide Indian and non-Indian Americans with an understanding, based on sound academic and disciplinary scholarship, of the depth and variety of literary experience to which we are all heir.¹⁶²

The following volume offers a wide range of approaches covering various culture and geographical areas, with additional special focuses on literature written by American Indian women, autobiographies, oral literature and representations of Indians in literature written by non-Indians. What remains consistent throughout the essays on offer, however, is an emphasis on the need for scholars to acquaint themselves with the specific histories, oral traditions of the particular tribal culture pertaining to the literary work being studied and, furthermore, because of the philosophical differences between Native American and non-Native cultures regarding knowledge and aesthetics, must also not only “clarify symbols and

¹⁶¹ Allen, introduction to *Studies in American Indian Literature*, viii.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, viii-ix.

allusions but also must define or describe whole *perceptual-interpretive systems*.”¹⁶³

Allen’s reference to interpretive systems is well-taken. In his recent book *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World*, Donald L. Fixico remarks on the importance of a rounded approach to studying Native peoples, including examination of social, cultural, historical and environmental factors, as well as the more challenging task (for non-Native scholars at least) of incorporating Native epistemologies, such as “the Navajo approach of considering all relations and the Muscogee concept of totality,” when developing critical methods for interpreting Native discourses.¹⁶⁴

Two key questions underpin debates regarding the development of Native American critical theories, especially in a cross-cultural environment involving the interpretation of Native literature by non-Native scholars. First, is the question as to whether cross-cultural critical endeavours in a Native American/academic context are desirable and/or ethical. There is no clear consensus on this issue. In Mihesuah’s edited volume *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, essayists contribute varying perspectives. Fixico promotes an ethical approach to writing American Indian history that involves fostering respect for Native American perspectives by “interpreting research data and writing to take into account the Indian viewpoint,” and the “deliberate removal of ethnocentrism” from one’s attitudes and research methodologies.¹⁶⁵ Duane Champagne (Chippewa), in his essay “American Indian Studies Is for Everyone,” argues in favour of an “open

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, x; emphasis added.

¹⁶⁴ Fixico, *The American Indian Mind*, 126.

¹⁶⁵ Donald L. Fixico, “Ethics and Responsibilities in Writing American Indian History,” in *Natives and Academics*, ed. Mihesuah, 91, 93.

and free forum for discussion among Indian and non-Indian scholars.”¹⁶⁶ While he notes the problematical practice of non-Indian scholars attempting to interpret Indian cultures from within broad and Western-oriented critical frameworks, instead of focusing on specific cultural characteristics, Champagne concludes that, “To say only Indians can study Indians goes too far toward excluding American Indian culture and history from the rest of human history and culture.”¹⁶⁷ In contrast, Karen Gayton Swisher (Standing Rock Sioux) argues that, in the field of Indian education, non-Indian scholars should “question their motives” and stand aside, deferring to Native scholars and contributing only from a secondary position, if at all.¹⁶⁸

My response to this first question is that, in its current form (and I am admittedly speaking from a United Kingdom perspective) the teaching of American Indian studies in universities remains a cross-cultural enterprise. Even in universities with a higher than average concentration of Native students and faculty, cross-cultural exchange, between Native and non-Native, and between different tribal cultures, remains an ever-present reality (tribally-controlled colleges possibly excepted). As such, the field benefits from a respectful cross-cultural approach and ongoing debate as to the most appropriate means for developing respectful methodologies.

This response, however, gives rise to the second question, inherent in both Allen’s attempt to provide guidance to enable scholars to negotiate “whole

¹⁶⁶ Duane Champagne, “American Indian Studies Is for Everyone,” in *Natives and Academics*, ed. Mihesuah, 181.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 182; see also Mihesuah, remarks posted to the H-AmIndian Discussion Logs, in which she notes wryly that Champagne’s contribution to the volume is the one most quoted by non-Indian scholars in order to authorise the participation in Native American studies, while essays that posit a less inclusive perspective on non-Indian scholars are ignored.

¹⁶⁸ Karen Gayton Swisher, “Why Indian People Should Write About Indian Education,” in *Natives and Academics*, ed. Mihesuah, 192.

perceptual-interpretive systems,” and Fixico’s suggestions that non-Indian scholars must not only take into account Native epistemologies, but also work consciously to remove ethnocentrism from the critical approaches. The second question, then, relates to whether non-Indian scholars can actually, in practice, achieve those things that are being asked of them. Is it possible for a non-Indian scholar to take into account Navajo or Muscogee epistemology, or to purge themselves of their ethnocentrism? This dissertation is an attempt to explore this second question, and to put into practice, in the specific cross-cultural context of a British student conducting doctoral research, some of the methodological frameworks that have been suggested as possible critical approaches for non-Native scholars conducting criticism of Native American narratives.

Arnold Krupat argues that most contemporary Native American literary criticism falls into one of three overlapping and mutually dependent categories – cosmopolitanism, indigenism and nationalist. Cosmopolitanism – which Krupat has previously referred to as “ethnocriticism” and is his chosen position – is an overtly cross-cultural practice that incorporates elements of both the indigenist and nationalist approach, but contends that only by interpreting these positions in terms of “*informed* comparison” with one another and with the texts and performances they attempt to interpret can their full interpretive potential be brought to fruition.¹⁶⁹ As such, a cosmopolitan comparative approach is strongly hybrid in its orientation and shares much common ground with approaches variously typified as mixedblood, crossblood, bicultural and mediative, and articulated by scholars such as Owens,

¹⁶⁹ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 19-20. See Arnold Krupat, *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992) for an earlier articulation of his approach.

Vizenor, Sarris and James Ruppert.¹⁷⁰ As an example of a cosmopolitan, or mixedblooded approach, I analyse, in the following chapter, Sarris's 1993 book *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*, with a specific focus on how Sarris's explicitly cross-cultural focus transfers to non-Native scholars conducting similar research.

An indigenist approach, according to Krupat, "foregrounds what is instantiated as a pan-Indian geocentric epistemology, a knowledge different from that of dispersed Europeans and other wanderer-settlers."¹⁷¹ It is upon this conception of "different bodies of systematic knowledge," that indigenist critical perspectives are based, wherein a "particular relationship to the earth," gives rise to "a worldview that can be called traditional or tribal."¹⁷² I would extend Krupat's definition of an indigenist approach to one that posits a view generally about Native knowledge that it is special or unique and, as such, epistemologies that focus on, for example, the matrilineal nature of many Native American cultures, for example the "gynocentric," approach explored by Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop*, which might also be termed a "Nativist" perspective.¹⁷³ In Chapter 3, I select as my indigenist example a non-Native written text, *Contemporary American Indian Literature and the Oral Tradition*, by Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez, as a means of exploring not only how indigenist perspectives might inform the development of critical frameworks, but

¹⁷⁰ James Ruppert, *Mediation in Contemporary American Indian Fiction* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma, 1995). Owens, Vizenor and Sarris as previously cited throughout this chapter.

¹⁷¹ Krupat, *Red Matters*, ix.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 7, 10.

¹⁷³ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, with a new preface (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1992). See Elvira Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 19-57 for a useful discussion of Allen's approach.

also as a means of examining the specific potential and limitations of such an approach for a non-Native scholar.

A nationalist, or separatist, approach, according to Krupat, is characterised by a focus on “Native cultural integrity that underpins Indian claims to autonomy and political self-determination.”¹⁷⁴ In this way, scholarship by Natives about Natives and for Natives becomes an exercise in sovereignty, a political stance that de-emphasises cross-cultural communication and, instead, focuses on developing critical strategies that inhere in tribal oral traditions and cultures. An example of such an approach would be Robert Allen Warrior’s (Osage) *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*, in which he develops an approach that emphasises the development of a specifically Native intellectualism by examining comparatively the intellectualism of Vine Deloria, Jr., and John Joseph Matthews (Osage).¹⁷⁵ In Chapter 4, I take as my key example of a separatist approach Craig S. Womack’s *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, in which he rejects mediative and cosmopolitan approaches and develops, instead, a specifically Creek literary criticism born out of Creek oral and written traditions. I examine Womack’s approach as a means to explore its potential for providing non-Native scholars with the means to conduct tribal-specific research.

In 2003, Elvira Pulitano published *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, in which she discussed the critical approaches of Allen (“Gynosophical”), Warrior and Womack (“Nativist”), Greg Sarris and Louis Owens (“Dialogic”) and Gerald Vizenor (“Trickster Hermeneutics”). Pulitano’s excellent study overlaps with

¹⁷⁴ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 4.

¹⁷⁵ Warrior, Robert Allen *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). See Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 59-78, for a discussion of Warrior’s approach.

my research in several areas, most notably in her focus on Womack and Sarris. What Pulitano does not do, however, is to move beyond her metacritical perspective in a more practical domain. In other words, Pulitano writes excellent theory about the theory of others, but does not attempt to put into practice the theoretical frameworks posited by these scholars and writers, in an attempt to explore the potential and limitations in a cross-cultural context. This seems to me to be a weakness in much of the literature on Native American critical theory; it is all talk and no action. As such, my aim, having explored various critical approaches on a theoretical level, is to put into practice those approaches as a means to discover their potential and limitations for conducting Native American narrative criticism within a cross-cultural context.

Given the issues outlined above, for a non-Native scholar the task of “understanding” and “interpreting” Native texts must become inextricably intertwined with reflexive questions about the methodology and assumptions inherent in Western academic discourse. Implicit in the central argument of this thesis - that context and audience are crucial to understanding Native texts and that scholars must consciously locate themselves within the specific context and audience that exists between Native storytellers and academics - is a challenge to the very conceptual methodology upon which the notions of scholarly objectivity and value-neutrality are based. In the following chapters, I shall attempt to explore further those challenges and to formulate a new approach, a context-specific framework that articulates “reflexive resonance” and ethical research practices.

PART II.
SYNTHESISING A CONTEXT SPECIFIC APPROACH
TO NATIVE AMERICAN NARRATIVES

CHAPTER 2

INTERRUPTIVE STORYTELLING AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS BORDER PEDAGOGY IN GREG SARRIS'S *KEEPING SLUG WOMAN ALIVE*

Don't ask me what it means the story.

Mabel McKay (Cache Creek Pomo)

Meeting an Old Indian Man in Santa Fe

“You sound strange.”

The old man's hair was the colour of cobwebs but it is his eyes I remember most vividly. Sometimes my memory tells me his eyes were a clear, unblinking blue, a reflection of the shimmering New Mexican sky. And sometimes I remember them as milky-white, shrouded with cataracts. I recall clearly the shock of seeing a person in a wealthy country blinded by untreated cataracts, so perhaps this is the true memory.

Katie and I had barely even noticed the old Indian man sitting at the other end of the seat as we chatted about the prospect of our year-long exchange at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He was wearing faded blue-jeans and a brightly coloured waistcoat. Even though we were visiting Santa Fe Indian Market, my first outing since arriving in the States, I had never had a conversation with an Indian person before. I wasn't certain Indian was a polite word to use, or even think.

One thing I had noticed about America, people loved my English accent. “You sound like the Queen,” they told me, or once, “It doesn't sound like swearing when you do it.” But the old Indian man was different. “You sound strange,” he said. It got our attention.

He tilted his head in our direction. “Where are you from?” the old man said, staring at us intently with his blind (or blue) eyes.

“Wales,” said Katie, giving the location of our home university.

“England,” I said, giving the location of our respective home towns.

“Britain,” we giggled, in order to clear up any confusion.

The old man shrugged. “I’ve never heard of that place,” he said.

We repeated ourselves. He shook his head.

“The United Kingdom?” offered Katie, hopefully.

“On the other side of the Atlantic ocean, to the east,” I added, pathetically.

“In Europe. Except it’s an island.” I racked my brains for a way to explain.

“Europe. Hmmm, is it near Spain, this place?”

“Yes,” we chorused, relieved, “north of Spain. Spain is hot and sunny but in Britain, it rains a lot. It’s very green there.”

He told us about Spain. As a child, he had attended a school run by Spanish nuns who taught him about the mother country. The nuns had a map of Spain, he explained, on the schoolroom wall. He asked us what language we spoke in England and we told him. English. He was impressed by this.

“My people,” he said, “lived here first. And then the people came from Europe.” He paused, a slight tremor running through his gnarled fingers. I imagined he was thinking of the things that had happened when the Europeans came. “Now we’re all friends,” he said, softly. I wasn’t sure he was right about that.

I wanted to ask what tribe he was from, but wasn’t sure how to phrase the question respectfully, so said nothing. Katie eyed her camera, but it seemed impolite to ask to take a photograph, almost as rude as referring to somebody as an Indian. I like to think we shook hands with him, but my memory is unclear. We don’t much

shake hands where I come from, so perhaps not. We watched him walk away into the crowd. He should have been shuffling, hunched over with age, but I don't remember it like that. He walked surefooted, with his head held high. I felt a sad, unfamiliar emotion, a mixture of guilt and loss.

The old Indian man's place on the seat was taken by a white lady psychic from Colorado. She told me she loved my accent and that I would soon be embarking on a long journey. She was right about that.

Introduction

In *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*, Greg Sarris (Kashaya Pomo/Federated Graton Rancheria) proposes and practices an intersubjective, storytelling strategy for approaching Native American texts, modelled on the "interruptive" talk and storytelling of Cache Creek Pomo medicine woman, basket weaver and Bole Maru Dreamer Mabel McKay.¹ In the previous chapter, I outlined some of the ways in which Sarris and other scholars see objective, critical discourse as a limiting and potentially colonial approach to understanding Native American narratives. Sarris, proposing that an intersubjective, cross-cultural approach is the way forward to overcoming some of these objections, questions the ways in which individuals read across cultures and asks if there is a way to do this that enables "intercultural communication [to be] opened rather than closed, so that people see more than just what things seem to be?"² More specifically, Sarris is suggesting that scholars or readers of Native American texts should consider the

¹ In 1992 the Federated Coast Miwok organised and were later renamed Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, including Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo people. Sarris was elected tribal chairman and is currently serving his sixth term. He uses the term Coast Miwok throughout *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*.

² Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 3.

“aims and consequences of their readings,” and how their readings are “located in a certain history.”³ The overall aim of Sarris’s approach, he explains, is not to achieve a universal or transparent understanding of the studied text or narrative but to encourage what he refers to as “interruption and risk,” enabling scholars to see and record how the specific context of their own lived experience limits the ways in which they interpret and write about the cultures and experiences of others.⁴

In this chapter, I will examine Sarris’s proposed strategy for reading American Indian texts – what I am referring to as “interruptive storytelling” – and its implications for mediating between Native American and academic philosophies of knowledge. Elvira Pulitano notes the mediative and hybridised focus of Sarris’s strategies and Helen Jaskoski observes Sarris’s intention to “mediate between his Kashaya background and academic or ‘mainstream’ culture.”⁵ Thus, I include *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* here as an example of the critical approach referred to by Arnold Krupat formerly as ethnocriticism and latterly as cosmopolitanism, and variously referred to by others as a “mixedblood,” “mediative,” “comparative,” “bicultural,” or “hybrid” approach.

Such approaches, with their focus on cross-cultural translation, Womack contends, are limited, because they emphasise an assimilationist perspective rooted in “the tragic Indian notions of the early part of this century, the half-breed torn between cultures.”⁶ Furthermore, Womack argues, mediative approaches tend also

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵ Pulitano, *Towards a Native American Critical Theory*, 102; Helen Jaskoski, “California Renaissance,” *College English* 56, no.4 (1994), 468.

⁶ Womack, *Red on Red*, 140. See also Cook-Lynn, “Literary and Political Questions of Transformation, 47-51. Cook-Lynn expands upon Womack’s explanation of the assimilationist impulse underpinning mixed-blood strategies: “The idea of mixed-bloodedness has a strong connection to the Anthropological and Ethnological studies which began by putting in place specific

to posit the assumption that cultural influence and assimilation is a one-way process, with always the Indian being overwhelmed by and forced to “mediate” with white culture.⁷ Referring to what he sees as the predominance of Native critics and writers of mixed-blood descent (as well as non-Native critics) engaging in bicultural and mediative approaches and an over-emphasis on first person perspectives at the expense of tribal and cultural integrity, Womack terms this tendency a “kind of mixed-blood malaise, where blood and marginalization, rather than the ongoing life of the nation, become the overriding issue.”⁸

Cosmopolitanism, as defined by Krupat, incorporates elements of nationalism, separatism and indigenism framed within an overriding comparative and hybridised cross-cultural strategy.⁹ Sarris, as a mixedblood scholar with Kashaya Pomo, Coast Miwok, Filipino and Jewish heritage, partly brought up by an adoptive white family and partly drifting between families, some Indian, in and around Santa Rosa, occupies a borderlands position he describes as often “not a comfortable one to be in.”¹⁰ Thus, I will examine Sarris’s technique in terms of its hybrid approach to philosophies of knowledge whereby he incorporates personal narrative, storytelling and conventional argumentative narrative within a non-hierarchical framework that stresses the importance of cross-cultural communication and dialogism.

tribal stories which were labeled ‘traditional,’ certain storytellers who were described as ‘authentic,’ and particular plots, motifs, and characters which were said to be ‘known’ and, therefore, canonical and static. Following this line of thought, traditional storytelling must end. Almost everything outside of those patterns must be discarded, ‘fictionists’ can not be said to exist, and there is no sense of an on-going literary and intellectual life. The new stories, should they somehow emerge, will always be lesser ones” (49).

⁷ Womack, *Red on Red*, 12, 143.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁹ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 1-23.

¹⁰ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 69-70.

Sarris's strategy, as noted above, is based on the talk of Mabel McKay and as such reproduces certain key features of Native discourse – or, to be more specific, Mrs McKay's Cache Creek Pomo discourse – such as the experiential negotiation of knowledge, ambiguity of meaning, long-term internal reflection on the part of the knowledge-receiver and frustration of closure.¹¹ The “interruptive” element of Sarris's strategy encourages scholars not only to address their personal limitations but to record the nature of their dialogue with a given narrative and write about it in a way that exposes the experiential, reflective and ambiguous nature of their relationship with the narrative, instead of filtering out this material in order to articulate unambiguous, fixed conclusions.

Keeping Slug Woman Alive, I will argue, provides a compelling and satisfying example of exactly the type of intersubjective critical approach Sarris is suggesting other scholars should adopt. For example, Sarris effectively circumvents the closure valued in academic research and substitutes instead a satisfying experiential aesthetic, through storytelling, that promotes an ongoing cross-cultural dialogue. Furthermore, he explicitly avoids privileging either implicit, experiential knowledge or fixed, explicit knowledge and successfully collapses what he refers to as the somewhat “arbitrary dichotomy between academic and non-academic, nonpersonal and personal discourse.”¹² Personal and scholarly narratives should be perceived, Sarris argues, not as “dichotomous and oppositional, but as interrelated and relational, as different voices capable of communicating with and informing one another” in order to allow academic discourse to be “interrogated by and integrated

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹² Ibid., 70, n.7.

with” personal forms of narrative, or, particularly significantly, to extend what is currently defined as “academic” discourse.¹³

Despite these successes, however, Sarris’s method remains limited in a number of key ways. For example, it relies not only on the interruptive nature of a given text, but also on the willingness or ability of a scholar to recognise and acknowledge his or her own personal limitations and, as I will demonstrate, even Sarris sometimes fails to achieve this. Even taking this limitation into account, however, Sarris’s interruptive storytelling provides an effective conduit for encouraging scholars to consider the context of their personal engagement with the text, an important function in itself. The problem lies in finding ways of recording and *representing* that engagement. This is where Sarris’s method is most limited in terms of its potential for other scholars, especially non-Natives, because of the need for scholars to incorporate elements of their own autobiographies into their critical work. Because the power and agency of autobiography is person-specific, Sarris is necessarily privileged by his position as a Native writer in that he has access to a bank of personal lived experiences that relate directly and compellingly to the discussion at hand. He is further privileged, I will argue, by his borderlands position, his simultaneous insider/outside status in Kashaya Pomo culture, because of his position on a cultural frontier which becomes the “locus of cultural critique,” the points where Sarris argues intersubjective critical activity can begin.¹⁴

On a more prosaic level, as a Native writer, Sarris’s life-story is likely to be of significant interest to readers of his book who, by definition, are interested in Native writing, an advantage not available to non-Native scholars incorporating their

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 33.

own personal narratives into critical work. Most significantly, however, I will argue that, because Sarris's interruptive storytelling strategy mimics the aporetic nature of Native storytelling and hence frustrates closure, it risks, in the absence of any definite answers, being intellectually unsatisfying, at least in terms of generally accepted academic standards of closure and communicability. As a Native writer including his own personal narrative, Sarris is able to overcome this potential limitation by substituting literary/aesthetic satisfaction for intellectual closure and thus *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* still provides an aesthetically and intellectually compelling read.

For non-Native scholars, I will argue, replacing intellectual closure with literary satisfaction represents a more problematic process, and risks resulting in culturally relativistic muddle that not only falls short of the communicability standards preferred in Western research methodologies, but also fails to provide non-Native scholars with a meaningful intersubjective framework within which they can engage with Native narratives. In other words, because non-Native scholars' autobiographical engagements with Native narratives lack the resonance associated with the deeply meaningful cultural experiences informing the Native narrative, the intersubjective engagement is likely to represent something more akin to an anecdote, rather than expressing the kind of synthesis that Sarris sees as necessary for a personal experience to *inform* an idea.¹⁵ Thus, in the specific cross-cultural context of non-Natives writing criticism about Native narratives, I will argue, an "interruptive storytelling" approach has two main attributes. First, it inscribes certain "positive" limits on access to non-Native scholars, thus mitigating what Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngati Awa/Ngati Porou) identifies as the colonialist

¹⁵ Ibid., 160.

agenda of research on indigenous peoples.¹⁶ Second, it potentially enables scholars to recognise such boundaries and to incorporate the dialogue that this initiates into their critical writing.

Storytelling and Dialogue as Interruption

In order to achieve the kind of cross-cultural approach he argues is necessary for decolonising Native American literary criticism, Sarris suggests a move away from the perception that criticism should function as a “meta-discourse that works in the hands of scholars to distance itself from the texts and subjects it studies.”¹⁷ Instead, Sarris argues, literary critics should become more reflexive by acknowledging their own historicity as readers and recording their ongoing dialogue with the texts they study. This change in methodology necessitates a change in the goal of criticism from a quest for “transparent understanding” of the Other, to a process whereby cross-cultural communication functions as a means for understanding cultural differences and acknowledging the specific cultural and historical boundaries of both the text and the reader.¹⁸ Sarris proposes reading, writing and teaching about Native American narratives in a way that exposes and records the dialogue the scholar is having with the texts or other cultural phenomena and, in doing so, also exposes and records the scholar’s own biases and limitations, thus interrupting and interrogating any preconceived notions the scholar may have brought to the exchange. This self-reflexive attitude, according to Sarris, should be present not only during their exchanges with others, but also, crucially, during their later written representations of

¹⁶ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 38-39.

¹⁷ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 6.

¹⁸ Ibid.

those encounters.¹⁹ This is necessary, argues Sarris, because “open and effective” cross-cultural communication requires interlocutors to “be aware of their boundaries, both personal and cultural, so that they might know the limits on and possibilities for understanding one another in the exchange.”²⁰

What critics who engage in conventional argumentative scholarship about Native American texts are often doing, in Sarris’s view, is attempting to “nail down the Indian in order to nail down the text,” creating a “fixed” definition of “Indian” that is “readable in certain ways” and thus provides a key for unlocking a given narrative. This does not mean, Sarris is at pains to point out, that what the critics under discussion have to say is “necessarily untrue,” but rather that “whatever truth they advance about Indians or Indian written literatures is contingent upon their purposes and biases as readers.” Thus, “genuine critical activity – where both the critics’ histories and assumptions as well as those of the texts are challenged and opened” can only take place when a critic both informs and is informed by an encounter.²¹ Critical activity, Sarris is saying, is not impossible but is “tied always to the subjectivity of observers and the relationships they establish with what they are observing or reading.”²² To achieve this, Sarris aims to “chart dialogues that open and explore interpersonal and intercultural territories.”²³ He achieves this by adopting a “mode of expression [that] is performative as well as expository,” created through the interweaving of different narrative styles including both theoretical

¹⁹ Ibid., 110.

²⁰ Ibid., 6.

²¹ Ibid., 128.

²² Ibid., 109.

²³ Ibid., 5-6.

discourse and personal narrative.²⁴ In this way, as Pulitano notes, Sarris's "storytelling strategy becomes a feasible technique through which to convey a Native epistemology not traditionally articulated in conventional academic discourse."²⁵

Keeping Slug Woman Alive is arranged into a prologue and eight chapters covering a variety of topics ranging from storytelling and orality, cultural phenomena, written literature and pedagogy in universities and reservation classrooms. Despite the range of material under consideration, Sarris maintains thematic cohesion by focusing closely on his strategy of storytelling as a tool for cross-cultural communication, adopting a multi-voiced approach that he describes as "performative as well as expository," incorporating autobiography, biography, formal and informal storytelling, academic analysis and personal testimony.²⁶

The emphasis on storytelling is so pronounced that Gail Reitenbach suggests "storytelling" rather than "holistic" would have been a more appropriate adjective to use in the title of the book.²⁷ However, even though, as Reitenbach observes, storytelling appears "as word and practice" on nearly every page, storytelling as an end in itself is not the aim, but instead it functions as a tool by which to achieve Sarris's desired cross-cultural communication. Storytelling, Sarris believes, "engenders a reflexivity" that has the potential to expose the cultural differences between interlocutors and thus "establishes the groundwork for further study."²⁸

²⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

²⁵ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 105.

²⁶ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 7.

²⁷ Gail Reitenbach, "Review of *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*," *American Literature*, 66, no. 2 (June 1994), 408.

²⁸ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 149.

The structure of the individual chapters varies depending on the topic under discussion, but typically they begin with a personal narrative – usually an account of something that has happened to Sarris, or that he has witnessed or heard about happening to somebody else in his community – before moving onto theoretical analysis of a particular issue interspersed with personal observations, autobiography, stories from Pomo oral tradition and detailed information about Pomo and Miwok culture and history. More often than not, Sarris returns to his opening story. He may or may not state or imply how the first story was relevant to the discussion at hand. Franci Washburn (Lakota/Anishinaabe) notes that Sarris, like Mrs McKay, often “[answers] a story with another story, or [ignores] the question until a later related event recalls the original story, and even then... allows the second event to stand as an explanation for the first story or event.”²⁹ In this way, Sarris’s storytelling strategy recreates the tendency in orally informed cultures for knowledge not to be explicated by the knowledge conveyor, but to allow the knowledge receiver to reflect upon the meaning of a given story over a period of time.

Practising what he preaches from the outset, the prologue begins with a story, an autobiographical account of Sarris peeling potatoes in the company of several elderly female relatives. Having carefully replicated the “smooth, egg-like” potatoes produced by the women, Sarris is shamed to realise he had achieved this result by producing “thick, coarse lumps” of potato peelings in contrast to the “paper thin... almost transparent” peelings produced by the women. As Sarris’s Auntie Violet observes, ““Just like a white man....So wasteful!””³⁰ This was, as Sarris notes, “a simple lesson,” illustrating that he, a man who had never had the

²⁹ Washburn, “The Risk of Misunderstanding,” 70.

³⁰ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 1-2.

responsibility of providing for a family on a limited budget, saw the potatoes in a fundamentally different way than the women. “My interaction with these women demonstrated as much, exposing the differences between us that constituted the different ways we saw potatoes.”³¹ The key word here is “interaction” and Sarris explains further that “writing about this interaction in a way that *reveals my limits and expectations* becomes a means for me to extend to readers what made for the exchange at hand.”³²

The multi-voiced, non-linear structure of Sarris’s writing mirrors the talk of Mabel McKay, the renowned Cache Creek Pomo medicine woman and basket weaver at whose home, on the occasion of her eighty-second birthday, the potato peeling episode occurred.³³ At the time, Sarris, who had known Mrs McKay since childhood, was a graduate student writing, at her request, a dissertation on her life.³⁴ The project, Sarris explains, was proving challenging because “Mabel didn’t present her stories in chronological sequence. Her stories moved in and out of different time frames and often *implicated me as a listener*.”³⁵ Sarris goes on to draw an explicit parallel between the nonverbal interaction of peeling potatoes and the verbal interaction of Mrs McKay’s storytelling, where both function “as a basis for intercultural and interpersonal communication and understanding.” This interaction, Sarris explains, “serves as the basis for dialogue within and between people that can

³¹ Ibid., 3.

³² Ibid., 4; emphasis added.

³³ Mrs McKay passed away in 1993.

³⁴ See Greg Sarris, *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

³⁵ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 1; emphasis added.

expose boundaries that shape and constitute different cultural and personal worlds.”³⁶ Furthermore, as Pulitano notes, at the time Sarris was peeling potatoes, Mrs McKay was telling a story about a Medicine Man that did not proceed chronologically, disconcerting Sarris in his impatience to reach the end and discover what the story meant. Sarris’s approach to peeling potatoes mirrored his approach to Mrs McKay’s story, because his focus was only on the end result and not on the *process* – of peeling potatoes or telling stories – a subtle allusion by Sarris to the different ways in which knowledge is negotiated and valued in Native American and academic traditions.³⁷

Sarris, as he explains, tell stories “not only to show how they might be used in critical discussions but specifically to place them in the contexts of those critical discussions in order to inform, often by means of their different narrative forms, the content and nature of the discussions.” He is careful to stress that he is not trying to privilege subjective or personal narratives over objective, scholarly ones, but to enable the different types of narratives to be understood as relational and mutually informing, thus enabling a text or narrative to be understood in terms, not only of the specific context of its production, but also the specific context of its performance, or the scholar’s reading, both of which contribute to a text’s meaning.³⁸

The dialogic process, of course, is not confined to the talk of Mrs McKay, or even to Native American discourse or discourse grounded in oral tradition, but is evident in all forms of communication. Sarris discusses Mrs McKay’s talk in Bakhtinian terminology, describing how she touches the interlocutor’s “inner

³⁶ Ibid., 5.

³⁷ Elvira Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 104.

³⁸ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 7.

dialogue” enabling “her words and ideas [to] become ‘internally persuasive.’”³⁹

What is significant about Mrs McKay’s talk, however, and what Sarris is attempting to replicate, is the “interruptive” nature of the speech event that exposes and makes the interlocutor aware of the whole dialogic process, prompting the interlocutor to reconsider the preconceptions they brought to the exchange.

The way in which Sarris structures the chapter is equally as important as the points he makes. By interweaving personal narrative and theoretical discourse, Sarris is able to not only argue persuasively how context is of crucial importance in interpreting narratives performed in a cross-cultural environment, but also to demonstrate how the different narrative styles – personal and theoretical – can inform one another, and, in fact, for Sarris personally, as a mixed-blood Kashaya Pomo scholar, are inseparable. Sarris’s interpretation of Mrs McKay’s stories is “tied” to all of his lived experiences, including those, such as his membership of the academic community, that are located “outside” of Pomo culture.⁴⁰ Of course, Sarris’s experience of the academic milieu is informed by his experience of Pomo culture and vice versa, so that in this exchange at least the borders between the two “open and overlap.” Sarris cannot, he observes, “reconstruct Mabel’s world independent of [his] own experience of it” but neither can he reconstruct her world independent of his wider experiences.⁴¹ The implication of all this, although not explicitly stated by Sarris, is that *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* (and, indeed, any text or narrative) is also “keyed” in a way specific to the “presence” of individual readers

³⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁰ To state that academic culture and Pomo culture are outside of one another is, of course, highly problematical in itself. Sarris notes that Mrs McKay had been engaged with academic culture for many years, giving lectures about basket-weaving and doctoring. See Sarris, *Mabel McKay*, 1.

⁴¹ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 30.

or groups of readers.⁴² Like Sarris's recreation of Mrs McKay's world, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* cannot be reconstructed (or deconstructed) by an individual reader/scholar independent of his or her presence in the encounter with the text. Furthermore, any such recreation is inextricably tangled up in the reader/scholar's wider experience outside of their encounter with the text.

In an account of a meeting between Mrs McKay and Jenny, a non-Indian university friend of Sarris's, Sarris provides a more explicit account of the ways in which Mrs McKay's discourse not only exposes the preconceptions brought to the exchange by her interlocutors, but also inhibits the tendency for literate interlocutors to close and fix narratives. Mrs McKay relates to Sarris and Jenny a story about a married woman who loved a man/snake.⁴³ Jenny, a PhD candidate studying Shakespeare, asks what the snake symbolises but Mrs McKay does not appear to understand Jenny's question. Jenny then asks why the husband of the woman, who kept finding the snake/lover curled up in a vase in his house, did not just kill the snake, to which Mrs McKay responds with incredulity that, "This is white man days. There's laws against killing people. That man, he would go to jail, or maybe get the electric chair, if he done that." Mrs McKay mentions that she knows the woman and describes how she once saw the man/snake the woman had loved buying groceries. "See, I knew he was odd. He's moving in cold, late at night. Snakes don't do that." Jenny gets more and more confused. "Well, was it man or snake? I mean when you were looking at it?" Later, Jenny tells Sarris that she kept thinking about Mrs McKay and the story for weeks: "I've been studying Shakespeare and,

⁴² Ibid., 18-19. Sarris discusses at length Richard Bauman's theories of culture-specific keyed performances and Dell Hymes's concept of *metaphrasis* accounting for how particular variables or contexts, such as the presence of a fieldworker at a storytelling performance, or the presence of a scholar reading a textualised version of a story, can affect the structure, and therefore the meaning, of a given performance.

⁴³ Ibid., 35-36.

well, if my ideas change, and they do, at least the text is the same. With Mabel what is the story? There is so much more than just the story and what was said that *is* the story. I wanted to write it, you know, when I was thinking of things, so I could think about it. But it – whatever it is – wouldn't stay put.”⁴⁴

What the initial exchange demonstrates, according to Sarris, is how Mrs McKay's story exposed hers and Jenny's “different respective worldviews” that influenced their understanding of the story. “For Jenny the snake was symbolic of something and, in that sense, supernatural. For Mabel the snake/the man was part of one coexistent reality, a reality that is located in historic time and subject to its strictures.”⁴⁵ What Jenny's continuing inner dialogue reveals, though, is the way in which Mrs McKay's story frustrated what Sarris refers to as Jenny's literate “instinct” to close and fix the narrative.⁴⁶ The difficulty in writing the story for Jenny lay, Sarris explains, not just in the spoken words that constituted Mrs McKay's telling of the story and the subsequent conversation between her and Jenny, but in the unspoken – the “different worldviews” of Mrs McKay and Jenny revealed by their verbal exchange. These “different worldviews,” Sarris explains, became “part of the story” so that a straightforward transcription of Mrs McKay's narrative, excluding Jenny's presence as a listener “would hardly represent Jenny's experience of the story.” Even a version that included the conversation between Jenny and Mrs McKay would not represent Jenny's continuing inner dialogue, the way “she negotiates [the] experience in time.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid., 36-37.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

In the same way as Sarris's account of peeling potatoes exposed a hitherto unacknowledged preconception on his part, and Mrs McKay's story about the snake/lover exposed certain assumptions on the part of Jenny, my story of meeting the old Indian man in Santa Fe exposes preconceptions of my own. Much of what the old man told us that day has faded from my memory, or I never heard it because I was occupied thinking about the fact that I had just met an intelligent, articulate English-speaking American who had never heard of Britain. My home country and culture, the centre of my own world, was demonstrably outside of this person's circle of knowledge and experience. Worse than that, it was *irrelevant* to him. This shocked me even more than his easily treatable blindness. I was quietly flabbergasted. I had never before met anybody who did not know where Britain was.

As noted in the previous chapter, Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) notes that Western students of Native literature tend to perceive themselves as being "well-intentioned, benign, culture-free entit[ies]" who are "devoid of cultural influence and social privilege based on skin color," and thus outside both of the "*real* audience" for such literature, and of the "oppressive system" to which the writers are responding.⁴⁸ Granted, at the time of my encounter I was not a student of Native American literature (although I became one shortly afterwards) but my conversation with the old man exposed deeply held assumptions of mine regarding my membership of a "dominant" culture with which everybody I encountered in the USA was likely to be at least vaguely familiar. What the encounter showed me, in other words, was that I was not "a benign, culture-free entity." Justice's observation that Western liberal students like to dissociate themselves from the oppressive colonial audience to which some Native writers are responding is particularly resonant for me, because as a

⁴⁸ Daniel Heath Justice, "We're Not There Yet, Kemo Sabe: Positing a Future for American Indian Literary Studies," *American Indian Quarterly* 25, no.2 (Spring 2001): 258-259.

British woman, it is all too easy to tell myself that I am not implicated in the particular colonial enterprise to which Native American cultures have been subjected. Thinking about my encounter with the man in Santa Fe helps to remind me of my tendency to remove myself from a colonial history which, one way or another, of course I am caught up in. This was the sense of guilt and loss I felt as I watched the old man walk away into the crowd. This realisation was not instant, but, like the stories told by Mrs McKay and Sarris, was “internally persuasive,” allowing me to reflect upon the encounter over time as I began to study Native American cultures. The old man’s uncovering of my implicit assumption of both cultural privilege and colonial innocence came to constitute part of my dialogue with these later encountered narratives. A part, incidentally, that never made it into any of my essays, because there is no space in conventional scholarly essays to write about how one feels. Thus, in writing this chapter, Sarris’s interruptive storytelling strategy has provided me with a potential means to bridge the gap between the explicit knowledge involved in the systematic and sequential analysis of narrative and the experiential, internally persuasive encounter with the old Indian man that has shaped and continues to shape the way I read these narratives.

One particularly significant element of both Mrs McKay’s oral and Sarris’s written discourse, is its potential to impede what Sarris refers to as “literate tendencies that would close the vastness of [the story’s] world and, hence, the complexity of its teller.”⁴⁹ One of the major difficulties in representing oral discourse in writing is that in textualising discourse it becomes fixed, or at least has the appearance of being fixed and static, seeming to “close the oral context in which

⁴⁹ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 47.

oral communication takes place.”⁵⁰ Sarris, in replicating Mrs McKay’s potential for frustrating the literate tendency of closure, is attempting to ensure that, by exposing the preconceptions of his readers and sparking off both their inner dialogues and their awareness that their preconceptions have been exposed, their interpretation of his text, its meaning, will be part of an emergent process, and thus not fixed or static.

For example, in the essay titled “The Verbal Art of Mabel McKay,” Sarris presents, initially without contextualisation, a story about the woman poisoned by a shaman, edited and presented in such a way as to mimic spoken Pomo English. This story is immediately followed by an analytical paragraph discussing the various “typical and atypical” elements of Pomo storytelling and culture that might be discernible from an ethnographic perspective to a knowledgeable individual, with reference to cultural taboos, poisoning and the supernatural. Likewise, the paragraph tells us, a literary scholar might be able to accomplish a close reading of the text and so uncover ways in which language and format determine meaning. Sarris concludes the paragraph with the statement: “Deconstruction would unveil Mabel’s hidden agenda,” informing us for the first time that the story was one told by Mrs McKay.⁵¹

In the following paragraphs, Sarris goes on to provide the context in which Mrs McKay told him the story. Sarris was attempting to elicit answers to some questions given to him by a professor of his at university about doctoring, questions that Mrs McKay “promptly circumvented,” followed by a conversation during which Sarris made derogatory comments about a particular family known for their immoral behaviour. Mrs McKay immediately admonished Sarris by telling him that he was not aware of the full story, then proceeded to tell the story about the shaman

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 25-26.

poisoning the woman, the grandmother of the girls to whom Sarris had been referring. The first line of the story is repeated, circling back to the beginning, but this time speech marks indicate Mrs McKay as the teller.⁵²

Sarris explains that Mrs McKay's story forced him not only to reconsider how he saw the family about whom he made the derogatory remarks, but also, by implication, all the other associated elements of the story including doctoring, crystals and herbs. What remains implicit, however, is that his statement "Deconstruction would unveil Mabel's hidden agenda" is the opposite of what Sarris means. This becomes evident in the context of his subsequent storytelling, by the juxtaposition of the decontextualised version with the contextualised version of the story, but the responsibility for making the connection rests with the reader.

The responsibility inherent upon readers of Sarris's book to make certain connections without having those connections spelt out is a key feature throughout *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, again based on the discourse of Mrs McKay. As Sarris points out, Mrs McKay's discourse (and by extension Sarris's own discourse) is "internally persuasive," performing a "simultaneous opening of two worlds" wherein an initial interruption, or exposure of an interlocutor's preconceived parameters occurs, and is followed by an indefinite period of "internal activity" on the part of the reader or listener.⁵³ As Sarris notes, "So much depends on the readers and what they bring to the text."⁵⁴ As he further observes about one of Mrs McKay's stories, "It teaches me in ways that I keep learning."⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 26-27.

⁵³ Ibid., 28, 30.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 87-88.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 13.



Washburn finds this approach problematical and criticises Sarris for failing to elucidate clearly what he is trying to say, claiming that *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*,

is a weaving of both oral and literary tradition, but without additional input, the weaving is interesting, but not understandable. It is similar to a Hopi pot or a Navajo rug, either of which can be interesting, admired for the intrinsic beauty of the object, while at the same time, the process of creating these objects and the cultural symbols or colors employed may be unknown to the observer. Without additional information and explication, a great deal is lost in the translation.⁵⁶

Washburn's principal objection is that by undermining the "fixity of meaning" in the stories he tells and inviting his readers to construct their own meanings according to their own personal life experiences, Sarris risks his "Eurowestern" readers, whose personal canons of lived and textual experiences are not grounded in Pomo or any other oral tradition, creating meanings markedly different from the meaning originally intended by either Mrs McKay or himself. This is an interesting criticism because, of course, it is precisely what Sarris himself is saying, except that he is arguing that these differences in interpretation, the spaces where meaning is lost in translation, themselves constitute part of the meaning of a given story and also provide an initiating point for dialogue between the various interlocutors.

Washburn feels particularly that "Eurowestern" readers "expect texts to provide at least a modicum of explanation" and that "many readers are not motivated to seek any understanding beyond the superficial, particularly when the text is not read by choice but is only part of a required course in Native American literature."⁵⁷ Washburn is particularly critical of Sarris's failure to explain fully the meaning of the story about the woman who loved the snake especially in the light of Jenny's

⁵⁶ Washburn, "The Risk of Misunderstanding," 72.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

assumption that the snake had a symbolic value. Washburn contends that “many Eurowestern readers steeped in Judeo-Christian ethics” are likely to project a biblical interpretation upon the snake as a “symbol of evil,” or that it “represents the Devil who tempted Eve, or possibly, the treachery of women,” all of which, she contends, are unlikely have much significance from the point of view of the Pomo people.⁵⁸ In Pomo thought, Washburn tells us, “The snake is not a symbol of anything. The snake is the man that the woman in the story loved. MacKay’s [*sic*] listener, Jenny, with her Eurowestern intellect and knowledge, does not understand that concept.”⁵⁹

Washburn, of course, is allowing Jenny’s mistaken attribution of symbolism to the snake in Mrs McKay’s story to extend synecdochally to all non-Native interlocutors. It is particularly interesting that Washburn interprets the story as a demonstration that the majority of non-Native readers will impose a biblical reading upon the snake story because, although Jenny asks Mrs McKay what the snake symbolises, it is at no time stated by Sarris, or even implied, that Jenny had projected any biblical symbolism onto the snake. Furthermore, it is made perfectly clear through both Mrs McKay’s initial response to Jenny’s question and Sarris’s later discussion that the snake holds no symbolic value at all in the sense that Jenny had assumed. This raises the question as to why a “Eurowestern” reader might come away from reading Sarris’s textualised account of Jenny’s experience of Mrs McKay’s story assuming a biblical interpretation. It seems to me that this would only be a possibility if the story about the man/snake was presented as detached from the context of its telling. However, I would argue, Sarris’s careful contextualisation

⁵⁸ Although this cannot be taken for granted. Sarris discusses in detail the differing religious beliefs of various contemporary Pomo, many of whom are fervent Mormons. See Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 176-178.

⁵⁹ Washburn, “The Risk of Misunderstanding,” 80.

of the story precludes this possibility. Any reader initially sharing Jenny's assumption of symbolism, biblical or not, will soon have their preconceptions shattered by Mrs McKay's and Sarris's interruptive storytelling.

Washburn further criticises Sarris for not clarifying the potato peeling episode in which he produces thick lumps of potato peelings in comparison to the paper thin ones produced by the women. Sarris, Washburn tells us, "is embarrassed by the difference, but he doesn't explain that the difference lies in the different experiences among Sarris and the two women."⁶⁰ Sarris, in fact, provides the following explanation of the potato peeling episode:

That day in the kitchen I learned that I did not see a potato the way Frances McDaniel, Mabel McKay, and Auntie Violet Chappell did. My interaction with these women demonstrated as much, exposing the differences between us that constituted the different ways we saw potatoes. For example, I came to terms with the fact that I am a man and have never had to worry about feeding a family, making ends meet. And writing about this interaction in a way that reveals my limits and expectations becomes a means for me to extend to readers what made for the exchange at hand. It is the way I learned to write Mabel's life stories, so that the written text becomes the story of my hearing her stories.⁶¹

Washburn provides the following, more explicit, explanation for the potato peeling story:

When Sarris peeled potatoes at MacKay's [*sic*] kitchen table, thousands of people's hands – all of the people he had seen or emulated in the same task – contemplated the task, decided how to proceed, and made the cuts. The product of his work could not possibly be the same as that of the two women and their polyphonic experience, nor is it possible that the product of the women's potato peeling was exactly the same. Surely one of the women peeled deeper or slower, because no matter how much alike these two women may have been in experience, there were almost certainly differences as well. All three batches of peeled potatoes came from differently perceived and interpreted experiences, so the potato peeling experience is as much of a text as the story describing it.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁶¹ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 3-4.

Washburn's interpretation of Sarris's potato peeling story elaborates and make explicit what is largely implicit in Sarris's text. Both Sarris and Washburn agree that the meaning of a given narrative is context-specific and therefore unfixable. However, Washburn argues that "it is incumbent upon those who attempt to translate and explain oral tradition and... [to] do so in a manner that is more easily understood by the dominant majority."⁶² Ironically, as a Native critic, Washburn is calling for Native narratives to be fixed and explicated in a manner that is antithetical to their dynamic and open nature, but which, Washburn seems to feel, is the only way in which they can be made understandable to Western readers.

Washburn, acknowledging that Sarris's purpose is to invite his reader to interact with both Mrs McKay's narrative and Sarris's textualisation of it by "allowing them to interpret the material through [their] own reality filter of experience, knowledge, and emotion," finds his approach problematical because it risks allowing a "Eurowestern" audience lacking understanding of oral tradition to misinterpret or misunderstand the stories that he tells.⁶³ However, what is of crucial importance as far as Sarris is concerned is that the nature of the lesson is emergent through the process of the interlocutor's internal dialogue, the "reality filter of experience, knowledge, and emotion" to which Washburn refers. Sarris quotes Mrs McKay as saying, "Don't ask me what it means the story... Life will teach you about it the way it teaches you about life."⁶⁴ Sarris explains that Mrs McKay's stories are "teachings" or "*šaba-du*," but "not in a way that the story or the moral that may be associated with it is fixed, understood on the spot."⁶⁴ Although Mrs McKay, as

⁶² Washburn, "The Risk of Misunderstanding," 82.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶⁴ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 194.

Sarris notes, disrupts the typical discourse between informant and fieldworker by assuming the role of a teacher, the nature of the lesson is not to teach a specific rule or idea, but to expose the ways in which Mrs McKay and her interlocutors are understanding or not understanding one another.⁶⁵ It is then incumbent upon the audience or reader to learn from this lesson what they will, once “internal activity” has been initiated. The risk of misinterpretation to which Washburn objects is precisely the location where Sarris feels meaningful dialogue can commence.

Interruptive Storytelling as Border Pedagogy

The inseparability of stories and other phenomena from their cultural context is a crucial point in understanding both Mrs McKay’s and Sarris’s discourse. Mrs McKay, for example, would be unable to separate a discussion about the “material aspects” of her basketry from a discussion about history, Dreams, doctoring and prophecy.⁶⁶ In the same way, Sarris is unable to separate his discussion of Pomo and American Indian literature, storytelling and cultural phenomena from its specific cultural context. One facet of the cultural context within which Sarris and the narratives he encounters is that he is the mediator and is operating from a borderlands position, both as insider and outsider to Kashaya Pomo culture.

Henry Giroux provides the following explanation of his notion of border pedagogy:

As a pedagogical process with the intent of challenging existing boundaries of knowledge and creating new ones, border pedagogy offers the opportunity for students to engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages. This means educating students both to read these codes historically and critically while simultaneously learning the limits of such codes, including the ones they use to construct their own

⁶⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 51-53.

narratives and histories. Partiality becomes, in this case, the basis for recognizing the limits built into all discourses and necessitates taking a critical view of authority as it is used to secure all regimes of truth that deny gaps, limits, specificity, and counter-narratives. Within this discourse, students must engage knowledge as border-crossers, as people moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power.... *This is not an abandonment of critique as much as it is an extension of its possibilities....* By “interrupting” representational practices that make a claim to objectivity, universality, and consensus, cultural workers can develop pedagogical conditions in which students can read and write within and against existing cultural codes, while simultaneously being given the opportunity to create new spaces for producing new forms of knowledge, subjectivity and identity.⁶⁷

I would like to argue that Sarris’s interruptive storytelling, from his borderlands position as a mixedblood Indian scholar, represents just such a border pedagogy and extension of the possibilities of critical writing. Robin Riley Fast points out that while Arnold Krupat sees borders as “supporting dichotomies” and therefore requiring deconstruction, Sarris “is interested in crossing, redefining, and yet *protectively maintaining* some boundaries while engaging in conversations across and through them.”⁶⁸ Fast suggests, with reference to the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa’s conception of the location of her personal borderlands conflict, her interior “shadow-beast,” that for some Native writers “the condition of having mixed blood” might constitute a “central [interior] site of border conflict.”⁶⁹

Sarris emphasises, throughout *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, his “unusual and awkward” position operating from the borders of different cultural milieus.⁷⁰ During the potato peeling episode from the prologue Sarris feels uncomfortable when Violet

⁶⁷ Henry A. Giroux, “Border Pedagogy and the Politics of Postmodernism,” *Social Text* 28 (1991), 52-53; emphasis added.

⁶⁸ Robin Riley Fast, “Borderland Voices in Contemporary Native American Poetry,” *Contemporary Literature* 36, no.3 (Autumn 1995), 514, citing Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 87; emphasis added.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 510.

⁷⁰ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 7.

Chappell, Mabel McKay and Mrs McKay's younger sister Frances McDaniel gossip disparagingly about a white woman. "I think of my mother, who was white, of the fact that I am a mixed blood."⁷¹ At ceremonies, Sarris sometimes feels awkward, "stand[ing] there with my fair skin and blue eyes."⁷² This tension is most visible in "Reading Narrated American Indian Lives," a chapter dealing with Elizabeth Colson's *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women*.⁷³ Sarris writes that he has been "in the middle of Pomo and white interrelations for as long as I can remember... [and] my life is made visible in a glance, the way someone is looking at me, and in the sound of a voice. It is made visible with stories, too."⁷⁴

The chapter begins with an autobiographical episode, the telling of a story, when Sarris was a boy, which haunts him to this day. The story was told by an old Central Pomo woman, Great-Grandma Nettie, about a stranger who visited her when she was a young girl, whom she feared might have come to poison her. Great-Grandma Nettie usually told her stories in her Central Pomo language but on this occasion spoke in English and, when she saw Sarris, among a group of children visiting the house, was listening, "cast [him] a suspicious glance". Sarris, with "all that talk in English about strangers" was reminded of his borderlands existence, between two cultures, and felt "self-conscious, confused. Was she saying something *for me or about me? Was I an insider or an outsider?*"⁷⁵

⁷¹ Ibid., 2.

⁷² Ibid., 61.

⁷³ Elizabeth Colson, ed. *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women* (Berkeley: Archeological Research Facility, Department of Anthropology, University of California, 1974 [1956]).

⁷⁴ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive.*, 92.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 79-81.

Sarris goes on to provide a detailed reading and analysis of Colson's book, making explicit a link between the emotions attached to his memory of Great-Grandma Nettie's story, and the ones initiated by his reading of *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women*. Sarris analyses the ways in which Colson, who recorded and transcribed the narrated autobiographies of three Central Pomo women, decontextualised their stories by positioning herself as an "absent editor". Almost immediately though, Sarris identifies a problem, noting his own "impulse... to say what was truly Pomo," so that he "could show what Colson had missed, how ignorant she was as an outsider to Pomo culture." Sarris, though, questions his own authority to speak for the Pomo: "To what extent would I be creating an Indian just as Colson had, albeit an Indian different from Colson's? Who am I as a spokesperson for either the Pomo or Colson? Who am I as a Pomo Indian? Who am I as critic? I am caught in the borderlands again."⁷⁶

Sarris notes, ironically, that his training as an academic encouraged him to assert an "objective" Native truth against Colson's "objective" anthropological truth. "In the academy," he writes, "we are trained to take a stand and defend it."⁷⁷ This route would have enabled Sarris to effectively remove his personal experience as a Pomo from his "Indian analysis and discussion" of Colson's text, bowing to the idea of an authoritative "distanced academic stance," but, in so doing, glossing over the tensions between his Pomo and scholarly identities. But in doing so, Sarris points out that he would have merely set his "Indian" objective truth against Colson's

⁷⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 112.

objective truth, which would have “preclude[d] our seeing the limits and consequences of the truth we paint.”⁷⁸

While Sarris’s critique of Colson’s work is cogent and persuasive, it becomes almost incidental to the process of a creating a way of approaching Colson’s text that allows Sarris to see both the text and himself as reader, so that they can be mutually informing.⁷⁹ Sarris reads *Autobiographies* as a cross-cultural project, between Colson and the three Pomo women, but his reading is also a cross-cultural project, between himself, Colson and the three Pomo women. Unlike Colson, whose introduction describing how she collected and edited the material presented in her book was written entirely from her own perspective, Sarris concludes that his reading must take into account the cultural and historical backgrounds of all the contributors including Colson, the three women and himself as reader.⁸⁰ This, of course, further complicates the insider/outsider issue because, as Sarris observes, “differing subjectivities are at play within any tradition,” and no reader, regardless of his or her cultural history, can be a “perfect lens into the life and circumstances” of either Colson, or the three Pomo women informants.⁸¹

Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes the “multiple ways of being an insider and an outsider in indigenous contexts” and the “constant need for reflexivity,” in insider research.⁸² Furthermore, she argues, insider researchers take “difficult risks... [when they] ‘test’ their own taken-for-granted views about their community.”⁸³ Sarris’s

⁷⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 83-87.

⁸¹ Ibid., 91.

⁸² Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 137.

⁸³ Ibid., 139.

intersubjective and interruptive cross-cultural reading of *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women* represents just such a risk. Sarris's experience of reading Colson's book and the process of textualising this experience records precisely the kind of reflexive approach Smith is calling for. However, for Sarris, of course it is not only his insider status that creates the risk, but also his outsider status. The location of the risk is in Sarris's borderlands position as both insider and outsider.

What is of critical importance to Sarris's reading of *Autobiographies* and his subsequent interpretation and writing about it, is his understanding that both encounters – the occasion when Great-Grandma Nettie told the story about the stranger and the occasion when Sarris read and wrote about *Autobiographies* – engendered similar feelings of insecurity about his identity as a Kashaya Pomo.⁸⁴ In an earlier chapter, Sarris briefly considers the position of having multiple identities as a potential device to promote cross-cultural communication, but notes that “a borderlands position often is not an easy or comfortable one to be in.”⁸⁵ What becomes clear in the chapter on *Autobiographies*, however, is that it is not Sarris's multiple identities themselves that provide a conduit to cross-cultural communication, but the *tension* between them, which becomes “the locus of cultural critique” from which Sarris's storytelling is generated.⁸⁶ Thus, the very borderlands position that Sarris finds so uncomfortable is a necessary component of his cross-cultural purpose, enabling him to open a dialogue with Colson's text and Great-Grandma Nettie's story. Sarris asks, “Who am I as a reader?” and suggests that the

⁸⁴ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 93.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

place to start looking for an answer is “wherever the tensions are felt.”⁸⁷ Part of the answer to Sarris’s question is found in the tension between his ethnic identity as a Kashaya Pomo and his identity as a scholar: “I didn’t want to be reminded of my situation in two worlds.”⁸⁸

Gail Reitenbach questions whether a non-Indian critic or teacher could interact on such a meaningful level or enjoy the same “kind of mutual exchange” with the narratives and cultural phenomena under discussion as does Sarris.⁸⁹ Sarris is, in practice, ambiguous about whether his Indian status, knowledge of Pomo culture and geography and personal relationship with Mrs McKay, or with other Native interlocutors, privileges him in understanding the meanings of their narratives. As Olga Najera-Ramírez observes, the boundaries between inside and outsider “[shift] along various axes... according to the specific context of the interaction,” such that Sarris’s insider/outsider status is in a permanent state of flux in the same way that meaning in oral tradition fluctuates at any given time depending on the context of the knowing.⁹⁰

Sarris discusses how the cross-cultural communication between Colson and the three Pomo women and the ways in which he can personally negotiate that communication are “shaped in gender-specific ways. Pomo women and white women and women who are both Pomo and white and women who are neither Pomo nor white can tell stories and open the text in ways I cannot.”⁹¹ What Sarris is

⁸⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 112.

⁸⁹ Reitenbach, Review of *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 409.

⁹⁰ Olga Najera-Ramírez, “Of Fieldwork, Folklore, and Festival: Personal Encounters,” *Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 444 (Spring 1999): 186.

⁹¹ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 107.

hinting at here is that interlocutors other than himself, whether Pomo or non-Pomo, Indian or non-Indian, scholars or non-scholars, may have access to areas of what he refers to as “a territory of orality,” within a conversation or storytelling that Sarris himself might not have, despite his insider/outsider status.⁹² This is significant because, as Sarris notes, “the context of orality covers the personal territory of those involved in the exchange, and because the territory is so wide, extending throughout two or more personal, and often cultural, worlds, no one party has access to the whole of the exchange.”⁹³ As Sarris states repeatedly, the aim of intersubjective scholarship is “not to have complete knowledge of the text or the self as reader, not to obtain or tell the complete story of one or the other or both,” but to create an environment conducive to mutually informed dialogic exchange between readers and narratives.⁹⁴ Robin Riley Fast notes an appropriate response to the “emotional, political, economic, and cultural barriers” imposed upon and sometimes internalised by Native peoples may be “a redefinition and reinforcing of some barriers, as a protective way of reclaiming and reasserting the power of cultural, communal self-definition. Borders, then, may be understood as functional, even desirable, or as impediments to be opened, crossed, blurred, or eroded.”⁹⁵ Sarris’s interruptive storytelling, then, represents a kind of border pedagogy that not only encourages students, in Giroux’s words, to “engage knowledge as border-crossers, as people moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power,” but also to recognise those borders that cannot or should not be crossed.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

⁹⁵ Fast, “Borderland Voices,” 514.

Sarris shows us that the “territories of orality” in an exchange that we cannot access are equally as significant as those that we can.⁹⁶

Autobiography, Authority and Interruptive Storytelling

Scattered across the various essays that make up *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, interspersed between the theoretical discussion and stories about Mrs McKay and others, is Sarris’s personal story. Sarris describes his life history in interludes of varying length and detail. His sixteen-year old Jewish, German and Irish mother died ten days after Sarris was born “illegitimately” in 1952 and Sarris was put up for adoption. His father, who was Filipino, Coast Miwok and Kashaya Pomo, a former high-school athlete, a sailor in the Navy, a future professional boxer and chronic alcoholic was aged twenty-one when his son was born, married to the first of three white wives and died aged fifty-two from a heart attack five years before Sarris traced him through a photograph in a high school yearbook. When Sarris’s adoptive father became abusive, his adoptive mother allowed him to live with different families, including some who were Indian, around his home town of Santa Rosa. Although he did not know it at the time, some of the families Sarris lived with were his blood relations. As a juvenile, Sarris was near delinquent, joining gangs, sniffing glue, smoking pot and beating up white boys. One of the people who took Sarris in when he was a child was Mabel McKay.⁹⁷

But there is a lot more to Sarris’s autobiography than the bare bones outlined above. Sarris repeatedly locates his own personal autobiography within the broader context of Pomo/Miwok history. For example, in the prologue, the first occurrence

⁹⁶ Giroux, “Border Pedagogy,” 53.

⁹⁷ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 7, 11-12, 93-94, 137.

of what could be termed Sarris's "primary autobiography" – two lines detailing his mother's and father's respective ethnic heritages – immediately precedes a lengthy description of the history and culture of the Pomo and Miwok peoples, which Sarris provides to give his readers "a better understanding not only of me as a writer but also of the people and social setting I write about."⁹⁸

A paragraph that begins by explaining the mixed ethnic heritages of most contemporary Pomo and Miwok peoples then segues back into Sarris's autobiography, detailing the ethnic heritage of his paternal grandmother and the story of his adoption and experiences living among different families in Santa Rosa. As a semi-delinquent teenager employed as a busboy and watching a friend's parents working low-paid, low-status jobs in the same restaurant Sarris had an epiphany, providing him with "a critical perspective about myself and my world."⁹⁹

Sarris makes this explicit link between his personal experience and the collective experience of the Pomo and Miwok peoples on a number of other occasions. For example, in "Reading Narrated American Indian Lives," Sarris uses autobiographical interludes to link the historical "patterns of domination, subjugation, and exclusion by whites," experienced by the Pomo to his own and his birth father's personal experiences. Sarris tells us that when he was fourteen he was taught to box by a mixed-blood Indian named Robert. Sarris, according to Robert and his friend Manuel, had the necessary ingredients to become a good boxer.

"You got hate in your eyes, brother," they said. "You got hate in your eyes." By the time I was sixteen I beat the hell out of people every chance I could, mostly white people. In the city park I beat the hell out of a white boy just because I didn't like the way he was looking at me. Not many Indians I knew

⁹⁸ Ibid., 7-8.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 11-12.

liked and trusted whites. I was a good Indian then. Any Indian could see I was.¹⁰⁰

In the chapter dealing with Louise Erdrich's (Chippewa) novel *Love Medicine*, Sarris explores parallels between the manifestations of internalised oppression within both his own Pomo community and Erdrich's fictional Chippewa community from the novel, such as low self-esteem, alienation and alcoholism. Sarris explicitly links the search by Erdrich's fictional Lipsha Morrissey for his father, to his own search for his birth family, which eventually resulted in him locating his paternal grandfather, an uncle and a half-brother.¹⁰¹

I could be jealous of Lipsha. He got to meet his father, see him face to face.... Of course miracles happened for both of us. The miracle of finding our fathers. The miracle of being lucky enough to be raised and cared for by our own people, even when we didn't know about our blood relation to those people, and then the miracle of finding out. The miracle of always having been home in some way or other. But none of these miracles changes the nature of home for Lipsha or for me. There is still the drinking and violence gossip and bickering. Indians fighting each other. Is finding our fathers and knowing our families love us as much as they can medicine enough?¹⁰²

There is something much more complicated going on, however, than Sarris merely making parallels between his own life and the characters in *Love Medicine*, or, for that matter, the broader experiences of Pomo and Miwok peoples as a whole. Laura Marcus has suggested that consideration of oral history and literature, personal testimony, cultural/communal memory and ethnographies has helped to moderate the distinctions between oral and written forms of expression in both theory and practice. Storytelling and "mythmaking," she contends, has enabled "life-speakers" and "life-writers" to negotiate the borders between the conflicting oral and written modes of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 136-142.

¹⁰² Ibid., 141-142.

transmission.¹⁰³ Robin Ridington notes that *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* is, in fact, itself an example of a Native American autobiography that happens to take “the form of critical essays about Native American texts.”¹⁰⁴

In this section I will consider the role of autobiography as a tool through which to reconcile Native and academic philosophies of knowledge and learning in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*. Sarris notes that scholars such as David Bleich, who propose intersubjective reading strategies, tend to present these strategies using the kind of “conventional argumentative narratives” that obscure the record of a scholar’s autobiographical engagement with the text, an essential component of intersubjective critical practices in Sarris’s view.¹⁰⁵ In terms of using autobiography in the recounting of interruptive encounters, however, Sarris occupies a somewhat privileged position over non-Native scholars. The power and agency of autobiography is person-specific and, although Sarris explicitly disclaims any form of cultural privilege over non-Native American scholars in writing about Native American texts, his position as a mixed-blood Kashaya Pomo/Coast Miwok scholar and his resulting autobiography affords him, in at least two respects, precisely the kind of privilege he denies.¹⁰⁶ First, Sarris’s life history – growing up with sustained access to, interaction with and participation in Pomo/Miwok culture – provides him with a bank of personal lived experiences that relate specifically and convincingly to the topics under discussion. Second, somewhat more prosaically, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* is about Native American texts and thus the autobiography of Sarris,

¹⁰³ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 293.

¹⁰⁴ Robin Ridington, review of *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*, *American Ethnologist* 22, no.3 (August 1995), 661.

¹⁰⁵ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 6.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 7, 21.

who is a Native American writer, is by definition likely to be of interest to his audience. In contrast, a non-Native American scholar may struggle to present lived experiences that relate directly to the subject at hand and any autobiographical material they do include is likely to be regarded by their readers as an obstacle, something to be skimmed or skipped over in order to return to the topic – Native American literature, storytelling or whatever – that the reader hoped to be learning about.

Kenneth Roemer agrees that Sarris's borderlands historicity provides him with a cultural privilege, noting that:

Sarris has two advantages compared to many scholars; he writes very well, and he has had a complex borderland life...Sarris can construct engaging dialogue and narrative action as he weaves in and out of academic and personal discourses. His own heritages and experiences... provide him with a practically endless series of entryways into the multicultural texts he presents. Someone with less developed writing skills and a less "appropriate" life might make a (pretentious or forced) botch of Sarris's approach.¹⁰⁷

Pulitano, on the other hand, argues that criticisms such as Roemer's are born out of "essentialist forms of discourse" and that to "argue that Sarris's 'Indianness' (or 'mixedbloodedness,' to be precise) allows him privileged access to the material that he presents is to miss the main point of his overall critical endeavor." Pulitano argues that observations about Sarris's cultural privilege mistakenly emphasise questions of authenticity and authority when, as she notes, "the fact that Sarris is part Indian does not make his reading more comprehensible or authoritative." In fact, Pulitano argues, Sarris's strategy works in exactly the same way for him as it would "for other readers, people of differing cultural backgrounds who want to broaden

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth M. Roemer, "Indian Lives: The Defining, The Telling," *American Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (March 1994), 86.

their conceptual horizons to include an understanding of other cultures.”¹⁰⁸ I would be inclined to agree with both Pulitano and Sarris that Sarris’s reading, his intersubjective engagement with a given narrative, is not necessarily “more comprehensible or authoritative,” than any other reader’s potential interpretation. However, it is still the case that Sarris’s life experience and his abilities as a writer provide him with the tools with which to *represent* his intersubjective experience of coming to know Mrs McKay’s talk and stories, which gives him an immediate advantage over scholars not enjoying insider and/or borderlands status.

On a surface level at least, my story about meeting the old Indian man in Santa Fe would seem to meet the intersubjective and autobiographical models proposed by Sarris. As I noted previously, my dialogue with the Indian man forced me to re-evaluate certain frames and preconceptions and, by relating it as part of a critical essay, it may help to define how I understand, as an outsider, the condition of being “Indian.” It also defines, for the reader, a few things about my specific context, namely that I am English/British/female/non-American/non-Indian all of which may have some bearing on the way in which I negotiate and mediate the narratives about which I am writing. Certainly, my encounter with the old Indian man exposed certain preconceptions I had about Indians specifically and Americans generally. But, I have to ask, how useful is this story in terms of presenting my critical writing about Native American literature? The encounter may have encouraged me to reconsider certain preconceptions under which I had been operating, but while it was undoubtedly valuable to me in terms of my personal development as a critic, it may not be that interesting or illuminating for readers of this dissertation to read about. This, I would argue, contrasts with the status of

¹⁰⁸ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 109-110.

Sarris's own autobiographical material. As a Native American writer writing about Native American writing, Sarris's autobiography, by definition, is likely to be of interest to a reader who has chosen to read a book about Native American writing. On the other hand, my autobiography, even my story about meeting the old Indian man in Santa Fe, for example, is more likely to be perceived by the reader as an impediment to their understanding of the texts under study and an obstacle to be overcome in order to return to the real matter at hand, Native American narratives.

Reitenbach notes that Sarris's intersubjective storytelling strategy is akin to fieldwork for literary scholars, which, as she points out, is "a rare option for most critics."¹⁰⁹ This raises the question of how literary scholars are to represent the autobiographical, reflexive elements of their "fieldwork" if they are not privileged, as Sarris is, with a bank of personal lived experiences that relate compellingly and convincingly to the subject matter at hand. Pulitano compares her response to Leslie Marmon Silko's (Laguna Pueblo) novel *Ceremony*, to Jenny's response to Mrs McKay's story about the snake/lover. She writes:

Like Jenny's, my notion of reality is deeply embedded within an analytic mind-set, one used to dissect, to categorize, to fix. And just as Jenny's literate instincts tell her, mine tell me that, if I can just write down the text, I can determine its meaning. However, unlike Jenny's experience with the oral tradition, mine has never been immediate, face-to-face with a storyteller; it has, instead, been intermediate, mediated by written texts, texts, moreover, that, despite a heavy reliance on the oral tradition, are still modeled after traditional Western genres.... Whereas Jenny saw the snake in McKay's story as symbolic, I saw Thought Woman, the spider, and the other mythic figures in *Ceremony* simply as supernatural beings intended to lend an exotic touch to the narrative.... I can now identify with the confusion and the sense of alienation that Jenny's questions revealed, and I can understand why and where those questions originated.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Reitenbach, review of *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 409.

¹¹⁰ Pulitano, *Towards a Native American Critical Theory*, 111-112.

Two points come to mind reading Pulitano's account of her engagement with Silko's, Mrs McKay's and Jenny's stories. First, as Donald M. Murray has argued, all forms of writing, including critical writing, research and scholarship are essentially autobiography, if only in that one's personal thinking style and voice as expressed on the page is by definition autobiographical, and thus Pulitano's consideration of her response to *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* and *Ceremony* constitute autobiography in that sense.¹¹¹ Second, is that Pulitano has not experienced the benefit of fieldwork, face to face with Native American storytellers. This is significant, because Sarris's intersubjective and interruptive storytelling strategy – both those aspects modelled on Mrs McKay's storytelling and those aspects modelled on reflexive developments in the field of anthropology – are strongly influenced by his personal, face to face contact with his interlocutors. Sarris claims, in fact, that his lived experiences among the Pomo affect only the texture and not the dynamic of his interpretation.¹¹² However, I would argue that this "texture" is crucial in terms of the credibility of his personal narrative, how it relates to the studied narratives, and how it is perceived by Sarris's interlocutors. As Roemer notes, Sarris is in a position to "construct engaging dialogue and narrative action as he weaves in and out of academic and personal discourses."¹¹³ Pulitano, with her lack of face to face contact with Native American storytellers, is unable to construct such an engaging account of her "dialogue" with written Native American texts and thus her autobiographical account of the way in which Jenny's preconceptions were similar to her own, while interesting, is not compelling and persuasive in the same

¹¹¹ Donald M. Murray, "All Writing is Autobiography," *College Composition and Communication*, 42, no. 1 (February 1991): 67, 73-74.

¹¹² Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 31.

¹¹³ Roemer, "Indian Lives," 86.

way as Sarris's stories. This suggests that engaging with a written narrative differs in critical ways from engaging in face to face conversation, or "fieldwork" with an interlocutor. Sarris is able to engagingly fictionalise his encounters with Mrs McKay and others but how does one fictionalise one's personal dialogue with a written text without resorting to navel-gazing? Sarris does, of course, engage with written texts, the chapters on Colson's *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women* and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, being the major examples. Even in these instances, however, his representation of his dialogue with the texts is mediated through his personal, face to face contact with members of his family and wider Pomo community.

For example, in the chapter on *Love Medicine*, shortly after Sarris recounts a story about Auntie Violet telling him, against the backdrop of loud music and fighting from an adjoining trailer, that his Coast Miwok grandmother Evelyn Hilario did not really want to be an Indian, Sarris presents the following paragraph:

Images and sounds, bits and pieces of conversations, peoples and places from home and from the novel came together and mixed in my mind. Albertine in a bar, "sitting before [her] third or fourth Jellybean, which is anisette, grain alcohol, a lit match, and a small wet explosion in the brain" (*LM* 155). My cousin Elna seated in the neon light of an Indian bar on lower Fourth Street in Santa Rosa. Marie Lazarre Kashpaw responding to the gossip about her: "I just laugh, don't let them get a wedge in. Then I turn the tables on them, because they don't know how many goods I have collected in town" (*LM* 70). My Auntie Marguerita: "Ah, let them hags talk. Who are they? Just women who kept the streets of lower Fourth warm." "My girl's an Indian." "Your grandmother didn't want to be an Indian." Albertine jumping on June's drunken son King and biting a hole in his ear to keep him from drowning his wife in the kitchen sink and the fighting that follows and the cherished fresh-baked pies getting smashed: "Torn open. Black juice bleeding through the crusts" (*LM* 38). The loud crash, a spilling of things, as if a table had been overturned.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 118; parentheses in original.

The advantage that Sarris possesses over a scholar lacking a bank of resonant personal life experiences that relate so convincingly to the text is unmistakable. This is not to argue that non-Native scholars cannot engage intersubjectively with a text such as *Love Medicine*, but to suggest that the process of *representing* such an interaction in a way that is engaging, relevant and interesting to readers is substantially more problematic.

This raises the question as to whether my face to face interaction with the old Indian man in Santa Fe represents an advantage over Pulitano's distanced interaction with Native American texts. Regrettably, I would suggest not. Perhaps the problem with my personal narrative is that it does not represent a location of potential tension or misunderstanding. Sarris contends that cross-cultural storytelling needs to be more than merely "an anecdote that [complements] a given idea," but rather a story born of personal experience that informs the critic's engagement with a text.¹¹⁵ The influence of my encounter with the old Indian man in Santa Fe has in some ways undoubtedly informed my engagement with *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* but not, I would argue, to the kind of mutually informing degree that Sarris feels is necessary for cross-cultural communication to occur. This, I would argue, relates to the problem of representation and the power accorded to the textualiser of an encounter. Sarris describes the process of textualising an encounter, in order to incorporate it as autobiography into critical writing:

The task is not to assimilate the text or any element of it to ourselves nor to assimilate ourselves to the text. It is not to reduce difference to sameness nor to exoticize or fetishize it. Rather, the task is to become aware of our tendencies to do any of these things. Maintaining a dialogue that works to validate and respect the subjectivities of text and reader is a way to accomplish the task.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 160.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 92.

In fact, maintaining a sense of difference in a textualisation of a cross-cultural exchange is crucial in sustaining the interruptive characteristics of Mrs McKay's talk that Sarris is attempting to replicate in his own discourse. Sarris discusses, in a footnote, the difficulties inherent in textualising dialogue, noting that the representation is necessarily controlled by the textualiser, thus granting them a significant degree of authority in representing the talk of another. Citing James Clifford, Sarris explains that he has attempted to undermine the possibility of authoritative representation by maintaining "the strangeness of the other voice" as it reveals "the specific contingencies of the exchange." Sarris presents or represents Mabel as she presented herself to him.¹¹⁷ A number of potential limitations arise here. Success is obviously reliant on the ability of the textualiser to fictionalise the exchange in such a way that "the strangeness of the other voice" is preserved. Even then, what is defined as "the strangeness of the other voice" is understood only in terms of the scholar's interpretation, limiting the degree to which the textualiser can undermine his or her own authority. Of course, this is what Sarris has been saying all along, that a scholar's interpretation is necessarily tied to their own historicity and this is why "interruption and risk" is such an important part of a cross-cultural exchange, enabling critics to acknowledge and challenge their own biases and preconceptions. In theory, then, the interruptive nature of Mrs McKay's and Sarris's discourse should ensure that the textualiser, in this case Sarris, is aware of the ways in which his or her biases may be affecting their interpretation of what constitutes "the strangeness of the other voice."

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 27 n.5, quoting James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 1, no. 2 (1983): 135.

I suspect my textualisation of my meeting with the old Indian man is deeply problematic. I remain unconvinced that I have avoided “exoticizing” the “Other,” and am uncomfortable with my representation of the old man’s words. In attempting to represent “the strangeness of the other voice,” I may have resorted to stereotype. Unlike Jenny, following Mrs McKay’s story about the snake/lover, I felt no “instinct” to commit the encounter to paper, to “fix” it, try and get it straight in my head. “Fictionalising” the encounter, and that, without a doubt, is what I have done, has not produced an intersubjective record but one where my own subjectivity is emphasised over and above the old man’s subjectivity. Doubtless, my friend Katie would remember the encounter differently than I, and the old man likely not at all. I doubt I had the impact on his world that he had on mine. I have represented his words only as I remember them and he has no opportunity to talk back. I have attempted to be honest but my memories may be false. Sometimes his eyes are shrouded in cataracts, and sometimes they are a clear, flawless blue.

In a recent paper, Deirdre Keenan discusses the corollaries between her position as a non-Native scholar researching Potawatomi history and culture, her Irish ancestors’ possession of Potawatomi land, and the still ongoing consequences of the role her grandfathers played in the “systematic assault on the Potawatomi people and culture.” Keenan asks, “From what position do I tell that part of the story and with what tone?”¹¹⁸ At the end of her thoughtful essay, Keenan recounts her attendance at a conference where she presented an earlier version of the paper. Another delegate approached her and said, “You have a story to tell, just do it... we

¹¹⁸ Deirdre Keenan, “Trespassing Native Ground: American Indian Studies and Problems of Non-Native Work,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 33, no.3 (Autumn 2000 – Winter 2001), 182.

can attack your work afterward if necessary.”¹¹⁹ Although Keenan “appreciated [the delegate’s] ironic encouragement,” her story raised an important question in relation to my own story about the old Indian man. Other scholars may respond to my work, positively or negatively. But the old Indian man remains voiceless. He is not what Sarris would refer to as an “empowered disputant.”¹²⁰ The authority attached to my representation of him is deeply problematic.

This is an issue Sarris raises himself, noting that “critics as writers can tell any kind of ‘personal’ story they want,” and that the representation of a critic’s subjectivity does not “automatically [establish] honesty or authenticity.”¹²¹ Although the critic’s subjectivity provides a conduit for opening the stories of his or her relationship with the text, which, in turn, “contributes to the reader’s reading,” readers must rely on the textualiser’s good faith. In terms of textualising his own encounters Sarris possesses a definite advantage, in that he is writing predominantly about individuals and groups with whom he has a close and ongoing relationship. Sarris’s “outsider” status in Pomo culture provides him with a “locus of cultural critique” where intersubjective activity can begin, but his “insider” status grants him the authority to textually represent the groups and individuals with whom he has engaged dialogically.

Linda Alcoff argues that scholars must explicitly interrogate their epistemic locations and context and suggests “constructing hypotheses about the possible connections between our locations and our words is one way to begin.” In the same way the Sarris argues that scholars must expose the limits born out of their own

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 187.

¹²⁰ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 196.

¹²¹ Ibid., 111 n.16.

historicity, Alcoff notes that such an interrogation “would be most successful if engaged in collectively with others, by which aspects of our location less highlighted in our own minds might be revealed to us.”¹²² However, Alcoff goes on to criticise the inclusion of autobiographical information in discursive practice as a means to achieve such an interrogation. The inclusion of autobiography, she argues,

is meant to acknowledge [the scholar’s] own understanding that they are speaking from a specified, embodied location without pretense to a transcendental truth. But... such an act serves no good end when it is used as a disclaimer against one’s ignorance or errors and is made without critical interrogation of the bearing of such an autobiography on what is about to be said. It leaves for the listeners all the real work that needs to be done.¹²³

Alcoff’s call for autobiographical material in discursive practice to be made explicit in terms of its relation to the discussion is interesting because, as I have argued, there exists a tension in critical writing about Native American narratives between explicit and implicit knowledge. In the original draft of this chapter I included the autobiographical material without explication but with every re-write my inclination as a Western scholar to *justify* its inclusion, to explicitly link it to the themes and issues discussed throughout, has come to the fore. Mabel McKay said, “Don’t ask me what it means the story,” but in academia we are forced to say what it means in order to demonstrate that we have understood, even when the stories are our own.¹²⁴

¹²² Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-1992): 25.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹²⁴ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 194.

The Limits of Interruptive Storytelling

In this section I will explore the potential limitations of Sarris's strategy of "interruption and risk" in encouraging scholars to acknowledge their own biases and preconceptions. As noted above, Sarris discusses at length the ways in which his personal lived experiences impact upon his interpretations of Mrs McKay's stories. However, Sarris's ability or willingness to be reflexive is not consistent throughout the whole of *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*. Sarris, too, exhibits a tendency to "circumscribe and totalise the other culture"¹²⁵ but in this instance, the "Other" becomes the non-Indian, or the non-Kashaya Pomo.

Sarris begins his first chapter with a story about Mrs McKay, in her capacity as a Native healer, answering a question from a non-Native student about what treatment she would recommend for poison oak with the somewhat prosaic suggestion of calamine lotion.¹²⁶ This response, argues Sarris, "renegotiated the representation of reality that the question presented," because Mrs McKay's pragmatic recommendation of calamine lotion introduced "the fact that she [was] a contemporary American, which redefined the student's notion of 'Indian.'"¹²⁷ Roemer describes Mrs McKay's response as "[exploding] the student's tendency to separate the contemporary and mundane from the mysteries of 'native healing.'"¹²⁸

Enlightening as this example may be, it relies on a significant assumption on Sarris's part about the nature of the response the student in question expected to receive from Mrs McKay. Sarris does not say whether he or anyone else asked the student what kind of answer she expected to get, or, at least, does not record a similar

¹²⁵ Murray, *Forked Tongues*, 117, quoted in Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 128.

¹²⁶ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 17.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹²⁸ Roemer, "Indian Lives," 88.

exchange. In this way, Sarris has projected motivations and expectations upon the questioner without reflecting upon how his own biases and preconceptions have influenced his reading of the student's question. His assumptions about what kind of answer the student was expecting may have been entirely correct, but they are assumptions all the same.

Perhaps the most significant example of Sarris not only generalising about non-Indian cultures, but also failing to follow his own advice and reflecting upon his own biases and preconceptions, occurs in "Storytelling in the Classroom: Crossing Vexed Chasms," a chapter that discusses storytelling as a pedagogical strategy in various university classroom environments. Sarris describes how he begins his American Indian literature course, attended by "predominantly middle-class [American] whites," by telling a story told to him by his Kashaya Pomo elders. In a subsequent class, Sarris then asks the students to repeat the story "as they heard it."¹²⁹ The way in which the students reconstruct the story, argues Sarris, "[tells] them more about themselves than about the story or about the speaker and culture from which the story comes." Thus the students' "unexamined assumptions by which they operate and which they use to frame the texts and experiences of members of another culture," are exposed.¹³⁰ By using storytelling as a pedagogical strategy, in other words, Sarris is attempting to replicate the interruptive nature of Mrs McKay's discourse.

Sarris presents a transcription of the story exactly as he tells it to his students. The story is too complex to summarise here, but for the purposes of this discussion what is particularly important is that in the first part of the narrative, and at various

¹²⁹ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 157. Sarris does not define what he means by middle-class. Neither does he consider whether or not the students in question would define themselves in this way.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

stages throughout, a certain amount of contextual information is provided including when, where and from whom Sarris heard the story, the “genesis” of the story, the classification of the story (*duwi dici-du*, or “telling about Coyote”) and certain storytelling rules, one of which Sarris, by telling the story in the spring, is breaking, requiring him to “fix the story so it’s not the same.”¹³¹

The most prominent feature of the students’ retelling of the story, which, according to Sarris is consistent across various groups of students, is the almost total omission of the contextual information. This is because, in Sarris’s view, the students “see narrative and context of production as extricable, independent from one another, and draw lines governed by preconceived notions of narrative.”¹³² The result of this exercise is that Sarris’s students have their interpretive frameworks exposed and are thus subsequently “much more sensitive” to issues of language and translation and more open to approaching literature dialogically.¹³³ Furthermore, as Walter Hesford notes, Sarris’s “hoodwinking” exercise “helps these students imaginatively cross a cultural border as they retell a traditional Pomo story; participation militates against rejection and condescension. Sarris’s storytelling strategy encourages *overt* appropriation, which, followed by critical analysis, subverts the *covert* appropriation of the dominant ideology.”¹³⁴

I have no argument with any of this. What is problematic, in my view, is that Sarris does not go on to consider, from the students’ perspective, the context in which they were asked to repeat the story. Furthermore, he does not reflect upon the ways in which his presence as an interlocutor may have affected the manner in which

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 151.

¹³³ Ibid., 152.

¹³⁴ Walter Hesford, “Overt Appropriation,” *College English* 54, no.4 (April 1992): 407.

the students represented the story. In earlier chapters, Sarris criticises both David Brumble and Elizabeth Colson for failing to consider the ways and reasons why their respective Indian interlocutors may have edited the information they presented to fieldworkers.¹³⁵ For example, Sarris argues that Gregorio, the informant discussed by Brumble, may have edited the presentation of his story to what he thought the fieldworkers wanted to hear.¹³⁶ However, Sarris does not seem to consider the ways in which his students may have edited their representations of the Coyote story in certain ways, influenced, perhaps, by what they thought Sarris, authoritative in this exchange as both a university professor and a Kashaya Pomo, expected, or by what is generally expected of them as students in a university environment. Could not Sarris's students have edited their presentation of his story to what they thought Sarris wanted to hear? In the context of the classroom, Sarris's students may well "see narrative and context of production as extricable, independent from one another," or at least describe it in that way, but he does not reflect on how the students may have thought about the story privately in different ways.

In "The Woman Who Loved a Snake" Sarris notes that Jenny's response to Mrs McKay's story, to write it down and try and make sense of it, was "instinct."¹³⁷ Jenny's literate response, however, was not instinctive but a response she had learned through her experience of education. The white students, critics, readers or other interlocutors who ask questions about symbolism, or separate narrative from context, or distance themselves from their interaction with a given narrative by the use of objective language are white students, critics and readers who have received a

¹³⁵ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 89, 103.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

specific and specialised kind of education that is not necessarily representative of non-Indian or European/Euro-American culture as a whole.

Of course, the dynamics of power and authority involved when an individual from a marginalised culture generalises about a dominant culture are significantly different than the dynamics involved when a dominant culture generalises about a marginalised one. Nevertheless, Sarris is demonstrably failing to consider the ways in which his preconceptions about European and Euro-American culture risk foreclosing the kind of cross-cultural communication Sarris himself is calling for. I am not claiming that the storytelling strategy Sarris created to “hoodwink” his students was not useful or that his criticism of the kind of critical thinking taught in universities is not valid. However, his failure to properly consider the context of the students’ retellings of the Kashaya Pomo story, the keying of their responses to his own presence and his tendency to homogenise the whole of non-Indian culture by projecting characteristics from a “specific and culturally based type of critical thought” onto European/Euro-American culture generally suggests that the kind of reflexive reading and writing practices Sarris is proposing are, in practice, not that easy to attain.¹³⁸ If Sarris, using his own methodology, himself fails to uncover some of his own biases and preconceptions, what hope is there for other critics? It may be an unavoidable consequence that committing an encounter to writing impedes the ongoing reflective process so important in Native philosophies of knowledge.

I must admit I was disappointed by Pulitano’s acknowledgment of the similarities between hers and Jenny’s initial assumption of a symbolic value to the snake/lover in Mrs McKay’s story about the woman who loved a snake and Thought Woman in Silko’s *Ceremony*. I wanted Pulitano to deny Washburn’s accusation that

¹³⁸ Ibid., 153.

“Jenny, with her Eurowestern intellect and knowledge, does not understand” the concept that “the snake is the man that the woman in the story loved,” and the implication that all “Eurowestern” intellects would make the same error.¹³⁹ My engagement with the stories mentioned so far in this chapter, including those told by Sarris, Mrs McKay, Washburn, Pulitano and myself, prompts me to question my own initial response to Jenny’s meeting with Mrs McKay, which was that Jenny’s assumption of symbolism was atypical and not representative of Western attitudes to Native narrative as a whole. The reason for my initial assumption, that Jenny’s response was an aberration, is simple. I did not recognise Jenny’s response because I did not, myself, assume the snake had a symbolic value.

This raises an important question about the potential for Sarris’s interruptive storytelling to expose deeply held assumptions. It may be that my self-assessment above was correct and I did not, in fact, project a symbolic value onto the snake. Or it may be that, despite engaging in an intersubjective dialogue with Sarris’s and others’ stories, that certain of my preconceptions have remained hidden. The success of interruptive cross-cultural discourse depends on the willingness and ability of a critic to recognise his or her own limitations and, as I have argued, sometimes even Sarris fails to do this. It is those biases and prejudices that we do not recognise that are the most damaging. Sarris’s cross-cultural strategy risks uncovering the historicity of the critic at only a surface level – that which is accessible to the scholar in question. This risks being even more damaging than criticism that is presented as being objective and distanced because Sarris’s strategy submits a veneer of openness and reflexivity that may be only fictional. Sarris observes that no individual is a “perfect lens into the life and circumstances” of another, but neither is any individual

¹³⁹ Washburn, “The Risk of Misunderstanding,” 80.

“a perfect lens” into his or her own circumstances, even if they are engaging in discourse that is interruptive in the sense Sarris describes.¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

Despite Sarris’s denial of privilege, his interruptive storytelling strategy in practice reinscribes certain cultural boundaries over which non-Native scholars, or specifically, non-Kashaya Pomo scholars, cannot or should not step.¹⁴¹ Although these boundaries and limits are not necessarily pejorative, Sarris’s privilege extends not only over non-Indian or non-Kashaya Pomo critics, but also over individuals (interlocutors but not necessarily critics in the academic sense) operating from further within Pomo culture, for example Auntie Violet Chappell. Sarris’s “outsider” status provides him with the “difference” he needs to create a gap in understanding or perception within which he can initiate cross-cultural dialogue, but his “insider” status provides him with a bank of meaningful lived experiences from which he can draw that dialogue.

Sarris effectively frustrates closure and initiates long term “internal” or “reflective” dialogue in his interlocutors, as a means to prevent the “fixing” and decontextualisation of Native knowledge in academic contexts. Although the frustration of closure risks dissatisfaction due to its tendency to raise more questions than it answers, Sarris overcomes this tendency by substituting for intellectual closure a compelling experiential aesthetic through the incorporation of his personal narrative. This remains a problematical strategy for non-Native scholars, however, who lack the cultural authority required to meaningfully incorporate their personal

¹⁴⁰ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 91.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 46, 168.

narratives into a dialogue with Native narratives. The best a non-Native scholar can hope to achieve is to *mimic* the boundary-crossing strategies employed by scholars such as Sarris, but this risks creating a culturally relativistic muddle that provides neither intellectual nor literary satisfaction.

Because Sarris's strategy is ultimately dependent upon the ability or willingness of scholars to recognise their own conceptual boundaries, it remains limited, particularly in contexts where dialogue is neither consciously or subconsciously interruptive. In terms of mediating between Native and academic philosophies of knowledge, however, interruptive storytelling is potentially valuable because its emphasis on interrogating one's own historicity, although subject to its own limitations, enables scholars to consider narratives on a context-specific basis that takes into consideration not only the implications of a scholar's dialogue with a given narrative, but also the boundaries around that dialogue and the places where they should not go.

SYNTHESISING A CONTEXT-SPECIFIC APPROACH I:
AN INTERRUPTIVE STORYTELLING APPROACH TO
THOMAS KING'S *GREEN GRASS, RUNNING WATER, "ONE GOOD STORY,
THAT ONE,"* AND THE *DEAD DOG CAFÉ COMEDY HOUR*

In this section, I will apply an "interruptive storytelling" reading to Thomas King's (Cherokee) 1993 novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, his short story, "One Good Story, That One," and the radio show the *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*, formerly broadcast in Canada by the CBC. This exercise represents the first step in synthesising a context-specific approach to Native American literary and film criticism and, as such, I intend to emphasise those elements of Sarris's strategy that are most appropriate given the circumstances of this particular reading; that is a cross-cultural interpretation by a non-Native scholar of a cross-cultural novel written by a mixedblood scholar and author.

In the preceding chapter, I argued that Sarris's interruptive storytelling approach is potentially useful to non-Native scholars conducting cross-cultural readings in at least two important respects. First, it inscribes positive boundaries upon Native texts that work to resist the colonial impulses of the academy. Second, it encourages scholars to recognise both the limitations placed on admittance to a narrative by the storyteller, in this case King, but also the interpretive limitations inherent in their own historicities as scholars (a process, as I noted, with its own limitations). As discussed previously, Sarris argues that scholars must engage intersubjectively and reflexively with narratives and suggests that in order to achieve the opening up of intercultural communication

critics should incorporate personal narrative into their theoretical writing. As I have argued, the notion of including autobiographical material in Native American literary criticism is problematical for non-Native scholars for a number of reasons, principally related to the autobiographical disadvantage applicable to non-Native scholars when engaging intersubjectively with a Native narrative. I do not therefore propose to expand on the autobiographical material I included during the discussion on Sarris's *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* but to focus on King's use of humour as a medium through which to expose and interrogate the constructed worldviews of his readers.

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King self-consciously employs dialogic and intertextual strategies, within a framework of "trickster discourse," as a means to engage both Native and non-Native readers in what Herb Wylie refers to as a process of "mutual decolonization," by encouraging a self-conscious and subversive conversation between cultures.¹ Bianca Chester observes, for example, how King "uses humour to create... a dialogue between oral and written, between Native and Christian creation stories, and between literary and historical discourses." In this way, Chester argues, King is able to initiate a dialogue between Native and Western theory and thus emphasise the different philosophies of knowledge in Native and non-Native cultures.² Furthermore, in addition to initiating a dialogue between Native and non-Native discourse, *Green Grass,*

¹ Patricia Linton, "'And Here's How It Happened': Trickster Discourse in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 45 (1999), 232; Herb Wylie, "'Trust Tonto': Thomas King's Subversive Fictions and the Politics of Cultural Literacy," *Canadian Literature* 161/162 (Summer/Autumn 1999): 118.

² Bianca Chester, "*Green Grass, Running Water*: Theorizing the World of the Novel," *Canadian Literature* (Summer/Autumn 1999), n.p., available from Literature Online, <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>.

Running Water is also overtly interruptive, encouraging readers to identify and interrogate their preconceptions. By telling jokes that expose the assumptions underpinning the audience's interaction with the text, King is able to position margins around the dialogue and restrict access into certain areas of the narrative.

Green Grass, Running Water is a multi-layered text comprising several overlapping and "contrapuntal" plots.³ Alberta Frank is a University professor with two lovers – Charlie Looking Bear whose father was a Hollywood actor appearing in 'B' Westerns and Lionel Red Dog, a hapless television salesman floundering on the cusp of middle-age. Eli Stands Alone, who has returned to the reserve following a career as a University Professor, is occupying his mother's house in the spillway of the Grand Baleen Dam while lawyers, including Charlie, argue over its legal status. Framing the novel are the stories of four ancient Indians who have adopted the guises of white heroes from canonical/colonial literature – Robinson Crusoe, Ishmael, Hawkeye and the Lone Ranger – and have escaped from a psychiatric hospital in Florida to hitchhike across America "fixing" the world. The four old Indians, accompanied by Coyote, each tell a version of a Native creation story which not only subverts and subsumes biblical scripture and Western canonical texts but relates how they came to adopt the guises of the white Western heroes. As the novel develops, the different plot strands become more and more intermingled, culminating in the destruction, by Coyote and the four old Indians, of the dam and the freeing of the river to flow its natural course, a metaphor for the demolition of static colonial narratives and the

³ Laura E. Donaldson, "Noah Meets Old Coyote, or Singing in the Rain: Intertextuality in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," *Studies in American Indian Literature* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 29.

restoration of a dynamic and adaptive way of interpreting history and telling stories.

The dialogic characteristics identified by Chester function as a type of border pedagogy, similar to the interruptive practice in which Sarris engages in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*. King initiates a conversation within which the participants internalise, reject, absorb and adapt utterances within a polyvocal conversation of voices, incorporating Native myth and folklore, colonial narratives and biblical scripture within a text that is, according to Chester, “saturated in dialogue,” and resembles the interactive engagement shared between storytellers and their audience in oral storytelling performances.⁴ By self-consciously incorporating characteristics of oral storytelling into his written text, King is undermining static colonial narratives in two ways, both by creating an internally persuasive dialogue between the colonised and the colonisers but also by reminding readers of the reciprocal and dynamic relationship existing between conveyers and receivers of stories.

Like Sarris, King is a “mixedblood.” Of Cherokee and Greek heritage, he grew up in California, attended University in Minnesota where he studied Cree and Blackfoot cultures and storytelling, and is currently a professor at the University of Guelph in Canada and a Canadian citizen. This situates him at a critical juncture between a varied range of networks of cultural knowledge – academic discourse, nationality, literature, history, popular culture and Native oral traditions and ceremonies.⁵ A number of critics have compared King’s boundary-

⁴ Bianca Chester, “*Green Grass, Running Water*,” n.p.

⁵ Patricia Linton, ““ And Here’s How It Happened,”” 212-215.

crossing activities with the work of Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor who, like King and Sarris, is also of mixed heritage and situated on the borders between cultures.⁶ Like Sarris and Vizenor, King's position at the intersection of cultures uniquely privileges him in terms of mediating between Native and academic discourse.

The multi-layered narrative hinges on a specific historical event – the creation of the body of work known as “Plains Ledger Art” by members of a number of Plains Indian tribes while incarcerated at Fort Marion in Florida in the late nineteenth century. King introduces this incident near the beginning of the novel when Alberta delivers a lecture to her students.⁷ The significance of the ledger art as a text of resistance is unfortunately beyond the conceptual grasp of most of Alberta's students but Alberta's lesson in history is also a lesson in *interpreting* history, as observed by Carlton Smith, who notes that the dialogic structure of *Green Grass, Running Water* “immediately foregrounds the linguistic and cultural processes that produce meaning” suggesting that students and readers alike “need to break free from the hegemony of traditional ‘white’ stories of the frontier and begin to understand how history is a construct.”⁸

Like Sarris, King is not privileging oral discourse over written discourse but initiating a dialogue between the two. According to Goldman, *Green Grass, Running Water* emphasises how the Plain's Ledger Art “affirmed Native people's

⁶ See, for example, Chester, “*Green Grass, Running Water*,” Linton, ““And Here's How It Happened,”” and Carlton Smith, “Coyote, Contingency, and Community: Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* and the Postmodern Trickster,” in *Coyote Kills John Wayne: Postmodernism and Contemporary Fictions of the Transcultural Frontier* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, University Press of New England, 2000), 58-78.

⁷ King, *Green Grass*, 14-19.

⁸ Smith, “Coyote, Contingency and Community,” 66, 65.

solidarity in the face of exile and territorial dispossession” and underscores how the creation of this visual “text” altered the status of the “book” in indigenous cultures.⁹ At a point in history when the “foundations of tribal existence were being challenged” books not only functioned as “repositories for Native wisdom and tradition” but were also “inextricably connected to Native resistance,” through the creation of a palimpsest that appropriated, in the case of the Plains Ledger Art, “foreign space” in ledger books by turning them sideways and drawing over them.¹⁰

While the Plains Ledger Art represents Native resistance through appropriation, absorption and adaptation of Western modes of transmission, the story of Lionel’s life is an object lesson in how Native identity has been “invented” in written history and literature. The comic misrepresentation of Lionel in official records as a radical AIM activist (which he is not) and suffering from a heart condition (which he does not) “allegorizes the familiar historic process of domination of Native Americans by written colonial narratives.” Possibilities in Lionel’s life are limited by such monologic records which “conspire to fix his identity and limit possibility,” part of King’s negotiation of the way conventional Western histories “perpetuate the entrapment of Native cultures within the ‘static’ historical representations of the past.”¹¹ Appropriately, Lionel’s deliverance is to be found in the liberating power of oral stories, used by the four old Indians to challenge monologic, written histories. The four old Indians, who,

⁹ Goldman, “Mapping and Dreaming, 20-26.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Smith, “Coyote, Contingency and Community,” 71.

in their quest to “fix” the world by disrupting white monologues, create a chant that subverts the ending of a John Wayne western, allowing the Indians to defeat the Cavalry, are undertaking essentially the same process as the ledger artists. They are, in effect, creating an “oral” palimpsest of sorts as they vocally “write” new endings over the static space of colonial narratives.

Ironically, as the four old Indians are “fixing” the world in the sense of mending, they are simultaneously “unfixing” the world in the sense that they are disrupting closure and interrupting monologic interpretations of a storied history. The four old Indians function as trickster figures, “[resisting] colonial representations and stories of containment.” Orality, represented here by the four old Indians, replaces the Native “absence” in fixed colonial narratives with “an active, disruptive, and fleeting presence... undermining the encoded narrative which seeks to contain Native American discourse.”¹²

In addition to humour and trickster aesthetics, part of King’s strategy is to mirror Native attitudes towards taking responsibility for stories and knowledge by refusing to pander to his audiences’ prejudices and assumptions, or to provide answers or interpret “Indianness” for non-Native readers, in much the same way as Sarris resists explicating and fixing the stories he tells. Instead, by overlaying “networks of cultural information,” according to Margery Fee and Jane Flick, King “entices,” and “tricks” his readers into taking responsibility for and contextualising such knowledge.¹³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Margery Fee and Jane Flick, “Coyote Pedagogy: Knowing Where the Borders Are in Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*,” *Canadian Literature* 161/162 (Summer/Autumn 1999): 132.

Green Grass, Running Water is brimming with jokes that require varying degrees of cultural and historical knowledge for optimal appreciation. If you do not know that Christopher Columbus's fleet comprised the *Pinta*, the *Niña* and the *Santa Maria*, then you will not appreciate the joke when three cars, a Pinto, a Nissan and a Karmann-Ghia, float over the edge of a dam.¹⁴ If your knowledge of Canadian Literature or Anglo-Indian relations is patchy, then names attached to minor characters such as Susanna Moodie, Archie Belaney, Mary Rowlandson, Elaine Goodale, Henry Dawes, John Collier and Buffalo Bill Bursum will lose their resonance. If you are unfamiliar with Cherokee syllabary, you will miss the significance of the four section headings - sacred directions and colours that give the novel a cartographically 360° circular structure.

In a paper that defines King's border-crossing strategy as "coyote pedagogy," Margery Fee and Jane Flick point out that every reader is "inside at least one network [of cultural knowledge] and can therefore work by analogy to cross borders into others." The reward "is the pure pleasure of getting the point or the joke, the pleasure of moving across the border separating insider and outsider." This strategy, what Fee and Flick refer to as "coyote pedagogy" requires "training in illegal border crossing," creating internally persuasive dialogue that challenges the authoritative borders of colonial literature.¹⁵ The problem with this interpretation is that it assumes all borders are crossable and that, if a reader negotiates far enough into networks of cultural knowledge

¹⁴ King, *Green Grass*, 453-454.

¹⁵ Fee and Flick, "Coyote Pedagogy," 131-132.

represented by King's overlapping jokes, they can move closer to an "insider" position, a more privileged location in terms of interpreting the narrative.

However, it seems to me that King has created a careful balance between crossing borders in order to enter the text, and recognising those borders that one, as an "outsider," cannot or should not cross. One of King's methods of maintaining this balance is through "interruptive" humour that, though always gentle, nevertheless works to expose assumptions and forces interlocutors to incorporate their own limitations into the dialogue they are having with the text. As King writes, in a paper predating *Green Grass, Running Water*: "Assumptions are a dangerous thing. They are especially dangerous when we do not even see that the premise from which we start a discussion is not the hard fact that we thought it was, but one of the fancies we churn out of our imaginations to help us get from the beginning of an idea to the end."¹⁶ In the same essay, King describes a particular category of Native-written literature he terms as "associational," which he defines as follows:

Associational literature, most often, describes a Native community. While it may also describe a non-Native community, it avoids centring the story on the non-Native community or on a conflict between the two cultures, concentrating instead on the daily activities and intricacies of Native life and organizing the elements of plot along a rather flat narrative line that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature. In addition to this flat narrative line, associational literature leans towards the group rather than the single, isolated character, creating a fiction that de-values heroes and villains in favour of the members of a community, a fiction which eschews judgements and conclusions.¹⁷

¹⁶ King, "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," 10.

¹⁷ Ibid, 14.

King explicitly draws attention to the boundaries associational literature creates; he points out that it “provides a limited and particular access to a Native world, allowing the reader to associate with that world without being encouraged to feel a part of it.”¹⁸ In *Green Grass, Running Water*, through his use of humour that exposes the readers’ preconceptions, King encourages in them an ongoing reflection upon the assumptions they brought to the text.

For example, what almost everybody in the novel, and by extension most of King’s readers, fails to notice, is that the four old Indian tricksters, the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye, are actually women.¹⁹ Most readers, given that the four old Indians are going under male monikers, would probably also have made the same assumption. By having such assumptions deflated – the truth is not so much “revealed” but left for readers to work out for themselves – readers are alerted to the possibility of other, more subtle assumptions that may colour their understanding and interpretations of both Native and colonial narratives, a direct example of interruptive storytelling in practice.

The retelling and reimagining of stories in a humorous manner is a recurring theme throughout the novel. In the original Lone Ranger story Tonto – which translates from the Spanish as “fool” or “idiot” – stumbles across a group of massacred Rangers and, discovering one still alive, nurses him back to health. The ranger dons a black mask and becomes a crusader against evil. In his essay “Shooting the Lone Ranger,” King describes a project he undertook to photograph

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ King, *Green Grass*, 55. See Also Jane Flick, “Reading Notes for *Green Grass, Running Water*,” *Canadian Literature* 161/162 (Summer/Autumn 1999): 145.

contemporary Native artists wearing Lone Ranger masks. In King's reimagining of the story the Lone Ranger is, in fact, wearing a mask to conceal the fact that he, or she, is an Indian who acquired the mask in a quick-witted act of survival as one of two Indians about to be discovered having inadvertently stumbled upon the bodies of a group of massacred rangers.²⁰

A further reimagining of this story appears in *Green Grass, Running Water* as part of First Woman's story,²¹ and yet another version occurs in the *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*, a radio spin-off from the Dead Dog Café that appears in *Green Grass, Running Water* and in which King appears, playing himself. This show also prompts listeners, through humour, to reconsider assumptions they may have brought to their "listening." A regular segment of the show is called "Trust Tonto," where questions about Canadian culture are answered. Here, it is Tonto, from Six Nations, who has knowledge and the Lone Ranger is dismissed as a white American who does not know anything. This represents, according to Herb Wylie, the "reclamation of images of Native people from stereotyping by the dominant culture, and the reassertion and privileging of a Native perspective," a reassertion that I would argue is achieved interruptively, using humour and internal persuasion.²²

Thus, King prompts his readers and listeners, through the use of humour to reconsider the deeply problematical and racist assumptions underpinning the "mainstream" version of the Lone Ranger story. This, in turn, encourages them to

²⁰ Thomas King, "Shooting the Lone Ranger," *Hungry Mind Review* 34 (Summer 1995): n.p., available on-line at <http://www.bookwire.com>, accessed 16 March 1998.

²¹ King, *Green Grass*, 74-77.

²² Herb Wylie, "Trust Tonto," 106.

consider what other hitherto unchallenged assumptions and preconceptions they might have brought to their encounter with the narrative. Patricia Linton, with reference to King, Vizenor and N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), whom she defines as “literati narrators,” notes that in novels such as *Green Grass, Running Water*, the “narrator’s display of erudition challenges both readers knowledgeable about Euro-American literature and readers grounded in an alternative culture.” However, she argues, this strategy principally benefits the “nondominant, nonwestern cultural community by protecting it from the “sense of entitlement” that “mainstream” readers may, through “years of privileged training,” have developed, harbouring “an expectation that every text will sooner or later yield to their enthusiastic embrace.” King’s interruptive storytelling and joke telling thus encourages readers to “recognize and respect barriers to easy assimilation,” and King is able to assert a degree of control on the ways in which his readers negotiate access into his narratives.²³

Another regular segment of the *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour* is the “Authentic Indian Name Generator.” In an early episode, the actress Jane Fonda was given the name Barbara Floppy Tomahawk. Others names bestowed include Gladstone Greasy Giggle, Clara Fluffy Flounder and Barlow Blue Belly, to name a few. In addition to the fairly unsubtle purpose of mocking “wannabees” – whites who desire or falsely claim Indian heritage – this part of the show is also a sly subversion of the power of naming, for example, the colonial habit of conferring new names upon ancient places and peoples. The inclusion of the word “authentic” also brings into play a vital interrogation about the slipperiness

²³ Linton, ““And Here’s How It Happened,”” 530.

of “authenticity,” how one defines it and who should be responsible for deciding what is and what is not authentic. Can an Indian name in the English language be truly “authentic”? Is a mixedblood, non-reservation Indian authentic and, if so, is “Thomas King” (for example) an “authentic” Indian name? The interruptive nature of King’s humour disrupts the stability of the narrative of manifest destiny to such a degree that simultaneously everything is authentic and nothing is authentic, undermining the trope of “authenticity” that has been applied to the invented Indian of European imaginations over several centuries of colonisation.

An “interruptive storytelling” reading of Thomas King’s work, within a cross-cultural context, allows for a consideration of not only the unarguably dialogic orientation of his narratives but also of the limits that surround that dialogue. King’s strategy – to initiate a dialogue with his interlocutors by drawing them in with gentle humour, and then to interrupt that dialogue also using humour – encourages readers to recognise and respect borders, but is not an exclusionary tactic. Rather, King’s joke-telling strategy enables his readers to work with him and take responsibility for their interpretations of his stories. In this way, the assumptions readers may have brought to the text are drawn into the story and become part of the dialogue, resulting in a qualified mediation of insider/outsider dichotomies that refrains from allowing non-Native readers to assimilate to the narrative, and also avoids creating an exclusion zone around Native discourse, allowing cross-cultural communication to remain open and ongoing.

CHAPTER 3

THE PROBLEMS OF SPEAKING FOR OTHERS AND SPEAKING FOR ONESELF IN SUSAN BERRY BRILL DE RAMÍREZ'S CONVERSIVE LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP

If all events are related, then what story does a volcano erupting in Hawaii, the birth of a woman's second son near Gallup, and this shoulderbone of earth made of a mythic monster's anger construct? Nearby a meteor crashes. Someone invents aerodynamics, makes wings. The answer is like rushing wind: simple faith.

Joy Harjo (Creek), *Secrets from the Center of the World*

No one knows
about being white,
just like no one knows
about being an Indian.
Or Latino.
Or black.
Or Martian.
And that means
I do know more about being Indian
than you do.

Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma), *Out There Somewhere*

Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyse the method of “conversive” literary scholarship proposed by Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez in her book *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition*. Brill de Ramírez's argument, briefly, consists of two key interrelated themes, similar to those articulated by other scholars whose work I discuss in this dissertation. First, in common with many other observers, she notes the intersubjective and relational characteristics of literatures deeply informed by their oral roots, American Indian literature being her case in point. Second, she proposes that in order to write effectively about such literatures,

scholars must find a way to move beyond traditional discursive and oppositional scholarly approaches and to write in a way that reflects the same intersubjective and relational qualities she finds present in American Indian literatures.

Although Brill de Ramírez's observations may seem familiar, her approach to negotiating the distances between Native and non-Native philosophies of knowledge is unusual in that, as a non-Native scholar, she adopts what I would define as an indigenist perspective that posits the unique and special status of Native knowledge in terms of a centring, healing force located within the interrelations between all elements of the universe. In *Red Matters*, Krupat raises the question as to whether non-Native scholars are compelled to occupy a cosmopolitan, bicultural or mediative perspective towards Native American critical theory by virtue of their outsider status. He concludes that this "is by no means an inevitability," noting that "an Indian or non-Indian identity does not in and of itself determine critical perspective."¹ Brill de Ramírez, I would argue, constitutes an example of a non-Native scholar whose work shies away from Krupat's cosmopolitan approach with its emphasis on a fluid cultural frontier between Native and non-Native and towards a perspective that privileges Native ways of knowing.

Having articulated her understanding of the "special" status of Native knowledge as consisting of a universal web of interconnections, Brill de Ramírez takes the somewhat radical, and potentially controversial, approach of arguing that scholars, Native and non-Native alike, must immerse themselves within the relational web of meanings. Scholars, she is arguing, should endeavour to experience Native narrative from the inside out rather than analysing them from the outside in. In other words, Brill de Ramírez contends, scholars must enter into the "story world" of a

¹ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 2.

given narrative in order to access the pathways of interrelated meaning that constitute what she defines as a “conversive” worldview. In the previous chapter, I discussed Greg Sarris’s (Kashaya Pomo/Federated Graton Rancheria) strategy of “interruptive storytelling” to expose the differences between interlocutors and thus the limitations of their interpretations. Brill de Ramírez’s “conversive” methodology, which, like interruptive storytelling, posits an “experiential” approach to criticism, achieves a more or less diametrically opposite result in that it works to erase the differences and deconstruct the boundaries that are so essential to the interruptive approach.

It is worth noting that Brill de Ramírez’s critical methodology falls only partially into the definition of an indigenist approach provided by Arnold Krupat in *Red Matters*. Krupat defines an indigenist approach as, among other things, one that emphasises a geocentric epistemology.² This perspective is largely absent in Brill de Ramírez’s definition of a universally interrelated web of meanings, although it does figure significantly in Craig S. Womack’s (Creek-Cherokee) separatist/tribal-specific approach, which I will discuss in the following chapter. Krupat further defines an indigenist approach as focusing upon “a particular relation to the earth as underlying a worldview that can be called traditional or tribal. It is this worldview that determines one’s perspective on literature as on all else.”³ It is this aspect of an indigenist perspective that is most prominent in Brill de Ramírez’s approach, although I would amend Krupat’s emphasis on “a particular relation to the earth” to extend to the interrelation between all elements of the universe, the dominant trope of Brill de Ramírez’s argument.

² Krupat, *Red Matters*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

Irish-American scholar Deirdre Keenan, in relation to her struggle to find a way of recounting the history of the dispossession of the Potawatomi, in which – as a descendent of the Irish immigrants who settled on Potawatomi land – she is inextricably complicit, writes: “I have been trying to imagine the possibility of reconfiguring the two-dimensional plane of inside/outside narratives into a three-dimensional space where our separate stories and the separation between past and present can converge without consolidation.”⁴ Brill de Ramírez’s conversive methodology represents a similar endeavour in the field of Native American literary criticism, where insider/outsider dichotomies are dispensed with and replaced by “a three-dimensional space” characterised by a web of relational knowledge constituting interconnected pathways open to all. Despite her radical, and potentially controversial (although not entirely successful) approach to developing a new strategy for interpreting Native American narratives, very little critical attention has been paid to Brill de Ramírez’s work. This is probably as a result of the perfectly reasonable desire on the part of many scholars to emphasise critical approaches that have been developed by Native American scholars, or focus on works that evaluate Native-led theories. As Womack writes in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, “It seems to me that the minimal requirement for a Native studies course should be that every classroom text is written by a Native author; otherwise, how can we possibly lay claim to presenting Native perspectives?”⁵ I remain sympathetic to Womack’s argument. However, Brill de Ramírez’s work represents a thoughtful attempt to address many of the issues relating to cross-cultural Native American literary criticism – and Native American studies remains for better or worse a cross-

⁴ Keenan, “Trespassing Native Ground, 184.

⁵ Womack, *Red on Red*, 10.

cultural enterprise if only by virtue of its location in predominantly non-Native institutions – and is thus deserving of some attention. I have elected to include it here because Brill de Ramírez’s strategy – both in its successes and its limitations – addresses fundamental issues in relation to developing a cross-cultural approach to Native American literary criticism, as part of an overall exploration into ways that Native American and academic philosophies of knowledge may be mediated.

Despite its many positive attributes, I identify a number of problems with Brill de Ramírez’s strategy that seriously limit its potential to function as a mediating tool between Native and academic philosophies of knowledge. First, by stating and arguing in support of a hypothesis that proposes the presence of “conversive” meaning in American Indian literatures, Brill de Ramírez is engaging in the very mode of discursive, oppositional scholarship that she is calling for scholars to move beyond. This, obviously, compromises her attempt to produce scholarly writing that mirrors the “conversive” qualities she perceives in the literary works under discussion and, furthermore, imposes an essentialising framework upon the narratives she studies, in that Brill de Ramirez presents them as knowable only in terms of her own perception of the relevant degrees of “conversivity” exhibited in each literary work.

Additionally, the anti-elitist impulse implicit in Brill de Ramírez’s method, whereby scholars adopt a more subservient role as “storyteller-guides,” rather than acting as authoritative and objectifying interpreters, is hampered by her use, at times, of a densely structured theoretical terminology, at times verging on jargon. This difficulty arises because of Brill de Ramírez’s rigorous attempts to deconstruct traditional scholarly discourse and demonstrate its limitations as a medium for understanding American Indian literatures. However, her meticulous examination of

the limits of discursive scholarship has the unfortunate side effect of placing such discourse centre stage, as the formative model against which any alternative strategy, including her own conception of conversive literary scholarship, must be judged. Even if the judgement falls in favour of the alternative methodologies, the outcome is still to mark them and the literatures to which they have been applied as “Other,” thus perpetuating deep-rooted patterns of domination and marginalisation.

Second, is Brill de Ramírez’s assumption that her method of conversive literary scholarship provides, for scholars and other readers, an open door into American Indian narratives. Brill de Ramírez stresses that this open door comes with responsibilities, but, nevertheless, she neglects not only to reflect upon the possible limits of her own understanding, but also to acknowledge the possibility that the storytellers whose work she discusses may have imposed certain strategic boundaries upon their narratives that deliberately impede the access of outsiders. Within a “conversive” reading of the type proposed by Brill de Ramírez, this kind of purposeful obstruction is not even a possibility, as meaningfulness is predicated only in terms of connectivity and interrelatedness and thus oppositional concepts such as insider and outsider are essentially meaningless.

Finally, although Brill de Ramírez proposes that scholars should write intersubjectively and include elements of personal narrative in their analyses, her own use of personal narrative is at best hesitant and at worst confined within the domain of the anecdotal. Not only does Brill de Ramírez appear to struggle to find lived experiences through which to mediate her readings of the narratives under discussion, the personal narratives that she does include are not used reflexively and thus do not adequately illuminate her own historicity as a critic and the implications of this historicity for her analyses.

My assessment of Brill de Ramírez's conversive literary scholarship may seem to some extent a fault-finding exercise, and a relentlessly critical and/or negative one at that. It is worth clarifying, then, that many of the problems I identify with Brill de Ramírez's research also apply to my own research, and to other non-Native scholars writing Native American literary criticism. I offer these criticisms not as an attack on Brill de Ramírez or her scholarship, but to highlight the difficulties faced by all non-Native scholars, by virtue of their epistemic positions, in attempting to negotiate between Native and academic philosophies of knowledge. Furthermore, by differentiating between those aspects of Brill de Ramírez's strategy that I find problematical and those that potentially have value in synthesising a flexible and context-specific approach to Native American literary and film criticism I hope to emphasise the importance of developing such a context-specific approach and to explore ways in which various critical approaches may be incorporated within a flexible framework.

Searching for Relational Pathways into Story Worlds

In *American Indian Literatures & the Oral Tradition* Brill de Ramírez has two interrelated aims. The first is to demonstrate what she terms the "conversive" characteristics of American Indian literatures deeply informed by their roots in oral tradition and the second is to propose a way of creating scholarship about these literatures that not only seeks meaning within these "conversive" qualities but also seeks to replicate those qualities in terms of its own structures and strategies. Brill de Ramírez's dominant trope throughout *American Indian Literature and the Oral Tradition* is the conception that, despite the diverse range of American Indian and Canadian First Nations cultures, there exists throughout this multiplicity of

experience a consistent emphasis on “the interrelatedness that is at the heart of a balanced world.”⁶

Within American Indian worldviews and storytelling, according to Brill de Ramírez, meaning is “inherently relational” and situated within the interconnectedness between humans, animals, plants, rocks and so on, all of which “possess subjective status as persons.”⁷ In a conversive realm, according to Brill de Ramírez, it is not possible to know something in isolation, only to understand it in terms of its complex and dynamic network of relationships with other elements of the universe.⁸ According to Brill de Ramírez, the quality of interrelatedness she identifies – the “knowing” that comes from understanding interconnections and interrelationships between persons, animals, things and places – constitutes a healing and regenerative centring impulse in American Indian worldviews and storytelling that she defines as the sacred.⁹ Brill de Ramírez describes these sacred, centring forces as “conversive,” a neologism that designates what she perceives as the two defining qualities of such relational discourse, conversion and conversation, describing “the conjunctive reality of traditional storytelling through both its transformational and regenerative power (conversion) and the intersubjective relationality between the storyteller and listener (conversation).”¹⁰ American Indian storytelling and worldviews, in other words, are both conversational, in the sense that all elements of the universe are in constant exchange with one another, and conversional in a spiritual sense that posits the sacred interconnectedness between

⁶ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 216.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43, 90.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 88-89, 203.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 7.

persons, things, animals and places as a focalising source of regeneration, revitalisation and healing.¹¹

Conversive communication, Brill de Ramírez argues, is present throughout both written and oral American Indian storytelling and demonstrates the power of interrelationality as a means to heal discordance and disconnectedness. Within conversive communication, “relationality is the element that makes communication transformative.”¹² Significantly, however, conversivity does not act as a homogenising impulse, but instead places emphasis on the “interrelatedness of different elements (or belief systems) rather than on specific points of contention,” thus enabling difference and diversity to be incorporated and valued, rather than subsumed or rejected.¹³

This sense of the sacred and the privileging of the interrelatedness of things over and above individual subjectivity and difference also underpins and is manifested in oral storytelling traditions and written literatures grounded in oral traditions, whereby the interaction between storyteller and audience, according to Brill de Ramírez, “continually, cyclically, and repetitively turns its focus from storyteller to story to listener to ancestors to descendents to other relatives and other persons, peoples, animals, things” thus creating a process through which all of these elements enter into and become part of the story.¹⁴ This interweaving of all the elements of a story includes, crucially, both the teller *and* the listener.¹⁵ Brill de Ramírez states explicitly that “it is the centering force of the sacred that inclusively

¹¹ Ibid., 203.

¹² Ibid., 17.

¹³ Ibid., 93-94, 127.

¹⁴ Ibid., 31, 204.

¹⁵ Ibid., 204.

enables readers to interact interrelationally with the words and worlds of Native North America in truly transformative ways.”¹⁶ This interaction is achieved through the consistent emphasis on the interrelatedness of all things, which facilitates a process whereby the listener’s (or reader’s) relationship to all the other elements becomes a centring focus that draws him or her into the story.¹⁷

Of course, the interactive nature of oral storytelling and written literatures grounded in oral tradition has been observed and commented on at length, as discussed in the two preceding chapters. Brill de Ramírez, however, is particularly explicit about the nature of this interaction. She believes that “*conversivity knows no boundaries and excludes no one.*”¹⁸ She cites Leslie Marmon Silko’s (Laguna Pueblo) explanation that “a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener” and how a storyteller’s role, rather than to act as mere narrator, is thus to “draw the story out of the listeners.”¹⁹ This process, whereby parts of a story are drawn *out of* a listener/reader as the listener/reader is simultaneously being drawn *into* the happenings of the story is achieved by encouraging an “open engagement” between different worlds – the real worlds of the storyteller and the “storylistener” and the storied world of the narrative – emphasising the listener’s or reader’s own relationship with all the interconnected elements of the universe “such that the listener becomes part of the story herself.”²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid., 197.

¹⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹⁸ Ibid., 189; emphasis added.

¹⁹ Leslie Marmon Silko, “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” in *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon*, ed. Leslie A. Fiedler and Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 57, quoted in Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 77, 134.

²⁰ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 19, 31, 82-83, 131.

In this way, Brill de Ramírez explains, a story becomes a joint creation of all those who participated in its making, a “mutually transforming” process whereby the story transforms the “listener-reader” and the “listener-reader” transforms the story.²¹ This is significant because it posits a privileging of intersubjectivity whereby the “self-focused individual” becomes problematised and “authorial presence” is asserted only in relation to a “conversive circularity” that equally privileges the subjective status of both oneself and others.²² Conversive structures, according to Brill de Ramirez, are not confined to oral storytelling events, but are also manifested in written literatures created by American Indian writers whose works are grounded in oral traditions and who consequently interweave into their work conversive strategies such as voice shifts that encourage readers to engage interactively and intersubjectively with the text.²³

What is particularly significant about Brill de Ramírez’s conception of interrelatedness, interconnectedness and the intersubjective and “mutually transforming” relationships between the storyteller, storied world and “storylistener” as a defining feature of American Indian and Canadian First Nations worldviews is her contention that it is within, and *only* within, the conversive relationships she describes that meaning can be located.²⁴ This process, whereby “interconnected subjects... reflect their own meaningfulness through their intersubjective relationships with other subjects,” has significant implications for scholars working in the field of American Indian literatures.²⁵ In order to access the meaning that is

²¹ Ibid., 147, 39.

²² Ibid., 71-71, 86, 110.

²³ Ibid., 6-7, 31, 41.

²⁴ Ibid., 16, 42-43, 62-63.

²⁵ Ibid., 46.

located within the interrelations Brill de Ramírez describes, she argues that scholars must engage conversively with the narratives they study by approaching them via “their conversive pathways” and entering into the relational domain of the storytelling worlds.²⁶ In this way, the “interactive and intersubjective relationship between the storyteller and the listener is transformed into the interactive and intersubjective relationship between the literary work and the scholar (in the role of listener-reader)” enabling scholars to become active and intimate participants in the storytelling event and access the meaning located in the web of interrelated connections that constitute the storied world.²⁷

The necessity of entering a storied world in order to access its meaning has profound implications, argues Brill de Ramírez, in terms of the use of traditional “Western” scholarly methodologies, what she refers to as “discursive” discourses, for accessing meaning in literatures. Brill de Ramírez concurs with those critics such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Dakota), Devon Mihesuah (Choctaw), Greg Sarris and Angela Cavender Wilson (Dakota), as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation, who note the limitations of such discursive critical methods for understanding and evaluating American Indian histories and literatures. As with Brill de Ramírez’s detailed explanation of the structure of the web of connective meaning in American Indian storytelling, however, she is somewhat more explicit and theoretical than these other scholars in terms of her explanation for these limitations.

Brill de Ramírez notes, in common with other observers, that literary critics have a tendency to read, understand and evaluate narratives within theoretical frameworks that privilege Western ideas of knowledge and meaning and therefore

²⁶ Ibid., 42, 62-63.

²⁷ Ibid., 1, 6, 14.

may not be appropriate for accessing meaning in narratives grounded in alternative ways of knowing, leading to possible or probable misunderstanding and misinterpretation. This difficulty is compounded by the privileging of the critic's voice in written criticism achieved at the expense of American Indian voices in the narrative that are silenced or marginalised, or serve only to authorise the critic's own conclusions.²⁸

Brill de Ramírez notes a number of problems in terms of Western literary criticism's applicability to American Indian literatures and, noting the legacy of her previous scholarship on Ludwig Wittgenstein, explicitly grounds her understanding of these problems within Wittgenstein's philosophical discussions on the limiting boundaries of theory and censure of the concept of objective criticism.²⁹ She argues that "textually derived" theoretical frameworks can access meaning or signification only in the strictly defined terms of "their respective signifying systems."³⁰

Because, according to Brill de Ramírez, the "respective signifying systems" of most Western models of literary criticism define meaning or signification as "inherently oppositional," and "delimit the world and texts through the discernment of distinctions, discordant elements, hierarchized orderings, differences, separations, ruptures, and aporias," knowledge and meaning is categorised and valued within frameworks that are clearly incompatible with the interrelational meaning located in conversive narratives, in which Western-orientated signifiers of meaning such as

²⁸ Ibid., 1, 70. See also Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman*, 123-128 and Tedlock, "Interpretation, Participation, and the Role of Narrative in Dialogical Anthropology," in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, ed. Mannheim and, 253-254.

²⁹ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 24-25, 34.

³⁰ Ibid., 41-42.

difference, oppositionality and objectification in fact represent an *absence of meaning*.³¹

In addition to the limiting boundaries of theory, Brill de Ramírez observes, like Sarris, that the distancing and “objectification of literary works as texts for critical consumption,” is a practice that alienates the scholar from the texts they study and thus precludes the kind of interactive engagement with the narrative that she argues must occur in order to access meaning within conversive domains.³² Thus, Brill de Ramírez concludes, literary criticism is capable only of accessing meaning and significance in a narrative “according to [its own] preconceived boundaries” of dialectical, discursive and dialogic oppositionality and is hence unable to enter the pathways of relational meaning present in conversively orientated narratives.³³

Scholars, then, argues Brill de Ramírez, must find ways to step beyond such limiting conceptual boundaries and develop a new method of literary scholarship that enables them to access the kind of relational meaning found in conversive literatures. Conversive literary scholarship would involve “entering [a] story and discovering meaning within it through one’s engagements as part of the story.” This “accession of meaning within stories,” Brill de Ramírez observes, “is a categorically different endeavor,” than the identification and interpretation of signification according to a preconceived theoretical boundary characteristic of conventional scholarly methodologies.³⁴

In addition to providing the rationale for Brill de Ramírez’s critique of traditional literary criticism through his “rejection of a priori theoretical

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7, 16-17, 42-43, 90-92, 204.

³² *Ibid.*, 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

interpretations of the world,” Wittgenstein’s work also plays a “mediating role” between discursive scholarship and the kind of conversive reading practices Brill de Ramírez is proposing, based on Wittgenstein’s “methodology of descriptive investigations.”³⁵ Ramírez discusses Wittgenstein’s explanation of the process through which we tend to objectify those who are different from us and suggests that in order to avoid such objectifying tendencies scholars should engage with the narratives they study “in a collaborative process of perception, description, interpretation, and evaluation.”³⁶ Conversive scholarship, whereby the scholar steps out of theoretical boundaries and into the pathways of relational meaning within a storied world “necessitates an intimate and transformational relationship,” that not only mitigates the distancing effect of Western critical strategies but also, because “signification is not contingent upon an external point of interpretation,” dispenses with the need for a critic to interpret a narrative on behalf of others. As Brill de Ramírez explains, “each individual must make her or his own way into and through the story.” All that is required from the scholar is to signpost those pathways of meaning along which other individuals must travel.³⁷ In other words, what Brill de Ramírez is suggesting literary scholarship should become, at least in terms of mediating American Indian literatures, is storytelling itself.

Bridging the Gap between Native and Academic Philosophies of Knowledge?

One of the fundamental principles of Brill de Ramírez’s conversive literary scholarship is the concept that it constitutes a methodologically much simpler

³⁵ Ibid., 26.

³⁶ Ibid., 31.

³⁷ Ibid., 14, 44, 74.

approach to accessing meaning within literatures than traditional Western critical methods.³⁸ What is significant here is her emphasis on descriptive scholarship, where the scholar functions not as the authoritative and objectifying arbiter of meaning, but instead takes on the more subservient role of “storyteller-guide” who facilitates the entry of others into the pathways of conversive meaning present in a narrative.³⁹ This is possible, Brill de Ramirez argues, because focusing on the intersubjective relationships between elements “is sufficient to define meaningful space,” and thus no “external point of interpretation” is necessary. Consequently, there is no requirement for a critic to interpret the work on behalf of other readers or listeners. The role of the scholar therefore becomes, as noted above, one akin to a “storyteller-guide, indicating pathways in/to the work for others to traverse” which thus “shifts the critic away from a critical hegemony over literary texts.”⁴⁰

In respect of her analyses of particular narratives, most noticeably in the chapters dealing with the work of Luci Tapahonso (Navajo), Nia Francisco (Navajo), Esther Belin (Navajo), Leslie Marmon Silko and Anna Lee Walters (Pawnee/Otoe-Missouria), Brill de Ramirez frustrates the closure involved in imposing “critical hegemony” onto texts by limiting her discussion largely to identifying and describing the various ways in which a given narrative manifests conversive structures. This descriptive approach to particular literary works is not without its limitations. Michael A.R. Biggs reiterates the gap between language and experience and notes that where experiential knowledge is so deeply entrenched as to be ineffable, “words

³⁸ Ibid., 1.

³⁹ Ibid., 1, 74.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 44, 74.

of *description* or words of *theory* are equally unhelpful.”⁴¹ Additionally, as Dean Rader notes in his review of Brill de Ramírez’s book, the strategy makes for an unsatisfying read, leaving the reader wanting “more than an explanation of how a certain text reveals its conversive structure.”⁴²

Furthermore, the anti-elitist impulse implicit in Brill de Ramírez’s method, while admirable in terms of its democratic orientation, is hampered by her use of a densely structured theoretical terminology, at times verging on jargon. This difficulty arises because of Brill de Ramírez’s rigorous attempts to deconstruct traditional scholarly discourse and demonstrate its limitations as a medium for understanding American Indian literatures. However, her meticulous examination of the limits of discursive scholarship has the unfortunate side effect of placing such discourse centre stage, as the formative model against which any alternative strategy, including her own conception of conversive literary scholarship, must be judged. Even if the judgement falls in favour of the alternative methodologies, the outcome is still to mark them and the literatures to which they have been applied as “Other,” thus perpetuating deep-rooted patterns of domination and marginalisation.

Although she notes that conversive scholarship need not necessarily employ “a simplistic writing style and diction,” Brill de Ramírez believes that it offers the potential for the extension of literary scholarship beyond the realm of universities and academic journals and thus should be couched in a language style that encourages and facilitates the entrance into the storied world that she postulates is necessary to access meaning in a conversive domain.⁴³ This is a point echoed by a

⁴¹ Biggs, “Learning Through Experience, 6-21 11; emphases added.

⁴² Dean Rader, “Review Essay: Relationality and American Indian Literature,” *MELUS* 27, no. 3 (2002): 219.

⁴³ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 209.

number of American Indian scholars who question the presentation of research about indigenous groups in a format that is generally inaccessible to the large majority of the members of that group.⁴⁴ Conversive literary scholarship, then, should enable the results of conversive research to be presented in a format that is accessible to readers from outside the rarefied environment of academia. This contrasts with the orientation of Western literary scholarship, which can operate from a position of “discursive power” over the literatures it studies, a power, Brill de Ramírez notes, “often reflected in a scholarly language inaccessible to anyone besides other scholars.”⁴⁵ Robin Ridington agrees, noting the tendency for literary criticism, until recent times at least, “to be unintelligible to the uninitiated in order to sustain the cabalistic world of its professors and their graduate student acolytes.”⁴⁶ A genuinely conversive literary scholarship, which, as Brill de Ramírez notes, would remove the need for outside interpretation, would be a threat to the status of scholars and is therefore likely to be resisted by the academy. By constructing her argument in such a way that one must be a scholar in order to penetrate it, I would argue that Brill de Ramírez is seeking to assuage this implied threat to academic power and authority. Granted, the majority of Brill de Ramírez’s theorising relates specifically to her discussion of Western-oriented critical methodologies, reserving a less densely theoretical style for her analyses of the American Indian literatures. However, this discussion constitutes a significant proportion of her study, which is likely to render

⁴⁴ See for example Mihesuah, *Natives and Academics* and Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

⁴⁵ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 209.

⁴⁶ Ridington, review, 661.

it appealing to only a limited audience consisting of what Womack refers to as “a handful of academic Ph.D.s who have read every word of the latest critical fads.”⁴⁷

Womack makes a similar criticism of Kenneth Lincoln’s *Indi’n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America*, noting that Lincoln’s language is “overly academic, hyper-theoretical, and abstract,” and thus “comes dangerously close to subsuming the Indian voices in the text.”⁴⁸ Brill de Ramírez’s volume differs from Lincoln’s in that she largely confines her theoretical excursions within the paradigm of her critique of theory, so mitigating its impact on the “Indian voices in the text.” Nevertheless, her decision to present a significant amount of her material in this manner has a number of consequences.

Most significantly, this strategy centralises the very methods of Western critical theory Brill de Ramírez is calling for scholars to move beyond. Brill de Ramírez criticises postmodern strategies of literary criticism, writing that they are unable to throw off the mantles of modernism and structuralism, instead clinging to the past and “defin[ing] themselves in terms of what they critique,” through a process of “continual backward referentiality.”⁴⁹ I would argue that this criticism could be equally applied to Brill de Ramírez’s own work, given her repeated forays into opaque theoretical terminology as a means to critique that very same kind of methodology. Brill de Ramírez’s own “continual backward referentiality” has the unfortunate effect of placing the Western critical strategies she wishes to critique at centre stage, a lexical privileging of theory that serves to perpetuate the process of “othering” the American Indian literatures she then goes on to discuss, because they

⁴⁷ Womack, review, 204.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 32.

are inevitably defined within a paradigm that posits what Brill de Ramírez defines as their oppositional relationship to Western theory.⁵⁰

Furthermore, the somewhat paradoxical situation arises that in order to achieve the circumvention of Western critical methodology that Brill de Ramírez recommends one must first become intimately acquainted with it. Ramírez cites Cook-Lynn's belief that American Indian fiction has been "the captive of western literary theory," but she also concurs with LaVonne Brown Ruoff's view that "a mastery of literary history and theory," is essential for writing good quality criticism about American Indian literatures.⁵¹ I would not disagree with Ruoff's view per se, but I would argue for a further consideration of the assumptions underpinning this argument, which seem to me to be based on a notion that implicitly privileges Western conceptions of knowledge validation, an assumption that seems to be at odds with Brill de Ramírez's stated inclination to privilege conversive meaning over Western discursive theory. Womack, in his review of Lincoln's book, suggests that something other than merely juxtaposing American Indian worldviews against a European-American model is required, hinting at the need to develop methodological strategies that, bypass Western models of critical endeavour altogether and instead focus upon tribally defined conceptions and validations of knowledge, an issue which he discusses at length in his later works.⁵²

⁵⁰ See also Cook-Lynn, "How Scholarship Defames the Native Voice...and Why," 79-92. Cook-Lynn makes a similar criticism of Arnold Krupat's volume *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989): "This critical study [places] whatever new forms were emerging from native voices 'at the margin' of the generally accepted canon of American literature. It is, perhaps, the placement of these literatures by scholars in the field either 'at the margin' or 'at the center of the margin' that gave rise to further negation of what it is that natives have had to say" (81).

⁵¹ Cook-Lynn, "Literary and Political Questions of Transformation: American Indian Fiction Writers," 51 quoted by Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 7; LaVonne Brown Ruoff, "Recent Native American Literary Criticism," *College English* 55, no. 6 (October 1993): 658 quoted by Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 207.

⁵² Womack, review, 204.

I would suggest that Brill de Ramírez's intensely theoretical discussion of the limits of Western critical methods serves to provide an outlet for the mode of explicit, systematic mode of knowledge validation that serves to mitigate what Jonathan Gottschall described as the humanities' "sense of disciplinary inferiority."⁵³ Having conformed to traditional scholarly standards of knowledge presentation and validation for a significant proportion of her book, Brill de Ramírez is then free to engage with the American Indian literatures she selects on what she would define as a more conversive level. Even as Brill de Ramírez circumvents closure on a micro level by concentrating her analyses of particular narratives purely on illuminating their conversive structures, on a macro level her impulse towards closure is perpetuated because the focus on the conversive structures functions also to support her overall totalising hypothesis.

It is not clear whether Brill de Ramírez's divided approach is intentional because she does not comment upon it. She does discuss, however, in what Rader refers to as "a rather postmodern move," the manner in which her conversive interaction with the American Indian literatures transformed her own scholarly writing into a more engaging, conversational style as she progressed through the writing of her book.⁵⁴ As she explains,

The transformational aspect of conversive relations that I was noting within American Indian literatures, and that I was talking *about*, actually transformed my own perspective as a literary scholar and transformed my own scholarship and writing as I began to talk *with* the storytellers, scholars, and character-persons in the stories, all of whom became part of this work. Of course, this necessitated my going back over the earlier chapters and rewriting them to fit more closely within the conversive mode of a storytelling literary scholarship.⁵⁵

⁵³ Gottschall, "The Tree of Knowledge," 262.

⁵⁴ Rader, "Review Essay," 219.

⁵⁵ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 204-205; emphases in original.

This would imply, of course, that Brill de Ramírez's earlier drafts were even more densely theoretical than the eventual published version. It is interesting that Rader perceives Brill de Ramírez's reflexivity as "postmodern" in orientation because, according to Gottschall, the recent postmodern backlash against scientific notions of truth and validity is rooted in the literary studies' inferiority complex he identifies. This has, he argues, resulted in a "devastating... assertion that all truth is relative and ultimately ineffable [representing] a bold declaration of independence from the rest of the academic community and from the standards by which the validity of findings are judged."⁵⁶ In my view, Brill de Ramírez's work is not postmodern, at least not in Gottschall's sense that postmodernism delivers a devastating critique of scientific notions of truth and verifiability. Rather, I would argue, Brill de Ramírez's approach is fairly conventional, in that for the most part she tends to conform to those elements of scientific understanding of truth and knowledge that have been co-opted by the humanities.⁵⁷ Brill de Ramírez *in theory* argues in favour of an approach that would, indeed, represent a "devastating" critique of Western notions of truth and verifiability, both in science and in the humanities, but that she fails *in practice* to deliver a methodology that produces a significant divergence from those same notions.

⁵⁶ Gottschall, "The Tree of Knowledge," 262.

⁵⁷ I doubt also that Brill de Ramírez would herself define her research as postmodern. As she discusses, citing Louis Owens, postmodernism "celebrates the fragmentation and chaos of experience," a quality that renders it incommensurable with the sacred, healing and centring impulses of conversivity; Owens, *Other Destinies*, 20 quoted in Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 35. See also the discussion of postmodernism as an approach towards reading American Indian literatures in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

The Problem of Speaking for Others in Conversive Literary Scholarship

Deirdre Keenan notes that the issue of essentialism raises important questions about “the relationship between knowledge and experience.”⁵⁸ Brill de Ramírez’s conversive literary scholarship attempts to mediate this relationship by developing a critical strategy that enables scholars to *know* through *experience*. This is why Brill de Ramírez argues for scholars to enter into the “story worlds” of Native American narratives, in order to “live” the story from within and obtain access to the meaning located in the web of interrelations between all elements of the universe. In this section, I will argue that, while a seemingly attractive proposition, a number of significant epistemological limitations become apparent.

Linda Alcoff notes that although scholars are implicitly authorised by their positions in academia to “develop theories that express and encompass the ideas, needs, and goals of others,” they must begin to question the legitimacy of that authority.⁵⁹ In terms of her rejection of the authority of Western discursive models as a framework for interpreting Native narratives, Brill de Ramírez’s conversive literary scholarship constitutes part of the interrogation Alcoff calls for. However, in this section I will explore the possibility that Brill de Ramírez’s contention that scholars must enter fully into the “story worlds” of the narratives they are reading in practice merely replaces one mode of “speaking for” with another.

I have already highlighted a number of similarities evident between Brill de Ramírez’s conversive literary scholarship and Greg Sarris’s interruptive storytelling strategy discussed in the previous chapter. Both approaches stress interrelationality, intersubjectivity, the abandonment of the mask of objectivity and the need for

⁵⁸ Deirdre Keenan, “Trespassing Native Ground,” 182.

⁵⁹ Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 7.

scholars to include personal narrative in their critical writing about American Indian literatures. However, where Sarris stresses cross-cultural storytelling as a tool for exposing the different worldviews of interlocutors and thus the limits in their understanding of one another, Brill de Ramírez stresses the necessity, in order to access the relational meaning present within a story, for readers or listeners to fully “step into the oral storytelling worlds” of the writers they study.⁶⁰

As noted previously, Brill de Ramírez identifies in conversively informed storytelling environments a tendency for the listener or reader to become a part of the story itself, through the relational engagement between all the elements of the universe that draws a reader or listener into a story while simultaneously drawing a story out of the listener.⁶¹ In this way, readers and listeners share not only in the emergent meaning of a narrative, but also participate “in the actual events of the stories.”⁶² Furthermore, this means that, because all are “active participants,” in the “co-creation” of the story, the story belongs jointly to the storyteller and the audience.⁶³ Thus, in order to develop a scholarship that mirrors this conversive process scholars, Brill de Ramírez argues, must undertake “deliberate and intentional conversation” with the stories they encounter and “actually [enter] the storied worlds and [come] to be in relationship with the work, the teller-writer, and the persons/characters within the stories.”⁶⁴ In this way, she asserts, “literary knowledge comes from being in relation with the story rather than by looking at it from without” and “literary scholars... become part of the written stories through their own writing,

⁶⁰Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 72.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

teaching, and living.”⁶⁵ She explains further that knowing a story within a conversive domain “involves being a part of the story,” and that only through “connective means” can this becoming “a part of the story” be achieved.⁶⁶

In essence, Brill de Ramírez’s conversive strategy is in opposition to Sarris’s disruptive cross-cultural storytelling strategy, in that it is reliant upon *not* recognising one’s cultural limitations as a reader, or recognising them only within a conversive environment that emphasises the interrelatedness of different cultural contexts. Rather, what is necessary in conversive scholarship is imaginative identification with a narrative – what Sarris calls “the assimilation of the text to the reader’s subjectivity [or] the assimilation of the reader to the text’s subjectivity.”⁶⁷ Sarris generally shies away from this practice because he argues that it inhibits the exposure of preconceptions essential to a successful cross-cultural reading. Brill de Ramírez, in contrast, in attempting to mirror the oral storytelling process, omits to consider the implications for the relationship between storytellers and audiences in two important respects. First, when one of more of the interlocutors comes from outside the specific cultural context in which a given narrative is located, and second, when one of the “outsider” interlocutors is then responsible for interpreting and textualising (fixing) a particular performance, spoken or written, of a story on the printed page. If, as Alcoff argues, “a speaker’s location is epistemically salient,” and “can serve to authorize or disauthorize one’s speech,” then Brill de Ramírez’s declaration that “a relationally conversive strategy... can enable non-Native critics to gain... a deeper

⁶⁵ Ibid., 19, 25.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁶⁷ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 167.

critical entry into seemingly resistant texts” seems highly problematical.⁶⁸ First and foremost, Brill de Ramírez’s statement assumes that entry facilitated into “storytelling worlds otherwise impenetrable” via the use of conversively orientated strategies is not only achievable, but also desirable and ethical.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Brill de Ramírez assumes also that any inability to penetrate an American Indian narrative is likely due to a deficiency in the (Western discursive) methodological strategy employed by the scholar, rather than considering that the American Indian storyteller may have constructed a narrative in such a way as to deliberately exclude or limit access by outsiders. Within a genuinely conversive domain (and I would question this as an attainable possibility), purposeful obstruction by a storyteller is not a serious prospect, because within such a domain meaningfulness is predicated only in terms of connectivity and interrelatedness and thus oppositional concepts such as insider and outsider are essentially meaningless. As Thomas King (Cherokee) argues, Native writers often construct narratives that permit “a limited and particular access to a Native world, allowing the reader to be associated with that world without being encouraged to feel a part of it.”⁷⁰

Brill de Ramírez cites Reed Way Dasenbrock’s observation in relation to Leslie Silko’s writing that, “precisely the opposite of the Western tradition of closure and boundedness obtains: stories are valued for their overlap, for the way they lead to new stories in turn.”⁷¹ I agree with this observation, but what Brill de Ramírez does not do is to consider further the nature of overlap, which is that, as in a Venn

⁶⁸ Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 7; Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 24.

⁶⁹ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 42.

⁷⁰ King, “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” 14.

⁷¹ Reed Way Dasenbrock, “Forms of Biculturalism in Southwestern Literature: The Work of Rudolfo Anaya and Leslie Marmon Silko,” *Genre* 21 (1988): 313 quoted in Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 94-95.

diagram, the areas of intersection are limited and the spatial areas where overlap does not occur are equally significant in terms of interpretation as the ones that do. One only needs to consider, for example, Gerald Vizenor's (Anishinaabe) maddening impenetrability, the film director Victor Masayesva's (Hopi) overt privileging of a Hopi audience, and various accounts of American Indian "informants" consciously obstructing anthropologists' attempts to collect and record stories from the oral tradition in order to realise that American Indian and First Nations storytellers sometimes do take deliberate steps to exclude non-Indian, or non-tribally specific, individuals from fully interacting with a storytelling performance.⁷²

Brill de Ramírez's notion that impenetrability can *only* be due to methodological deficiencies undermines the notion of "co-creative" participation because it implicitly limits the authority – individual and cultural – of American Indian storytellers and instead concentrates the power and agency to access meaning – to *interpret* – firmly in the hands of scholars. This is problematical because, even if an interpretation is undertaken within a conversive domain that focuses on the sacred interrelationality of all elements of the universe, by textualising that interpretation it becomes timeless, frozen on the page, and consequently gains a measure of authority, re-concentrating power in the hands of scholars.

⁷² See Gerald Vizenor, "I Defy Analysis": A Conversation with Gerald Vizenor." *Studies in American Indian Literature* 5, no. 3 (1993): 43-49. When Vizenor remarks that he "defies analysis," he was not boasting about his undoubted ability to tease the reader but stating the heart of his method. To defy analysis is to defy academic authority and monologism and to engage white academics in an intercultural, open and unfixed dialogue that inhibits the "re-colonisation" of American Indian narratives by non-American Indian academics; see in particular Victor Masayesva, Jr., (director) *Hopiit* and *Itam Hakim, Hopiit*, both of which privilege Hopi audiences by refusing to interpret Hopi culture in terms accessible to outsiders and *Ritual Clowns*, (Hotevilla, Ariz.: IS Productions, 1988), which inhibits scholarly desires to fully know a culture by playfully breaking off halfway through a narrative explanation of the role of ritual clowns in Hopi culture; See, for example, Drew Hayden Taylor, "Academia Mania," in *Funny, You Don't Look Like One: Observations from a Blue-Eyed Ojibway* (Penticton B.C.: Theytus Books Ltd, 1998), 95-99. Taylor describes a friend from an unspecified Northern Ontario First Nations tribe who, as a child, told "fake" stories to anthropologists in return for ice cream and money, only to find them years later in a bookstore printed in a volume of "authentic" Native legends. Taylor fictionalises this event in his play *alternatives*.

Brill de Ramírez, however, does discuss the “manifold” responsibilities incumbent upon interlocutors with American Indian narratives in a conversive framework and likens the process of being invited into the storied world of the narratives to being invited into the home of a friend. She explains: “The conversive reading of these poems involves a responsibility on the part of the reader, much as any person would have certain responsibilities as a guest in someone else’s home.”⁷³ These responsibilities include, according to Brill de Ramírez, acquiring a degree of familiarity with the cultural context from where the storyteller and story originates and “respond[ing] in turn and in kind” to the open and inclusive nature of the conversive storytelling performance.⁷⁴

Brill de Ramirez cites Robin Riley Fast’s observation that “for different peoples and individuals... variously realized borders may have quite different origins, appearances, and implications,” but makes no attempt to consider the implications of this for her own work, instead continuing to assume that her conversive method grants her unrestricted access to the American Indian literatures she studies.⁷⁵ It seems to me that the abandonment of the notion of boundaries is inherently risky. If I may extend Brill de Ramírez’s house visiting analogy, most people, when invited into the home of a friend, respect certain boundaries and do not engage in activities such as rifling through drawers or removing items from their friend’s home. It is this analogous respect for cultural boundaries that seems to me to be absent from Brill de Ramírez’s conversive methodology.

⁷³ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 75-76.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁷⁵ Robin Riley Fast, “Borderland Voices,” 508, quoted in Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 92.

A further problem, in my view, is that the *intersubjective* relations called for by Brill de Ramírez in conversive scholarship are actually undermined by her unreflective entry into the storied worlds of the narratives she studies. Brill de Ramírez cites Helen Jaskoski's observation that the intimate interweaving of a story "into our own lives" constitutes a "very personal, intersubjective experience."⁷⁶ Furthermore, Brill de Ramirez states, "conversive literary engagements present subjects whose very vocalization privileges the subjectivity of others... that emphasizes the connections between subjects rather than the individualized subjectivities and vocalizations of specific persons or groups."⁷⁷ I would argue that it is challenging, in textualising such an intimate interweaving, to maintain a genuinely intersubjective orientation. The act of interpretation, even within a conversive domain, necessarily privileges the individual subjectivity of the interpreter, in this case Brill de Ramírez as the scholar.

Furthermore, Brill de Ramírez does not interrogate, through her use of personal narrative or in any other sense, the implications of her own subjectivity for her readings of particular American Indian literary works. Narayan argues that the "discursive reiteration" of essentialism functions to "construct the senses... [of] cultural identity that shape the self-understandings and subjectivities of different groups of people who inhabit these discursive contexts." The consequence of this, Narayan warns, is that,

discourses about "difference" often operate to conceal their role in the production and reproduction of such "differences," presenting these differences as something pre-given and prediscursively "real" that the

⁷⁶ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 208.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 209-210.

discourses of difference merely describe rather than help construct and perpetuate.⁷⁸

I would argue that, despite Brill de Ramírez's remarks about the interconnectedness of diverse elements within a framework, a similar role of construction and perpetuation of difference could be ascribed to Brill de Ramírez's work. Brill de Ramírez's theory of conversive relations, to paraphrase Narayan, does not merely *describe* the "special and unique" status of Native knowledge but also plays a role in constructing it. Because Brill de Ramírez's conversive approach tends to work to erase difference then the "epistemically salient" location of Brill de Ramírez as a speaker is overlooked as an influential factor in this process of construction. As before, what is missing here is a self-reflexive consideration by Brill de Ramírez of the implications of her own methodology in reading and interpreting given literary works.

Brill de Ramírez's failure in practice to respect cultural boundaries in her readings of American Indian literatures is interesting because in the theoretical portions of her text she seems to argue in favour of the opposite case, citing Wittgenstein's belief that humans are incapable of moving "beyond our conceptual boundaries" and quoting his observation that: "The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of *my* world."⁷⁹ The implications of Wittgenstein's statement are clear. If we alone can understand the limits of our worlds, then we can

⁷⁸ Uma Narayan, "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism," *Hypatia* 13:2 (1998), n.p., available via Literature Online, <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>.

⁷⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (New York: Routledge, 1988), 7 quoted in Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 42; Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.62, quoted in Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 211; emphases in original.

only ever understand the worlds of another on our own terms. This has obvious and significant repercussions in terms of cross-cultural reading and interpretation.

Brill de Ramírez, in fact, frequently asserts that scholars *must* step outside their conceptual boundaries and into the storied world of the literatures they study. The conversive process for the scholar of becoming part of the story he or she is reading necessarily focuses on meaningful relations, resulting in the possibility that points of misunderstanding may be ignored or glossed over. Brill de Ramírez does not see conversive relations as a homogenising impulse but rather as a process that values interrelatedness between different and diverse elements. The difficulty with this position is that it is the scholar who is in control of textualising his or her own entry into the storied world and is thus privileged in terms of “discerning ‘family resemblances’ and connections between apparent similars *and* between dissimilars.”⁸⁰ The authority ascribed to the textualisation process, of course, is the case with all scholarship, including the kind of textualisations undertaken by Sarris in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*. The difference is that Sarris’s strategy attempts to expose his historical and personal context and the implications this context has for his decisions regarding textualisation.⁸¹

Sarris asserts that because the “territory of orality” is so vast that “no one party has access to the whole of [an] exchange,” it is necessary to expose those areas of the territory where access is limited.⁸² In contrast, Brill de Ramírez suggests that all that is necessary for a scholar to enter the storied world of a conversively orientated narrative – to “discover and traverse particular descriptive and interpretive

⁸⁰ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures*, 94.

⁸¹ A strategy which, as I argued in the previous chapter, is subject to its own limitations in terms of a scholar’s ability to recognise his or her own preconceptions and limitations.

⁸² Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 40.

pathways in/to [a] literary work” – is that they must first “become fairly familiar with the ‘language games’ and ‘family resemblances’ in which the literary work participates.”⁸³ Of course, Brill de Ramírez is correct to suggest that scholars should endeavour to become familiar with the cultures and worldviews about which they write. However, I would argue that Brill de Ramírez does not seriously consider what constitutes “a sufficient degree of familiarity,” in terms of her understanding of American Indian cultures and that she does not acknowledge the potential limitations of her personal context as a non-Indian scholar.⁸⁴

For example, in her reading of various poems by Navajo women poets such as Luci Tapahonso, Nia Francisco and Esther Belin, Brill de Ramírez provides a number of definitions of what she terms as a “Navajo conversive style” that comprises “nonlinearity, holism, and welcoming inclusivity” upon which her analyses of the poems are predicated.⁸⁵ Brill de Ramírez has obviously taken the trouble to familiarise herself with Navajo culture and worldviews and quotes various sources to support her interpretation⁸⁶ but what she does not do, in my view, is to establish fully her “own [context] for the co-creative act” of entering the storied worlds of these writers.⁸⁷

Uma Narayan notes a tendency in feminist studies where attempts to avoid essentialising about women across various cultural contexts can result in the

⁸³ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 34-35, 39. By her use of the Wittgensteinian term “language games” Brill de Ramírez is referring to the web of connections between a given storyteller’s personal experience, cultural traditions, history, language and storytelling, a familiarity with which, Brill de Ramírez contends, is fundamental to accomplishing conversive engagement with a given narrative.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 84, 78.

⁸⁶ Namely Beck and Walters, *The Sacred*; Anna Lee Walters, ed., *Neon Pow-Wow: New Native American Voices of the Southwest* (Flagstaff, Arizona: Northland, 1993); and Herbert John Benally, “Diné Bo’óhoo’aah Bindii’a’: Navajo Philosophy of Learning,” *Diné Be’iina’* 1.1 (1988): 133-148.

⁸⁷ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 210.

formation of “essentialist notions of ‘cultural difference.’” This endeavour, Narayan explains further,

becomes a project that endorses and replicates problematic and colonialist assumptions about the cultural differences between “Western culture” and “Non-western cultures” and the women who inhabit them. Seemingly universal essentialist generalizations about “all women” are replaced by culture-specific essentialist generalizations that depend on totalizing categories such as “Western culture,” “Non-western cultures,” “Western women,” “Third World women,” and so forth.⁸⁸

Narayan notes the similarities between gender essentialism and cultural essentialism in that both “assume and construct sharp binaries about the qualities, abilities or locations,” between either “‘men’ and ‘women’” or “‘Western culture’ and particular ‘Other’ cultures.”⁸⁹ This tendency, I would argue, is present in the way that Brill de Ramirez extrapolates characteristics of Tapahonso’s, Francisco’s and Belin’s poetry and presents them as constituting a “Navajo conversive style.” I would question whether or not it is possible to define a “Navajo conversive style,” based on a selection of poems from only three Navajo women. Furthermore, Brill de Ramírez does not consider in what ways her presence as an interlocutor may qualify the “Navajo conversive style” she identifies. Furthermore, Brill de Ramírez considers only the “Navajo” context of the production of Tapahonso’s, Francisco’s and Belin’s poetry, and not the context of the performance, which is qualified in subtle ways by Brill de Ramírez’s own presence as an interlocutor.

As noted above, Brill de Ramírez argues that all participants, including both tellers and listeners, jointly own stories. She has based this observation, presumably, on her understanding of the communal and collaborative ownership of stories in oral traditions. Angela Cavender Wilson comments similarly: “I know from personal

⁸⁸ Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History,” n.p.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

experience that as you hear the stories repeatedly through time, the stories do not remain the stories of your elders and ancestors, but your elders' and ancestors' memories become your own."⁹⁰ What is different, however, is that Wilson is referring to storytelling within a specific cultural group within which, as Evers and Toelken point out, stories operate "as personal experiences within culturally meaningful settings," and Brill de Ramírez is referring to stories that are being performed outside of a specific cultural tradition and where "outsiders" conduct much of the interaction, joint ownership and joint construction of meaning.⁹¹

Richard Rorty argues that "ethnocentrism is... inevitable and unobjectionable... We cannot leap outside out Western social democratic skins when we encounter another culture, and we should not try."⁹² I agree with Rorty's statement that ethnocentrism is inevitable. The issue, in my view, is whether we acknowledge the implications of our inevitable ethnocentrism for our interpretations of other cultures. Brill de Ramírez cites Joshua Fishman's argument that ethnocentrism can be transcended through a process of "comparative cross-ethnic knowledge and experience."⁹³ However, I would argue this can only be effective to a limited degree and that limitations may have profound consequences for our ability to penetrate narratives, whether in discursive or conversive domains. I would suggest that Brill de Ramírez's desire and belief in her ability to enter even resistant

⁹⁰ Wilson, "Power of the Spoken Word," 111-112.

⁹¹ Evers and Toelken, introduction to *Native American Oral Traditions*, 8.

⁹² Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 212. Rorty continues: "All we should try to do is to get inside the inhabitants of that culture long enough to get some idea of how we look to them, and whether they have any ideas we can use" (212-213). The attitude that the ideas, knowledge and values of marginalised cultures are available to be mined for the benefit of the dominant culture is, of course, one that many Native American critics find particularly irritating.

⁹³ Joshua A. Fishman, "Language, Ethnicity, and Racism," in *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1977: Linguistics and Anthropology*, ed. Muriel Saville-Troike (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1977), 306 quoted in Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 211.

American Indian narratives is characteristic of a desire in traditional Western scholarly methodology to attain a complete and universal understanding of a given literary work. This is a tendency Sarris cautions against in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*.⁹⁴ Similarly, Womack notes that in many American Indian cultures “knowledge for knowledge’s sake means little.”⁹⁵

Yet another assumption is inherent in the quest for a relational engagement on equal terms between Native storytellers and non-Native academics, which is that from a Native perspective an equal relationship with academics is desirable. This is not to say that Native storytellers desire a subordinate position to non-Native academics but rather to suggest that the “inherent separateness” to which Brill de Ramírez objects can function as a protective barrier against unwanted academic intrusion and a means by which Native storytellers can, if they desire, privilege Native audiences over non-Native audiences. Non-Native scholars should not assume that they are entitled unlimited access to Native stories or the freedom to assume equal authority for their intersubjective interpretations.

The Problem of Speaking for Oneself in Conversive Literary Scholarship

Like Greg Sarris, Brill de Ramírez believes that scholars should incorporate personal narrative into their critical writing about American Indian literatures. In fact, she goes so far as to argue that this practice is an essential component of a “co-creative” conversive engagement with a narrative that enables the “physical absence from the

⁹⁴ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 29, 130-131.

⁹⁵ Womack, review, 204.

storyteller,” inherent in engaging with written literatures to be bridged, as the “listener-reader” “establishes [his or her] own contexts for the co-creative act.”⁹⁶

However, I would argue that a number of differences arise regarding Sarris’s and Brill de Ramírez’s respective approaches to incorporating personal narrative into their critical writing. Sarris, in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, is somewhat more successful in this respect, seeming to segue with ease between theoretical, autobiographical and historical writing and renditions of traditional Pomo stories. However, Brill de Ramírez’s approach is more conspicuously differentiated between her theoretical discussions of Western critical methodology and her identification of conversive features in the American Indian literatures she analyses, with an occasional smattering of tentative personal narrative thrown in. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Sarris gains a degree of privilege from his borderlands position as a mixed-blood Kashaya Pomo scholar because it enables him to approach Pomo stories simultaneously from the status of both insider and outsider, to cross the borders between various overlapping territories of orality. Furthermore, Sarris’s lived experiences have furnished him with supply of meaningful personal narratives that he can interweave with the more theoretical elements of his writing.

Brill de Ramírez, on the other hand, in my view, struggles to incorporate meaningful personal narratives alongside or within her theoretical writing. Where Brill de Ramirez does include elements of personal narrative she does not use them to illuminate the limits of her understanding in the manner that Sarris proposes. Instead, Brill de Ramírez presents her personal narrative in a more anecdotal sense, making connections between her personal experiences and happenings in the literatures under analysis as a means of further supporting her hypothesis of

⁹⁶ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 210.

relationality. Brill de Ramírez uses personal narrative on only a limited number of occasions and in a much more restricted sense than Sarris, and I would suggest that this hesitancy, timidity even, stems from Brill de Ramírez's position as a non-Indian scholar. Although she never explicitly acknowledges this, it seems that Brill de Ramírez is aware, perhaps subconsciously, that unlike Sarris, who, I have argued is privileged by his insider/outsider position, Brill de Ramírez herself, as a non-Indian scholar, is operating from a culturally disadvantaged position. This obviously raises questions relating to essentialism and cultural authority in terms of the potential for non-Indian scholars for incorporating autobiographical material into written scholarship about American Indian literatures.

I would argue that Brill de Ramírez's personal narrative represents reflexivity on only the most superficial of levels. She does not devote any great consideration to how her own historicity as a reader or critic impacts upon her analyses of given narratives. Rather, her trope of relationality impels her to discover only connections between the storied worlds of the American Indian literatures under discussion and her own personal narrative. Although a conversive domain allows for the acknowledgement and appreciation of difference and diversity, Brill de Ramirez does not, as Sarris recommends in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, use the differing historical contexts of herself and the American Indian writers she discusses to interrogate the possible limits of their mutual engagement. Rather, the focus of Brill de Ramírez's personal narrative is to highlight the "meaningful 'family resemblances'" that bring together "kindred stories" from diverse experiences and cultures and so to extend her trope of relationality.⁹⁷ Although Brill de Ramírez argues that conversive relations value diversity by focusing on the interrelatedness of different elements, the effect of

⁹⁷ Ibid., 115-116.

her strategy is to erase difference by undertaking the kind of imaginative identification with the stories against which Sarris warns. Imaginative identification with a narrative, in Sarris's view, risks blurring "the distinction between the listener's [or reader's] world and that of the text," thus inhibiting the "recognition and understanding of difference" that Sarris argues is essential for cross-cultural communication.⁹⁸

For example, Brill de Ramírez discusses at length the tendency for "personhood" to be accorded to animals and plants within a conversive worldview, which, she argues, is a consequence of "the relational intersubjectivity of persons that is at the heart of all conversive storytelling."⁹⁹ Brill de Ramírez notes that within many orally informed cultures "personhood is a status attribution... [that] need not be applied only to human beings."¹⁰⁰ This contrasts with Western discursive traditions, where, Brill de Ramírez notes, "nonhumans and even human beings [such as women, members of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, the poor and working classes, the elderly, and children] have been defined as nonpersons and accordingly treated as objects."¹⁰¹

Brill de Ramírez provides examples of personhood accorded to animals in American Indian literatures, for example, the poem "For Lori, This Christmas I Want to Thank You in This Way," by Luci Tapahonso and the short story "Talking Indian," by Anna Lee Walters, followed by a personal narrative from her own childhood that "demonstrates the value of interspecies conversive relations and the

⁹⁸ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 167.

⁹⁹ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 116.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

loss that accrues from the destruction of those relationships.”¹⁰² Brill de Ramírez’s reminiscence describes how, as an eleven-year-old girl, miserable at summer camp in Maine, she would go out into the woods and talk to the tree frogs about her unhappiness: “I felt that those frogs were the only persons out there with whom I could sit down and have meaningful and intelligent conversations. The frogs always seemed to understand my confusions with a camp environment.”¹⁰³ As Brill de Ramírez got older, however, “the pressures of fitting in had taken their toll” and she stopped talking to the tree frogs, enduring the misery of camp without their comforting conversations. Brill de Ramírez explains that her childhood relationship with the tree frogs constituted “a connective relationship” that was “reestablished and reaffirmed” through her conversive scholarship on Tapahonso’s and Walters’s stories and suggests that “an evolving, conversively informed approach to literatures will also ‘re-establish and reaffirm’ similar relationships between scholars and our colleagues, students, and listener-readers.”¹⁰⁴

The realisation of a connective relationship between the American Indian narratives she is studying as an adult and a memory from her childhood may have been a valuable experience for Brill de Ramírez but as a contribution to reading and understanding American Indian literatures it has limited usefulness. Part of the problem stems from Brill de Ramírez’s trope of relationality, which has a tendency to obscure areas where understanding might be potentially limited. Brill de Ramírez thus focuses only on the relationships she sees and does not consider those relationships her historicity as a critic might lead her not to see. I would argue that

¹⁰² Ibid., 122.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 122-123.

Brill de Ramírez's personal narrative has the status of what Sarris describes as "an anecdote that [complements] a given idea" but does not represent the kind of synthesis that Sarris sees as necessary for a personal experience to *inform* an idea.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Biggs, in a paper that discusses the implications of practice-based research – what he terms as "experientially led research" – argues that we should be "less interested in experiential feeling," the emotion that "comprises or accompanies a particular experience," and instead focus our attention on "the meaning of that experience, of the experiential content and how that might be related to the content of our shared context."¹⁰⁶

Had Brill de Ramírez presented her personal narrative in a manner that went beyond the anecdotal she may perhaps have considered the ways in which her relationship with the tree frogs differed from the intersubjective relationships with/between animals represented in Tapahonso's poem and Walters's short story. The most obvious difference, of course, is that Brill de Ramírez stopped talking to the tree frogs when she was twelve years old, yet Tapahonso and Walters, as adults, according to Brill de Ramírez's interpretation, continue to value intersubjective relationships with and between animals. I am not suggesting that Tapahonso and Walters or their respective tribal cultures are childlike in their perspective on animals, in fact, just the opposite. It seems to me that Brill de Ramírez's childhood relationship with the tree frogs was informed by a fundamentally different set of cultural values than the intersubjective relationships with animals as persons depicted in Tapahonso's and Walters's stories. This difference, using Sarris's interruptive storytelling model, represents a "locus of cultural critique," where, had Brill de

¹⁰⁵ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 160.

¹⁰⁶ Biggs, "Learning Through Experience," 8-9.

Ramírez taken a more reflexive approach, intersubjective critical activity might have begun.¹⁰⁷

Of course, this is largely Brill de Ramírez's point; that scholarship about American Indian literatures should tend towards the descriptive and away from the theoretical. Writing descriptive scholarship about American Indian literatures, however, presents a number of challenges, particularly for non-Indian scholars. In an essay published in the same year as *Contemporary American Indian Literature and the Oral Tradition*, discussing the power of American Indian autobiographies to resist "ethnographic colonization," Brill de Ramírez cites Sidner Larson's (Gros Ventre) observation that European American scholarship tends "to sacrifice truth in favor of literary closure."¹⁰⁸ This is an issue to which Brill de Ramírez attends in *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition*, suggesting that conversive literary scholarship holds "no expectation of a linear narrative that culminates in some final resolution."¹⁰⁹ Thus, Brill de Ramírez, like Sarris in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, is explicitly attempting to frustrate the narrative closure that is antithetical to many Native narratives characterised by openness and unfixed meanings. Unlike Sarris, however, I would argue that as a non-Native scholar, Brill de Ramírez lacks, at least within the context of a cross-cultural interpretation of Native literatures, the necessary cultural authority needed to replace literary closure with a satisfying experiential aesthetic.

¹⁰⁷ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 33.

¹⁰⁸ Sidner Larson, "Native American Aesthetics: An Attitude of Relationship," *MELUS* 17, no. 3 (1991-1992): 65, quoted in Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez, "The Resistance of American Indian Autobiographies to Ethnographic Colonization," *Mosaic* 32, no. 2 (1999): n.p., accessed via Literature Online, <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>.

¹⁰⁹ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 61.

Tony E. Jackson notes that one of the reasons literary-interpretive arguments tend to mimic scientific models of establishing truth claims is that this method provides literary scholars with a degree of “confidence and pleasure” in presenting and “proving” their arguments.¹¹⁰ Brill de Ramírez’s general hesitancy with regard to the use of her own personal narrative implies a lack of confidence in her ability to write the mode of descriptive, intersubjective scholarship she is calling for. This lack of confidence, I am suggesting, is initiated by her move away from the comfort zone represented by the humanities’ co-option of scientific models of establishing truth claims.

Jackson further notes that “literary interpretation” and other similar terms refer not only “to the kind of text being interpreted... [but also] to the kind of interpretation being performed.” He explains that,

an interpretation is literary if it conjoins with the literary text so as to bring out in a determinate way the text’s indeterminacy by revealing the critic’s own account of literary meaning. An outcome of all this is that literary interpretation falls somewhere in between (“inter”) straightforward logical explanation and literature itself... The pleasure of writing a successful interpretation partakes of this same in-betweenness. The critic gets at one moment both the pleasure of creating a “new” imaginative work and the pleasure of having mastered an argumentative skill.¹¹¹

I would extend Jackson’s contention that scholars need to feel “confidence and pleasure” to not only those who *write* literary interpretation but also to those who *read* it. Readers read literary criticism with the expectation of having made determinate, to borrow Jackson’s terminology, that which is indeterminate in the literary narrative. Brill de Ramírez’s descriptive approach deviates from Jackson’s model of “confidence and pleasure” in a number of significant respects. In a reversal

¹¹⁰ Jackson, “‘Literary Interpretation,’ 192.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 203-204.

of Larson's criticism of Western critical methods, Brill de Ramírez in effect sacrifices "literary closure" in favour of her (subjective) perception of "truth." In terms of mediating between Native and academic philosophies of knowledge, this is a commendable goal, but risks being unsatisfying from the point of view of the reader of the literary scholarship. Even if Brill de Ramírez achieves a degree of "pleasure and confidence" in making a connection between her childhood memory of the tree frogs and Tapahonso's and Walters's stories, this sentiment is not one that will necessarily be shared by her own readers, unless perhaps they recall a similar experience. To be fair, Brill de Ramírez does imply that the role of scholars is to assist students in making their own *personal* connections to the stories, but she does not offer any strategies for achieving this kind of cross-cultural engagement in contexts other than her own writing.

Biggs points out that "research undertaken by a practitioner into his or her own practice may have a limited interest and applicability to other practitioners." Conversely, however, "research that draws out from such an investigation a transferable outcome will increase the likelihood that it will be consequential and therefore meaningfully communicated or disseminated to others."¹¹² Although Biggs is discussing the relationship between experiential knowledge gained through art and design research and the linguistic expression of such knowledge in scholarly papers, it is possible to draw a close parallel between practice-based research and Brill de Ramírez's desire to write experiential personal narrative.

Biggs further argues that the "appropriateness of methods is to be judged in terms of satisfying the audience for whom the questions have value."¹¹³ It seems to

¹¹² Biggs, "Learning Through Experience," 7.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.

me that Brill de Ramírez's inclusion of personal narrative is not wholly successful in this respect, if one assumes the audience in question to be scholars of American Indian literatures.¹¹⁴ In terms of her use of personal narrative, Brill de Ramirez fails adequately to disseminate on anything other than a relatively anecdotal level the *personal* knowledge she has gained from her conversive engagement with the American Indian literatures in question. Explicit knowledge dissemination is achieved only through her discursive critique of the limits of Western theory.¹¹⁵

This raises the question as to why Brill de Ramírez's use of intersubjectivity and personal narrative should remain unsatisfying for the scholarly reader. This failure contrasts with the work of, for example, Sarris, Vizenor and Womack who have all produced critical writing about American Indian literatures that incorporates autobiographical material and, to various degrees, collapses the boundaries between theoretical and personal narrative that provides a more satisfying reading experience.

I would argue that Sarris, Vizenor and Womack succeed where Brill de Ramírez fails for two reasons. First, and as I discussed at length in the previous chapter in relation to Sarris, their personal life experiences provide them with autobiographies that relate persuasively to the discussion at hand. Second, is their ability to substitute for the intellectual pleasure gained from writing or reading argumentative literary interpretation an intellectual pleasure grounded in aesthetic

¹¹⁴ The question of audience is, of course, not as simple as all that. See Wilson, "Power of the Spoken Word." Wilson states: "Familiarity with the concept of reciprocity breeds a realization of the need to give something back to both the individual and the culture from whom and from which one has taken material. This goes far beyond the economic compensation that many scholars have used in exchange for their 'informants' time. Rather, what is called for is an acknowledgement of a moral responsibility to give back in a far more profound way, one that matches the value of the stories that are shared" (105). Devon Mihesuah, Craig S. Womack and the Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith all argue that it is incumbent upon scholars to produce scholarly writing that is relevant and accessible to indigenous audiences, as previously cited through this chapter.

¹¹⁵ Biggs, "Learning Through Experience," 13. Biggs further argues: "It is perhaps a measure of the success or impact of research how many other people are satisfied with the answer, i.e. an interpretation of the meaning of Hamlet that satisfies only me is less significant than an answer to the meaning of Hamlet that satisfies every Englishman."

satisfaction. This satisfaction, I would argue, is not predicated on “closure” but on “opening,” whereby literary strategies that variously blur, collapse or shatter the perimeters of theoretical and personal narrative expose hitherto concealed preconceptions and initiate long term “internal activity” within the reader. Reader satisfaction comes, then, from the responsibility conferred upon the reader to negotiate this “internal activity.” For example, Vizenor’s own approach to writing about American Indian issues explicitly challenges the static and monologic definitions he associates with Western scholarship. His use of word play, neologisms, genre crossing and humour may suggest answers but definitive resolutions remain elusive. As Barry O’Connell has observed, “reading Vizenor can feel at times like entering an idiosyncratic world, tantalizingly almost comprehensible, in which one wishes for explicit instruction which almost never is granted.”¹¹⁶ Not only is explicit instruction not granted by Vizenor, I would argue that neither is it necessary in order for his interlocutors to achieve literary satisfaction.

Consider the three following short passages, written by Brill de Ramírez,

Vizenor and Sarris respectively:

For four years from the ages of eleven to fourteen, I attended (actually, painfully endured) a two-month-long elite summer camp in Maine for girls. During my first summer there, the tree frogs in the woods became my closest friends and my reality checks against a camp that provided the illusion of “roughing it” within an environment of clean and pressed clothes for each dinner time, weekly theatrical productions of recent Broadway musicals, and standardized uniforms with the occasional special day for choice in clothing, which invariably ended up being a competition between who could outdo whom with her designer summer clothes.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Barry O’Connell, “Gerald Vizenor’s ‘Delicious Dancing with Time’: Tricking History from Ideology,” in *Loosening the Seams* ed. A. Robert Lee, 65.

¹¹⁷ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 122.

My grandmother was an *indian* on the reservation and an emigrant in the city. She endured the seasons of poverty and the winters over tricky stories but never lost her soul to victimry. She teased the lonesome and, in her late sixties, married a generous, sightless, younger man.

Alice never summoned the reservation shamans; the causes of their wounds, and the unrest of their visions, were onerous and not the newsy stories of survivance in the city. She must have been wary of reservation men and their traditions; yet, she teased chance and mentioned the *miinidiwag*, the native “giveaway” in *anishiinaabe*.¹¹⁸

“Mabel, people want to know about things in your life in a way they can understand. You know, how you got to be who you are. There has to be a theme.”

“I don’t know about no theme.”

I squirmed in my seat. Her hands didn’t move. “A theme is a point that connects all the dots, ties up all the stories...”

“That’s funny. Tying up all the stories. Why somebody want to do that?”

“When you write a book there has to be a story or idea, a theme...”

“Well, theme I don’t know nothing about. That’s somebody else’s rule. You just do the best you know how. What you know from me.”

Back to the facts. I drove on in silence. Mirages rose from the hot pavement. Stories. Old Grandma Sarah Taylor on her wagon. The buckets of dirty clothes rattling on the wagon bed as she steered the horses over the hard, rocky ground to the creek. The sickly little girl next to her who was Dreaming in a world of white people...¹¹⁹

Brill de Ramírez is a talented writer, but it seems clear to me that her autobiographical interlude compares badly to the personal narratives produced by Sarris and Vizenor in a number of important respects. For example, although Brill de Ramírez writes in the first person, her account of her childhood experience is presented in style of language that does not differ in any great respect to the language she uses throughout the rest of her book. Obviously, she is not using the densely structured theoretical language that characterises her discussion of Western discursive methodologies, but tonally, I would argue, her personal narrative maintains a degree of distance that is more usually associated with conventional

¹¹⁸ Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 51.

¹¹⁹ Sarris, *Mabel McKay*, 4-5.

scholarly writing. The effect of this is to distance the reader from the experiences she is trying to convey, both her childhood relationship with the tree frogs and the reawakening of that memory through her conversive engagement with Tapahonso's poem and Walters's story. By distancing the reader from this experience through her use of language, I would argue, Brill de Ramírez inhibits the possibility that it will trigger "internal activity" on the part of her interlocutors and thus the experience for her readers remains an unsatisfying one. Not only does Brill de Ramírez not provide intellectual closure, neither does she provide aesthetic satisfaction.

The detachment demonstrated in Brill de Ramírez's narrative is in stark contrast to the engaging language used by Vizenor and Sarris. Although Vizenor writes about his grandmother in the third person, his writing, simultaneously provocative and challenging, is also engaging and evocative, in terms of imagery, characterisation and humour. Sarris's style is more conventional than Vizenor's, but, again, is strong on imagery and characterisation. Sarris invites the reader to imaginatively engage with his characters (himself and Mrs McKay) but also simultaneously uses that engagement to expose his, Mrs McKay's and the reader's different cultural conceptions of "theme," and thus ignites in the reader the kind of internal, reflective activity that he considers vital for cross-cultural reading.

This raises the question of why Brill de Ramírez presents her personal narrative in such a conventional, distanced manner. One reason could be a comparative lack of ability on the part of Brill de Ramírez to fictionalise her autobiography in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Vizenor and Sarris, after all, as well as being scholars, are both published writers of fiction and Brill de Ramírez, as far as I can establish is not. Because of the very limited amount of personal narrative Brill de Ramírez presents in her volume, it is difficult to assess her fictional ability. I

would suggest, however, a more fundamental problem, which is that Brill de Ramírez's hesitancy is a result of a perception of her own lack of cultural authority.

As I argued in the previous chapter, Sarris is placed in a privileged borderlands position by his insider/outsider status as a mixed-blood Indian scholar and his experiences growing up with a white adoptive family and Indian families in and around Santa Rosa. Vizenor, a mixed-blood Anishinaabe scholar, after the murder of his Anishinaabe father when Vizenor was aged just twenty months, was variously passed between his paternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, many different foster families and his white mother and her new husband. Vizenor makes explicit reference to the interpretive privilege conferred by such a borderlands experience at the beginning of his autobiography, quoting the Jewish-Italian writer Primo Levi's observation that "someone who lives at the margins of the group... can leave when he wants to and get a better view of the landscape."¹²⁰ Thus, both Vizenor and Sarris are uniquely positioned to act as mediators between different cultural traditions and Vizenor, in fact, consciously styles himself as a compassionate crossblood trickster, crossing between the boundaries of different cultures in an attempt to liberate and heal what he perceives as the terminal and monologic stasis imposed upon American Indian tribal cultures by Western critical methodology.¹²¹

The border crossing undertaken by both Vizenor and Sarris that enables them to mediate between cultures is, however, something of a one-way street that, in my view, cannot not be adequately replicated by non-Indian scholars for the simple reason that, although individuals of Indian heritage can and do become scholars, non-

¹²⁰ Gerald Vizenor, *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Levi's quote appears on an unnumbered page between the dedication and the contents page.

¹²¹ Vizenor, "Trickster Discourse," 187.

Indian scholars cannot and never will become Indians, however much some may appear wish it.¹²² The very best that a non-Indian scholar such as Brill de Ramírez or myself can hope for when producing scholarship about American Indian literatures is to *mimic* the blurring or shattering of borders between theoretical and personal narrative that Sarris, Vizenor, Womack and others practice. There are two main reasons for this. The first, which I will touch upon only briefly, involves the risk of drowning out the voices of the American Indians in a conversation and instead privileging the non-Indian scholar's subjectivity. Brill de Ramírez avoids this problem by minimising the inclusion of personal narrative to such an extent that it seriously undermines her claim to be conducting intersubjective scholarship.

The second, more significant reason are the issues of cultural authority and essentialism and the implications of this for both Indian and non-Indian scholars attempting intersubjective literary criticism. Gilbert and Tompkins, citing Gayatri Spivak, observe that "strategic essentialism" can function as a tool "by which marginalised peoples can deliberately foreground constructed difference to claim a speaking position."¹²³ African-American feminist scholar bell hooks, while quick to condemn the use of essentialism as an exclusionary tactic with which to silence other voices, raises questions about the "ways individuals acquire knowledge about an experience they have not lived... especially if they are speaking about an oppressed

¹²² Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 60-61, 88, 99-101. Vizenor cites, without reference, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's criticism of the non-Indian scholar Hertha Dawn Wong. In the introduction to her book on Native American autobiography, *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years*, Wong writes that during the course of researching and writing her book about American Indian "nonwritten forms of personal narratives," she discovered that her "great-grandfather may have been Creek or Chickasaw or Choctaw or perhaps Cherokee." Wong then describes the similarities between what her mother taught her and the "traditional values long associated with Native American cultures." Elizabeth Cook-Lynn notes that Wong's claim to be American Indian is "so absurd as to cast ridicule on the work itself."

¹²³ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 13 n.4.

group.”¹²⁴ In hooks’s view, although it is not the case that non-African-American scholars “cannot know” the realities of African-American experiences, it is true that “they know them *differently*.”¹²⁵

The reason for this difference in knowing, hooks argues, is based on the “unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing,” that constitutes, within the paradigm of African-American studies, “a privileged standpoint” for African-American scholars. This privilege, she argues, “cannot be acquired through books or... distanced observation and study of a particular reality.”¹²⁶ What is significant about hook’s approach, and which I believe can be transposed to the rubric of American Indian studies, is that she disavows terminology such as the “authority of experience,” choosing to substitute instead the concept of “the passion of experience, the passion of remembrance.”¹²⁷ Hooks demonstrates what she means by citing a passage from the Guatemalan Indian activist Rigoberta Menchu describing how Menchu’s mother had taught her that without women’s participation in the struggle against oppression there would be no victory.¹²⁸ Hooks describes what would then happen if she, a non-Indian scholar, were to mediate Menchu’s reminiscence of her mother’s teachings:

I know that I can take this knowledge and transmit the message of her words. Their meaning could easily be conveyed. What would be lost in the transmission is the spirit that orders those words, that testifies that, behind

¹²⁴ bell hooks, “Essentialism and Experience,” *American Literary History* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 181. See also Womack, *Red on Red*, 5. Womack quotes Howard Adams, the Métis scholar and activist, who writes: “Aboriginal consciousness... is an intrinsic or inner essence that lies somewhere between instinct and intuition, and it evolves from the humanness and spirituality of our collective, Aboriginal community.”

¹²⁵ hooks, “Essentialism and Experience,” 182; emphasis added.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, (New York: Verso, 1986), 168, quoted in hooks, “Essentialism and Experience,” 182.

them – underneath, everywhere – there is a lived reality. When I use the phrase “passion of experience,” it encompasses many feelings but particularly suffering, for there is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience. This complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance. It is a privileged location, even as it is not the only or always the most important location from which one can know.¹²⁹

Two important points arise here. First, is the different ways in which individuals know their own lived experiences and the lived experiences of those from other cultures. It is recognition of these different ways of knowing that Sarris’s cross-cultural storytelling strategy seeks (not always successfully) to expose. The second and, with regard to Brill de Ramírez’s personal narrative, most significant, point is the concept of the “passion of experience” or the “passion of remembrance” that infuses literatures written by members of certain groups, in particular groups that have been historically oppressed. This “passion of experience,” is like a secret ingredient that nourishes Sarris’s and Vizenor’s personal narrative, an ingredient that is largely absent from Brill de Ramírez’s reminiscence. I would suggest that even if Brill de Ramírez were to present her personal narrative incorporating such literary strategies as imagery and dialogue it would not help matters much. In short, Brill de Ramírez’s methodology is flawed because it is simply not possible for her as a non-Indian scholar to translate “the spirit that orders [the] words” of Tapahonso and Walters through her personal account of childhood isolation and oppression. Brill de Ramírez’s childhood experiences at camp, unpleasant as they may have been for her, do not constitute an adequate channel for translating American Indian experiences of colonisation and, likewise, her relationship with the tree frogs does not provide an adequate framework for mediating Tapahonso’s and Walters’s understanding of personhood in animals. However well written, Brill de Ramírez’s personal narrative

¹²⁹ hooks, “Essentialism and Experience,” 182-183.

will always fall short in terms of aesthetic satisfaction and therefore it affords her no replacement for the literary and intellectual closure she has elected to relinquish.

A number of scholars have pointed out that the process of conducting research is in itself an experiential one, an observation that raises its own problems of representation. As Hexter explains in relation to the discipline of history, “communication... requires historians to put into written words what they know experientially and diffusely about the past, to organize it into coherent and sequential statements in order to make it fully accessible first to themselves and then to others.”¹³⁰ Brill de Ramírez notes the experiential component of her own scholarship whereby her conversive engagement with a given narrative “realizes and substantiates the text into an experiential process that is real and has substance.”¹³¹ Donald Braid extends the comparison further, noting “parallels between comprehending lived experience and the process of following narrative performance.”¹³²

This parallel suggests to me some justification for the incorporation of personal narratives, both in a broadly autobiographical sense and in a finer sense of reflecting upon one’s own practice, as a means to overcome the gulf between experiential and cognitive knowledge in scholarly writing about American Indian narratives.¹³³ Helen Jaskoski notes that the “intimate ownership of a text, and the

¹³⁰ Hexter, “The Rhetoric of History,” 372, quoted in Conkling, “Expression and Generalization,” 240.

¹³¹ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 210.

¹³² Braid, “Personal Narrative and Experiential Meaning,” 5.

¹³³ Biggs, “Learning Through Experience.” As noted previously, Biggs notes that reflection upon one’s own research “may have a limited interest and applicability to other practitioners” unless such reflection results in outcomes that are significant and capable of being disseminated meaningfully to others (7). Personal narrative that reflects upon one’s own practice, then, I would argue, must inform a broader set of issues that identifiable as relevant for a given community of readers. I hope I am achieving this here.

right to perform it,” characteristic of oral tradition, “suggests a different way of looking at literature and its analysis; the memorized text is made part of the experiencing subject instead of remaining alienated as an object for analysis.”¹³⁴ Gloria Bird (Spokane) points out that “our ability as readers to enter as participants of the story ultimately relies upon our ability to... forgo on an *intuitive* level the constricting notions we have of language and its use.”¹³⁵ Biggs identifies three principal categories of experiential knowledge – that which is “explicit” and can be expressed linguistically, that which is “tacit” and includes an experiential ingredient that is difficult to express linguistically and that which is “ineffable” and cannot be expressed linguistically.¹³⁶ Within a worldview that values reflection upon experiential knowledge over a long period of time, these categories may be in flux depending on the degree of reflection undertaken by a given individual. Biggs points out that reflection is a form of cognition (explication) and thus, when reflecting upon one’s own experience in an academic context, one must consider the potential degree to which this may “corrupt” the original experiential content.¹³⁷

Furthermore, Braid reminds us that, although “significant meaning is generated in the active process of following a narrative,” the subsequent generation of “a complex referential field,” occurs within “culturally based interpretational frameworks.”¹³⁸ Such “culturally based interpretational frameworks,” I hope I have

¹³⁴ Helen Jaskoski, “Teaching with *Storyteller* at the Centre,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 5, no. 1 (1993): 57, quoted in Brill de Ramirez, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures*, 208.

¹³⁵ Gloria Bird, “Towards a Decolonization of the Mind and Text: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 4, quoted in Brill de Ramirez, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures*, 89; emphasis added.

¹³⁶ Biggs, “Learning from Experience,” 6.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

¹³⁸ Braid, “Personal Narrative and Experiential Meaning,” 9, 12,

demonstrated, are of crucial importance to scholars of American Indian narratives because of their profound implications for interpretation and representation. In the specific instance of Brill de Ramírez's conversive literary scholarship, the culturally based framework from which she operates (and the similar culturally based framework from which I operate) categorically prevents her (and me) from accessing those components of experiential meaning Biggs defines as "ineffable," and seriously limits her access to those components he terms as "tacit," purely because in order to know these experiences one must live them, and Brill de Ramírez (nor I) will ever be able to achieve this. Only that level of experiential knowledge that Biggs defines as "explicit" – capable of being expressed in words – is accessible to non-Indian or non-tribal scholars, and even then we are dependent on the goodwill and representational abilities of those who have lived those experiences – Sarris, Silko, Vizenor, Momaday, Alexie and so forth. This is not to say that there is no value in scholars, Indian and non-Indian, in mediating this kind of explicit experiential knowledge but I agree with Sarris's claim that, as far as possible, scholars must work to expose the limits on their understanding.

Conclusion

To summarise, I have identified a number of specific areas where I perceive Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez's conversive literary scholarship to be limited in its capacity to understand, interpret and write about American Indian literatures. First, although Brill de Ramírez defines conversivity as consisting of a domain where meaning is located solely within the web of interrelations between all elements of the universe, and thus positioned definitively outside the domain of differential, discursive meaning that characterises Western literary theory, she argues her case through the

use of a hypothesis and systematic argumentation, a decision that places her own scholarship firmly within a discursive domain. As such, Brill de Ramírez devotes a significant proportion of her volume to densely structured theoretical analysis likely to be accessible only to scholars. This contradicts her contention that conversive scholarship should adopt a more accessible orientation whereby scholars act as guides into pathways of relational meaning in the literatures. Additionally, this strategy has the effect of replicating old patterns of domination and marginalisation by placing Western methodologies firmly at the centre, as a model by which all other methodologies must be judged. Significantly, Brill de Ramírez's decision to incorporate this mode of rarefied language is almost solely confined to her analysis and critique of Western discursive methodology, while her discussions of American Indian literary works are more conversive, or descriptive, in orientation.

The second problem relates to Brill de Ramírez's stated belief that conversivity provides a means for scholars and readers to access seemingly impenetrable narratives. This contention, I have argued, demonstrates a diminished respect for cultural boundaries and an implicit assumption grounded in Western methodological strategies that a universal knowledge of a given text is a prerequisite of successful research. This is contrary to some American Indian worldviews that emphasise the responsibilities that come with knowledge and caution against knowledge for knowledge's sake. Furthermore, Brill de Ramírez assumes that difficulty in accessing meaning in American Indian literatures is largely the result of Western methodological deficiencies, a supposition that denies the power and agency of American Indian storytellers consciously to obstruct unwanted access by scholars.

Finally, Brill de Ramírez's incorporation of personal narrative into her analyses of given American Indian functions as a strategy for emphasising the

interrelatedness of all elements of the universe. Brill de Ramírez uses her personal narrative unreflectively, I have argued, by not considering the cross-cultural implications of how her experiences and understanding may differ from those expressed by the American Indian writers she studies. More significantly, though, Brill de Ramírez's use of personal narrative, and the conversive, descriptive orientation of her analyses of American Indian works, is unsatisfying because she fails to provide a substitute for intellectual closure. This, I have argued, is in stark contrast to the personal narratives of American Indian writers such as Sarris and Vizenor, whose works, while resisting literary closure, substitute instead aesthetic satisfaction and the opening of disruptive "internal activity" in the consciousness of interlocutors, so providing a fulfilling alternative for their readers. This difference, I have argued, is less to do with the fictional abilities of the respective writers and more to do with what bell hooks defines as "the passion of experience" or the "passion of remembrance" engendered by their cultural positioning as American Indians.

It may seem that I have been hyper-critical of Brill de Ramírez's approach. However, in many ways the problems I have identified in her scholarship are the same problems I identify in my own work, and in that sense I have somewhat ruthlessly used her here as a foil to my own limitations. I would like to stress that in spite of the criticisms I have made of Brill de Ramírez's conversive methodology, there is much of value to be found in her approach. The problem of how to make descriptive scholarship or personal narrative satisfying in the hands of non-Native scholars remains a challenging one and I would support Linda Alcoff's observation that scholars should not "assume an ability to transcend one's [epistemic]

location.”¹³⁹ However, Brill de Ramírez’s attempts to step outside of Western epistemological boundaries, her emphasis on the importance of *intersubjectivity* rather than the privileging of one individual subjectivity over another and her understanding of the relational orientation of many Native worldviews all offer potential benefits in terms of creating critical approaches to Native American narratives.

What I would like to suggest here is that conversive literary scholarship is likely to function most effectively when consideration is given not only to the site of production of a given literary work, but also the site of its interpretation. When a scholar steps into the “story world” of a given narrative, they do not cast off their own historicity as critics, and neither should they wish to. Use of conversive literary scholarship, it seems to me, should be conditional on having been *invited* into a narrative by the teller of the story. Of course, the issue of what constitutes an invitation is not clear-cut. Some might argue that simply publishing a narrative represents such an invitation, although I would contend that an invitation to engage with a narrative does not necessarily equate with granting access to all areas. A second condition ought to be, that having accepted an invitation, the scholar recognises and respects any boundaries that may have been imposed.

As non-Native scholars, we must acknowledge the privileged colonial context from which we approach the Native texts. To ignore the power differential between academic and Native discourses is to ignore context and without context, we cannot properly locate ourselves within the reciprocal storyteller-audience relationship. If we fail to do this then we fail in our responsibilities as co-participants in the telling of the story. By situating ourselves in this way, we can immediately see that the

¹³⁹ Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 6-7.

adoption by scholars of intersubjective methodology in order to effect a democratisation of discourses is in itself a manifestation of a power differential because it assumes that the non-Native scholar has the power or authority to extend this privilege to the Native participant in the storytelling process. Conversive literary scholarship, therefore, is likely to function most effectively when synthesised with other critical approaches that foreground the historical and cultural positioning of scholars so that such manifestations of power, and other potential weaknesses of the method, in turn become part of the dialogue a scholar is having with the narrative. I will explore this approach in “Synthesising a Context-Specific Approach II,” which provides readings of two plays by Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway), that emphasise both the attention to epistemic locations emphasised by Sarris and the focus on comparative relationality proposed by Brill de Ramírez in order to create a flexible and context-specific criticism that considers both the site of production of Taylor’s plays, but also the site of their performance.

SYNTHESISING A CONTEXT-SPECIFIC APPROACH II:
CONVERSIVE AND INTERRUPTIVE APPROACHES TO
DREW HAYDEN TAYLOR'S *TORONTO AT DREAMER'S ROCK*,
SOMEDAY AND ALTERNATIVES

In this section, I will introduce and develop the concept that Greg Sarris's interruptive storytelling and Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez's conversive literary scholarship may be synthesised to produce a context-specific approach to intersubjective literary criticism. Conversive literary scholarship provides the means for scholars to step outside of their conceptual boundaries to engage intersubjectively and democratically with Native narratives and allows emphasis to be placed on an indigenist understanding of universal relationality. Interruptive storytelling provides a means for scholars to recognise the boundaries that apply to that relational engagement. I will look briefly at two plays by Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway) and consider the ways in which elements of both conversive and interruptive strategies might be combined to produce a context-specific reading of his work. As ever, one of the most significant contextual indicators of my readings is a cross-cultural one, given that I am a non-Native scholar writing about Native narratives.

Taylor, a mixedblood, blue-eyed Ojibway, originally from the Curve Lake Reservation in Ontario currently resides in Toronto. In addition to his reputation as a playwright, Taylor is also a journalist, short-story writer and humorist. In *Funny, You Don't Look Like One*, Taylor writes: "Some are tall, some aren't. Some are fat, while others have a lean and hungry look about them. Most wear

glasses or contacts, but not all. And believe it or not, some could be your next door neighbour. I am referring to academics.”¹ According to Taylor, a common joke among Native communities is: “What’s the definition of a Native family? Two parents, a grandparent, five kids and an anthropologist (or academic).”² Although he notes and acknowledges the role academics play in introducing Native literature, including his own plays, onto high school and university curricula, Taylor objects to the “cultural appropriation” of Native cultures by academics for their own purposes, purposes that, in his view, often do not include much that benefits Native people. Taylor also bemoans the seeming obsession that academics have with identifying symbolic metaphors of the trickster, Mother Earth, spiritualism and the like in Native literature. “Sometimes,” Taylor writes, “you just wanna yell, ‘He’s just fishing, for Christ’s sake!’”³

I will discuss here, briefly, three of Taylor’s works – *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock* (premiered 1989), *Someday* (premiered 1991) and *alterNatives* (premiered 1999). A possible critical approach to these three plays, I will argue, would travel along a continuum from a predominantly conversive strategy (*Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock*), a combined conversive and interruptive approach (*Someday*) and a predominantly interruptive approach (*alterNatives*). Thus, by considering briefly each of these plays, I will examine how synthesising elements from conversive literary scholarship and interruptive storytelling allows for the creation

¹ Taylor, *Funny, You Don’t Look Like One*, 96-97.

² *Ibid.*, 97.

³ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

of a flexible interpretive strategy that can be customised to the specific context of a given narrative.

Toronto at Dreamer's Rock, Taylor's first play, was written for young people and draws from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Three Native boys, Keesic from the past, Rusty from the present and Michael from the future meet, as a result of some kind of unspecified magic, at "Dreamer's Rock" – a real and sacred location on the Birch Island Reserve in Ontario – and talk about their lives, fears, hopes and dreams in a play characterised by its gentle humour.⁴ The one-act play opens on a summer afternoon in 1989. Sixteen-year-old Rusty has climbed up to Dreamer's Rock to be alone and drink beer. Magic happens and he is joined on the rock first by Keesic, dating from somewhere around the 1590s, and then by Michael, from 2095. The word "Toronto," we learn, is a Native word meaning "meeting" or "conference" that has come to be used as the name of a (predominantly white) city.⁵ Michael and Rusty have to explain the term "Indian" to "pre-contact" Keesic, while Keesic has to explain to Rusty that the crow is the messenger of the Creator. Michael, a history buff, tells Rusty that the period of Aboriginal history from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century is known, in Michael's future time, as the Alcoholic Era.⁶ The boys discover that they are all Odawa, or part-Odawa and Michael proudly informs the others that in his time, an Odawa doctor discovered the cure for the common cold.

⁴ Taylor, *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, 10; Taylor's production notes stress that Dreamer's Rock is a sacred place and great care should be taken in its depiction.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48, 36-37, 41.

Keesic replies: “We never had the common cold.”⁷ As the boys talk and come gradually to understand one another and eventually themselves, the audience shares their journey, becoming participants in the “toronto.”

In one sense, *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock* could be argued to be “interruptive” because, for example, Michael’s appearance in futuristic Indian garb undermines any lingering stereotypes about Vanishing Indians, and the boys also have their own preconceptions about one another corrected. When Keesic starts to tell a story to demonstrate a point he is making about Rusty’s defensive attitude with the words, “One time when I was young, I don’t think I’d seen a dozen winters yet...” Michael responds with all the enthusiasm of a twentieth century anthropologist, “Traditional Native Storytelling!...Please, proceed.”⁸ However, Taylor handles these “interruptions” so deftly and gently that I would argue they allow the audience to travel fully along the storytelling pathway along which the three boys are also journeying.

Taylor observes that among Native Canadians, “theatre has become the predominant vehicle of expression,” because it represents “a logical extension of the storytelling technique.... the process of taking your audience on a journey, using your voice, your body and the spoken word.”⁹ Christopher Balme notes that the “theatrical space” represented by, for example, a traditional proscenium style stage, to some degree limits the interactive relationship between audience and players. However, as Taylor’s production notes explain, *Toronto at Dreamer’s*

⁷ Ibid., 38-39, 64-65, 69.

⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹ Taylor, “Alive and well,” 256.

Rock is designed as “theater-in-the-round,” with a small, elevated set resembling the top of a rock outcropping and enabling the players to look over the audience into the distance. Taylor explains further that the play is dialogue-oriented with limited action and that “within such a confined space, the action and *interrelation* of the characters is amplified.”¹⁰

I would argue (and I am making this point without having had the benefit of seeing the play performed onstage) that Taylor’s script and the “theater-in-the-round” direction that is similar to an audience sitting around a storyteller, represents a sincere invitation to the audience members to participate in the telling of this particular story, with minimal limitations placed on their interaction with the narrative. Rather, he works to facilitate understanding by a non-Native audience by making conversive links to other stories, most obviously Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, with which his audience is likely to be familiar. Of course, Native audiences may experience a more resonant response to the epiphany undergone by Rusty when he realises he has a greater path in life than getting drunk and skipping school, but Taylor emphasises universal issues and similarities more than unbridgeable differences.¹¹ When Rusty points out that the three of them “are nothing alike. What we got in common you could stuff in my underwear,” he is initiating a dialogue that leads the participants, not only the three boys in the play but the members of the audience, to realise they share more than Rusty initially might think, despite the differences in, for the three boys, hundreds of years of history and, for non-Native audience members, cultural

¹⁰ Taylor, *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock*, 10; emphasis added.

¹¹ The play was premiered on the Sheshegwaning Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario.

locations. If the gulf between the three Odawa boys from different historical periods can be bridged by talking, by finding out the hopes, fears and dreams they share, Taylor implies, so too can the apparent differences between Native and non-Native cultures. To relate this specifically to Brill de Ramírez's conceptualisation of conversive relations, Taylor's play stresses interrelations, both between the three boys in the play, but also between their characters and the audience members, be they Native or non-Native. Furthermore, the non-linear structure of the script and the circular structure of the set work to emphasise the gentle humour contained within the play as a centring, healing force. The humour in *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, then, functions to encourage a relational, universal understanding, and thus is regenerative and cohesive.

At the close of the play, when Keesic regains his ability to speak his Native tongue (which he lost temporarily during the course of his interaction with Rusty and Michael), instead of providing dialogue, Taylor presents instead the following stage directions:

Keesic speaks to them in Indian, telling them they must pray. He places the boys carefully, facing the east, and begins a final prayer of thanksgiving to the Creator for allowing them to meet across time on this sacred spot.

At the end of the prayer, Rusty sinks to the rock, holds his weekah pouch with one hand and drums a beat on the rock with the other. He sings a song in Indian about hearing the voice of the people so far away... At the end of the song, Rusty opens his eyes. He is alone. He goes to pick up his knapsack and beneath it he finds a crow feather. He holds the feather up to the sky, turning four times, saluting the Four Directions. Then he moves off. Just before leaving, he places his hand respectfully on the rock.¹²

¹² Taylor, *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, 75.

From the perspective of Native productions of the play, Taylor explains that he has kept the ending ambiguous to enable theatre groups to perform a song and a prayer relative to their own tribal culture.¹³ The use of a Native-language prayer and song, however, are not, I would argue, intended here as a barrier to non-Native audiences. The pressure on Native languages means that many Native audience members may not be able to speak their own languages well enough to understand every word. The incorporation of a Native language is significant, because it speaks to the ongoing cultural survival of Native peoples, but it does not, I would argue, diminish the invitation to share the three boys' stories extended via Taylor's deft interweaving of humour, sadness, loss and hope. As Taylor states in his epigraph to the volume containing *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, "Stories are memories / that must be shared with the Universe, / because if they aren't / the Universe becomes a much smaller place."¹⁴

One noticeable feature of *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, is a lack of what, in Western theatre, would be classed as "drama." Apart from a few minor scuffles between the boys that are quickly resolved, there is very little conflict in the play. Taylor notes that in Western dramatic structure, "the story progresses through conflict, information is perceived through conflict."¹⁵ This, notes Taylor, is in fundamental opposition to most Native theatre, which is informed by its roots in family and community storytelling. Taylor explains that "overt or aggressive conflict" was discouraged in Native communities, because "conflict would

¹³ Taylor, *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, 11; Taylor does not restrict performance rights to Native groups, having granted permission to a production company in Europe to perform a version of the play (personal interview).

¹⁴ Taylor, *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, 6.

¹⁵ Taylor, "Alive and Well," 259.

infringe upon the harmony of the community and therefore its survival,” and that this antipathy to conflict is often reflected in theatrical works produced by Native writers.¹⁶

Additionally, as Taylor and others have noted, many traditional Native stories are more episodic, or narrative in their orientation than Western stories avoiding what Thomas King (Cherokee) describes as the “ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature.”¹⁷ As Taylor puts it, “The hero goes on a journey but he doesn’t have to fight his way through, or slay dragons to get to the end.”¹⁸ Taylor cites the example of Tomson Highway’s (Cree) play *The Rez Sisters*, the plot of which, as summarised by Taylor, involves a group of women going to Toronto to participate in a bingo tournament, and then, with a lot of squabbling along the way, coming back again, and which was rejected by over a dozen Toronto theatre groups as not being dramatic enough.¹⁹ Taylor reports having a similar experience with his play *Someday* and suggests the Western theatre directors have difficulty in dealing with perceived this lack of conflict in Native theatre.

In *Someday* and its sequel *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*, Taylor uses humour to frame the tragedy behind the historical reality at the centre of the plays – the “scoop-up,” in the 1950s and 1960s when Native children were forcibly removed from “unsuitable” parents and given to white families for

¹⁶ Ibid., 259-260.

¹⁷ King, “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” 14.

¹⁸ Taylor, “Alive and Well,” 260.

¹⁹ Tomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters* (Calgary, Alberta: Fifth House, 1988); Taylor, “Alive and Well,” 259-260.

adoption.²⁰ *Someday* tells the story of Anne, a Native woman whose child, Grace, was taken from her and adopted into a white family thirty-five years previously. Anne wins five million dollars on the lottery, a dream come true for most people, but her only real dream is to get her “baby” back. The lottery win also, as Robert Nunn points out, underscores a supreme irony: “Arbitrariness imposed the loss [of Grace] and, since it is the publicity around the lottery win that puts Janice [formerly Grace] on the trail of her mother, arbitrariness governs the return.”²¹ This sense of arbitrariness, I would argue, is a metaphor for the powerlessness imposed on Native communities by the removal of their children. Anne describes how, when she refused to leave the Children’s Aid Society offices until they let her see her daughter’s file, they called the police and told her she was “fixated.”²² Rodney, her younger daughter Barb’s boyfriend, responds with the story of a teenaged girl who, having been returned to her birth family after ten years living in the city with her adoptive white family, was gang-raped by a group of boys on the Reserve because, “Nobody likes an outsider.”²³

By writing *Someday* in the style of a sentimental Christmas television sitcom special, peppered with funny but meaningful asides from Rodney, Taylor, achieves a highly subversive effect because the general cosiness and sentimentality of the storyline, according to Nunn, functions as a “disarming frame,” leading up to a painful and short-lived reunion between Anne and

²⁰ Drew Hayden Taylor, *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* (Burnaby, B.C.: Talonbooks, 1998).

²¹ Robert Nunn, “Hybridity and Mimicry in the Plays of Drew Hayden Taylor,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 65 (Fall 1998), 111.

²² Taylor, *Someday*, 13-14.

²³ *Ibid.*, 15.

Janice/Grace.²⁴ As Nunn further explains, in *mimicking* a cultural product of the colonising culture – typically sentimental Christmas television fodder – Taylor sets up a devastating shock wave at the end of the play when it becomes clear that the “Christmas special’s ideological agenda,” that promises “a warm-hearted resolution of all problems in individualistic terms,” manifestly fails to deliver when Janice leaves to spend Christmas with her white family, demonstrating the “stunning inability of the form [of Christmas television specials] to resolve the ‘problem’ of cultural genocide.”²⁵ As Rodney says, when Janice gives him the news she is leaving, “It’s not supposed to end this way. This should be a happy movie like *It’s a Wonderful Life*.”²⁶

Clearly, despite its lack of dramatic conflict, at least by Western standards, Taylor’s script functions in a highly interruptive way, drawing his audience into the comfort zone of Christmas sit-com sentimentality and shocking them back out of it by implicating them, at least from a non-Native audience’s perspective, in an act of cultural genocide. Taylor sets the audience up to expect a happy ending – woman wins five million dollars and discovers her long lost child – but there are no happy endings, not for the stolen children, not for their birth parents, and perhaps not for their white adoptive parents too. However, an interruptive reading alone, from a cross-cultural perspective, does not provide a fully-rounded interpretation of the text. In order for non-Native audiences to appreciate fully the consequences of the policy of forced adoptions, Taylor encourages them, through

²⁴ Nunn, “Hybridity and Mimicry,” 111.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Taylor, *Someday*, 79.

his emphasis on the universality of a mother's love for her children, to empathise with the mothers whose children were stolen from them.²⁷ By then shocking the audience out of their comfortable "empathy" and assimilation to the viewpoint of the Native characters with his refusal to provide the happy ending promised by the sentimental sit-com framework, Taylor adroitly manoeuvres white audiences into acknowledging their complicity in not only the removal of Native children from their families but also the ongoing process of colonisation that characterises Native and non-Native relations in Canada. In this way, the healing, centring orientation of a conversive reading is foreclosed by the shockingly interruptive denouement that results in a narrative that is deeply moving and, for non-Native audiences, discomfiting. Taylor notes that some reviewers have found the juxtaposition of humour and tragedy in *Someday* uncomfortable and inappropriate.²⁸ I would suggest that perhaps it is not the juxtaposition of humour and tragedy that makes *Someday* such an uncomfortable experience, but the way that Taylor forces, through a combination of conversive and interruptive strategies, non-Native Canadians to acknowledge their complicity in the colonial process.

Taylor's play *alterNatives*, however, is almost entirely a product of interruptive storytelling. This play, which takes the form of a dinner party farce in downtown Toronto, is among Taylor's most controversial. As Taylor writes, "There is something in this play to annoy everybody. Part of my goal was to create unsympathetic characters right across the board. And to do this, as the

²⁷ Taylor, personal interview.

²⁸ Taylor, *Funny, You Don't Look Like One Two Three*, 72.

saying goes, I had to break some eggs.”²⁹ The central character of the story is Angel Wallace, a twenty-four-year-old Native science fiction writer and his older girlfriend Colleen, who is Jewish and a Professor of Native literature. Also invited to the dinner party are Colleen’s liberal vegetarian friends Michelle and Dale and, unbeknownst to Angel, Yvonne and Bobby, two radical Native activists, who refer to themselves as alterNative warriors, “a new breed of warriors who have an allegiance to the truth, rather than tradition” who were previously close friends of Angel’s but from whom he has recently distanced himself.³⁰

Although many cultural issues – from vegetarianism and existentialism to essentialism, cultural appropriation and middle-class white guilt – are dealt with as the dinner party descends into chaos and recriminations, academia and its attitude towards Native discourse is at the heart of all the problems. Colleen is always trying to persuade Angel to give up writing science fiction and to write about the Native community, to be what she refers to as “a window through which the rest of Canada can see your community.”³¹ As Yvonne points out, the idea that Natives can only write about Native issues is dangerously close to “ghettoization.” And although Yvonne is critical of white college professors who appropriate Native culture, hypothesising that in Colleen’s case it is because she is seeking to fill a cultural vacuum created by a distancing from her Jewish spiritual heritage, in the interest of balance, she is also critical of the “cultural hypocrisy”

²⁹ Taylor, *alterNatives*, 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

of Natives who practice a selective recall of Native history, choosing to “forget” the existence of arranged marriages, inter-tribal warfare, slavery and rumours of cannibalism.³² During a heated discussion on race, class, white guilt and vegetarianism, Michelle, Colleen’s vegetarian veterinarian friend, denies she has a case of white guilt by pointing out, “I’m not white. I’m Celtic.”³³

The dramatic climax of the play, however, concerns the transpiration that Angel and Colleen have met before, when Angel was a child living on the reserve and Colleen was a graduate student.³⁴ This episode is based, according to Taylor, on a true story, during which a group of white anthropologists, having failed to persuade the tribal elders to furnish them with traditional legends, instead bribed the children of the reserve with ice-cream and small change, in return for “authentic legends.” The children, wanting to keep their legends private, but also wanting to make some money, made up a series of stories that eventually made their way into print, presented as factual and authentic versions of Native legends.³⁵ In the play, Angel and Bobby were two of those children and Colleen was one of the anthropologists. To make matters worse, Colleen, in her attempt to broaden Angel’s horizon, gave him a copy of the book to read when they first met.

Taylor’s strategy in this play is exclusively interruptive. By creating unsympathetic and stereotypical characters – it is difficult to believe that a Professor of Native Literature, even a non-Native one, would serve up moose

³² Ibid., 76.

³³ Ibid., 111.

³⁴ Ibid., 127-131.

³⁵ Taylor, *Funny, You Don’t Look Like One*, 95-99.

roast in the belief that it would make her dinner party more “authentic” for her Native guests – Taylor sets up a dynamic whereby the preconceptions of virtually every audience member – Native, non-Native, academic, non-academic, vegetarian, carnivore, Celtic, Jewish – are exposed and ridiculed. This is democratic interruptive storytelling in which the preconceptions and limitations of Native audiences are subject to the same vigorous interrogation as those of non-Natives. In his introduction to the published version of *alterNatives*, Taylor writes that he fully expected to “become the Salman Rushdie of the Native community,” a response which was later borne out by an angry response from a close Native friend of Taylor’s, “So this is what you really think of Native people!”³⁶ Non-Natives were equally irritated by the play, with one reviewer referring to it as “witless white bashing,” shortly after which a bomb threat in Vancouver caused a performance to be cancelled.³⁷

alterNatives, it has to be said, is not Taylor’s most subtle work. But it is extremely effective in exposing audience preconceptions. In fact, I would argue, that it is perhaps a little too effective and has, in the cases outlined above at least, the result of foreclosing dialogue and thus closing the narrative, instead of opening, as is intended, a robust, intercultural dialogue about the important issues such as essentialism and cultural appropriation. Taylor reports that, bomb threat notwithstanding, the overall response to the play was a positive one, with most

³⁶ Taylor, *alterNatives*, 6.

³⁷ Ibid.

people congratulating him on dealing with difficult issues that had long been avoided.³⁸

To summarise, *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, uses gentle humour and a “theater-in-the-round” set to encourage a relational engagement with the stories of Keesic, Rusty and Michael, and for which a conversive approach, whether audiences are Native or non-Native, physically present at the performance or reading the script in print, provides an effective framework for analysis. In *Someday*, Taylor uses a combination of conversive and interruptive approaches that benefit from a similarly combined critical perspective. By using conversive strategies Taylor encourages empathy from audiences for the suffering of both mothers and children. However, by combining this conversive approach with interruptive storytelling, through the disruption of the Christmas sit-com television format, Taylor ensures that this empathy is mediated by an exposure of the ongoing complicity of non-Natives in the forced adoption process. In *alterNatives*, Taylor adopts a very democratic interruptive strategy, that exposes the limits not only on “outsider” or non-Native audiences, but also forces Native interlocutors to reconsider their own biases and preconceptions. The degree of interruption in this text is so pronounced, in fact, that it risks undermining its essential purpose and precluding the intercultural dialogue it is intended to promote. However, by selecting the most useful elements of both conversive literary scholarship and interruptive storytelling, it is possible to synthesise a flexible critical perspective that takes into account the rich and varying dynamics of Taylor’s three plays.

³⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

CREEK INTELLECTUALISM AND ABSTRACT PHILOSOPHIES OF KNOWLEDGE IN CRAIG S. WOMACK'S CREEK-SPECIFIC LITERARY CRITICISM

Oral traditions are the expression of a tribe's sovereignty in matters of culture and beliefs, encapsulating the totality of its understanding of life and living.

Victor Masayesva (Hopi), "It Shall Not End Anywhere"

Old and dim trails are
sought after
for they were once
The beaten path to
Somewhere
definite.

Louis "Littlecoon" Oliver (Creek), "Creek Indian Thought No. 5"
Caught in a Willow Net

Introduction

The first epigraph above, from Hopi photographer and film director Victor Masayesva, articulates concisely the fundamental importance of oral tradition in two significant ways. First, oral tradition functions as a mode of information dissemination, a way in which a community of people transmit their history and accumulated wisdom from generation to generation. Second, oral tradition functions as a particular *way* of knowing, the manner in which information and the transmission of information is *experienced* by a given community and *how* that community lives and imagines itself. As many Native American and non-Native observers have noted, in oral tradition, and in written literatures grounded in oral tradition, an interdependent, holistic relationship exists between these two strands of

knowledge, as they weave together to form the “totality of [a tribe’s] understanding of life and living,” to which Masayesva is referring. The second epigraph, from Creek (Muscogee) elder Louis Oliver, articulates precisely this kind of interweaving of different strands of knowledge, whereby the author’s relationship with the landscape expresses and delineates a particular facet of Creek philosophy of knowledge. The right to articulate indigenous knowledge of this kind, on its own terms is, Masayesva suggests, a matter of sovereignty.

This chapter explores strategies for creating Native American literary criticism that bridges the gap between Native American and academic discourse by encompassing or even centralising the kind of experiential, implicit knowledge I have argued is characteristic of many cultures informed by oral traditions. In order to consider these issues, I take as my key text Craig S. Womack’s (Creek-Cherokee) 1999 book *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, in which he proposes a separatist approach where American Indian literary criticism is both tribally specific and tribally centred.

In the previous chapter, I discussed Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez’s conversive literary scholarship as an example of what Arnold Krupat defines as an “indigenist” approach to Native American literary criticism, which posits the special and unique nature of Native knowledge as a basis for interpretation. Womack’s separatist approach also exhibits many indigenist tendencies. However, unlike Brill de Ramírez, who bases her interpretive methodology on the universal web of interconnectedness that she sees as characterising Native knowledge, Womack conceives of a critical methodology that arises out of unique and specific tribal literatures and local, geocentric landscapes and the belief that particular cultural groups possess a sovereign right to interpret their own literatures on their own terms.

Thus, Womack's indigenist inclination leads him to what Krupat defines as a nationalist or separatist approach to Native American literary criticism, whereby "the political meanings of sovereignty" are extended into "the realm of culture," which has "occasionally meant the assertion of a 'sovereign' critical stance in the sense of an exclusivist or separatist stance."¹

Womack's purpose, first and foremost, is to prioritise what he refers to as "a Native perspective" in the singular, although I would argue that "Native perspectives" plural in fact provides a more accurate representation of the multiplicity of distinct worldviews his tribally specific methodology implies. Native voices, Womack argues, "May vary in quality, but they rise out of a historical reality wherein Native people have been excluded from discourse concerning their own cultures, and Indian people must be, ultimately will be, heard."² In prioritising Native perspectives, Womack, like Masayesva, contends that the right to interpret one's own cultural or national literature according to one's own values and on one's own terms is a sovereign right.³

Equally significantly, Womack argues for a separatist agenda in which Native American critics take responsibility for interpreting Native American literatures, and against efforts to de-marginalise Native American literatures by incorporating them into the broader American canon:

I say that tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the *tree*, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. *We are the canon...* Without Native American literature, *there is no American canon.* We should not allow ourselves, through the definitions we choose and the

¹ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 5.

² Womack, *Red on Red*, 4-5. Womack, in fact, uses both "a Native perspective" and "Native perspectives" throughout the text, but with the balance falling in favour of the singular expression.

³ *Ibid.*, 9, 14.

language we use, to ever assume we are outside the canon; we should not play along and confess to being a second-rate literature. Let Americanists struggle for *their* place in the canon. (Understand this is not an argument for inclusion – I am saying with all the bias I can muster that *our* American canon, the Native literary canon of the Americas, predates *their* American canon. I see them as two separate canons.)⁴

One controversial element of Womack's separatist position is his rejection of the class of analytical strategies variously described as biculturalist, mediative, hybridised, mixed-blood, comparative and cosmopolitan. Such approaches, with their focus on cross-cultural translation, Womack contends, are limited, because they emphasise an assimilationist perspective rooted in "the tragic Indian notions of the early part of this century, the half-breed torn between cultures."⁵ Furthermore, Womack argues, mediative approaches tend also to posit the assumption that cultural influence and assimilation is a one-way process, with always the Indian being overwhelmed by and compelled to "mediate" with white culture.⁶ Referring to what he sees as the predominance of Native critics and writers of mixed-blood descent (as well as non-Native critics) engaging in bicultural and mediative approaches and an over-emphasis on first person perspectives at the expense of tribal and cultural integrity, Womack terms this tendency a "kind of mixed-blood malaise, where blood

⁴ Ibid., 6-7; emphasis in original.

⁵ Ibid., 140. See also Cook-Lynn, "Literary and Political Questions of Transformation", 47-51. Cook-Lynn expands upon Womack's explanation of the assimilationist impulse underpinning mixed-blood strategies: "The idea of mixed-bloodedness has a strong connection to the Anthropological and Ethnological studies which began by putting in place specific tribal stories which were labeled 'traditional,' certain storytellers who were described as 'authentic,' and particular plots, motifs, and characters which were said to be 'known' and, therefore, canonical and static. Following this line of thought, traditional storytelling must end. Almost everything outside of those patterns must be discarded, 'fictionists' can not be said to exist, and there is no sense of an on-going literary and intellectual life. The new stories, should they somehow emerge, will always be lesser ones" (49).

⁶ Womack, *Red on Red*, 12, 143.

and marginalization, rather than the ongoing life of the nation, become the overriding issue.”⁷

Womack’s separatist manifesto may seem like a strange choice for inclusion in a study that focuses on cross-cultural communication. However, as I will demonstrate, Womack’s Creek-centred methodologies present a number of strategies that may be of relevance to scholars operating within a cross-cultural arena. Specifically, Womack’s tribally centred methodologies provide avenues for potentially overcoming some of the interpretive difficulties arising out of the gap between the implicit and fluid “experiential” knowledge of oral tradition and the explicit and fixed “cognitive” knowledge valued in academic research.

Critical responses to Womack’s work, both positive and negative, have largely focused on analysing the relative validity of both his separatist stance and his scepticism of mixed-blood mediation and cosmopolitanism as interpretive approaches to Native American literature. Elvira Pulitano, for example, interprets Womack’s separatist theory as arising out of “a unitary, a priori given [Native] identity, [that overlooks] the complex level of hybridization and cultural translation that is already operating in any form of Native discourse.”⁸ She argues that Womack’s quest for “a Native essence,” imposes a reductive and limiting framework upon American Indian discourse that, in the end “embraces another sort of colonial invention.”⁹

Arnold Krupat, arguing in favour of a cosmopolitan approach to Native American literary criticism, “cannot support Womack’s logic of ‘literary

⁷ Ibid., 211.

⁸ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 61.

⁹ Ibid., 63.

separatism,” but “[understands] the importance of its rhetorical instantiation,” in that a nation, or culture’s, “spirit” or “essence” is articulated through its body of literary works.¹⁰ Krupat concedes the significance of Womack’s call to examine “primary cultures” as a source for interpretive strategies when analysing the stories emerging from that culture, but rejects what he perceives as Womack’s claim that “the ‘primary culture’ out of which the stories arise is the only legitimate source of analyses for them.”¹¹ Rather, Krupat argues, certain elements of Creek literature, or any other tribal literature, can only be illuminated “by *informed* comparison with other texts or traditional performances.”¹²

Although criticisms of Womack’s somewhat narrow definition of mixed-blood mediation and hybridity are surely valid, a point I shall discuss in greater detail below, scholars such as Pulitano are, in my view, mistaken in their belief that Womack’s rejection of hybridity as a critical approach implies a belief in a pure and authentic Creek cultural discourse. This, in fact, is a position that Womack explicitly repudiates on more than one occasion, noting that the “Creek world, *like other nations*, [is] a complex one that cannot be simply analyzed inversely to its relationship to the pristine; that is to say, its cultural power does not diminish to the degree it evolves.”¹³ Rather, Womack argues, it is hybridity and mixed-blood

¹⁰ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 9.

¹¹ Arnold Krupat, “Red Matters,” *College English* 63, no. 5 (May 2001): 660; Krupat, *Red Matters*, 20; Womack, *Red on Red*, 4. Womack, in fact, does not claim that tribally centred critical strategies are the only valid approach to Native American literatures. As he states in his introduction: “My argument is not that it is the *only* way to understand Creek writing but an important one given that literatures bear some kind of relationship to communities, both writing communities and the community of the primary culture, from which they originate” (4; emphasis in original).

¹² Krupat, *Red Matters*, 20; emphasis in original.

¹³ Womack, *Red on Red*, 142; emphasis in original; Pulitano does, in fact, acknowledge Womack’s definition of Creek culture as dynamic and adaptive, but chooses, presumably because it would undermine her analysis, to ignore this point and focus on discussing the ways in which Womack’s separatist approach and “monolithic” Native perspective, in Pulitano’s view, in fact “fixes” Creek oral tradition. See Pulitano, *Toward A Native American Critical Theory*, 60-61, 79, 81-83.

mediation that resort to assumptions of cultural purity because they depend on a conception of a pure and uncontaminated oral, precontact, preliterate Native culture that can only be tainted and weakened by its subsequent contact with Europe and literacy, never strengthened or evolving.¹⁴

A more positive assessment of Womack's position is provided by Michelle Henry who reads *Red on Red* in conjunction with Womack's 2001 novel *Drowning in Fire*, and argues that throughout the two texts Womack consistently represents "the ongoing cultural and communal fluidity of Creeks," and notes, as does Womack in *Red on Red*, that this fluidity arises out of Creek culture's historical ability to cope with flux, to absorb groups of people from diverse tribal (and sometimes non-tribal) backgrounds without compromising their worldview and customs.¹⁵ This is an important rejoinder to the criticisms of Pulitano and Krupat because, as Henry points out, Womack's view of Creek culture as fluid and adaptable provides the framework for his conception of Creek writing and Creek literary criticism which, by virtue of their association with a culturally fluid Creek perspective, by definition repudiate accusations of "fixing," "rigidity" and "cultural purity."¹⁶

Womack expresses this condition most compellingly in the character of Jimmy Alexander (a major character in *Drowning in Fire* who also appears, briefly, in *Red on Red*). Jimmy does not represent any of the static Indian stereotypes because he is black, Indian, gay and, in the latter part of the novel, HIV positive. These conditions sometimes cause him uncertainty and struggle, sometimes bring him joy, love and belonging, but never compromise his Creek cultural identity. This

¹⁴ Womack, *Red on Red*, 143.

¹⁵ Michelle Henry, "Canonizing Craig Womack: Finding Native Literature's Place in Indian Country," *American Indian Quarterly* 28, no. 1/2 (Winter 2004), 32-34; Craig S. Womack, *Drowning in Fire* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001); Womack, *Red on Red*, 30-31.

¹⁶ Henry, "Canonizing Craig Womack," 47-48.

is because, Henry points out, although Jimmy acknowledges his black ancestry, “His identity is informed through being a Creek nationally, culturally, and personally.”¹⁷

Interestingly, Henry also notes, despite Womack’s stated separatist strategy, the potential for cross-cultural communication in academic contexts, arguing that Womack’s methods both allow and require literary critics, Native and non-Native, to “create a sense of community between [themselves] and Native authors.”¹⁸ The main purpose of Henry’s paper, however, is to respond to Pulitano’s and Krupat’s criticisms of Womack, and she does not therefore explore in any great depth the potential for community-building between critics and American Indian authors she so pertinently identifies. Bearing in mind Henry’s comments, I would like to suggest that although Womack’s argument for separatism in literary criticism is grounded in a belief that cultures have the inherent right to interpret their own literatures on their own terms and in ways that are meaningful to them, he is *not* saying that non-Creek or non-Indian scholars cannot also conduct American Indian literary criticism, only that the terms of their investigation will be necessarily different. Furthermore, Womack’s strategies delineate a process whereby tribal specificity reveals “universal human truths,” providing further potential ground for cross-cultural communication.¹⁹

Much of the critical attention devoted thus far to Womack’s strategies, the articles by Pulitano, Krupat and Henry cited above, for example, tends to focus upon

¹⁷ Henry, “Canonizing Craig Womack,” 33. See also Michael Dorris, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (New York: Henry Holt, 1987) and Owens, *Other Destinies*. Jimmy Alexander, of course, is not the first black Indian to appear in Native American fiction. Rayona, the youngest protagonist in Michael Dorris’s (Modoc) novel *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* has an absentee African-American father and a dying Indian mother from an unspecified reservation in Eastern Montana. Unlike Jimmy, who is secure in his Creek identity, Rayona is presented, according to Louis Owens’s analysis of Dorris’s novel, as having a “precariously balanced sense of self that straddles... her ‘dual heritage’” (219).

¹⁸ Henry, “Canonizing Craig Womack,” 31.

¹⁹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 195.

the perceived theoretical validity or otherwise of his approach. Little attention has been paid to what seems to me to be at least as important an issue, regardless of what position one takes on Womack's separatist stance, which is whether or not his strategies actually *work*, whether they provide an effective critical tool for reading American Indian literatures. What I would like to do in this chapter, then, is to move beyond a binary discussion of the relative merits of mediative and separatist approaches and instead to put into practice Womack's theories of tribally specific and tribally centred interpretive strategies.

In order to contextualise my application of Womack's strategies, I will begin with an examination of Womack's political position – his contention that the right to interpret one's own cultural literature, or, as he would term it, *national* literature, is a question of sovereignty. Although I will examine this contention in the light of the various critical responses that have arisen, and will summarise the debates around his rejection of biculturalism, my principal intention here is neither to challenge nor defend Womack's position, as these issues have been effectively argued elsewhere. Rather, I seek to take the critical tools Womack presents and to apply them to my own critical endeavours in order to evaluate whether or not they offer potential strategies for engaging in cross-cultural communication with American Indian literatures in an academic context. This chapter, then, functions as something of a bridge between the previous more theoretically orientated analyses dealing with Greg Sarris (Kashaya Pomo/Federated Graton Rancheria) and Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez, and the final chapter, which applies on a more practical basis the respective strategies proposed by Sarris, Brill de Ramírez and Womack to a study of American Indian film and video.

I will then analyse in depth the Creek critical strategies arising out of Womack's analysis of various Creek writers and storytellers, including Linda Alexander, Alexander Posey and Louis Littlecoon Oliver. It is from within Womack's reading of Louis Oliver's search for an intellectual centre that the most profound of his Creek literary critical strategies arise, thus my analysis of Womack's strategies focuses largely on his articulation of these strategies as they relate to Mr Oliver's writing. In addition, one element of *Red on Red*, that has been largely ignored by critics is Womack's inclusion of Creek dialect, or *stijaati*, letters from Jim Chibbo to Hotgun, based on the early twentieth century Fus Fixico letters written by Alex Posey, and placed at various stages throughout the text to provide humorous yet critical commentary upon the contents of each preceding chapter. These letters demonstrate, I will argue, how what Womack identifies as specifically Creek philosophies of knowledge may be articulated outside of a Western-orientated critical context and present possibilities for scholars searching for strategies that bridge the gaps between Native (or tribally-specific) and academic philosophies of knowledge.

Native American Literary Criticism as Sovereignty

Womack states his position plainly: "Native literature and Native literary criticism, written by Native authors, is part of sovereignty."²⁰ Fundamental to understanding Womack's conception of sovereignty and how it proceeds to his separatist perspective are the three interrelated concepts of indigenism, ancestral memory and nationalism. Citing Howard Adams (Métis), Womack stresses the importance of an indigenous, or Aboriginal, consciousness, necessary to achieve self-determination

²⁰ Womack, *Red on Red*, 14.

and liberation for Native peoples. This aboriginal consciousness, argues Adams, “is an intrinsic or inner essence that lies somewhere between instinct and intuition,” and “evolves from the humanness and spirituality of our collective, Aboriginal community.”²¹ Indigenism, then, or indigenous consciousness, is not confined to inward articulations of individual or collective authenticity but has a dynamic political impulse aimed at mobilising indigenous communities to self-determination and social justice.

Speaking from a Maori perspective, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngati Awa/Ngati Porou) argues that, while not all theories of indigenism “claim to be derived from some ‘pure’ sense of what it means to be indigenous,” they do express a “real sense of, and sensitivity towards, what it means to be an indigenous person” and enable indigenous communities to establish their own priorities and discuss them on their own terms.²² As Smith notes, in relation to both Maori and global indigenism, “politically interested” concepts such as healing, decolonisation and spirituality are at the forefront of indigenous agendas.²³

According to Krupat, indigenism arises from the instantiation of “a pan-Indian geocentric epistemology, a knowledge *different* from that of dispersed Europeans and other wanderer-settlers.”²⁴ Lakota scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn suggests that, “The persistent political questions which plague the study of the literatures of indigenous populations in America can be put aside only if the intellect of a people expressed in literary art is examined as the fabric which holds a people

²¹ Howard Adams, *A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization* (Penticton, B.C.: Theytus Books, 1995), 38 quoted in Womack, *Red on Red*, 5.

²² Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 38.

²³ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

²⁴ Krupat, *Red Matters*, ix; emphasis added.

together.”²⁵ Eva Marie Garroutte (Cherokee) argues that “radical indigenism has the potential to help us formulate definitions of identity that can contribute to the survival of Indian people, even as it teaches the academy about *philosophies of knowledge* it has failed to see and understand.”²⁶ It is evident from Garroutte’s statement that indigenous perspectives articulate a decolonising rationale that legitimises and emphasises indigenous “philosophies of knowledge” not only within indigenous communities, but also within cross-cultural contexts, as a strategy for resisting colonial research methodologies.

A fundamental component of indigenous, or Aboriginal, consciousness, is the concept of ancestral memory, sometimes also referred to as blood memory or racial memory.²⁷ Chadwick Allen describes its power: “The trope’s provocative juxtaposition of *blood* and *memory* transforms [the] taxonomy of delegitimization through genetic mixing into an authenticating genealogy of stories and storytelling....blood memory redefines American Indian authenticity in terms of imaginative re-collecting and re-membering.”²⁸ This power is foregrounded, Womack explains, in oral literature, where the constant retelling of stories transmits

²⁵ Cook-Lynn, “Literary and Political Questions of Transformation,” 50.

²⁶ Eva Marie Garroutte, *Real Indians: Identity and Survival of Native America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 107, quoted in Henry, “Canonizing Craig Womack,” 30; emphasis added.

²⁷ Womack, *Red on Red*, 26. See also Arnold Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin*, 14 n. 7; Chadwick Allen, “Blood (and) Memory,” *American Literature* 71, no.1 (March 1999): 93-116; N. Scott Momaday, “Personal Reflections,” in *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, ed. Calvin Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 157. Womack notes that “racial memory” as articulated in many of the works of N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) has been mistaken for “racist memory” by some critics. Womack does not expand upon or footnote this observation but this is presumably a reference to an argument made by Arnold Krupat in *The Voice in the Margin*. The situation is somewhat more complex than Womack’s passing remark implies. As Chadwick Allen has pointed out, Krupat was responding not to Momaday’s earlier evocations of racial memory but to a later extension of his trope of “blood” or “racial” memory to encompass in addition “genetic” memory, an altogether more problematical notion. See Allen, *ibid.* for a fuller discussion of this issue.

²⁸ Allen, “Blood (and) Memory,” 94; emphasis in original. Allen extends and expands his argument to take in other indigenous groups in *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

ancestral memory, a product of “imagination and storytelling” that enables tribal memories to be constantly and perpetually re-experienced leading to the creation and sustenance of a communal tribal consciousness.²⁹

Although ancestral memory is an important component of the “different” knowledge ascribed to indigenous perspectives, because it is also grounded in the specific oral and cultural traditions of particular tribes it also provides an important bridge from the pan-Indian, or even global, associations of indigenism to more locally defined bodies of knowledge. Indigenous “local knowledge” thus combines with Native conceptions of nationalism, becoming a proactive anti-colonial force.³⁰ It is important to note, however, that nationalism in a Native American or First Nations context, according to Krupat, does not merely replicate or reflect European nationalism by “[seeking] to express itself in the form of a state,” but rather “[links] specific land claims and a people’s experience to principles of sovereignty.”³¹

One way in which Native nationalism may be articulated is through oral and written literatures. “Sovereign nationalism” or “tribalism,” according to Cook-Lynn, is “a humane trademark in native/indigenous literature(s)... a concept in the arts that argues for nation-specific creativity and political unification in the development, continuation and defense of a coherent national mythos.”³² In this sense, Womack observes, the Creek oral tradition “has always had... a nationalist perspective,” as it enables people to “exist as a nation... [and helps] them imagine who they are as a people, how they came to be, and what cultural values they wish to preserve.” Ancestral memory and oral tradition, then, according to Womack, engender

²⁹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 26.

³⁰ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4, 20.

³² Cook-Lynn, “Literary and Political Questions,” 46.

nationalism through “an intersection of the political, imaginary, and literary.”³³ In the same way that oral and written literatures provide a medium for the articulation and implementation of Native nationalist ideals, so too does Native American literary criticism. Cook-Lynn, for example, notes the possibilities for creating “nation-centred theories of fiction [that] may assist in the articulation of an ethic which would defend the authenticity of the native/tribal voice.”³⁴

Pulitano criticises Womack’s and Cook-Lynn’s emphasis on nationalism and sovereignty, arguing that such terms do not constitute valid “parameters of authenticity” because they “are of European origin and do not express indigenous realities.”³⁵ This is an interesting criticism, given Womack’s explicit contention that Creek national identity is inherent in the oral tradition and predates European contact.³⁶ It is worth noting, also, that, unlike Cook-Lynn’s vaguely defined “authenticity of the native/tribal voice,” Womack makes no claims of authenticity. Rather, he explicitly states in his introduction that his proposed strategies “are more suggestive than prescriptive,” and that “it goes without saying that I cannot speak for Creek people or anyone else.”³⁷ As Henry points out, Womack presents his interpretations of Creek literatures as only one possible correct version among many other possible correct versions presented by other equally “authentic” storytellers.³⁸ Pulitano’s position is further problematised because, even if one accepts her assertion

³³ Womack, *Red on Red*, 26.

³⁴ Cook-Lynn, “Literary and Political Questions,” 50.

³⁵ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 71.

³⁶ Womack, *Red on Red*, 15, 53.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁸ Henry, “Canonizing Craig Womack,” 44.

that nationalism, sovereignty and self-determination are exclusively European traditions, her subsequent conclusion that this means they cannot also represent “indigenous realities” implies the existence of an uncontaminated pre-European contact “indigenous reality,” an assumption that conforms to the stereotypical “Vanishing Indian” view that freezes “authentic” Native cultures at a point just prior to contact and posits any future change as culture loss. This is particularly ironic, given that, as Womack himself notes, critics of literary nationalism such as Pulitano accuse its practitioners, falsely in Womack’s evaluation, of much the same fault – the belief that “Native perspectives are pure, authoritative, uncontaminated by European influences.”³⁹

It may be the case that although Womack does not claim authenticity, his nationalist-separatist position implies it. Citing the incorporation of Catholic Christian rituals into Acoma Pueblo fiestas, poet Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma) notes that the celebration, of saints’ names and days, becomes both Acoma and Indian “in the truest and most authentic sense.”⁴⁰ This syncretic adoption, adaptation and authentication of the colonisers’ traditions and rituals on Indians’ own terms is, argues Ortiz, representative of “the primary element of a nationalistic impulse.”⁴¹ An example of the “Indianisation” of colonial traditions in a Creek context can be

³⁹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 5. See also Krupat, *Red Matters*, 4 and Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 15. Krupat notes Gerald Vizenor’s (Anishinaabe) attempt to undermine the ambiguities associated with attaching Native conceptions of nationality and sovereignty to European terminology by coining the neologisms “sovenance” and “transmotion.” In *Fugitive Poses*, Vizenor defines “sovenance” as “that sense of presence in remembrance, that trace of creation and natural reason in native stories.” Transmotion is “creation stories, totemic visions, reincarnation, and sovenance; transmotion, that sense of native motion and an active presence, is *sui generis* sovereignty. Native transmotion is survivance, a reciprocal use of nature, not a monotheistic, territorial sovereignty. Native stories of survivance are the creases of transmotion and sovereignty.”

⁴⁰ Simon J. Ortiz, “Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism,” *MELUS* 8, no. 2 (1981): 7-8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

found in Louis Oliver's poem "2-Bio-Poetic Sketch." The poem describes how Mr Oliver has had dreams, but to date, no visions:

My dreams were all distorted
 Surrealistic,
 and I've searched for the key
 that would open the door

to interpretations.
 so, I write like I dream
 metaphorically
 as my language fits
 in the groove of
 surrealism.⁴²

In a reading that relies on a paradigm of hybridity, Mr Oliver's invocation of surrealism, a European artistic and literary movement, to describe his dreams, would represent a mediation between Indian and European cultures, a paradigm which, in Womack's assessment, assumes that such a mediation renders Mr Oliver somehow "less" Indian through his "corrupting" association with non-Indian culture. A Creek nationalist reading of Mr Oliver's poem, however, would interpret the descriptors "surrealistic" and "surrealism" to have been co-opted not only from what Gloria Bird (Spokane) and Joy Harjo have referred to as "the enemy's language" but also from a European worldview and, in the process, Indianising, or "Creek-ising" the concept of "surrealism" as it relates to a specifically Creek theology that informs Mr Oliver's understanding of his dreams.⁴³ From a nationalistic perspective, Mr Oliver, rather than passively assimilating to European or European-American influences, actively synthesises those elements of a European worldview that he finds useful and re-creates them as Creek. As Mr Oliver writes in another poem, "Creek Indian Thought

⁴² Louis Oliver, "2-Bio-Poetic Sketch," in *Caught in a Willow Net: Poems and Stories* (Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1983), 70.

⁴³ Bird and Harjo, introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, 25.

No. 8”: “So I chewed, but never masticated/ Plato, Aristotle, Paracelsus/ Bruno, Galileo, Kepler, Newton/ et cetera-et cetera.”⁴⁴

From such a perspective, then, there is no reason why conceptualisations of nationalism, sovereignty and self-determination, regardless of origin of idea or terminology, should not form part of historical and contemporary Native “realities.” Gerald Vizenor notes that sovereignty comes from within tribal communities. It is, he argues, an “inherent... essential right that has been *limited* but not *given* by the government.”⁴⁵ This is an important observation because, while Womack refutes the accusation that literary nationalism and literary separatism posit a belief in a pure and uncontaminated Native or tribal perspective, he does point out that for many Creeks, traditional narratives about their origins carry greater importance than what he terms “anthropological and historical mythologies.” By exercising this belief, Womack contends, their right to interpret their own narratives, “even when their interpretations differ from those of the dominant culture,” Creeks are, in essence, affirming their own sovereignty.⁴⁶ Womack, thus, makes an explicit link between Creek literary aesthetics and sovereignty and the two are posited as interdependent and mutually supporting. Tribal concepts of sovereignty, nationhood and self-determination are both imagined through and exercised by literary endeavour.

One of the colonial enterprises resisted by Native sovereignty is the appropriation and institutionalisation of indigenous knowledge in academia. In this sense, then, the sovereign exercise of Native American literary criticism can function

⁴⁴ Louis Oliver, “Creek Indian Thought No. 8,” in *Caught in a Willow Net*, 30.

⁴⁵ Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 145.

⁴⁶ Womack, *Red on Red*, 29.

in “defense of [Native] intellectual property rights.”⁴⁷ The issue of intellectual property rights in relation to Native American knowledge is one that I will deal with in more detail in the following chapter in relation to the work of Victor Masayesva, but for the moment it is sufficient to note that Womack seeks to develop what he refers to as “‘Red Stick’ literary criticism” that, in addition to emphasizing sovereignty, nationalism and self-determination, also “seeks connections between literature and liberation struggles... roots literature in land and culture... and [attempts] to find Native literature’s place in Indian country, rather than Native literature’s place in the canon.”⁴⁸ According to Henry, not only is Womack not seeking to create a place for Native literature in the American canon, neither is he merely positing an *alternative* Native canon.⁴⁹ What is at stake here is more fundamental and relates to the legitimising of Native perspectives on Native terms. In order to understand why Womack’s literary nationalism is associated also with literary separatism – and literary nationalism, I would argue, does not automatically engender literary separatism⁵⁰ – it is first necessary to account for Womack’s rejection of bicultural or mediative strategies of literary criticism.

Womack’s disavowal of mediative strategies – those that seek to understand Native American literatures in terms of their hybrid relationship to European literatures – is grounded in his belief that such approaches tacitly support the idea of the vanishing Indian and exhibit subtly racist tendencies that assume the cultural frontier between Native and white cultures only moves in one direction, which is that Native culture becomes less Native in contact with white culture. As Henry points

⁴⁷ Cook-Lynn, “Literary and Political Questions,” 51.

⁴⁸ Womack, *Red on Red*, 11.

⁴⁹ Henry, “Canonizing Craig Womack,” 35.

⁵⁰ See also Krupat, *Red Matters*, 5.

out, very rarely outside of Native American studies, does anybody discuss the reverse of this process, that American literature generally is the product of a cultural frontier with Native America.⁵¹ Womack explicitly rejects this “supremacist notion” and assumes “that it is just as likely that things European are Indianized rather than the anthropological assumption that things Indian are always swallowed up by European culture.”⁵² Cook-Lynn, of whom Womack is a stated admirer and who shares his distrust of bicultural critical strategies, also argues that mediation relies on a paradigm of hybridity which posits that the assumed cultural “purity” of Native peoples is contaminated by contact with European culture, a claim that she believes undermines Native authenticity.⁵³ Furthermore, she contends, cosmopolitanism challenges Native intellectual property rights because it functions as an “exploration in literature of the tastes and interests of the dominant culture,” contributing to the appropriation and institutionalising of Native knowledge.⁵⁴

The tendency to place Native Americans in what Womack terms a “reductive tainted/untainted framework” is damaging, he argues, because it encourages the perception of Indians as dehistoricised cultural artefacts.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Womack argues, bicultural theory renders Native viewpoints an impossibility because according to a bicultural definition all Native authors must be influenced by their contact with European literature.⁵⁶ Finally, Womack points out, somewhat mischievously, bicultural arguments enable white critics to create a place for

⁵¹ Henry, “Canonizing Craig Womack,” 43.

⁵² Womack, *Red on Red*, 12.

⁵³ Cook-Lynn, “Literary and Political Questions,” 49.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁵ Womack, *Red on Red*, 141.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

themselves within Native American literary criticism, “since we [Natives] really need a heaping helping of non-Indian critical theory to understand the stuff, given its European underpinnings; and they aren’t really outsiders to the literature, since their cultures helped to produce it anyway!”⁵⁷ Rather, Womack sees the need for radical voices to resist against and disrupt the status quo, reasoning that such disruption “does not come about by merely emphasizing that all things Native are, in reality, filtered through contact with Europe.... This is an assimilationist ideology, a retreat into sameness and blending in.”⁵⁸ The important point to note here is not that Womack is claiming that Native culture generally and Creek culture specifically have existed in a cultural vacuum without exchange but that European elements, such as the Catholic Christian rituals Ortiz describes in Acoma tradition and Louis Oliver’s invocation of surrealism to describe a particular quality of his dreams, have been recreated as Indian and thus represent resistance to and not assimilation with the colonising culture.

Womack does not deny that Native cultures are to varying degrees “hybrid” cultures arising out of contact with Europe (and, of course, Womack would argue that European American cultures are also hybrid cultures, arising out of contact with Native America) but contends that the channelling of the majority of Native American literary criticism through a narrow bicultural paradigm works to emphasise this one aspect of the Native literary evolution, at the expense of literatures and literary techniques arising out of tribal cosmologies. In other words, what Womack is saying is not that hybridity has had no effect on the development of Creek discourse and literatures, but that theories of hybridity and mediation have occupied

⁵⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 5.

a disproportionately large amount of the theoretical space given over to American Indian literary criticism. One of the effects of this, argues Womack, is that the European or European-American side of this relationship is nearly always centralised, with Native American discourse taking the subservient role as having to adapt, negotiate and mediate with the dominant culture in order to survive.

Womack's literary separatism is not suggesting that critics ignore the influences of European and Euro-American discourse on Creek literatures, but that these influences are dealt with using strategies that are Creek-centric as opposed to Euro-centric, and that acknowledge that Creek writers incorporating European conceptions into their work were not always writing with a European audience in mind.

Womack, for example, makes the point strongly that Mr Oliver's work, specifically two bilingual books *The Horned Snake* and *Estiyut Omayat*, were written "to some degree" with a Creek audience in mind.⁵⁹ Thus, Womack argues, any discussion about the "literariness" of these works as defined by Western norms "constitutes an impossible criteria" by which to evaluate Mr Oliver's and other similar works because their "purpose is to educate Creeks about their culture rather than white readers about Creeks." Mr Oliver's writing, then, according to Womack, needs to be evaluated according to a standard of "Creek cultural integrity."⁶⁰

Leaving aside Womack's problematical suggestion of a "Creek cultural integrity," which, seems to conflict with his more frequent assertion that Creek culture is a dynamic, vital and integrative force, the question of audience becomes paramount.

⁵⁹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 188; Louis Oliver, *The Horned Snake* (Merrick, N.Y.: Cross-Cultural Communications, 1982; Louis Oliver, *Estiyut Omayat* (Muskogee, Okla: Indian University Press, 1985).

⁶⁰ Womack, *Red on Red*, 188-189.

Womack's position implies that works written with different kinds of audiences in mind may be interpreted in different ways.⁶¹

It has to be stated, however, that Womack's understanding of mediation and biculturalism is somewhat one-dimensional. While all of the criticisms he makes are valid *if* bicultural approaches only operated in the ways he suggests, mediative approaches encompass a much broader and, at times, more subversive agenda than Womack suggests. James Ruppert, for example, discussing biculturalism in fictional texts written by Native authors (Womack and Cook-Lynn extend their criticisms of biculturalism to mixed-blood Indian writers and critics producing works of criticism and fiction that straddle both their Indian and non-Indian heritages) notes in mediative texts "the possibilities of realigning and reinforcing the reader's epistemology," and describes mediation thus:

The successful contemporary Native writer can create a text that merges delegitimizing influences while continuing oral tradition and culture. The text is both substantially Native and substantially Western. In seeking its complex goals, it must adopt and transfer each culture's means of knowledge and value formation. This back and forth, the assertion and reassertion of value and form, creates multidimensional understanding for each reader. The best work... mediates as it illuminates, juxtaposing cultural traditions on both conscious and unconscious levels.⁶²

The late Louis Owens (Choctaw-Cherokee), in response to criticisms from Cook-Lynn that much mixed-blood literature is antithetical to what she defines as

⁶¹ Womack does not state how he knows for whom Mr Oliver was writing, whether it was his intent to educate Creeks or non-Creeks or both about Creek culture. It is interesting to note that *The Horned Snake* was published by a company named Cross-Cultural Communications, as part of a series of chapbooks intended to focus, according to the copyright page, "on cultures in contact....designed to introduce individual authors/artists who are representative of those groups." See Louis Oliver, *The Horned Snake*, 2.

⁶² Ruppert, *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, 6. See also Cook-Lynn, "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story," 128-129. Regarding mixed-blood Indian academics and writers, Cook-Lynn makes the opposite observation to Ruppert with regards to knowledge transfer and value formation, suggesting that "American Indians who have become a part of the elite intellectualism of American universities are unable to meet standards of the true intellectual...they are failed intellectuals because they have not lived up to the responsibility of transmitting knowledge between certain diverse blocs of society."

“First Nation ideology,” wrote that bicultural writing produced by mixed-blood authors “is a powerful literature of resistance,” and “is hopeful, life-affirming literature. It is literature that, often invoking traditional songs, stories, and rituals with discretion, tells the stories of who we are today, not only yesterday, with humor and strength so that we may, as a people, continue to survive.”⁶³ Owens suggested that Cook-Lynn’s vague evocation of what she refers to as “tribal realism” – a reality that in her opinion mixed-blood writers manifestly fail to articulate – “rings of what... Vizenor [calls] a terminal creed: a static utterance that insists upon its own authority, taking part in no dialogue. Since, as Vizenor has explained again and again, the ‘real’ Indian is a colonial invention, to be thus real, to engage in ‘tribal realism,’ is to conform to the invented stereotype.”⁶⁴ A similar charge is made against Womack by Pulitano, who suggests that his separatist approach and support of a Native perspective “ultimately reinscribes colonial definitions of Indianness,” which risks perpetuating Native’s marginal status.⁶⁵ I would argue that Womack, in fact, avoids many of the essentialising tendencies observed by Owens in the work of Cook-Lynn. This is because Womack is careful to avoid positing monolithic statements about Native perspectives and, instead, confines himself largely to a specifically Creek literary domain. Furthermore, as noted previously, he explicitly repudiates accusations of a naïve belief in Native cultural purity.

Accusations regarding who does and who does not ascribe to colonial inventions of a “real,” ahistorical, culturally pure and static Indian state seem, to me, to be less than productive. Krupat argues that indigenist, nationalist and

⁶³ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 158-159; Cook-Lynn, “American Indian Intellectualism,” 124-130.

⁶⁴ Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 156.

⁶⁵ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 80.

cosmopolitan positions are interrelated “so that each can only achieve its full coherence and effectiveness in relation to the others.” Furthermore, Krupat notes, all three approaches have the potential to both subvert and perpetuate colonial dominance, depending on how they are used.⁶⁶ What is important is that Womack’s evaluation of the limits of biculturalism has led him to conflate literary nationalism with literary separatism and posit a Native critical endeavour that asserts sovereignty by operating, he claims, not in academia but in “Indian Country.”

Womack’s separatist contention that he is arguing not for inclusion for Native American literatures in the American canon, but for the already existing Native American canon generally, and the Creek canon specifically, to be addressed on its own terms raises a number of questions regarding audience, the existence of a Creek or Native perspective and inside/outsider status. Henry argues that Womack’s primary audience for *Red on Red* is his own Creek community, to encourage, as he states in his introduction, Creeks to talk about what constitutes “meaningful literary efforts” in a Creek context.⁶⁷ Pulitano, however, notes Womack’s privileged position in the academy and points out that as “a sophisticated work of literary criticism,” *Red on Red* is likely to be confined to an audience made up largely of other academics and therefore not accessible to those Creek readers located outside academia.⁶⁸ It seems to me that Womack’s audience is likely to be drawn from both of these locales. *Red on Red* most certainly is a “sophisticated work of literary criticism,” as Pulitano observes but is also, I would argue, couched in terminology that is not so esoteric as to exclude interested readers from outside the academy. In

⁶⁶ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 1.

⁶⁷ Henry, “Colonizing Craig Womack,” 31; Womack, *Red on Red*, 1.

⁶⁸ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 92.

many respects I would imagine a Creek reader from outside the academy would be privileged over a non-Indian scholar in terms of accessing Womack's text, thus, I would argue, Pulitano's assumption of privilege on the part of scholarly readers is problematical.

Womack contends that, in teaching Native literature, every classroom text, fiction, criticism or other, should be authored by a Native person. "Otherwise," he asks, "how can we possibly lay claim to presenting Native perspectives?"⁶⁹ This raises an interesting point, because I suspect there are many teachers who would not consider assigning a non-Native written fictional text on a Native American literature course, a Tony Hillerman novel, for example, but would not give a second thought to assigning a non-Native authored textbook on Native American literary criticism. Womack defines this, and the teaching of Native studies by predominantly non-Native faculty as appropriation, noting that "the appropriation of Native issues by non-Natives is still acceptable in Native studies in ways that have long been unacceptable in regards to other minorities."⁷⁰

It seems to me that Womack's position ignores the reality that the teaching of American Indian studies in universities, is a cross-cultural undertaking for all concerned, whether Womack likes this or not. Indeed, at the time of writing *Red on Red*, Womack was teaching at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, which presumably involved engaging with non-Creek and non-Indian students and faculty. Under these circumstances, Pulitano asks, "Can Womack's work still maintain... its professed Creekcentrism?... Can a book written... in response to the charge that only whites can "do theory" speak to Native communities in their own terms? Can

⁶⁹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 10.

⁷⁰ Womack, *Red on Red*, 8-9.

Womack justify grounding his study in a notion of Creekcentrism when that study must, as it does, inevitably engage Western literary theory (even if only to attack it)?”⁷¹

It is worth noting, also, that *Red on Red*, a textbook on Native American literature written by a Native American, is also a cross-cultural document, in terms of both its production and performance. Womack cites, on a number of occasions and not always critically, the research of non-Native scholars, in some cases at great length.⁷² This observation perhaps would stray too close to a bicultural cosmopolitan reading for Womack’s comfort, but I am not attempting to suggest that Womack’s incorporation of non-Indian criticism into his work represents any kind of conscious or unconscious assimilation on his part. It is rather that his incorporation of such elements represents, as Ortiz might put it, an *Indianisation*, or even a *Creekisation*, of what Womack might see as “colonial” scholarship, but on Creek-defined terms. This does not detract from the reality that Womack’s scholarship both speaks to and requires multiple audiences from differing perspectives, a fact that potentially allows for multiple meanings in his work, regardless of one’s personal position on its Creek “authenticity.” Thus, to answer Pulitano’s question, I would argue that, yes, even under these cross-cultural circumstances, Womack’s work can continue to speak to Creek audiences, among many other audiences, and maintain its Creek-centred meaningfulness, among many other potential meanings.

Such questions, however, do give rise to the issue of Womack’s insider status in relation to his interpretation of Creek stories. Smith notes that “there are multiple

⁷¹ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 92.

⁷² See for example Womack, *Red on Red*, 30-31. In his discussion of the history of Creek absorption and assimilation of other cultural groups Womack cites, at some length, Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941).

ways of being an insider and an outsider in indigenous contexts.” The crucial concern, she argues, “is the constant need for reflexivity.”⁷³ Although Womack discusses the insider status of several of the Creek writers whose work he interprets, and criticises postmodernists and biculturalists for their continual deconstruction and undermining of insider status, he does not pay very much attention to his own position, what Pulitano refers to as his “strategic location” and “implication in the discourse of the metropolitan literate culture.”⁷⁴ While I would question Pulitano’s binary division locating Creek discourse and culture in opposition to “the metropolitan literate culture,” I would agree that Womack’s overall position would have benefited from a more reflexive outlook. Smith describes some of the considerations facing insider researchers:

Insider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research. It also needs to be humble. It needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position... The comment, “She or he lives in it therefore they know” certainly validates experience but for a researcher to assume that their own experience is all that is required is arrogant. One of the difficult risks insider researchers take is to “test” their own taken-for-granted views about their community.⁷⁵

I am not suggesting that Womack exhibits any taken-for-granted views about his Creek community in *Red on Red*, but if he did reflect on these issues, it is not recorded for his readers. Unlike the kind of reflexivity practiced by Greg Sarris in his writing about his relationship with Mabel McKay in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* and discussed in detail in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, Womack does not explicitly consider how his presence as a Creek scholar/friend/relative impacts upon the

⁷³ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 137.

⁷⁴ Womack, *Red on Red*, 5, 118, 141, 196; Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 92.

⁷⁵ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 139.

meaning of the performance or reading of the texts he considers. As noted in Chapter 2, the meaning of a narrative is “keyed” at the site of its performance to a given listener or reader. As Sarris notes, a fieldworker – and Womack is operating as a fieldworker in this instance, albeit an “insider” one – “cannot know about frames independent of his or her presence” but can only ever be party to how a performance is keyed specifically taking the fieldworker’s presence into account.⁷⁶ Womack does not appear to consider how his personal Creek “territory” does or does not overlap with the Creek “territories” of, for example, the nineteenth century/early twentieth century mixed-blood Creek writers S. Alice Callahan and Alexander Posey, or the full-blood elder Louis Oliver, who was ostracised by his community when he graduated from high school. Womack does not, for example, consider how his position as a gay, Creek-Cherokee scholar impacts upon his reading of the play “Cherokee Nights,” written by the (closeted) gay Cherokee writer Lynn Riggs.

Pulitano notes that in relation to Womack’s discussion of various versions of the Creek story of how the Turtle’s shell got broken he fails, as a “Native informant,” to acknowledge his “complicitous and parasitic relationship with his object of study,” and “[interrogates] only his investigating tools when he should also be interrogating his position as a critic and subject of investigation.”⁷⁷ In response, Henry notes that Pulitano’s criticism “relies... upon a Western definition of ‘insider’ and ‘authenticity.’”⁷⁸ However, neither Pulitano nor Henry undertakes a detailed examination of the precise dynamic of Womack’s investigation of the story about how Turtle got his shell broken.

⁷⁶ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman*, 18-19.

⁷⁷ Pulitano, *Towards a Native American Critical Theory*, 84-85.

⁷⁸ Henry, “Canonizing Craig Womack,” 44.

Womack examines four versions of the story of how Turtle got his shell broken, in order to identify what can be learned from certain key Creek oral texts that may assist in the development of Creek literary criticism.⁷⁹ The first two versions are told by Creek storyteller Linda Alexander, initially in Creek and then in English, to a small audience including Womack, presented in the book verbatim as recorded and transcribed by Womack. Womack provides his own literal translation of Alexander's Creek version of the story in order to compare it with the way in which she rendered the story in English, and also records the conversation between the group before and after both stories. Womack then presents a reprint of two versions of the same story taken from anthropologist John Swanton's 1929 book *Myths and Tales of the Southeastern Indians*.⁸⁰ The remainder of the chapter is devoted to Womack's comparative analysis of all the versions of the story, in which he provides an insightful and compelling reading of the various cultural influences – language, audience, shared cultural knowledge, humour, and so on – that shape each version of the story. The purpose of Womack's analysis, as noted above, is to establish whether there are characteristics of Creek oral tradition arising out of Creek oral tradition that may inform the models of Creek literary criticism. I will discuss the features identified by Womack in more detail in the following section, but in terms of Womack's status as an "insider" researcher and his level of reflexivity a number of interesting observations arise.

Womack does provide some limited "autobiographical" material in this section, noting, for example, that while writing the doctoral dissertation on which *Red on Red* is based, he suffered a crisis of faith in ethnology regarding its tendency

⁷⁹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 75-76.

⁸⁰ John Swanton, *Myths and Tales of the Southeastern Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Ethnology Bulletin 88, 1929).

to objectify its subjects.⁸¹ Womack also notes that his personal limitations as a Creek language speaker mean that his translations of Alexander's Creek-language version of the story cannot be considered as authoritative.⁸² What Womack does not provide, however, is adequate consideration of the specific context in which the stories were told by Alexander and recorded by himself. Womack very helpfully provides a full transcript of the conversation between the group before and after the story, and records some humorous conversation that took place between those present immediately subsequent to the second (English-language) version of the story, and Alexander handing Womack some turtle shells to demonstrate their chequered pattern as explained in the stories. Womack correctly notes that this conversation and the examination of a turtle shell contextualises the spoken versions of the story in a way absent in Swanton's written versions, which, in contrast, erase the presence of a narrator and present the stories in a vacuum, thus rendering them as static artefacts. The subsequent conversation between Alexander, Womack and other persons present, prompted by their shared experience of the stories, Womack suggests, extends the story of how Turtle got his shell broken into that moment of conversation and beyond – their conversation becomes part of the meaning of the story.

Thus, by providing a transcript of the conversations framing the two spoken versions of the story, Womack is able to provide a context-specific analysis.

Unfortunately, however, this analysis is limited because he fails to approach his reading from a reflexive perspective, considering how the stories might have been keyed for his presence. For example, in the conversation preceding the storytelling,

⁸¹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 75.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 77.

a seemingly obscure element of the story – a woman ties a strand of her pubic hair around Turtle’s neck, who later shows off his new “silk scarf” to his turtle friends – is discussed. Another member of the audience, Pam Innes, described by Womack as “a Southeastern Indian specialist,” who assisted him with the translation of the Creek-language version into English, initiates the following exchange:

PI: Well, we can leave it up to Craig to come up with something.

LA: Something, OK [laughs].

CW: For me to come up with something? What?

PI: About the meaning of the story.

CW: Oh yeah. That’s my job [we laugh].

LA: Whenever y’all are ready, I’m ready.

PI: We’re rolling.

LA: I’m gonna tell it in Indian, and then I’ll tell it in English after that.⁸³

As noted above, Womack suggests that the post-storytelling conversation between the group constitutes part of the Turtle story and I would append this observation to include, also, the conversation that preceded the storytelling performance. This conversation, and admittedly it was initiated not by Alexander, the storyteller, nor Womack, the interpreter, but by another member of the audience, explicitly empowers Womack with the power to ascribe meaning to the story Alexander is about to tell. Womack provides us with a transcript of the conversation, thus contextualising the specific performance of the story, but completely fails to consider reflexively how his position as a researcher – whether an insider or an outsider – affects the meaning of the story on that particular occasion.⁸⁴ Granted, Womack does not claim authenticity or authority for his analysis of the stories, but a consideration of his position as a researcher and its implications for the meaning of

⁸³ Womack, *Red on Red*, 80; brackets in original. The Creek-language telling of the story commences immediately subsequent to this conversation.

⁸⁴ Neither does Womack advise how he felt personally about the bearing of this conversation, although I suspect it was a discomfiting experience for him.

the stories would have added an additional very significant layer of context to his analysis.

An example of the nuances of insider research is given by Smith in an account of her early experiences as an “insider” Maori researcher. Smith recalls subtle differences in the behaviour of interviewees when she visited them at home in her capacity as a researcher to the way they behaved when she visited them as a friend or relative, from extra-spotless houses and more rigid bedtime routines for children to subtle signs of respect usually reserved for contact with strangers. These behavioural differentiations, however subtle, acted to cast Smith in a more formal role as researcher and, for the period of her research, outsider.⁸⁵

It is clear from the pre- and post-storytelling conversations recorded by Womack that attending storytelling performances given by Alexander was not an uncommon occurrence. Whether or not the specific context of Womack’s attendance on this occasion, as a researcher, impacted upon the meaning of the story, is difficult to ascertain, because Womack does not consider his engagement with the storytelling performance in a reflexive manner. I am suggesting, however, that if the conversation that framed the storytelling performances is considered to constitute part of the story, and therefore part of the meaning of the story, then, if only by virtue of Innes explicitly bringing Womack’s researcher status into the conversation, the tenor of the story was altered, however subtly. Thus, I would argue, that Womack’s failure to approach his analysis of the story about how Turtle’s shell got broken within a reflexive framework, weakens what is otherwise a compelling and insightful analysis. In the following section, I will explore further how Womack relates various strategies evident in Creek storytelling and literatures to the existence of a Creek

⁸⁵ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 137-138.

philosophy of knowledge and intellectualism, and the potential of this philosophy for developing specifically Creek models of literary criticism.

Creek Intellectualism and Literary Criticism

The interpretive strategies of Creek literary criticism must arise, in Womack's view, out of a body of specifically Creek tribal discourse. Because Creek oral tradition is the original Creek discourse, "a living literary tradition," it becomes the standard not only by which all Creek literatures, written and spoken, should be evaluated, but also the locus from which specifically Creek interpretive strategies relating to politics, spirit and geography originate.⁸⁶ Particularly significant is Womack's contention that Creek oral tradition constitutes, and always has constituted, part of Creek culture's "national search for knowledge."⁸⁷ By studying Creek oral tradition, and written literatures arising out of Creek oral tradition, according to Womack, it should be possible to identify certain Creek characteristics that could inform the development of a Creek-centred literary criticism. "Critics create literary theory," argues Womack, "in relation to literature, and one would expect nothing less from national literatures – that the oral tradition would generate vital approaches for examining Native literatures."⁸⁸

Because Native American literary criticism is seen by Womack as being an expression of sovereignty, it follows, then, that it should be not only tribally specific but also tribally centred. There is a subtle but key distinction here between tribally specific and tribally centred, in that the former describes a process where criticism is

⁸⁶ Womack, *Red on Red*, 66.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 187.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

tailored to a knowledge of what Womack refers to the “primary culture” from which a given text originates and the latter, more controversially, describes a process where that specificity becomes the central critical strategy or, in other words, where critical strategies inhere in the given “primary culture” and where narratives are assessed in relation to the tribal cultures that engendered them and not in relation to Western methodologies. Tribally centred literary criticism, in other words, is generated from within tribes, prioritises Native perspectives and utilises critical strategies that arise out of tribally specific theologies, cosmologies and bodies of literature.

In response to Womack’s assertion, Krupat has claimed that, while “criticism should fit itself to the contours of its subject/objects,” the idea that “*models* for interpretation and evaluation inhere in the stories,” is deeply problematic.⁸⁹ The root of Krupat’s objection seems to be that because “critical models” are constructs – “the conjunctural products of an encounter between an individual mind and a cultural corpus,” – they cannot therefore be innate within a body of literature.⁹⁰ Although it is certainly the case that any interpretive strategies Womack identifies within the body of Creek literature are necessarily conjunctive to a degree – arising out of his personal interpretation of the narratives – Krupat’s position, I am suggesting, relies on a Western definition of literary criticism and assumes too readily the impossibility of developing a new and radically different literary criticism based on Creek perspectives. The question I am asking here is, even if it is true that European American literary critical models are constructs imposed upon from without rather than being generated within literatures, as Krupat seems to suggest, does this necessarily mean the same conditions are true of Creek literary criticism? This is a

⁸⁹ Krupat, “Red Matters,” 659.

⁹⁰ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 10.

difficult question to answer, especially given that, as noted above, Womack does not provide an adequately reflexive consideration of his position as a Creek scholar and his implied complicity with what he would see as the colonising impulse of academia. Notwithstanding this omission, however, Womack does in practice provide a compelling case for a Creek literary criticism inherent in the body of Creek literature, and provides equally compelling readings of that literature using the strategies he identifies.

Comments provided by Smith, from a Maori perspective, provide further support to Womack's argument that critical perspectives may be inherent in tribal cosmologies. Smith describes the first Maori "research project," when Tane-nui-a-rangi, a child of the sky father and the sky mother, travelled to the twelfth universe in search of knowledge. Smith emphasises two points of significance in Tane-nui-a-rangi's story. First, that his quest to discover knowledge was not for himself as an individual, but for his whole people. Second, that the knowledge Tane-nui-a-rangi acquired was placed into three baskets, each basket containing a different type of specialised knowledge. The "gifts" of knowledge were distributed among the people and, as all types of knowledge were essential to the physical and cultural endurance of the group, each member of the group relied upon the interdependent specialised knowledges held by other individuals, providing a source of cultural coherence and continuance.⁹¹ The implications of this cultural understanding of knowledge for research into Maori culture are clear. As Smith notes, any researcher conducting research with individual Maori informants is likely to receive only a partial picture from each "informant" as different kinds of knowledge are distributed among different individuals, only becoming realised when all knowledges work together

⁹¹ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 172-174.

interdependently. I present Smith's explanation of Maori understanding and origin of knowledge not to posit any superficial relationship between Creek, or American Indian, indigenous "knowledge" and Maori knowledge but to demonstrate the possibilities, in indigenous contexts, of tribally specific conceptualisations of knowledge giving rise to tribally specific, or culturally specific, critical theories.

It is this kind of tribally centred critical methodology that Womack attempts to identify through his analysis of a number of Creek storytellers and writers such as Linda Alexander, Alexander Posey, Louis Oliver, S. Alice Callahan and Joy Harjo. Evident in the narratives of these storytellers (or conspicuously absent, according to Womack, in the case of Callahan's novel *Wynema: A Child of the Forest*) are a number of what Womack perceives to be characteristically Creek literary features that provide models for the development of Creek literary criticism.⁹² The features include, for example, the political nature of oral tradition, the interdependent relationship between the political and the spiritual, the nationalist orientation of Creek oral tradition, Creek landscape and geography as literary method, persona writing, language as invocation, balance between opposites based on Creek cosmology of Upper and Lower Worlds, the dramatisation of a listening audience and the positioning of abstract ideas within the context of a narrative.

In the chapter "Louis Oliver: Searching for a Creek Intellectual Center," Womack discusses the articulation of Creek intellectualism in the writing of the Creek elder Louis Oliver from the Racoon (*wotkalgee*) clan, who died in 1991 aged eighty seven years.⁹³ Womack notes, in Mr Oliver's work, a number of key

⁹² S. Alice Callahan, *Wynema: A Child of the Forest*, (Chicago: H.J. Smith and Company, 1891). Reprinted and edited by A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

⁹³ Womack, *Red on Red*, 187-189. Mr Oliver's death, writes Womack, was "an inestimable loss to the Creek Nation." Mr Oliver began writing late in life, with his first book published when he was 78

interpretive strategies arising out of Creek sensibilities that frame Creek storytelling, oral and written, as a “national search for knowledge.”⁹⁴ It is in Womack’s reading of Mr Oliver’s writing that the most compelling aspects of Creek literary criticism and Creek intellectualism are foregrounded. Because much of the critical response to Womack’s work has focused on theoretical and political debates about the validity or otherwise of a separatist approach, his discussion of Mr Oliver’s work has been largely overlooked. This is to the detriment of any analysis of Womack’s position, because it is in his analysis of Mr Oliver’s work, beyond the political and theoretical debates, that his position is stated most compellingly. Womack discusses Mr Oliver’s writing at length, but many of his observations may be encapsulated by the following short passage taken from Mr Oliver’s retelling of the Creek origin and migration story in *Chasers of the Sun*:

We came pouring out of the backbone of this continent like ants. We saw for the first time a great ball of fire rising out of the earth in the east. We were astounded at the phenomena, but we had no fear of it. We held council and made a decision to go and find the place that it lived.⁹⁵

According to Womack, this brief excerpt is richly layered with meaning. For example, according to Womack, Mr Oliver’s use of the pronoun “we” is significant in a number of ways. First, it articulates ancestral, or blood, memory, enabling the creation/migration event to be “reexperienced so that the people are reconstituted as a nation as they hear about their origins in ancient stories of creations and

years old. He was evidently regarded with great esteem and affection by many Native writers. See, for example, Joseph Bruchac, “For Littlecoon in Oklahoma Two Years After His Death,” *Callaloo* 17.1 (Winter 1994): 102.

⁹⁴ Womack, *Red on Red*, 187.

⁹⁵ Louis Oliver, *Chasers of the Sun: Creek Indian Thoughts* (Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1990), 3, quoted in Womack *Red on Red*, 190.

journeyings.”⁹⁶ This participatory impulse goes beyond the mere interaction between storyteller and audience because, as Womack points out, not only is Mr Oliver “narrating his own history from an insider’s viewpoint rather than as an outsider looking in at the culture,” he is also participating himself in the story as he recounts it: “*he* is emerging from below the earth out into the light of the broader landscape; *he* is on the migration trail with his people, searching for the origin of one of their most important symbols, the sun.”⁹⁷ Because Mr Oliver, then, is telling his own story as a member of the Creek Nation, within the telling of the history of his people he is, argues Womack, depicting “intellectual activity as a relationship between an individual and a community of people; it is a ‘we’ relationship.”⁹⁸ This is extremely significant in terms of the development of a model of Creek literary criticism, because a “we” relationship that emphasises the knowledge-seeker’s close relationship with his people and concomitant position as part of the subject/object of the study is a radical departure from traditional Western orientated models of literary criticism.

This is, in fact, a poor example from Womack because the passage cited above is not, in fact, told in Mr Oliver’s voice. Immediately preceding the excerpt quoted by Womack are the following two sentences, in fact the opening of the book: “The only explanation of the origin of the Muskoke (Creek) tribe with veracity, was told by an ancient one by the name of Chikili. Because the ethnologists pressured him for a revelation he told the following with a twinkle in his eye.” The story about the Chasers of the Sun is then recounted within quotation marks, indicating Chikili as

⁹⁶ Womack, *Red on Red*, 26.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

the speaker. It is Chikili, not Mr Oliver who uses the pronoun “we.” When Mr Oliver returns to speaking in his own voice the history of the Creek, he does so in the third person. The fact that Mr Oliver describes Chikili as having told the story “with a twinkle in his eye,” at the behest of ethnologists, intimates that Chikili may have been having a little fun with his story at the ethnologists’ expense. I cannot speculate as to why Womack included the excerpt from *Chasers of the Sun*, in the decontextualised format he chose. Perhaps he, like Chikili and Mr Oliver, was just having a little fun.

However, the excerpt from *Chasers of the Sun* demonstrates a number of other characteristics that identify Mr Oliver’s storytelling as a political and intellectual enterprise, and Womack’s examples in these cases are more compelling. The narrative, for example, “supports an ordered world chosen for Creeks,” and locates the importance of fire in Creek religious and ceremonial activity within a teleological context.⁹⁹ This teleological orientation superbly undermines any stereotypical simplistic views of Creek religion and makes a specific intellectual link between religion and science. As Womack explains: “Creeks were looking for answers to a scientific inquiry (and from a Creek viewpoint, given the centrality of fire in ceremony, a religious one as well) in their search for the place where the sun originated. That intellectual questions were part of the national character, not a mere chance phenomenon, is made evident by the fact that the issue was deliberated in council.”¹⁰⁰

These characteristics, Womack suggests, contribute to a suggestion “that intellectualism is a tribally specific activity in relation to a given nation of people,” in

⁹⁹ Ibid., 193.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 190.

much the same way as Smith suggests Maori intellectualism is specifically linked to the Tane-nui-a-rangi story.¹⁰¹ What Womack seems to be saying is that the type of storytelling undertaken by Oliver is not *only* storytelling, but also functions as *theory* in the sense that it represents an individual's intellectual relationship with his people, as well as a national search for knowledge. Oral storytelling, in this sense, is interpretive in a way similar to more conventional literary criticism. This has a number of implications for the development of Creek literary criticism and the development of strategies that bridge the gap between experiential and cognitive knowledge.

By immersing himself as an individual, an intellectual and a community member in his depiction of the origin/migration story and in many of his poems, Mr Oliver represents, in specifically Creek terms, not only the experiential nature of knowledge, but also the reflection upon and explication of that knowledge through generations of storytelling and ancestral memory. This process, I would argue, has the potential to bridge the gap between what Michael A.R. Biggs has referred to as implicit, experiential knowledge and the explicit knowledge characteristic of academic research.¹⁰² The knowledge contained within Mr Oliver's storytelling is experiential but, through the invocation of ancestral memory, it becomes something akin to the explicit knowledge valued in academia, although the route to cognition is radically different.

A further key element of Mr Oliver's writing, according to Womack, is the articulation in his work of a "relationship to a specific landscape and a specific tribal culture," that demonstrates "the importance of migration stories and the way these

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁰² Biggs, "Learning from Experience, 6-21 and Biggs, "The Rhetoric of Research," 111-118. See discussion in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

narratives move from chaos and pain at emergence toward settlement in a homeland.”¹⁰³ Womack explains how the Creek experience and character has been shaped by a number of migrations, from their first migration to find the place where the sun lived, to their forced removal from their homelands in Alabama to Oklahoma in the 1930s.¹⁰⁴ These migrations continue on into the contemporary era and Womack provides, albeit briefly, one of the few examples of “primary” autobiographical material in the book, when he discusses his family’s experience of migration to and return from the San Joaquin Valley in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰⁵

Mr Oliver’s version of the migration story, and the migration story generally, functions, Womack points out, as not only a prophetic forerunner to Creek experience of removal but also serves a mimetic function, whereby oral literature, through stories of migration, is explicitly linked to contemporary Creek life and the ongoing “migrations” of the Creek people.¹⁰⁶ Geography and landscape is so fundamental to Mr Oliver’s work, argues Womack, that it “is not merely the subject of Oliver’s work; it is the *method* of his work, so that geographic specificity affects both content and technique.”¹⁰⁷ What Womack is suggesting is evident in Mr Oliver’s work is the concept that Creek spiritual attachment to the land is also adaptable and that it is transferable from the original Alabama homelands to the new Oklahoma land and, by implication, to new landscapes and cityscapes in

¹⁰³ Womack, *Red on Red*, 192.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 190-191.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 194; emphasis added.

contemporary times.¹⁰⁸ What the migration story does, in effect, is to function as a map, both geographically and spiritually, of Creek life and culture.

From a Maori perspective, Smith provides an interesting corollary of geographical specificity and its relationship to Maori intellectual endeavour, although in the Maori case this geographical specificity relates to the ocean. “From a Pacific peoples’ perspective,” Smith explains, “the sea is a giver of life, it sets time and conveys movement. Within the greater ebb and flow of the ocean are smaller localised environments which have enabled Pacific peoples to develop enduring relationships to the sea.”¹⁰⁹ Smith extends this geographical specificity somewhat farther even than does Womack, creating a chart of concentric circles based on the flow of the tides that delineates Maori intellectualism, theory and research, using the ocean as a metaphor that maps the processes, directions and impulses that inform, or should inform, Maori research in a contemporary context. Smith’s explanation is so relevant to Womack’s concept of creating theory through tribal and geographic specificity that I quote it here in full:

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 236. Womack explains that when the Creeks were removed from Alabama to Oklahoma they took with them not only the names of the towns, but also replicated the complex “spatial and cultural relationships” between “upper” and “lower” Creek towns and the physical geographical settlement of towns along rivers. See also Mr Oliver’s poem “Exodus” in *Caught in a Willow Net*, in which he writes of the forced Creek migration from Alabama to Oklahoma in the 1830s:

The Creek prophet Said: “The blood
of Coosa, Chattahoche, Flint,
and Okmulgee – arteries
To the heart of my people’s homeland;
.....
 “If we can’t keep our homeland,
 We shall take it all with us;
You – Chattulgee, Chicasalkee, Chalakalgee
 Semanolee!
Take with you seeds of Cedar
 and plant along the way
.....
Take with you our rivers, streams
 and towns –
 Our deer, bear and turkey” (9).

¹⁰⁹ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 116.

The tides represent movement, change, process, life, inward and outward flows of ideas, reflections and actions. The four directions named here – decolonization, healing, transformation and mobilization – represent processes. They are not goals or ends in themselves. They are processes which connect, inform and clarify the tensions between the local, the regional and the global. They are processes which can be incorporated into practices and methodologies.

Four major tides are represented in the chart as: survival, recovery, development, self-determination. They are the conditions and states of being through which indigenous communities are moving. It is not sequential development – the survival of people as physical beings, of languages, of social and spiritual practices, of social relations, and of the arts are all subject to some basic prioritizing and to recognition that indigenous cultures have changed inexorably. Recovery is a selective process, often responding to immediate crises rather than a planned approach. This is related to the reality that indigenous peoples are not in control and are subject to a continuing set of external conditions. In reality this means that specific lands and designated areas become a priority because the bulldozers are due to start destruction any day now.¹¹⁰

Smith's invocation of a specifically Maori theoretical framework based on the tides of the ocean points to ways in which Womack's investigations into the development of tribally specific American Indian critical theories might proceed. The significance of the landscape to American Indian cosmologies has been often noted and commented upon. For example, Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), in "Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories," makes explicit the link between a ritually functioning landscape and "a precise cultural identity."¹¹¹ Keith Basso's scholarship on the use by the Western Apache of precise geographical features as "mnemonic pegs" within their oral tradition is a frequently quoted example.¹¹² Okanagan writer Jeannette C. Armstrong has described how the Okanagan language, N'silxchn, was a gift from the land:

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Leslie Marmon Silko, "Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories," in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997): 35-37.

¹¹² Keith Basso, *Western Apache Language and Culture: Essays in Linguistic Anthropology* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990).

I have heard elders explain that the language changed as we moved and spread over the land through time. My own father told me that it was the land that changed the language because there is special knowledge in each different place. All my elders say that it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks...Not to learn its language is to die. We survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings – to its language – and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generations. It is the land that speaks N'silxchn through the generations of our ancestors to us. It is N'silxchn, the old land/mother spirit of the Okanagan people, which surrounds me in its primal wordless state.¹¹³

In *Haboo*, a book of Lushootseed literature in English compiled by the Tulalip elder Vi Hilbert, which consists of translated stories told by elders of various Lushootseed speaking tribes in Washington state, the stories are arranged not by topic, sophistication, or date of recording, but in order of the geographical location of each storyteller's tribe, from the state's northern to southern borders.¹¹⁴ This arrangement seems to me to have two distinct advantages. First, stories adjacent in the volume arise out of adjacent landscapes, emphasising the importance of their relationship to the land. Second, a geographical grouping enables Mrs Hilbert to avoid anthropological ("creation," "origin," "trickster," "hero," and so on) or chronological categorisation of the stories, that may be seen as inappropriate.

The importance of geography to tribal philosophies of knowledge, then, appears to be a feature common to many indigenous groups. However, this apparent commonality also gives rise to a crucial specificity in that, if a given tribe's philosophy or theology of knowledge arises out of their relationship with a specific landscape then, by implication, all tribal philosophies are unique and, if interpreted

¹¹³ Armstrong, "Land Speaking," 175-176.

¹¹⁴ Vi Hilbert, ed., *Haboo: Lushootseed Literature in English* (Lushootseed Press, 1996). This volume was compiled for use in Mrs. Hilbert's literature class at the University of Washington. A version was published as *Haboo: Native American Stories from Puget Sound*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985).

within a framework that ignores their link to specific “geocentric epistemologies,” potentially diminished.

Another important feature of Creek oral tradition that relates specifically to Creek intellectualism and the development of Creek critical theory is the power of language not only to evoke, but also to *invoke*. This power is what Sarris refers to when he notes that “words and stories poison the healthy, heal the sick, empower lovers, [and] transform the world.”¹¹⁵ From a Creek ceremonial perspective, Womack describes how ceremonial chants “spoken in the appropriate ritual contexts, will actually cause a change in the physical universe.”¹¹⁶ In relation to a description of the ceremonial aspect of the Creek stomp dance by Louis Oliver in *Chasers of the Sun*, Womack writes: “As the words go forth, they cumulatively gather power until they begin to exert energy on the physical world, actually causing things to happen... Mr Oliver’s philosophical musing includes an explanation of the power of language and ways in which words are incarcerated in ceremony.”¹¹⁷ A fundamental aspect, identified by Womack, of language as invocation is the potential for language to “upset the balance of power, even to the point... where stories will be pre-eminent factors in land redress.”¹¹⁸

There is, then, a strong political imperative to the generative power of Creek literatures in general and the oral tradition specifically.¹¹⁹ In terms of the

¹¹⁵ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 127.

¹¹⁶ Womack, *Red on Red*, 16-17.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 197; Oliver, *Chasers of the Sun*, 9.

¹¹⁸ Womack, *Red on Red*, 17.

¹¹⁹ Pulitano claims that Womack’s separatist-nationalist position seeks to “politicize the oral tradition,” but, in fact, what Womack is saying is that the Creek oral tradition has always been political in nature, since the first Creek people emerged from the earth. See Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, 80.

development of a Creek literary criticism, this power is articulated most effectively in Linda Alexander's story about how Turtle's shell got broken. In the story, Turtle is annoying two women who are pounding corn by constantly trying to scavenge for food and looking up their dresses until, in exasperation, one of the women pounds on Turtle's shell until it breaks. Seriously injured and on the point of death, Turtle sings a healing song "caato sokoso, caato leyh leyh," which translates into English as "Rub that rock together and get me together." The power of the Turtle's chant remakes his shell, but imperfectly, leaving it with creases and a chequered pattern.¹²⁰

The depiction of the power of language as invocation through Turtle's healing song is fairly obvious but, in addition, Womack notes that prior to invoking healing with his chant, Turtle is voiceless and helpless. This observation is directly related to the idea of the power of speech, to bring into being protest, for example, or education, again emphasising the strong political element of oral tradition. "In addition to the physical mending," Womack observes, "there is a movement in the story in which Turtle progresses from an inarticulate state to an articulate one... Because he is unable to speak, he suffers."¹²¹ The implications of this for the development of a Creek literary criticism are clear. As Womack notes in his introduction, "Native people have been excluded from discourse concerning their own cultures."¹²² To extend his observation about Turtle's voicelessness to his own community, then, because Creeks have been "unable to speak," they suffer, and the assertion of a Creek voice in the development of a Creek literary theory represents a

¹²⁰ Womack, *Red on Red*, 80-87. The version of the story I have presented here contains elements from all four of the versions Womack presents – the Creek and English language versions told by Linda Alexander and the two "anthropological" versions from Swanton's collection. I have included only the very bare bones of the story required for my analysis of language as invocation and further sources should be consulted for a fuller rendition.

¹²¹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 91.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 4-5.

movement from the inarticulate state created through colonial control of Creek discourse to a state of articulation in which Creeks can interpret their own discourse on their own terms.

The power of language to invoke reality also has specific implications for Creek literary theory in the sense that, if words can bring things into reality, they can make explicit that which is implicit. In the previous chapter I argued that one of the reasons for tension between American Indian discourses and academic discourses is the tendency for the knowledge expressed in orally informed literatures to be experiential and implicit, and that reflection (explicating) upon this knowledge is an ongoing and dynamic, sometimes lifelong experience. In comparison, knowledge that is valued in an academic context needs to be immediately communicable and is thus explicated and made static in written research. Womack argues that “certain key stories [from Creek oral tradition] need to be examined really thoroughly,” in order to uncover what can be “learned from them that might help us formulate interpretive strategies.”¹²³ This call for the explication of certain key stories would seem, at first glance, to resist the argument that the explication of tribal knowledge in academic contexts is problematic. However, what Womack is saying is that Creek literature should be explicated within not a “traditional” academic context but one where Creek scholars use interpretive strategies arising out of specifically Creek philosophies of knowledge, which gives voice to Creek people and thus represents the power of language to physically invoke healing, in the same way that Turtle’s medicine song enabled his shell to mend.

Another important element of the story of how Turtle’s shell got broken, Womack explains, is that the healing process is imperfect. Turtle’s shell is

¹²³ Ibid., 76.

permanently scarred but this does not, Womack notes, affect the power of the story or of Turtle's medicine song, but rather emphasises that "Turtle's song acknowledges roughness and imperfection, a gradual and progressive cure.... healing is an ongoing process. Something is set in motion the moment Turtle starts to sing, but the working out of it takes time."¹²⁴ This observation, I would argue, is fundamental in that it explicitly posits a key element of a Creek philosophy of knowledge – that "the working out of it takes time" – which, because conventional academic research requires knowledge to be made static in order that it can be instantly communicated, necessitates the development of a Creek-centred theory that allows for the "working out of it" in ways that are compatible with this requirement.

Furthermore, this element of the story demonstrates the acceptance of a little imperfection, a pragmatic approach that, once again, has direct implications for a Creek literary criticism because it implies that understanding does not need to be universal to be powerful. This echoes Sarris's argument that the goal of American Indian literary criticism should not be a "final transparent understanding of the Other or of the self, but at continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both."¹²⁵ Although Sarris's approach stresses cross-cultural communication where Womack emphasises literary separatism, there is a clear similarity in the suggestion that understanding in both Kashaya Pomo and Creek contexts, whether approached from cross-cultural or separatist perspectives, requires an ongoing and long-term engagement. The interruptive storytelling approach explored by Sarris represents a conscious attempt to frustrate the closure of Native knowledge in academic contexts, in the same way that the "imperfection" valued in the story about how Turtle got his

¹²⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹²⁵ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 6.

shell broken indicates a Creek philosophy of knowledge that incorporates “imperfect” knowledge, or knowledge that is still in flux as part of the ongoing process of reflection.

Womack’s *Stijaati* Letters as Creek Literary Criticism

The Chibbo-Hotgun letters in *Red on Red* have been largely ignored by critics but they are, I will argue, extremely significant, in that they constitute a quintessential, working example of the kind of specifically Creek literary criticism that Womack is calling for. These letters, written by Womack in the persona of Jim Chibbo and addressed to Jim’s friend Hotgun, are placed between chapters in *Red on Red* and provide a humorous critique and commentary on the issues Womack has already discussed in a more academic style.

The genesis of these letters is the work of Alexander Posey, a mixed-blood Creek who, between 1902 and 1908, published a series of seventy-two humorous, dialect letters in various newspapers, including the *Eufaula Indian Journal*, the *Fort Smith Times*, the *Muskogee Evening Times* and the *Muskogee Phoenix*.¹²⁶

Womack’s letters from Jim Chibbo to Hotgun are deeply informed by Posey’s Fus Fixico letters and, in order to understand Womack’s letters it is also necessary to understand Posey’s work. Posey’s letters, written in the persona of a full-blood Creek by the name of Fus Fixico were addressed to the editor and written in a Creek English dialect, referred to by Posey at the time as *este charte* or “red person”

¹²⁶ Alexander Posey, *The Fus Fixico Letters*, ed. Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr. and Carol A. Petty Hunter, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993). See also Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., *Alex Posey: Creek Poet, Journalist, and Humorist* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). Posey also published a number of short stories, Creek oral traditions and orations, recently collected and published as *Chinmubbie and the Owl: Muskogee (Creek) Stories, Orations & Oral Traditions*, ed. Matthew Wynn Sivils (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

English (Womack advises that *stijaati* is closer to the correct pronunciation.)¹²⁷ The letters, mildly humorous in tone, were intensely political in nature, providing a critical commentary of the events surrounding moves towards the allotment of Creek land and Oklahoma statehood, and the dissolution of tribal governments, and were structured through the reporting, by Fus, of conversations his full-blood friends had had regarding such matters. Womack argues that Posey's written style had its strongest origination in Creek oral tradition, and that although his work drew upon Western traditions, his treatment of this material was such that he re-created it as a Creek tradition: "By the time Posey gets through with these quotes, they sound as if the full-bloods originated them rather than Shakespeare or Homer."¹²⁸

Womack identifies a number of characteristics of Creek literature with the potential for informing Creek literary criticism present within the Fus Fixico letters. These characteristics include the use of persona writing, the origins of which Womack traces back to the oral tradition in Linda Alexander's story about how Turtle's shell got broken, and which he argues is a quintessential Creek form.¹²⁹ Persona writing is important in the Fus Fixico letters, Womack explains, because it has the effect of creating an "outsider" who can report events "with humor and a sense of detachment."¹³⁰ The dramatisation of a listening audience, Womack argues, has much the same effect, enabling Posey, through his narrator Fus, "to respond to the contents of the discussion and to subtly indicate his approval or disapproval, channeled through the positive or negative reaction of the full-blood listeners."¹³¹

¹²⁷ Womack, *Red on Red*, 136.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 156; see also Posey, *Fus Fixico Letters*, 12.

¹³¹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 168.

Finally, Womack notes, the placing of abstract information, such as ideas about land fraud within “the context of a narrative, which is the way that oral cultures pass on information.”¹³²

The dialect writing offered by Womack follows Posey’s model very closely. The first instance of *stijaati* in fact does not appear as persona writing, but is in Womack’s own voice, simply segueing out of his thus far conventionally presented introduction:

Hotgun told me that he’d been through most everything, but that if he were ever to become a university professor, he wanted me to beat him over the head with a hickory ballstick and put him out of his misery. To avoid the nastiness of a profession that is just pitiful mean, Jim tries to tell a few funny stories here and again to consider the most serious critical issues in the book without becoming mean himself. Him and Hotgun found that they could get to the heart of matters quicker by funning each other than by writing literary criticism, and they could use jokes instead of taking up the hickory stick themselves as a bloody cudgel on everybody who disagrees with them...
... They felt that as Creek critics, or just Creeks who talk a lot, if they abandoned their role as storytellers, something very significant would be missing from their criticism. They didn’t want merely to write a book *about* Creek literature; they wanted to write a Creek book.¹³³

As noted previously, Pulitano criticises Womack for not interrogating his complicity, as a Native academic, with the “dominant academic discourse.”¹³⁴ It seems to me that the above excerpt is just such an interrogation, albeit a humorous one. The first letter from Jim Chibbo to Hotgun appears immediately subsequent to the dialect English in Womack’s own voice, and extends this interrogation from a more distanced perspective. Jim describes a trip taken by *Stijaati Thlaako*, Big Man,

¹³² *Ibid.*, 169.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹³⁴ Pulitano, *Towards a Native American Critical Theory*, 74.

Rabbit and Chebon to attend gospel singing at the Indian Methodist Church in

Sapulpa:¹³⁵

Chebon all out of breath from writing down his long-winded literary introduction take more time than getting them guys loaded up for singing hymns. They was to go a whole lot easier if it was catfish fry with white file, beans, and coleslaw like last week, and Chebon's work go a whole lot easier if he didn't have to write the whole book before he was to understand what it was about so he could go back to make up the introduction... Hymn singing went on forty pages too long, like most chapters in Chebon's book.¹³⁶

Later, while they are behind the church having a smoke, Hotgun reports

Stijaati telling his friends the following joke:

"How's this pack of cigarettes like Chebon's book?"

Big Man wonder, "Is this a quiz?"

Rabbit was say, "It turns your fingers yellow?"

Stijaati actually asking oratorical question, want to lecture. "It ain't," he answers hisself, "Chebon's book about the Red, not the white."

Rabbit was exclaim, "I love trick questions!"

Big Man was say, "Ain't that a little naive? A Red book?"

Rabbit was answer, "Only if you believe white always swallows up Red. I think Red stays Red, most ever time, even throwed in with white. Especially around white. It stands out more."¹³⁷

While this re-assertion of Womack's position through gentle humour might not be particularly subtle it does provide a framework for the following letters as they sometimes work to mock Womack's position as an academic and sometimes develop a more defensive stance, undermining potential criticisms of Womack's theory without resorting to the adversarial style some Native critics have argued is a feature of much scholarly writing. For example, Womack's chapter on S. Alice Callahan's 1890s novel *Wynema*, the first novel to be written by an Indian woman, is

¹³⁵ Rabbit, known as Choffee or Chufee is the central trickster character of Creek oral tradition. One of Choffee's adversaries is Big Man-eater, a bloodthirsty mountain lion. See Matthew Wynn Sivils, ed., introduction to "Stories" in *Chinnubie and the Owl* by Alexander Posey, 28.

¹³⁶ Womack, *Red on Red*, 23.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

highly critical, arguing that the novel, due to its non-Creek viewpoint, rejection of Creek culture, history and politics, silencing of Creek voices and intentional misrepresentation of Creek life in order to “satisfy white stereotypes” manifestly fails as “an act of nation building.”¹³⁸ A number of obvious objections to Womack’s dismissal of Callahan’s book arise, not least that Callahan was attempting to write a pro-assimilation and pro-Christian novel, not one that was an exercise in nation-building.

These objections are dealt with more fully in the succeeding letter from Jim Chibbo to Hotgun that they are in the preceding conventional literary criticism. Jim reports on a conversation Stijaati has, in the back of a police cruiser, with Callahan and two of her characters – Genevieve, the white school teacher who attempts to remould Wynema into a model, assimilated Christian Indian, and Wynema herself. Callahan defends herself against vociferous criticisms of her novel made both by Stijaati and Wynema, who finally has a voice to express her own opinions. In this way, Womack’s critical interrogation of the novel is extended, and certain abstract ideas concerning authenticity, the privileging of white women’s rights over the rights of Indian women and the necessity of appealing to a predominantly white audience in order to secure publication are discussed.

Womack also uses this opportunity to address the possible weaknesses of his own argument in a humorous manner, subtly undermining any potential future criticisms from what Stijaati refers to as “Native Lit Critters.”¹³⁹ At the end of the episode the arresting policeman, Officer Keithly (named after the white male “hero” of the novel) hands Stijaati a ticket, fining him for “operating without a license to

¹³⁸ Ibid., 107-118.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 127.

criticize a novel,” and provides details of the level of the fine, running from a mere forty dollars for a perpetrator who is A.B.D. (all but dissertation) through to eighty dollars for holding only a bachelor’s degree. The level of fine for an Indian is not specified, but long-term financing is available.¹⁴⁰ Thus, ironically, despite his cogent and informed analysis of Callahan’s novel, Stijaati is rendered voiceless again, not considered, because of his Indian status and his lack of a Western education, a valid commentator on a novel about his own culture.

In another example, Womack deals, in the context of a humorous narrative, with abstract issues of authenticity and the shared experience of knowledge and memories. Jim tells the story of how Stijaati and Big Man went hunting, separated, but failed to meet at their prearranged meeting point after Stijaati got lost. The story is long, almost six pages of text episodic in style and reported by Jim from Stijaati’s perspective, describing not only Stijaati’s various adventures as he tries to find his way back to his truck, but also a story he concocts in his head in order to explain his lateness to Big Man. When Stijaati finally makes it back to the truck, Big Man is not there anyway and Stijaati creates another story in his own mind, one that explains Big Man’s absence. Eventually everything is resolved and after a few grumpy days of not speaking to one another, normal relations between Stijaati and Big Man are resumed.

After having recounted events in some detail, Jim then undermines his own narrative by telling us that the stories he has told are not the same stories as the ones Stijaati and Big Man told to explain getting lost. Jim, who was not present at the events he is describing, apparently believes Stijaati and Big Man have not been entirely truthful with their own versions of events, which Jim never gives us.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 128.

Instead, the versions of the stories Jim has given us, “is my own speculations, based on what I know about them two. This is what we call Indian oral tradition, the real stuff, not tales and legends.”¹⁴¹ There is more to this letter, however, than simply asserting the truthfulness of oral tradition over and above “tales and legends” propagated by anthropologists. Jim has claimed the authority to speak the truth for Stijaati and Big Man, based on what he knows about them, through their shared participation in an oral tradition consisting of stories told “as personal experiences within culturally meaningful settings.”¹⁴² As noted previously, Pulitano has criticised Womack for claiming an insider’s position of privilege and authenticity in terms of his interpretations of Creek literature. She writes, “Storytelling... enters the book both on an ideological and on a structural level, in the attempt to inscribe its own theories about its nature and various functions while generating a discussion of Native literature from an insider’s point of view, a position that, in Womack’s perspective, legitimates authenticity.”¹⁴³ As also noted previously, Henry has responded to this by noting that Pulitano’s critique relies on Western definitions of “insider” and “authenticity,” noting, in the case of the story about how Turtle’s shell got broken, that Womack claims only to offer one authentic interpretation amongst many other possible authentic interpretations.¹⁴⁴

What is interesting here is that neither Pulitano nor Henry discuss the *stijaati* letters and how their content either supports or undermines the positions stated in Womack’s more conventional narrative arguments. I would suggest, however, that in this segment, Womack is expressly claiming the privilege, as a Creek scholar,

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁴² Evers and Toelken, introduction to *Native American Oral Traditions*, 8.

¹⁴³ Pulitano, *Towards a Native American Critical Theory*, 80.

¹⁴⁴ Henry, “Canonizing Craig Womack,” 44.

reader and community member, to speak the “truth” for other members of the Creek community. Just because this admission is disguised within a humorous story in no way lessens its significance. It is worth clarifying that Womack’s claim for authenticity arises out of his participation in the Creek ancestral memory that is nourished by oral tradition. Henry makes this point very well in relation to *Drowning in Fire*, where one of the protagonists, Josh Henneha, enters into the memories of his Aunt Lucy, living and experiencing the stories of her life as she experienced them. Henry notes that Josh’s “so-called authentic Creek claim to enter [Lucy’s] story,” lies not in his Creek “purity” or blood quantum, but through his understanding of Creek worldviews, as informed by his engagement with his Creek community.¹⁴⁵ There is a healing element to this process, the power of words to invoke, as Josh comes to appreciate the importance of telling and legitimating his own stories also.¹⁴⁶ A similar interpretation works well for Jim Chibbo’s letter about Stijaati’s and Big Man’s hunting trip. The actual story Jim tells, amusing though it is, is in fact incidental to the realisation that this community is so closely bound by blood and ancestral memory that they can enter and experience one another’s stories.

Thus, Womack’s inclusion of Jim Chibbo’s letters to Hotgun demonstrate a number of specific ways in which persona writing, a quintessential characteristic of Creek oral tradition according to Womack, may be shown to articulate particular elements of Creek intellectualism leading to specifically Creek literary criticism. These features are fundamental to the creation of a specifically Creek literary criticism. For example, persona writing, and the dramatisation of a listening audience, enable the creation of distance between the narrator and his or her material,

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 40-41.

allowing for evaluation and “semi-objective” interpretation of given events. The placing of abstract information within the context of a narrative is an important issue in terms of overcoming the perceived gap between implicit and explicit knowledge – by placing abstract material within the context of a narrative it becomes concrete and cognitive, without necessarily being explicated or categorised. This method of knowledge dissemination and validation offers significant potential for the creation of tribally-specific critical strategies for dealing with literatures grounded in oral tradition. In a Creek context, persona writing provides potential avenues for bridging the gap between Native and academic philosophies of knowledge because it allows for the written contextualisation and explication of abstract and experiential knowledge, albeit in a uniquely Creek way. Other tribal oral traditions may offer their own pathways to bridging philosophies of knowledge. Although it remains questionable, however, whether a non-Native, or even a non-Creek scholar could make effective or ethical use of a persona writing strategy, simply drawing attention to the tribally-specific ways in which knowledge is negotiated is a valuable contribution towards mediating between Native and academic philosophies of knowledge.

Conclusion

I believe that Womack’s Creek-specific approach makes available a number of interpretive pathways to non-tribal scholars. Although Womack’s methodologies undoubtedly privilege Native tribal perspectives generally and Creek perspectives specifically, a number of key features inherent in the Creek literary criticism he delineates ensure that non-Indian scholars also have a role to play in de-centralising

European and European-American dominated critical methodologies. As Womack states in his introduction:

Just as there are a number of realities that constitute Indian identity – rez, urban, full-blood, mixed-blood, language speakers, nonspeakers, gay, straight, and many other possibilities – there are also a number of legitimate approaches to analyzing Native literary production. Some of these... are more effective than others; nonetheless, *Red on Red* is merely a point on this spectrum, not the spectrum itself. I do not believe in a critical approach that preempts or cancels out all those that came before it.¹⁴⁷

Womack's separatist argument, I believe, does not stem from a conviction that only Creeks can do Creek literary criticism, or that only Native Americans can do Native American literary criticism. As Cook-Lynn has stated, "No one should suggest that the urge toward nation-centered dialogue is a call for separatist identity and conflict and monopolization of intellectual thought and scholarly inquiry."¹⁴⁸ The concept of separatism in Womack's work, I am suggesting, relates only to his contention that Native American literature should constitute its own canon, apart from American and European canons, and that it should be assessed on its own terms.

Garrouette suggests that researchers must enter both tribal philosophies and tribal relations in order to learn about indigenous philosophies of knowledge.¹⁴⁹ Henry notes that the notion of scholars creating a community with Native peoples leads to accountability on the part of the scholar "in asking to be allowed to discuss Native issues."¹⁵⁰ This raises the question as to how a non-Indian critic can enter a community of "tribal philosophies and tribal relations," while avoiding the kind of

¹⁴⁷ Womack, *Red on Red*, 2.

¹⁴⁸ Cook-Lynn, "Literary and Political Questions," 50-51.

¹⁴⁹ Garrouette, *Real Indians*, 107, quoted in Henry, "Canonizing Craig Womack," 30.

¹⁵⁰ Henry, "Canonizing Craig Womack," 30.

uncritical imaginative identification with the words, worlds and experiences of the Native storytellers associated with Brill de Ramírez's conversive approach. The answer to this problem, I feel, lies in the interruptive storytelling methodologies proposed by Greg Sarris. Sarris's approach has its limitations, not least in its reliance on the ability or willingness of a given scholar to recognise their own limitations, but his interruptive approach, which exposes the preconceptions and limitations of all the interlocutors, functions to complement both tribally-specific and conversive approaches, by enabling scholars operating in a cross-cultural environment to enter and participate in tribal philosophies of knowledge, but always with one eye on the limits of their understanding.

Sarris's interruptive storytelling strategy, despite being an example of a cosmopolitan approach that mediates between Native and non-Native worldviews, also bears an interesting comparison to Womack's tribal-specific/separatist approach. Sarris not only grounds his storytelling strategy firmly within a Kashaya/Cache Creek Pomo tribal milieu, but both Sarris's and Mrs McKay's stories often invoke a relationship to a specific geographical landscape that has meaning and resonance for the Pomo. For example, Sarris describes a visit he made with Mrs McKay to land around the Elem Pomo reservation, during which she tells him a story about the Elem people's first contact with white people. The contact is prophesied in a Dream by Old Man: "You will find a way, a way to go on even after this white people run over the earth like rabbits. They are going to be everywhere." Mrs McKay continues the story:

"This things, they come over the hill in a trail, long trail. So much that dust is flying up, like smoke wherever they go. And first to see them this people down there, where you are looking. "What is this?" the people are saying. Things with two heads and four legs, bushy tail, standing here on this hill somewhere, looking down at Elem people.

‘Lots of people scared, run off, some far as our place, Cache Creek...Some people somewhere seen them things come apart, like part man, then go back together. Then I guess maybe they knew it was people – white people.’¹⁵¹

Thus, the specific Pomo landscape around Elem functions in a culturally meaningful way for Mrs McKay, prompting the telling of a contact story that is extremely specific in terms of its highlighting of particular geographical features of the landscape, over which the colonisers came. For Mrs McKay, then, landscape functions in much the same way as a Creek landscape constitutes part of the intellectual methodology of Louis Oliver’s (Creek) storytelling.

A number of interesting comparisons between a tribal-specific approach and conversive literary scholarship are also evident. Both arise out of an indigenist conviction that Native American knowledge is “special” or “different” in relation to the knowledge held and valued by the descendants of the colonisers. Both Womack and Brill de Ramírez note the tribal specificity of such “special knowledge.” The tribal specificity that concerns Womack, obviously, is that of the Muscogee Creeks. Brill de Ramírez defines what she terms as “a Navajo conversive style,” although she tends to project this specificity outwards through her perceived web of interrelationality to apply synecdochally to Native knowledge in general and not just Navajos.¹⁵²

Both Womack and Brill de Ramírez posit an indigenous geography as contributing to the meaningfulness of Native discourse. For Womack, this relationship arises out of specific geographic landscapes, primarily, but not exclusively, Alabama and Oklahoma. For Brill de Ramírez the relationship is more

¹⁵¹ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 42.

¹⁵² Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 84-86.

generalised, arising out of the interconnectedness of all elements of the universe and the intersubjective personhood attributed to animals, plants and rocks. It is this apparently minor discrepancy that gives rise to the most serious divergence between Womack's and Brill de Ramírez's proposed methodologies. Womack's conviction in an indigenous perspective leads him, via tribally specific aesthetics arising out of a specific landscape, to a nationalist position wherein he argues that Creek literature, and other tribal literatures, must be interpreted on their own terms and according to standards that are relevant and important to Creeks. This, in turn, leads him to a separatist position that rejects biculturalism and mediation as critical approaches and posits that, rather than attempting to incorporate Creek literature into an American canon, it is of sufficient quality, depth and complexity to merit its own canon, operating independently of but on equal terms with the American canon.

Brill de Ramírez, on the other hand, proceeds from her indigenist perspective of a "special" Native knowledge to a conception that all things in the universe are interconnected and that meaningfulness can be found *only* within those connections. Because all elements of the universe are interconnected then Native and non-Native are also connected and thus conversive literary scholarship is open and inclusive, allowing non-Native scholars to enter seemingly impenetrable literatures in order to access the meaning that lies in the web of interrelated beings. In this sense, conversive literary scholarship, despite its indigenist perspective, remains an example of what Womack would term a bicultural or mediative approach whereby Native texts are interpreted in terms of their relationship to American or European perspectives, creating a role for non-Indian scholars in the field of Native American literary criticism. Conversive literary scholarship, perhaps, is the supreme example of such role-creation because it does not just allow non-Indians to enter Native

stories, it *requires* it, even if that requirement is from a perspective that encourages a humbler, less prescriptive approach to scholarship.

In the following section, “Synthesising a Context-Specific Approach III,” I will undertake readings of the poetry of Joy Harjo (Creek), Luci Tapahonso (Navajo) and Nia Francisco (Navajo) incorporating elements from all three of the strategies discussed so far – interruptive storytelling, conversive literary scholarship and tribal-specific – and explore more fully the relationships between the different interpretive strategies and how elements of the three strategies may be synthesised to create a customised and context-driven interpretive framework for the reading of Native narratives.

SYNTHESISING A CONTEXT-SPECIFIC APPROACH III:
INTERRUPTIVE STORYTELLING, CONVERSIVE AND TRIBAL-SPECIFIC
READINGS OF JOY HARJO, LUCI TAPAHONSO AND NIA FRANCISCO

Having now identified the strengths and weaknesses of Greg Sarris's (Kashaya Pomo/Federated Graton Rancheria) interruptive storytelling strategy, Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez's conversive literary scholarship and Craig S. Womack's (Creek-Cherokee) tribal-specific methodologies, in this section I will conduct readings of poetry by Joy Harjo (Creek), Nia Francisco (Navajo) and Luci Tapahonso (Navajo), utilising elements from all three of the previously discussed strategies in order to synthesise a context-specific approach that is flexible to the individual dynamics of each poem/performance.

I will compare Womack's Creek-centred interpretations of Joy Harjo's poetry with interpretations of my own made following either the principles of Womack's Creek-specific literary theory, Brill de Ramírez's conversive literary scholarship, Sarris's interruptive storytelling, or, in some cases, a combination of all three methodologies. I then extend this exercise to include the poetry of Luci Tapahonso and Nia Francisco, both of whom Brill de Ramírez discusses at length in terms of a conversive reading, and both of whom offer potentially meaningful comparisons to Harjo. The purpose of this comparison is not only to establish which methodology produces the most compelling or convincing readings of Harjo's, Tapahonso's and Francisco's poetry, but also to explore comparatively, from the perspective of a non-Native scholar, the possibilities and limitations all three methods offer for cross-cultural readings in an academic context.

Before I move onto the interpretations of Harjo's poetry, I wish to return briefly to Womack's discussion of Louis Oliver's *Chasers of the Sun*, and to compare Womack's separatist, tribal-specific interpretation of the "we" pronoun in Mr Oliver's story, with Brill de Ramírez's conversive, inclusive interpretation of the use of "we" in Nia Francisco's poem "Naabeeho Woman with Blue Horses."¹ Womack argues that Mr Oliver's use of "we" is an articulation of his experiential engagement with Creek history and culture. Mr Oliver, in Womack's view, lives, or re-lives the Creek migration story as he recounts it.² In "Naabeeho Woman with Blue Horses," Francisco asks, "Are we preparing? getting decorated dressing up young Naabeeho women / for the passing of age no one warned us of." This line, argues Brill de Ramírez, invites the imagined vocalised response in the reader, "Yes, yes," "Ah yaa ah."³ Thus, according to Brill de Ramírez's conversive interpretation, Francisco's use of the pronoun "we" demonstrates an "openly engaging conversive [relational] style that speaks directly to her readers," and "graciously includes them with herself and the other Navajo women."⁴ Both Womack's interpretation of Mr Oliver's story and Brill de Ramírez's interpretations of Francisco's poem may be equally valid, but the almost diametrical opposition of their respective readings, in spite of the indigenist orientation positing a "special" or "different" kind of indigenous knowledge that underpins both separatist and conversive strategies, raises two possible explanations. The first, and most obvious, is the undoubted difference

¹ Oliver, *Chasers of the Sun*, 3; Francisco, "Naabeeho Woman with Blue Horses," in *Blue Horses for Navajo Women*, 27-30.

² Womack, *Red on Red*, 196. See Chapter 4 of this dissertation for a discussion of the problems related to Womack's use of this excerpt from *Chasers of the Sun*.

³ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 77. The words "Yes, yes," or "Ah yaa ah," are not included in Francisco's poem.

⁴ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures*, 76-77; Nia Francisco, "Naabeeho Woman with Blue Horses," 27-29.

between two distinct and vital tribal cultures – the Creek and the Navajo. But equally significant as a possibility are the interpretive tools used to make the readings – separatism and conversivity. I would argue that Womack’s and Brill de Ramírez’s understandings of the word “we” – for Womack “we” means “us, the Creek people,” and for Brill de Ramírez “we” means “us and you, all people” – typify their respective interpretive positions in the clearest possible way, and shed light on separatist and conversive readings of other literary works.

In terms of Womack’s interpretation of Harjo’s poems, he contends that “Creekness” is essential to the effectiveness of her art. This, according to Womack, is despite the fact that Harjo is not resident in Oklahoma, that she explicitly articulates pan-tribal concern and that movements such as feminism influence her poetry. In Harjo’s poem “New Orleans,” from *She Had Some Horses*, the Creek speaker travels through a Southeastern landscape of places significant in the Creek people’s history of oppression.⁵ The speaker describes a memory that “swims deep in blood,” and carries her out of Oklahoma to the Mississippi River, where she hears “voices buried in the Mississippi / mud,” and remembers her Creek “ancestors and future children,” drowned in the Mississippi and “buried beneath the current stirred up by / pleasure boats going up and down. / There are stories here made of memory.” Womack’s accompanying gloss explains how, during the 1830s removal, three hundred Creeks drowned when one of the boats chartered to transport them up the Mississippi collided with another vessel and sank.⁶ Even without the historical contextualisation provided by Womack, the poem is powerful and affecting.

Womack notes, and it would be evident to any careful reader, the power of ancestral, or

⁵ Joy Harjo, *She Had Some Horses*, 42-44.

⁶ Womack *Red on Red*, 228.

blood memory, which has a hypnotic pull, drawing the speaker into Creek narrative and memory:

My spirit comes here to drink.
My spirit comes here to drink.
Blood is the undercurrent.

A Creek-specific reading of the poem, however, moves its interpretation far beyond an obvious evocation of blood memory (which, I would add, is no less powerful for its clarity) and a knowledge of the history of Creek people drowning in the Mississippi, herded into boats like cattle. An understanding of Creek cosmogony is crucial to interpreting “New Orleans” within a tribally specific aesthetic. At various stages throughout *Red on Red*, Womack discusses the three realms of Upper World, Lower World and This World:

The Upper World is the sky world....the Lower World is the water and underground realms, and This World is the earth’s surface where humans live. These divisions are spiritual as well as geographic and stratospheric. Upper World and Lower World are opposed to each other, and humans are in the middle, in a fragile balance between the three worlds....The Upper World is a realm of order and periodicity because of the lunar cycle and planetary orbits. The Lower World is one of chaos, though also of fertility. This World, where humans live, is a less ideal version of the Upper World. Rivers, lakes, and caves are entrance points to the underworld.⁷

Lower World, Womack explains, is inhabited by a creature known as Tie-Snake, a horned, snake-like creature, that lures its victims into the water and drowns them. However, the balance of oppositions fundamental to Creek cosmogony – a “complex relationship of both danger and power” – is demonstrated by the fact that, despite the obvious dangers associated with Tie-Snake, he is also valued for the medicine contained in his horns.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 239-240.

⁸ Ibid., 203.

This knowledge, then, enables a much more profound interpretation of Harjo's poem. Womack, in fact, does not dwell on the significance of Tie-Snake to blood memories of ancestors drowned in the Mississippi, other than to note that "Harjo refuses to allow the submergence of her memory... she fights the temptation to be pulled under the waters of forgetfulness, to bury the pain under a river of denial – Tie-Snake's hypnotic pull comes from the most surprising of water holes."⁹ There are, however, a number of further elements of the poem, not directly discussed by Womack, that are illuminated by a knowledge of Creek cosmogony.

The speaker remembers not only her ancestors, but also the Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto: "He is buried somewhere in / this river, / his bones sunk like the golden / treasure he traveled half the earth to find." DeSoto's heart, the speaker tells us, "wasn't big enough / to handle" the gold he thought he wanted to see, so the Creeks "drowned him in / the Mississippi River / so he wouldn't have to drown himself." Western history records that DeSoto died of a fever and his body was weighted down and sunk in the Mississippi by his men, to prevent Native Americans, whom he had tortured and enslaved, from finding and desecrating his body. Harjo's Creek-centered remembering of DeSoto's death, in the context of Lower World and Tie-Snake, could perhaps be regarded as the Creeks having done DeSoto a favour by drowning him, lured into the Mississippi by Tie-Snake, but also, given the medicinal properties of Tie-Snake's horns, healed from the gold-fever that burned in his heart.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid. 228.

¹⁰ See also Jean Chaudhuri and Joyotpaul Chaudhuri, *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks* (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 2001), 138. Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri record DeSoto's journey into Creek country as follows: "Indians were either massacred when they resisted or enslaved as porters (women were forced to become concubines). In one village alone, de Soto's people roasted and ate the entire dog population without the Creeks' consent. In the corners of Creek minds, there flow rivers and lakes of blood, devastated cornfields and homes, enslaved men and raped women."

A Creek-centred reading of the poem, therefore, produces a particularly compelling and evocative interpretation. Pulitano argues that Womack's readings ignore aspects of Harjo's poetry related to feminist theory, surrealism and imagism, and that his exclusively Creek-centred approach is thus both "reductive and... inadequate."¹¹ In my view, Womack is not overlooking these facets of Harjo's poetry at all, but rather positing that a Creek-centred approach enables Harjo's utilisation of such strategies not to be perceived as rendering her somehow "less" Creek, but to enable these elements to be understood as just one part of her Creek-ness. In other words, feminist theory, surrealism and imagism can *become* Creek as Harjo incorporates them into her poetry. The presence of these elements in Harjo's poetry represent their assimilation into Creek culture, rather than Harjo's assimilation into the dominant Euro-American paradigm.

Conversivity calls for the reader to enter into the poem, to become part of the story, to *experience* the emotions of the poem as the speaker speaks them. This, I would argue, is a problematical concept in relation to non-Native scholars reading "New Orleans." Harjo explicitly invokes the power of blood memory, which, to repeat Chadwick Allen's explanation, redefines "authenticity in terms of imaginative re-collecting and re-remembering."¹² The invocation of blood memory by Harjo, I would argue, problematises the "entry" of non-Creek, or non-Indian, readers and scholars into the story world of the poem. You may not need to be Creek to identify the evocation of blood, or ancestral memory, but I would question whether a non-Creek, or non-Indian, reader or critic could negotiate the experience of Creek blood memory – the story of a Creek woman remembering the experiences of her ancestors

¹¹ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical*, 94-95; Pulitano does not, however, offer any alternative readings.

¹² Allen, "Blood (and) Memory," 94.

and re-experiencing their pain and suffering – from within the world of the poem in the same way as a Creek reader. Non-Indian readers may be able to understand the concept of Creek ancestral memory but, to once again quote bell hooks, without, “the passion of experience, the passion of remembrance,” they could never understand it experientially in the same way as Harjo and Womack, and thus a conversive approach, where readers are asked to enter wholly into the story world created by blood memory, remains problematical from a tribal-centric perspective.¹³

Greg Sarris notes the dangers of “imaginative identification” with a text in a cross-cultural reading because it results in a blurring of the two worlds and a loss of “recognition and understanding of difference.”¹⁴ In a context where white readers perceive themselves as not complicit in colonial systems, I would argue, conversive entering, without reflection, into the story world of a Native writer could be interpreted not as an act of empathy or identification, but as an act of colonisation. Of course, it is helpful for non-Indian readers to try and understand the colonial legacy of pain and suffering but this should be tempered with an acknowledgement that non-Indians may be able to understand Native experiences, but their understanding will always be different, and, in some respects, limited. As Womack notes in relation to “New Orleans,” “empathy and imagination are not always fun when ‘blood is the undercurrent.’”¹⁵

A conversively-orientated reading of “New Orleans,” therefore, is much less effective than a tribal-specific one, although it does have some potential, which lies

¹³ hooks, “Essentialism and Experience,” 182.

¹⁴ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 167.

¹⁵ Womack, *Red on Red*, 228.

more in its comparative orientation that its call to enter into story worlds. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker describes a blue horse:

Near the French Market, I see a blue horse
 caught frozen in stone in the middle of
 a square. Brought in by the Spanish on
 an endless ocean voyage he became mad
 and crazy. They caught him in blue
 rock, said
 don't talk.

I know it wasn't just a horse
 that went crazy.

The last stanza could be taken to refer to the Spanish – crazy with gold fever – or it could be taken to refer to the Creeks, or other Native people, whose voices were silenced by those of the colonisers. Conversely orientated scholarship seeks connections and interrelations in order to locate meaningfulness. The title poem of the same collection, “She Had Some Horses,” collapses the boundaries between human and horse qualities in a hypnotic chant that is evocative and, perhaps, also invocative:¹⁶

She had horses who liked Creek Stomp Dance songs.
 She had horses who cried in their beer.
 She had horses who spit at male queens who made
 them afraid of themselves.
 She had horses who said they weren't afraid.
 She had horses who lied.
 She had horses who told the truth, who were stripped
 bare of their tongues.

From a conversive perspective, then, meaningfulness can be found in the interconnected relationship between the two poems, where the complexity of the human experience is articulated through the mythic power of horses. Brill de Ramírez, as previously noted, discusses the subjective personhood ascribed to

¹⁶ Harjo, *She Had Some Horses*, 63-69.

animals in many Native American worldviews.¹⁷ “She Had Some Horses,” I would argue, goes beyond a simple web of intersubjectivity between humans, animals and other elements of the universe, in that the respective subjectivities and experiences of humans and horses merge in a hypnotic chant that invokes, powerfully, the strengths and frailties of the human condition. Meaningfulness, in a conversive sense, is present in the interconnections between each of the actions or conditions depicted in the poem. This conception of conversivity is similar to Imagism, with the exception that meaning is located *within* the relationship between the images depicted in the poem, rather than arising out of the artificial or political juxtaposition of images to achieve a specific effect.

A poem from Harjo’s later collection, *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, “Promise of Blue Horses,” has a more explicit approach to interconnectivity, tracing the relational paths between lightning, electricity and love: “I run with the blue horses of electricity who surround / the heart / and imagine a promise made when no promise was possible.”¹⁸ In this poem, the speaker imagines herself and her lover becoming dust together, reabsorbed to make a house, or a floor, or food. The blue horses of this poem are powerful and elemental, fuelled by love and electricity, unlike the blue horse in “New Orleans” who is disempowered, voiceless, “caught in a blue rock.” Conversivity also calls for connection to be made between the work of different poets. The Navajo poets Luci Tapahonso and Nia Francisco invoke images of blue horses in their poetry and these images, like Harjo’s, often portray, in a mythic sense, the mythopoetic merging of human and mythic-equine sensibilities. An example of this is Tapahonso’s poem “Blue Horses Rush In,” about the birth of

¹⁷ Brill de Ramirez, *Contemporary*, 116.

¹⁸ Joy Harjo, *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1994), 48.

her granddaughter where the mythical thundering of hooves segues into the beat of an unborn Navajo child's heart, echoed through the delivery room via a foetal monitor.¹⁹

One of the most interesting observations Womack makes about Harjo's poetry is that it represents a kind of universality, a pan-Indianness that is grounded, seemingly paradoxically, in its Creek specificity. There are two main elements to this concept. The first is Womack's belief that the more landscape-specific the writing, "the deeper an author delves into her own home country," the more compelling and universal it becomes.²⁰ Second, Womack believes that in Harjo's poetry there occurs an intersection between Creek specificity and pan-tribal experience.²¹ What Womack does not discuss, however, is whether the concept of tribal specificity leading to universality can be extended beyond the limits of a merely pan-Indian scope, to the experiences of non-Indian readers, writers and scholars. This is a contentious issue because, obviously, despite the tribally distinct cultures and histories, American Indians do have a shared history of colonialism and thus a greater potential for universal experience. However, the concept of a universal power emanating out of tribal specificity does imply that there may be shared "territories of orality," between the experiences of other cultural or gendered groups

¹⁹ Tapahonso, *Blue Horses Rush In*, 103-104. This poem also appears in Tapahonso's earlier collection *Sáanii Dahataak: The Women Are Singing*, 1-2; Recalling Pulitano's argument that terms such as nationalism and self-determination are post-contact phenomena, thus cannot express "indigenous realities," one wonders how Pulitano would interpret the undoubted significance of horses in the work of these and other poets, given that horses, also, are a post-contact phenomenon. The logical extension of Pulitano's argument would be to conclude that horses, also, cannot therefore articulate "indigenous realities" and are thus not valid markers of either a Creek or Navajo authenticity!

²⁰ Womack, *Red on Red*, 7. Here Womack is citing Flannery O'Connor.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

and Creek experience, an impulse that ironically undermines Womack's separatist status.

Harjo's collection, *Secrets from the Center of the World*, combines short and startlingly beautiful prose poems with photographs, also startlingly beautiful, of Navajo country taken by the non-Native photographer Stephen Strom (who began photographing the land when he was teaching astronomy at Navajo Community College). In the preface, Harjo writes of Strom's photographs:

The distances he imitates make sense in terms of tribal vision. We feel how it all flows together, and time takes on an expansive, mythical sense.

Strom emphasizes the "not-separate" that is within and that moves harmoniously upon the landscape. The camera is used to see with a circular viewpoint which becomes apparent even though the borders of the images remain rectangular.... The photographs are not separate from the land, or larger than it. Rather they gracefully and respectfully exist inside it. Breathe with it. The world is not static but inside a field that vibrates. The whole earth vibrates. Stephen Strom knows this, sees this, and successfully helps us to remember.²²

Herbert John Benally explains that Shiprock is the home of the mythological man-eating creature Monster Bird, and the place where Monster Slayer and Child of Water killed Monster Bird.²³ In "Just Past Shiprock," Tapahonso tells the story of a mother and a father who buried the body of their dead child under a pile of rocks just past Shiprock: "Those rocks might look like any others, but they're special.... This land that may seem arid and forlorn to the newcomer is full of stories which hold the spirits of the people, those who live here today and those who lived centuries and other worlds ago."²⁴ In *Secrets from the Center of the World*, Harjo writes, "If you

²² Joy Harjo, Preface to *Secrets from the Center of the World*, n.p.

²³ Herbert John Benally, "John Collier Jr.'s Photographs of Navajos Breaking New Ground," in *Photographing Navajos: John Collier Jr. on the Reservation 1948-1953* by C. Stewart Doty, Dale Sperry Mudge and Herbert John Benally (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 8.

²⁴ Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataał*, 5-6.

look with the mind of the swirling earth near Shiprock you become the land,
beautiful.”²⁵

In *Secrets from the Center of the World*, I would argue, Harjo’s Creek-centred tribal-specificity develops conversively, unfurling from a geocentrically focused relationship with Navajo land, via a Creek poet’s descriptions of the land and a non-Native astronomer’s photographs of the land into a spiral of interrelations that balance the specific with the universal. Opposite a photograph of Round Rock, Harjo writes: “Near Round Rock is a point of balance between two red stars. Here you may enter galactic memory, disguised as a whirlpool of sand, and discover you are pure event mixed with water, occurring in time and space.”²⁶ Paired with a photograph of Canyon de Chelly in autumn are the words, ““It’s true the landscape forms the mind. If I stand here long enough I’ll learn how to sing.... something cool as the blues, or close to the sound of a Navajo woman singing early in the morning.”²⁷

It seems to me that Harjo’s prose poems and Strom’s photographs and their articulation of the “beautiful force” that pulses within Navajo land is the apotheosis of a conversive method, that emphasises the centring, healing power located within the interrelations between all elements of the universe, but does not call for the potentially colonial entering into the story world of a narrative proposed by Brill de Ramírez. Rather, the conversivity expressed in *Secrets from the Center of the World*

²⁵ Harjo, *Secrets from the Center of the World*, 4; See also Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataal*, xii. Tapahonso writes: “For many people in my situation, residing away from my homeland, writing is a means for returning, rejuvenation, and for restoring our spirits to the state of ‘hohzo,’ or beauty, which is the basis of Navajo philosophy.” Harjo explains that, for the Navajo, “beautiful,” is “an all-encompassing word, like those for land and sky, that has to do with living well, dreaming well, in a way that is complementary to all life” (Preface to *Secrets*, n.p.).

²⁶ Joy Harjo *Secrets from the Center of the World*, 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

articulates relational meaningfulness in a way that maintains tribal (or non-tribal)-specificity – Creek, Navajo and non-Native – and boundaries. Strom’s photographs encompass both “a circular viewpoint” and rectangular borders, enabling them “gracefully and respectfully [to] exist inside [the land].”²⁸

In Nia Francisco’s poem “Iridescent Child,” the Navajo landscape forms not only the mind but also the body:

My body is curved and carefully carved
by the touch of the wind
chipped and sculpted like sexy mesas
and sand stone cliffs

My hair black like storm clouds
and you will often see black birds
flying through my thoughts
and gestures
I am the land and the land
is me

My breath is the rain essence
My finger nails are chips of abalone shell²⁹

In the foreword to Francisco’s collection, *Blue Horses for Navajo Women*, with reference to “Iridescent Child,” Grace Anna McNeley (Navajo) writes that “the reader who is acquainted with [the] holy beings [of the Navajo mythological world] can reach deeper into the flow of Nia’s song.”³⁰ In *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*, Francisco explains that when a Navajo child is born, it receives life from the sacred beings: “The wind is sent into the newborn baby. That is why there are whirls on the (finger) tips of human hands and the hair grows in whirls on the head.”³¹ Herbert John Benally explains that in Navajo philosophy, a person’s hair is sacred: “A person’s head extends into heaven and is crowned with hair that

²⁸ Harjo, Preface to *Secrets from the Center of the World*, n.p.

²⁹ Francisco, *Blue Horses for Navajo Women*, 7.

³⁰ Grace Anna McNeley, Foreword to *Blue Horses for Navajo Women*, n.p.

³¹ Nia Francisco, “Navajo Traditional Knowledge,” in *The Sacred* ed. by Beck and Walters, 272.

represents the male and female rain. We know that water brings creation to fruition.”³² Thus, a re-examination of Francisco’s poem, from a tribal-specific perspective, emphasises the specific relationship between Navajo mythology and a Navajo relationship with the land and elements, going beyond the universal meaningfulness of relationships articulated by a conversive approach. The meaningfulness in the lines, “My body is curved and carefully carved / by the touch of the wind,” and “My hair black like storm clouds / and you will often see black birds / flying through my thoughts,” is illuminated by a tribal-specific approach but not, I hasten to add, unlocked for all to access.

Benally writes further that, “Hair is also symbolically associated with thought. Thought is considered to be similar to water, for thought gives rise to life, growth, and prosperity.”³³ In Francisco’s poem “Like Water Her Voice Flows,” the speaker describes a woman’s voice flowing “in yellow red orange purple ribbons / like the running stream / through a rocky valley / water coming out of the lash black soil.”³⁴ The poem evokes timelessness, where Navajo past and Navajo present occupy the same space. The woman whose voice flows retells her grandmother’s stories about the Long Walk to Fort Sumner in 1864. She speaks in her grandmother’s voice “of old women the silence the burning cornfield / and the breathless waiting / high in the pine tree / expression of lost emotions listening for another wail.” In the final stanza, the speaker describes, again, “a woman’s voice / like riverflowing she sung-whispered a soothing song / to her baby boy / each lullaby like a floating leaf it came to my ears.” There is no distance in time

³² Benally, “John Collier Jr.,” 20.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Francisco, *Blue Horses*, 43.

between the speaker, the woman whose voice flows, the grandmother and the woman singing a whispered lullaby to her baby in the final stanza, who may be the woman whose voice flows in the first stanza, who may be her grandmother, who may be another Navajo woman singing to hush her child today, or yesterday. A tribal-specific reading of Francisco's poems emphasises the power of words and thoughts, an associative relationship between the wind and the hair, between water and creation, between thoughts and words, between "Iridescent Child" and "Like Water Her Voice Flows." A conversive approach holds dangers, too, for a non-Native scholar to presume to experience, vicariously through Francisco's words, the collective Navajo experience of The Long Walk. But Francisco's words exert a hypnotic pull that works to lull readers into the poetic world.

In Luci Tapahonso's "Sháá' Áko Dahjiníteh: Remember the Things They Told Us," the speaker tells a third person, probably a child, "When you were born... different kinds of winds entered through your fingertips / and the whorl on top of your head."³⁵ Later in the poem, she writes: "Don't cut your own hair or anyone else's after dark. There are things that come with the darkness that we have no control over." Benally records how, when young Navajo women were sent away to federal boarding schools and had their hair cut off, to prevent lice, they wept.³⁶ In Tapahonso's poem "They were Alone in the Winter," the speaker tells of braiding her daughter's hair: "My fingers slip through the thick silkiness / Weaving the strands into a single black stream." The speaker tells her daughter, "In the old

³⁵ Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataał*, 19.

³⁶ Benally, "John Collier, Jr.," 20.

stories, they say the moon comes as a beautiful horse,” and “Tomorrow, if the sun rises, / it will come as many different horses.”³⁷

In writing about these poems, there arises a fundamental tension between Native and academic philosophies of knowledge. In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, I noted Dean Rader’s dissatisfaction with Brill de Ramírez’s tendency towards a descriptive approach, in which she restricts herself to describing the conversive structure of a given text, but refrains from offering any further analysis.³⁸ This, I have argued, is a potential weakness of conversive literary scholarship, a way of opting out of the epistemological tension between Native and academic discourse. This is partly the reason Brill de Ramírez devotes so much time analysing Western critical theory and its limitations, because only in this way can she conform to the conventional requirement for systematic, original research that can be explicated and communicated to other scholars. However, my inclination when writing about Francisco’s and Tapahonso’s poems is, in much the same way as Brill de Ramírez suggests, to act as a *guide* in highlighting areas of potential meaningful interrelations between the two poets, but to refrain from conducting an intensely theoretical analysis, which would fix and close the narratives. What I hope I am doing here, by combining the most valuable elements of tribal-specific and conversive approaches, is to allow the specifics of Navajo philosophy, in whatever limited way I may understand them, to provide contextualisation and depth to a generally conversively oriented analysis, while avoiding the fixing and closing tendencies of literary analysis. A further advantage of emphasising tribal specificity in this way is that it provides a buffer against the more intrusive aspects of a conversive approach by

³⁷ Luci Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataał*, 11.

³⁸ Rader, “Review Essay,” 219.

subtly but consistently emphasising the co-dependent relationship between centeredness and boundaries, reminding literary critics to watch their step.

The role of reminding scholars of the limitations of their readings is one that could also be undertaken by Sarris's interruptive storytelling. However, as I have pointed out previously, this strategy is sometimes limited by its reliance on overtly interruptive characteristics in a given narrative. Francisco's and Tapahonso's poetry, I would argue, tends not towards interruption but towards invitation.³⁹ Although I have challenged Brill de Ramírez's assumption regarding the extent of that invitation, the characteristic inclusiveness of Tapahonso's and Francisco's poetry points to the diminished effectiveness of an interruptive storytelling strategy when a narrative is not explicitly interruptive. In this specific context, I would argue, interruptive storytelling functions best as a supplement to tribal-specific and conversive approaches.

To close, I would like to return to the poem with which I began, Joy Harjo's "New Orleans," which tells about the drowning of three hundred Creeks during the 1830s removal of the Creeks from their homelands in Alabama to Indian Territory, where Creek "ancestors and future children," are "buried beneath the currents stirred up by pleasure boats / going up and down."⁴⁰ In 1864 the Navajos had their own experience of removal, when over eight thousand were compelled to walk three hundred miles from their homelands to Fort Sumner at Bosque Redondo, where they were incarcerated for four years. In "In 1864," Tapahonso tells this story of their journey:

When we crossed the Rio Grande, many people drowned. We didn't know how to swim – there was hardly any water deep enough to swim in at home.

³⁹ Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 75-76.

⁴⁰ Harjo, *She Had Some Horses*, 43.

Some babies, children, and some of the older men and women were swept away by the river current.

We must not ever forget their screams and the last we saw of them – hands, a leg, or strands of hair floating.⁴¹

Clearly, a conversive relationship can be drawn between the two poems and the ancestral memory of removal and drowning of innocents and children. Harjo's ancestral memory is grounded in specifically Creek cosmogony, whereby Tie-Snake lurks in deep waters to pull the unwary deep down into water, into blood, into memory. Tapahonso's ancestral memory invokes the image of strands of hair and, by association, thoughts and words, washed away by the Rio Grande. As a scholar, there is not much I can add to that.

To conclude, synthesising a context-specific approach, one that incorporates the most valuable elements of interruptive storytelling, conversive literary scholarship and tribal-specific approaches for a given set of conditions, offers the potential for community building between Native writers and non-Native scholars for five main reasons. First, rather than presenting a one-size-fits-all approach to Native American literary criticism, it allows for critical approaches to be customised according to the particular circumstances of a given reading/performance. Second, it encourages a reflexive approach by scholars and a consideration of the limitations they bring to their interpretations. Third, it mitigates the drowning out of Native voices and inhibits the process whereby Native voices appear only to support the conclusions reached by a scholar. Fourth, it enables the contextualising of narrative while avoiding the "fixing" and "closing" tendencies of some literary critical techniques. Fifth, and most important, is that a context-specific approach to Native American literary criticism encourages not only border crossing but, where

⁴¹ Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataal*, 10.

appropriate, respect for borders and an acceptance that there may be places in a narrative where scholars cannot or should not venture.

PART III.
PUTTING A CONTEXT-SPECIFIC APPROACH
INTO PRACTICE

CHAPTER 5

SYNTHESISING A CONTEXT-SPECIFIC APPROACH TO NATIVE AMERICAN FILM NARRATIVES

Even as ghosts, the indigenous people of the Americas pervade
and fill the continent's imaginative spaces, exactly like
the winds that blow freely over national borders.

Victor Masayesva, Jr., "Indigenous Experimentalism"

In your heart when you hear these songs, you're told
by the red man you sing this song whatever you do.

Grandmother, A Season of Grandmothers

Introduction

This chapter applies the three critical frameworks discussed thus far – interruptive storytelling, conversive and tribal-specific – to a reading of the films and videos of Victor Masayesva Jr., (Hopi) and George Burdeau (Blackfeet), respectively. The chapter builds on the developmental synthesis of the three strategies undertaken throughout this dissertation, as a means to formulate a context-specific approach to Native American critical film theory that accounts for not only the site of production of a narrative, but also its site of performance, which, in this case, is a cross-cultural scholarly interpretation.

To summarise, briefly, the three approaches: Greg Sarris's (Kashaya Pomo/Federated Graton Rancheria) interruptive storytelling approach exposes the preconceptions of the interlocutors at the point of performance, initiating long term "internal" or "reflective" dialogue in interlocutors. This reflection leads to an

acknowledgement of the limits of an interlocutor's understanding of a given narrative, effectively frustrating closure and preventing the "fixing" and decontextualisation of Native knowledge in academic contexts. Two specific limitations arise in relation to this strategy. First, interruptive storytelling relies on the ability or willingness of a scholar to recognise his or her limitations, most particularly when interacting with a narrative that is not consciously "interruptive." Second, for non-Native scholars, the process of incorporating one's own personal narrative into critical writing about Native American texts, a key component of Sarris's strategy, is problematical because they lack the cultural privilege afforded to Native scholars/writers when conducting an intersubjective dialogue with a Native narrative. This, in turn, highlights the limited potential for non-Native scholars to replace the "fixing" and "closing" tendencies frustrated by an interruptive approach with a meaningful experiential aesthetic. For this reason, my use of interruptive storytelling in this chapter will focus on "interruptive" characteristics, predominantly by identifying interruptive strategies in the narratives that force interlocutors to reconsider their preconceptions, but will deemphasise the focus on incorporating autobiography into critical writing.

Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez's "conversive literary scholarship" posits that Native American stories are relational in orientation, and that meaning lies within the interrelationships between all elements of the universe. The key feature of conversivity is that it is open and inclusive, requiring the entrance of the scholar into the storied world of the narrative, in order to access meaningfulness. The advantages of this approach include the development of a democratic intersubjective engagement with a given narrative and avoiding the imposition of Western-orientated theoretical frameworks onto Native American narratives. In terms of limitations, a conversive

approach calls for scholars to enter fully into the “story worlds” of the narratives they study, and, furthermore, tends to lack reflexive awareness. This can lead to scholars not recognising or respecting boundaries to access, and a failure even to acknowledge that unrestricted access into a narrative may sometimes be inappropriate.

Craig S. Womack’s (Creek-Cherokee) tribal-specific approach posits that Native American narratives should be assessed on their own tribally-specific terms, separate from the American canon, and that the methodological tools used for that assessment should be drawn from tribally-specific bodies of literature. The advantages of this approach are that it enables narratives to be evaluated from within, according to the oral tradition from which they originate, with the potential to broaden out into pan-Indian, or universal, concerns without compromising tribal specificity. The disadvantages include a tendency to promote tribally-specific aesthetics at the expense of all other possible influences and, from a cross-cultural perspective, the limited access and understanding available to non-tribal scholars.

Although a number of excellent works have appeared in recent years dealing with Native American film and video by scholars such as Steven Leuthold, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (Choctaw-Cherokee) and Beverly Singer (Santa Clara Pueblo), these works, because they are pioneers in the field, have justifiably tended to focus on bringing to the forefront the work of Native American filmmakers, rather than on developing theoretical frameworks within which to interpret the films.¹ Although interpretations of Native American made films and videos have often considered the context of their production – the specific cultural experiences and histories of the

¹ Steven Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art, Media and Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native American and Film* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Beverly R. Singer, *Wiping the War Paint Off the Lens: Native American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

filmmakers – the context of their performance, the interaction of a given film narrative with a particular audience – has rarely been deliberated upon.

This chapter, then, is an attempt to bridge this gap, to interrogate the critical tools used for interpreting Native American film and video in the same way that so many scholars have interrogated the methodologies they apply to Native American oral and written literatures. Rather than attempt to create a “new” methodology, a one-size-fits all hypothesis to unlock the secrets of Native American film, my intention, rather, is to apply the approaches suggested by Sarris, Brill de Ramírez and Womack in terms of literary narratives, to an interpretation of filmed narratives. I take this comparative approach because I believe that interpretive approaches should be context-specific, that is, that they should take into consideration both the context of production and the context of performance of a given film, rather than imposing a rigid theoretical framework from without.

Objections may arise regarding my application of methodologies designed for interpreting written and oral literatures to the reading of film narratives. There are, of course, many differences between the ways literature and film operate. However, in a Native American context, I believe that the visual literacy of film narratives occupies an interesting middle-ground straddling the conceptual border between the author-originating narratives of written text and the “authorless” communal and collaborative texts of oral literature. A strict division of narratives into “literature” and “film,” in a Native American context, is probably unhelpful, because it implies that the makers of these films are primarily influenced by Western methods of production where the distinction between film and literature is perhaps more defined. This is not to say that Native American filmmakers are not sometimes influenced by non-Native filmmakers, but to suggest that, in many and probably the majority of

cases, the telling of stories, in both literature *and* film, is grounded in the oral tradition, and thus the two modes of transmission, in a Native American context, have more commonalities than differences.² As such, there is no reason why the critical tools developed by literary critics to approach Native American literature should not be useful in understanding Native American film.

Victor Masayesva, Jr. and George Burdeau, the two filmmakers on whom I have elected to focus in this chapter, create films arising out of very different personal and tribal histories. Masayesva was born in the traditional Hopi village of Hotevilla in Northern Arizona and has spent most of his life immersed within a Hopi community and perspective. Leuthold notes the “intensely local focus” of Masayesva’s films, the majority of which focus on depicting Hopi life and culture.³ However, there is a clear development of theme from his early work, which tended to focus on representing Hopi life for Hopi audiences, without explication for outsiders, to later films where he takes a more mediative approach, although Masayesva’s brand of mediation comes with an ironic Hopi twist. Contrastingly, George Burdeau, the first American Indian to become a member of the Directors Guild of America, was born and raised in Oklahoma, away from his Blackfeet tribal heritage, and has spent much of his career working on films with various tribal groups, including the Cherokee, the Pueblos and several Northwestern plateau tribes.⁴

By synthesising a context-specific approach to Masayesva’s and Burdeau’s works, I will argue, it is possible to customise a critical framework that takes into consideration the various factors, such as intended audiences, the involvement of

² See also Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 12, for a discussion of the origins of Native aesthetics in film and video.

³ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴ Singer, *Wiping the Warpaint Off the Lens*, 49.

one's community and sources of funding, involved in "keying" a particular "performance" of a film to a particular audience. In order to develop such a context-specific approach, I will examine a number of films directed by Masayesva, within the context of debates surrounding Hopi tribal-specificity, Native American intellectual property rights and epistemological tensions between Hopi and academic discourses, and will discuss how tribal-specific and interruptive storytelling approaches provide a flexible critical framework within which to approach these issues. I will then analyse the films of Burdeau with a specific focus on the ways in which conversive and tribal-specific approaches may be synthesised to enable an indigenist perspective on relational meaningfulness that is bounded and contextualised by tribal specificity.

Native American Film and Video in Historical Context

Native American film began as early as 1910, when James Young Deer (Winnebago), a leading figure in the Pathe Frere Studio made *White Fawn's Devotion*. The film tells the story of a young Indian woman's attempted suicide when her white husband inherits a great fortune and is particularly interesting in that, unusually for the period, it endorses miscegenation, with the mixed-race couple and their daughter permitted to overcome the obstacles placed in their path and live happily ever after. Young Deer went on to make *Yacqui Girl* in 1911 before travelling to France in World War I to make documentaries and eventually slipping into obscurity.⁵ Edwin Carewe (Chickasaw) made *The Trail of the Shadow* (1917) and *Ramona* (1928) before, according to Ward Churchill (Keetoowah Cherokee),

⁵ Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race*, 209-210, n.38.

becoming, like Young Deer, unemployable in Hollywood due to post-World War I changing attitudes to Native Americans.⁶

Native Americans also featured strongly as subjects in early documentaries including Thomas Edison's first Kinetoscope film *Sioux Ghost Dance* in 1894.⁷ From that early example, Native peoples have consistently been subject to ethnographic spectacle. For example, Edward S. Curtis's 1914 film *In the Land of the War Canoes*, purports to document Kwakiutl Indian life on the northwest coast, but the film, in fact, consists of an entirely fictional narrative, with a storyline concerning a sorcerer, dowries, betrothals and the rescue of a maiden that reads like a European fairytale and was concocted by Curtis as a backdrop against which to display ethnographic artefacts.⁸ Eight years later, Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) claimed to portray the "essential truth" of a Hudson Bay Inuit's struggle to survive but was, in fact, a series of staged "reconstructions," emphasising traditional Inuit ways and filtering out examples of cultural adaptation and change.⁹

⁶ Ibid., 208 n.38; Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 19.

⁷ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 17. Kilpatrick notes that there is no evidence that the dance portrayed in the film was indeed a Ghost Dance.

⁸ This film was originally titled *In the Land of the Headhunters*. David Gerth's 1979 documentary, *The Image Maker and the Indians; E.S. Curtis and his 1914 Kwakiutl Movie* records how when Curtis began to plan for the documentary in 1912 many Kwakiutl Indians were still living in traditional wooden houses with painted fronts, with replica totem poles. However, by 1914 frame houses had begun to appear in villages and glass windows were beginning to be installed and Curtis decided to build a replica of an old village on Deer Island near Fort Rupert. Five false house fronts were built - some on pole frames covered with painted canvas and totem poles and carved house poles made especially for the film. Tlingit women were hired to make traditional blankets and kilts and a shortage of traditional red cedar bark meant that raffia had to be used to supplement the available supply. The commentary notes that the real ethnological value of the film lay in its depiction of objects in use which were known to most only as objects in museums such as "powwow boards," ornately carved with totem figures being used in a clip of a tribal dance.

⁹ For a fuller discussion of this work see Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Freeze Frame: Alaska Eskimos in the Movies* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995), 47-55 and Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 23-26.

Another well-known ethnographic representation of Native Americans was the series of films made on the Navajo reservation in the 1960s as part of a project undertaken by the anthropologists Sol Worth and John Adair.¹⁰ The basis of Worth and Adair's experiment was to provide film cameras to Navajo youths and to analyse the resulting films, presumed to have been produced by filmmakers free from the "tainting" influences of Hollywood, for evidence of a "pure" Navajo cultural film form. Fatimah Tobing Rony argues that the project was based on the problematic assumption that "Western" film conventions provided a norm against which "Navajo deviations" could be measured. Moreover, it proved difficult for the anthropologists not to interfere with the Navajo filmmakers' artistic choices. At one point Worth became so exasperated by the filmmaker's "failure" to move in for a close up of her grandfather, whom she was filming creating a sand painting, that he eventually took the shots himself.¹¹

In the 1970s, ethnographers Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling made a series of films about Alaska Eskimos, including *Inuqqaain: From the First People* (1976), which depicts daily life in the autumn and winter of the village of Shungnak in Alaska.¹² The opening captions state that, "the people of Shungnak determined the content of this film to present their community's way of life from the perspective

¹⁰ Sol Worth and John Adair. *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973); reprinted with a new foreword and afterword by Richard Chalfen (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997); all subsequent references are to the reprint edition.

¹¹ Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 211-212; the incident is recorded in Worth and Adair, *Through Navajo Eyes*, 156-165. See also Faye Ginsburg, "Mediating Culture: Indigenous Media, Ethnographic Film, and the Production of Identity," in *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader*, ed. Kelly Askew and Richard R. Wilk (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 214, for a further discussion of Worth and Adair's methodology.

¹² Leonard Kamerling, Sarah Elder and the People of Shungnak (directors/producers), *Inuqqaain: From the First People* (The Alaska Native Heritage Film Project Center for Northern Educational Research, University of Alaska, 1976).

of its own people.” The village has registered copyright protection of the film along with the filmmaker. There is also an emphasis on equality of native languages with English, as the villagers code-switch, speaking a mixture of both languages, depending on the circumstances. The narration is bilingual in both English and Inuit, as are the closing titles.

Inuqqaain depicts various scenes of daily life such as gathering snow (for water) with a tin pail, dog teams pulling sleds, riding on motorised snowmachines, constructing mudshark traps and catching, spearing and storing mudsharks. Interspersed with these are images of the environment and animals that influence the daily lives of the people, a black raven swooping down over a snow-covered village, ice floating on the surface of the river, forests, late sunrises and early sunsets, huskie puppies gnawing at a frozen deer carcass and speared mudsharks bleeding over white snow. Later scenes depict a middle-aged couple talking about their life and memories and children getting ready to go trick-or-treating at Halloween.

The chronological narrative, which runs from September to December, is framed by two stories. In the first, an unseen man narrates, in his native language with English sub-titles, the story of the prophet Maniilak, who foretold the coming of the white man. At the close of the film a second narration talks about changing ways of life and weather patterns and how the world is old, perhaps dying. Although still framed by the preconceptions non-Native filmmakers, *Inuqqaain* was unprecedented in terms of Elder and Kamerling’s attempts to let the Native subjects speak for themselves.¹³

In the same year as Elder and Kamerling were letting their Native subjects speak for themselves, Burdeau was engaged in filming a series of videographies of

¹³ See Fienup-Riordan, *Freeze Frame*, 154-161, for a discussion of other films made by Elder and Kamerling.

Eastern Washington, Idaho Panhandle and Western Montana American Indian cultures as part of “The Real People” project.¹⁴ Since then, and corresponding with a proliferation of American Indian film festivals, film and video have become widely utilised tools for expression and negotiation of American Indian discourse.¹⁵

Victor Masayesva

Victor Masayesva asks, “What’s different about Native filmmakers? Why do we even insist on being the storytellers?” and proposes the following answer to his own question, “A Native filmmaker has the accountability built into him....Accountability as an individual, as a clan, as a tribal, as a family member.”¹⁶ This “accountability” marks a crucial difference between the creative approaches of Native and non-Native filmmakers. Western creative artists and scholars, notes Elizabeth Weatherford, tend to believe in total freedom of information and freedom of speech whereas, for example, in Hopi culture the privilege of knowledge confers a deep-seated sense of responsibility, “initiation into the implications of knowledge...a precondition for... [receipt] of further information.”¹⁷

Masayesva’s contention that American Indian filmmakers possess a built-in accountability is not to suggest, however, that American Indian attitudes towards the use of film and video to mediate cultural discourse are fixed and uniform. As

¹⁴ George Burdeau (director), *The Real People Series* (Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1976).

¹⁵ Select examples of well-known contemporary American Indian filmmakers and videographers include George Burdeau (Blackfeet), Aaron Carr (Navajo/Laguna), Lena Carr (Navajo), Shirley Cheechoo (Cree), Chris Eyre (Cheyenne-Arapaho), Bob Hicks (Creek/Seminole), Phil Lucas (Choctaw), Shelley Niro (Mohawk), Victor Masayesva (Hopi), Malinda Maynor (Lumbee), Randy Redroad (Cherokee), Diane Reyna (Taos/San Juan Pueblo), Chris Spotted Eagle (Houma) and Milo Yellowhair (Lakota). See Singer *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens*, 44-55 for a more comprehensive list.

¹⁶ Victor Masayesva, Jr., quoted in Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 1.

¹⁷ Weatherford, “To End and Begin Again,” n.p.; see also Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 209.

Weatherford has pointed out, in relation to Masayesva, Hopi culture confers a greater importance on the continuance of traditional practices than on the conservation of objects such as ceremonial masks, customarily buried with their owners upon death. Although film provides a potential medium for the continuation, or at least recording of, traditional practices its “ambiguous relationship to lived reality” might also be interpreted as “inappropriately preserving the elders” images past the duration of their own lifetimes, indicating that Hopi relationships with film narratives remain, at best, ambivalent.¹⁸

However, the importance, for Masayesva, of Hopis representing themselves on film and video (and also in photography – Masayesva began his career in this field), or, indeed, choosing not to represent themselves, cannot be underestimated. Masayesva explains his vision of indigenous filmmaking in terms similar to those used by Craig S. Womack in his discussion of Native American literary separatism:

The act of colonization through technology is well under way. The gun/camera/computer are all aspects of the complete domination of indigenous cultures. From this perspective experimental films and videos can be defined by the degree to which they subvert the colonizers’ indoctrination and champion indigenous expression in the political landscape. This act of protest and declaration of sovereignty is at the heart of experimental mediamaking in the indigenous communities. I say this with authority, believing that indigenous mediamakers have in common the humiliating experience of being treated like foreigners in the lands of our ancestors.¹⁹

Masayesva’s comments should not be mistaken for centralising the colonisers’ indoctrination as a force against which to react. The images and “resistance” depicted in Masayesva’s films are much more subtle than this, and emerge out of an indigenous Hopi aesthetic grounded in Hopi culture and oral

¹⁸ Weatherford, “To End and Begin Again,” n.p.

¹⁹ Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism,” 235-236.

tradition. In an essay that appeared in a collection of Hopi photography, Masayesva

writes:

We Hopis often find ourselves the subjects of tourist cameras. The reason is simple. As Southwest Indians we are on display, always: on napkins, on sugar and salt packets, on Fred Harvey tours and brochures, sometimes in rare library collections, but most often on postcards. As tourist attractions we remain as available as the inimitable prong-horned jack-rabbit, the rare jack-a-lope. And yet it is a fact that, although we are inundated by collectors of Indian images, we somehow keep our essential selves away from the camera.²⁰

Masayesva identifies in Hopi culture a characteristic secretiveness, an understanding of “the value of silence and unobtrusiveness....As a Hopi, you cannot violate the silences, just as you would not intrude on ceremony.” Hopi photographers and filmmakers, then, are compelled to find a way of committing images to film that does not infringe the community’s collective understanding of what should and should not be disclosed. As Masayesva clarifies, “Refraining from photographing certain subjects has become a kind of worship.”²¹ This raises important and difficult questions for a community such as the Hopis who, having been subject to an unprecedented degree of anthropological and ethnological interest, now potentially have the power to tell their own stories in their own voices. As a people who wish their privacy to be respected, though, Masayesva notes the fundamentally important questions that must be addressed: “What is so important that it must be shared? What risks are tribal people willing to take to make this available?”²²

²⁰ Victor Masayesva, Jr., “Kwikwilyaqa: Hopi Photography,” in *Hopi Photographers, Hopi Images*, comp. Victor Masayesva, Jr. and Erin Younger (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1983): 10.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism,” 229.

Over the past decade the concept of “intellectual property rights” as a means of protecting indigenous knowledge bases from appropriation as come to the fore. However, as Ted Jojola (Isleta Pueblo) has noted, intellectual property “is a legal concept that advances the right of the individual. It does not solve the problem of ‘collective’ rights.” Rather, Jojola suggests, the concept of “cultural property” may prove a more effective means of protecting tribal cultural knowledge.²³ In response to what is seen by many Hopis as “theft” of their cultural knowledge, the community has been at the forefront of moves to restrict access by scholars who wish to conduct cultural research on reservations. Armin W. Geertz notes the fundamental conflict wherein “cultural research is a critical project and is based on *the need to know and to proliferate that knowledge*. On the other hand, Hopi culture is based on *knowledge gained through secrecy and initiation*.”²⁴ Ever deteriorating relationships between Hopis and scholars in Hopi studies culminated in 1995 with a statement issued by the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office that drastically restricted cultural research, and forbade all research on Hopi religion unless expressly requested by the Hopi people.²⁵

²³ Ted Jojola, “On Revision and Revisionism: American Indian Representations in New Mexico,” in *Natives and Academics* ed. Mihesuah, 178. See also Cook-Lynn, “Literary and Political Questions of Transformation,” 46-51. Cook-Lynn writes: “Without speculating about what native/tribal nationalism means... the literary profession has become prisoner to an oppressive legal language and reading of rights that derives from a tradition of European based, perhaps even male oriented property rights tradition which institutionalizes knowledge not only as a commodity but as a possession. The profession plunges ahead with questions which cannot be answered in any meaningful way without a clear sense of the historical realities which formulated the contemporary American Indian literary voice in the first place” (51); Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 118. Smith claims that: “Indigenous groups argue that legal definitions of ethics are framed in ways which contain the Western sense of the individual to give his or her own knowledge, of the right to give informed consent. The social ‘good’ against which ethical standards are determined is based on the same beliefs about the individual and individualized property. Community and indigenous rights or views in this area are generally not recognized and not respected.”

²⁴ Armin W. Geertz, “Contemporary Problems in the Study of Native North American Religions with Special Reference to the Hopis,” *American Indian Quarterly* 20, no. 3/4 (Summer/Fall 1996): 408.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 406-409

It would be presumptuous to suggest that there exist no differences of opinion in Hopi society on this matter but such moves do indicate the general consensus of opinion within which filmmakers such as Masayesva operate. In the previous chapter, I discussed Womack's contention that critical strategies must be drawn from and based upon tribal epistemologies. In terms of a tribal epistemology that is grounded in "secrecy and initiation," – and Masayesva agrees with Geertz that the Hopi are generally a secretive people²⁶ – however, this raises serious questions about the potential for a tribal-specific approach to act as a bridge between Hopi and academic philosophies of knowledge. On the one hand, a tribal-specific approach might foster an environment within which scholars can interpret narratives according to Hopi philosophies. On the other hand, developing a critical strategy out of an epistemology based on "secrecy and initiation" seems doomed to failure, at least within a cross-cultural context where one is trying to bridge the gap between Native and academic philosophies. And, of course, there is also the need to interrogate the assumption that bridging the gap between Hopi and academic philosophies of knowledge is a desirable and/or ethical endeavour, which it may very well not be from a Hopi perspective.

In the following readings, I shall attempt a context-specific approach to interpreting four of Masayesva's films, *Hopiit* (1980), *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* (1984), *Ritual Clowns* (1988) and *Siskyavi: Place of Chasms* (1989) and will explore the potential that synthesising a context-specific approach offers for creating critical strategies that conform to the requirements of systematic and communicable research, while respecting Hopi attitudes to the acquisition and dissemination of sacred knowledge.

²⁶ Masayesva, "Kwikwilyaqa: Hopi Photography," 10.

Hopiit

In his early films, Masayesva shifts away from an ethnological focus on the “interpretation of Hopi-ness by and for outsiders” and concentrates instead on privileging a Hopi audience.²⁷ Masayesva, Leuthold notes, in his early films, creates a sense of stillness, a “meditative mood,” through the use of “lengthy shots and close attention to particular details of his environment,” perhaps as a result of his grounding in photography.²⁸ Sands and Sekaquaptewa Lewis note that Masayesva tends to focus “on individual moments... each image connecting an idea before it fades into another connected or contrasting moment.”²⁹ Beverley Singer concurs, noting that Masayesva’s films articulate the “natural rhythms” of his community.³⁰

Hopiit, which lasts for sixteen minutes, presents a montage of visually stunning images of contemporary Hopi life expressed through their intricate relationship with the cycle of seasons. Powerful images such as children sliding on corn ears in the back of a pick up truck while eating watermelons, a sustained shot of barely moving peach blossoms and a woman stacking ears of blue corn are, according to Sands and Sekaquaptewa Lewis, examples of Hopi “language” imagery. The organisation of the visual narrative demonstrates “how meaning is created out of composition of dream-like images as they move, overlap, blur and connect like

²⁷ Weatherford, “To End and Begin Again,” n.p.

²⁸ Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 116.

²⁹ Kathleen M. Sands and Allison Sekaquaptewa Lewis, “Seeing With a Native Eye: A Hopi Film on Hopi,” *American Indian Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 392.

³⁰ Singer, *Wiping the Warpaint Off the Lens*, 64.

thoughts in the mind.”³¹ Masayesva presents these images as integral and reciprocal components of contemporary Hopi life.³²

For the purposes of discussion, I present here a brief summary of *Hopiit*, based on my own viewings and supplemented by the explanations provided by Beverly Singer in *Wiping the Warpaint Off the Lens*. The film opens with prayer feathers blowing in the breeze, outlined against a clear blue sky, which, according to Singer, symbolically communicates good wishes to the audience.³³ An old man is speaking in Hopi, perhaps telling a story, and we see him sitting by a window, looking out towards the sun, as the shadow of a dancer fades in and out of focus.³⁴ Various images of winter life then follow, a man carrying a load of wood through heavily falling snow, a young child watching women weaving baskets inside a warm house, children playing on toboggans,³⁵ a horse and a dog in a snowy field and smoke rising from a chimney in the village. Next, we see children dancing a Deer Dance, a dance usually performed in the winter. The children are wearing deer horn headdresses adorned with evergreen.³⁶

The arrival of spring is identified by a shimmering blossom in the rain, women voices singing in Hopi and bird song. An old woman and a young child make blue paste in corn husks, ready for preparing corn cakes. We see blossom trees growing in the desert and the wind blowing channels into the sand. A farmer aerates

³¹ Sands and Sekaquaptewa Lewis, “Seeing With a Native Eye,” 387.

³² *Ibid.*, 388, 395. Sands and Sekaquaptewa Lewis interpret Masayesva’s presentation of images as being more spiral than circular.

³³ Singer, *Wiping the Warpaint Off the Lens*, 64.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Singer identifies the dancer as wearing a buffalo headdress.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 64-65. Singer notes that the sleds are, in fact, metal filing cabinet drawers.

³⁶ Deer dance identified and explicated by Singer, *Wiping the Warpaint Off the Lens*, 65.

his soil with a metal rod. We see a young eagle, chained to a rooftop and being fed raw meat by a group of men. Singer explains this image as follows:

The significance of the eagle... is a respectful relationship rooted in [Hopi] origins and ceremonial life. Federal and state government restrictions on religious and ceremonial use of eagle feathers and other birds of prey that are endangered species weighs heavily on the religious freedom rights of American Indians; thus Masayesva's documentation of the eagle on a rooftop demonstrates the Hopis' self-determined action regarding such federal regulation.³⁷

The narrative cycle then shifts to young boys playing with bows and arrows, a lightning strike across a desertscape, rows of corn growing in the desert rain and ladybugs mating on the corn. A young girl runs barefoot through the field as the adults harvest the corn. Then, the chanting and drums of the corn dance and children eating watermelons sitting in the back of a pickup truck full of ears of corn. The final scene is of a woman standing on a stool and stacking rolls of corn in neat rows.

The film, at least from the perspective of this non-Hopi viewer, is beautiful and affecting. Singer notes that it is "inspiring to watch seemingly simple activities appear so valuable."³⁸ I agree with this assessment, but Singer makes two other statements regarding the film, which require further examination. The first statement is her observation that the events of daily life depicted in the film "are not mysterious activities... Masayesva's sequences of dance, song, ritual, ceremony, and the profane tasks are associated with their appropriate season."³⁹ The second observation that

³⁷ Ibid; See also Masayesva and Younger, *Hopi Photographers, Hopi Images*, 62, 67, which includes two still photographs of an eagle chained to a building. These photographs were taken by Freddie Honhongva, who worked as a media technician for Masayesva on the Ethnic Heritage Program from which *Hopiit* was created. Honhongva, in his artist's statement, explains simply that, "Most of my photography consists of personal views of familiar surroundings."

³⁸ Singer, *Wiping the Warpaint Off the Lens*, 64.

³⁹ Ibid., 67.

requires qualification is Singer's explanation that Masayesva's "symbolic opening becomes the entry point to the daily cycles of Hopi."⁴⁰

I am not suggesting that Singer's interpretations of the film on these points are incorrect, but I am suggesting that they would not be the case for every viewer, especially those from outside of specifically Hopi culture. Like Masayesva, Singer is from a Pueblo culture (Santa Clara) suggesting certain elements of each culture will be accessible to those of the other tribe. Masayesva's "symbolic entry point to the daily cycles of Hopi," in fact is not an entirely open door. It is accessible only to those who are either Hopi or, like Singer, have sufficient in-depth knowledge of Hopi and similar cultures to enable them to understand the narrative according to Hopi terms. For audiences not possessing that knowledge, this "symbolic entry point" is foreclosed and the "sacred and profane" tasks of daily life remain, to non-Hopi literate audiences, intentionally esoteric and impenetrable.

Masayesva mischievously provides a case in point on his website by posting a list of comments made about *Hopiit* by panellists and jurors at the American Film Festival:

This looks like a home movie – no narration is provided thus leaving the viewer totally bewildered as to what one is viewing.

Poor because the viewer does not know what is being explained.

No narration. Visuals do nothing to explore the subject.

Too much dialogue with no translation.

*Too idiosyncratic for broad understanding; conceits were either overdone or the result of poor technique; whichever, the end result was diminished.*⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 64; Singer is referring here to the opening images of the prayer stick, the old man telling a story and the buffalo dancer/spirit fading in and out.

⁴¹ "Reviews of *Hopiit* by American Film Festival Panelists, Jurorists," available via <http://www.infomagic.net/~isprods/FeatrsTx.html>, accessed 11 August 2005; emphasis added.

All of which, of course, represent precisely the point Masayesva is making. *Hopiit* is intended for a predominantly Hopi audience, who require no explanation of the imagery and symbolism contained in the film, in the same way that communities sharing a body of oral tradition do not need to have given stories explained, because shared community knowledge provides all the context that is needed. Thus, I would argue, that although the film was accessible on some level to Singer, a member of the Santa Clara Pueblo, to a non-Hopi it is arcane and intended to be.

In terms of synthesising a critical framework within which to approach *Hopiit*, it seems clear that any form of conversive engagement with the narrative would be problematical, if not nigh on impossible. The conversive stipulation that scholars enter into the storied world of the narrative is, for a non-Hopi watching *Hopiit*, most probably a hopeless endeavour, and this film demonstrates the limitations of conversive scholarship very well by completely undermining its “access-all-areas” assumption and demonstrating how Native storytellers may place boundaries around their narratives in order to fend off unwanted intrusion. An understanding of a Native worldview that posits the centring, healing force of interrelations between all elements of the universe is not enough to get a scholar into Masayesva’s Hopi “story world.”

In respect of an interruptive storytelling approach, I would suggest that, while the non-Hopi interlocutor’s limitations are starkly exposed, this level of interruption is a secondary consequence of Masayesva’s focus on creating a Hopi film for a Hopi audience. As such, while the undoubted interpretive limitations of non-Hopi viewers are manifestly exposed, I would suggest that this interruption does not represent an invitation, on Masayesva’s part, for non-Hopi interlocutors to engage intersubjectively with the narrative. Rather, interruption is a side-effect of

Masayesva's lack of interest in non-Hopi audiences. As such, and as I will demonstrate below with regard to *Itam Hakim, Hopiit*, dialogue is rapidly foreclosed.

On the surface, a tribally specific approach would seem the logical methodological framework within which to approach *Hopiit*. However, given the debate about intellectual property rights and the ownership of cultural knowledge that surround particularly Hopi culture, access, for non-Hopis, to the kind of cultural research necessary for conducting tribally specific readings may well be difficult, or undesirable. Creating a separatist critical approach out of Hopi epistemology presents an interesting challenge because, as noted above, Hopi culture, and therefore epistemology, is based, at least in part, on secrecy and initiation. In this sense, separatism in the essential sense of the word, whereby no pathways are available to non-Hopi scholars, and interpretations are conducted only by Hopis according to their own standards of "secrecy and initiation" would seem the only possibility. Whether non-Hopi scholars are prepared to step aside, however, remains to be seen.

Itam Hakim, Hopiit

In *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* (We Someone, the Hopi), made in recognition of the Hopi Tricentennial, Ross Macaya (1887-1984), a tribal elder of the Bow clan recounts, in the Hopi language, various episodes in both his personal history and the communal tribal history. Like *Hopiit*, this film is uniquely Hopi-centred, and does not attempt to explicate or analyse Hopi culture for the benefit of a non-Hopi audience. Instead, it relies on the shared body of knowledge incumbent in a Hopi audience and parallels, according to Elizabeth Weatherford, "Hopi patterns for instruction" by the developmental "unfolding" of information.⁴² *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* was commissioned

⁴² Weatherford, "To End and Begin Again," n.p.

by the German television station ZDF and was originally produced entirely in Hopi with no English subtitles. When the film was broadcast on German television (re-titled *The Legend of Lone Wolf*) it was with the addition of German subtitles from Masayesva's Hopi to English translation.⁴³

Again, as with *Hopiit*, the film includes images of great significance to a Hopi audience. In *Itam Hakim*, footage of a captive eagle accompanies Mr Macaya's explanation of the origin of death. What would escape a non-Hopi audience but would be evident to Hopi viewers is the knowledge that, according to Weatherford, (and similar to Singer's explanation of the captive eagle in *Hopiit*) the eagle will be sacrificed to obtain feathers for use in prayer.⁴⁴ Explicit explanation of this and other Hopi-centric images is neither provided nor required. Masayesva's Hopi-centred narratives, according to Sands and Sekaquaptewa Lewis, express a common Hopi "dream," the "cultural sensibilities" of which are collectively understood to a degree that enables them to be "complete as they are received into the minds and imaginations of Hopi viewers," even though they may appear incomplete or inadequate to non-Hopi viewers.⁴⁵

Elsewhere, Masayesva acknowledges the significance of a shared body of myth, legend and memory and points out the "cobwebby (*wishapiwta*)" nature of such deeply embedded knowledge. He recalls hearing a story from his grandmother about famine and starvation, a similar story to which was delivered by Mr Macaya and recorded by Masayesva on video. Masayesva himself had created a poem and photograph born from the same communal story: "There was a lot we ate that year/In

⁴³ Masayesva, "Indigenous Aesthetics," 229.

⁴⁴ Weatherford, "To End and Begin Again," n.p.

⁴⁵ Sands and Sekaquaptewa Lewis "Seeing With a Native Eye," 395.

the wintertime we ate our children.”⁴⁶ Another member of the Hopi community provided a further “cleaned-up” recording of the story, based on Mr Macaya’s version, to be shown on television. Masayesva perceives this cumulative experience of storytelling as being,

what defines and refines the indigenous aesthetic. Not only is it the accumulative experience of one individual, but it gets passed on to everyone with whom he or she comes into contact, clinging like sticky cobwebs.⁴⁷

As such, Masayesva’s Hopi narratives, his poems and photographs, his grandmother’s stories and Mr Macaya’s stories, all function as culturally meaningful experiences within a culturally charged setting that depends on the “cobwebby” sharing of communal knowledge and experience for its meaningfulness. Despite the ironic twist of funding provision coming from German television, Masayesva made the film exactly as he wanted to make it and, again, his principal focus is his Hopi audience.

In her essay “Reading with a Eurocentric Eye the ‘Seeing with a Native Eye’: Victor Masayesva’s *Itam Hakim, Hopiit*,” non-Native scholar Sonja Bahn-Coblans investigates the possibilities for analysing the film from an explicitly acknowledged Eurocentric perspective, while still attempting to experience the Native perspective “created by the Native eye of the filmmaker.”⁴⁸ Bahn-Coblans points out that “the soundtrack is completely dominated by the voice of the storyteller speaking a language which is only understandable to a minority” causing the non-Hopi viewer to feel “one is missing out the nuances” and that “the non-Native cannot help feeling

⁴⁶ Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism,” 230-231; see Masayesva and Younger, *Hopi Photographers, Hopi Images*, 100. A complete version of this short poem “Famine” appears here, accompanying Masayesva’s photography of a room stacked with corn ears.

⁴⁷ Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism,” 230-231.

⁴⁸ Sonja Bahn-Coblans, “Reading with a Eurocentric Eye the ‘Seeing with a Native Eye’: Victor Masayesva’s *Itam Hakim, Hopiit*,” *Studies in American Indian Literature* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 47-48.

that the subtitles do not even offer half of what is actually told.”⁴⁹ While the soundtrack is narrated in Hopi by Ross Macaya, the visual track portrays those elements of Hopi life suggested by the narration. Macaya tells a prairie dog tale to a group of children, followed by a telling of the Hopi emergence myth.⁵⁰ He then relates the history of his clan, the Bow Clan, the invasion of Spanish Conquistadors and the Pueblo Revolt. Initially, Macaya is shown telling the stories to children but as the narrative progresses, Bahn-Coblans observes that, “the audience is no longer the children and the viewer but more generally viewers.”⁵¹ At the close of the film, Macaya asks “the listeners to reflect on what he has told them and insists that the stories must be told so that the children do not forget; that is how it is and it will never end.”⁵²

Masayesva describes the genesis of an indigenous aesthetic in the work of

Native filmmakers as follows:

Our earliest childhood experiences play a role in shaping our future sensory world, our later reconstruction of what affected us when we were young... If you were surrounded by Native speakers and immersed in traditional performances at an early age, then this shaped your instinct to pounce on the record button at the epiphanic moment.⁵³

Thus filmmakers, and by extension film viewers, from outside a specific indigenous culture lack that innate sense of “indigenous aesthetics” or what is “epiphanic” in Native culture and lack the ability to “see with a Native eye.” This seems to be a troubling concept to Bahn-Coblans, who explains in her introduction

⁴⁹ Ibid., 49, 55.

⁵⁰ See also Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 117-121.

⁵¹ Bahn-Coblans, “Reading with a Eurocentric Eye,” 52. One is reminded here of the “dramatization of the listening audience,” noted by Craig Womack in relation to the writing of Alexander Posey, and discussed in the previous chapter.

⁵² Ibid., 52.

⁵³ Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism,” 230.

that her purpose is to determine whether or not “it is possible to see into the Hopi world with a Eurocentric eye and yet to experience the ‘accountability’ and ‘different perspective’ created by the Native eye of the filmmaker.”⁵⁴ To do this she undertakes what she freely acknowledges as the “Western tradition of methodical probing” and produces a “film protocol” consisting of a table of five columns in which the time, textual inserts, visual track, soundtrack and film techniques are analysed in detail. The function of this protocol, according to Bahn-Coblans, is to “give the non-Native a feeling of *control* over the material.”⁵⁵ Understanding the “meaning” of the film, according to Bahn-Coblans, is an analytical process that “*of course*” involves “a search for structure, an analysis of the thematic content [of the film], and interpretation of recurrent and striking images, a record of techniques, all in order to get an *intellectual grasp* of the artistry and to *read its meaning*.”⁵⁶

Bahn-Coblans’s comments raise a number of questions. She acknowledges her non-Native perspective and states that what she is pursuing is an *intellectual* reading of the film, thus positioning herself explicitly within the context of a non-Native academic audience. However, there are certain assumptions inherent in her rationalisation for producing a film protocol: first, that a full and complete understanding of the “meaning” of the film is a desirable and constructive goal; second, that the way to achieve this understanding is through the imposition of Western methodology onto Native texts; and third, that Native and non-Native perspectives are oppositional and mutually exclusive. Even more problematical is

⁵⁴ Bahn-Coblans, “Reading with a Eurocentric Eye,” 47-48.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 52; emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48; emphasis added.

her choice of the word “*control*” because a non-Native scholar exercising control over a Native text risks engaging in an act of colonisation.

In order to define what she means by Native and non-Native perspectives, Bahn-Coblans turns to the respected Laguna Pueblo/Sioux scholar Paula Gunn Allen. Bahn-Coblans quotes extensively from Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop*, particularly a passage that describes the tendencies for persons of Native descent to view the world from a non-hierarchical, egalitarian perspective, with space viewed as spherical and time as cyclical, in contrast with a Christian worldview that categorises the world in “hierarchical and dualistic terms,” and sees space as linear and time as sequential.⁵⁷

The way in which Bahn-Coblans incorporates Allen’s remarks into her analysis of Masayesva’s film makes for interesting reading in the light of Sarris’s remarks about critics of Native texts who attempt “to locate and account for an ‘Indian’ presence or ‘Indian’ themes in a text, but... do not consider how they discovered or created what they define as Indian.”⁵⁸ According to Sarris such critics tend to posit generalisations about Natives authorised by the use of citations from “an Indian or authoritative non-Indian to support and make legitimate [the] use of generalization to identify and understand things Indian in the text(s).”⁵⁹ This strategy of “[nailing] down the Indian in order to nail down the text” assumes that the “Indian is fixed, readable in certain ways, so that when we find him or her in a... text we have a way to fix and understand the Indian and hence the text.”⁶⁰

It is upon the peg of Allen’s “authoritative” definition of Indianness – circular, spherical, egalitarian – that Bahn-Coblans hangs her analysis of what she

⁵⁷ Bahn-Coblans, “Reading with a Eurocentric Eye,” 49-50, quoting Allen, *The Sacred*, 54-75, 58-59.

⁵⁸ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 123-124.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

understands to be “Indianness” in Masayesva’s films. She writes, “The fascinating thing for the non-Indian is the way Masayesva has combined so many of the elements of Indianness mentioned in Allen’s... essay: circularity, inter-relatedness, egalitarianism, dynamism,” as if Masayesva might have consulted Allen’s volume in advance of making his film, in order to ensure he fulfilled the correct specifications.⁶¹ Furthermore, by accepting Allen’s definition of “Indianness,” Bahn-Coblans is framing the film text in a very specific way. Her reading of the text is predicated on a search for things Indian - circularity, egalitarianism, wholeness - as defined by Allen. This is not to say that Bahn-Coblans’s interpretations of the film are incorrect – I found her essay helpful in illuminating certain aspects of the narrative – but to note that, despite pointedly positioning herself within a non-Native academic audience, she does not account for the ways in which she is framing and closing the narrative and how this might affect the process of cross-cultural reading. In other words, although, from a non-Hopi perspective, *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* is interruptive, like *Hopiit* this quality of interruptiveness does not seem to represent an invitation to engage in a dialogue with the narrative, but rather to be an unintended consequence of Masayesva’s obligation to Hopi audiences. Bahn-Coblans’s essay, I would argue, is a product of just such a foreclosed dialogue, where her engagement with the narrative has been interrupted just enough to initiate a recognition of the tensions between Hopi and non-Hopi discourse, but does not allow for a continuing intersubjective and self-reflexive conversation.

Interestingly, Bahn-Coblans seems to be consciously living up to the “linear”, “sequential” and “hierarchical” characteristics of non-Indianness posited by Allen, remarking that, “the Eurocentric perception of time and space has distinct difficulty

⁶¹ Bahn-Coblans, “Reading with a Eurocentric Eye,” 50.

in coping with the ‘spherical’ and ‘cyclical’ perceptions of the Native American.”⁶²

However, she confesses to feeling “dissatisfied” with the analytical fruit borne out of the film protocol:

The analysis has given an insight into the structure, content, themes, and techniques; it has interpreted parallelisms, repetitions, contrasts, and images. In the manner of New Criticism the attempt has been made to grasp the film as a text. However, if one glances at the film protocol, one soon realizes that only two columns are of any interest to the Native American: the visual track and the soundtrack. The others [time, textual inserts and film techniques] are purely Eurocentric in their orientation. Even worse, the whole protocol is full-fledged proof of Paula Gunn Allen’s argument: “they [non-Indians] order events and phenomena in hierarchical and dualistic terms.” Space is “linear” and time is “sequential”.⁶³

This statement is, of course, only true if one accepts the oppositional definitions of “Indianness” and “non-Indianness” put forward by Allen who, of course, is consciously making a generalisation to support an argument, as I have done many times throughout this dissertation. However, Bahn-Coblans’s suggestion that “the Native American” will have no interest in the protocol columns relating to time, textual inserts and film techniques is a sweeping statement, that can easily be discounted when one considers that, in Bahn-Coblans’s own words, Masayesva has produced a video with “technical aspects that are extremely diverse” including the use of “posterization” and rack focusing, clear evidence of Masayesva’s own personal interest in film techniques.⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid., 49.

⁶³ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 49, 55-56. According to Bahn-Coblans “posterization” is a process similar to polarization in photography, which involves “restricting the vibrations of light waves on the filmstrip so that they have different amplitudes on different planes and, therefore, show distorted outlines and distorted colors.” Masayesva, when discussing *Itam Hakim, Hopiit*, refers to the effect as “impressionistic images achieved through chroma manipulation.” See Masayesva, “Indigenous Aesthetics,” 228. “Rack focusing” is defined by Bahn-Coblans as “shifting of the focus plane to force the viewer to see a specific object or movement.”; See also Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 117.

Bahn-Coblans writes in the first person and explicitly locates herself within a Eurocentric audience, so is reflective in a somewhat limited sense. Having acknowledged the limitations of a Eurocentric perspective, however, she does not examine these limitations or consider ways in which the text might inform her and vice versa but, instead, seeks to impose a degree of Eurocentric order on the narrative. She is, however, completely honest about her goal and her perspective and includes a short critique where she wonders whether setting aside the protocol analysis and going with “gut reaction” might not have been a more effective approach. Of course, Bahn-Coblans is still missing the point. A “gut reaction” is not acceptable in Western-orientated research because it does not conform to objective/scientific models of knowledge acquisition and proliferation. However, neither is a “gut reaction” cognate with Native ways of knowing, that require reflection upon experience and the accumulation of wisdom over a lifetime. Bahn-Coblans was compelled to create the film protocol as a means of regaining “control” over a Hopi- narrative and over her “gut reaction.” The fact that she was unable to exert the control she desired is testament to the strength of Masayesva’s filmmaking skills to resist colonisation.

Ritual Clowns

The challenges extended by Masayesva to the dominant discourse in *Hopiit* and *Itam Hakim, Hopiit*, resulted in an increased level of European and Euro-American interest in his work. With self-conscious irony, Masayesva mediated this apparent act of conciliation by incorporating the implications of increased Euro-American interest in his work as a central theme of subsequent films. For example, *Ritual*

Clowns presents, among other narrative threads, a commentary – playful but cutting – on the history of relations between the Hopi and anthropologists.

The film opens, once again, with the telling of a story, in the Hopi language by a male narrator, of how the clowns came from Topkela, to the Fourth World.⁶⁵ From behind a night moon in a black sky, a tiny animated character with a white body, red shoes and spiked cap, appears and runs across the screen increasing in size as it does so. The next clown, wearing black and white horizontal stripes, runs across the top of the accompanying caption. Clown number three is dressed in orange with red boots and bounces and leaps across the screen. Clown four has a blue tunic, a red bandanna and orange hair in a topknot. The clowns are in space and are shown running through the stars and eventually soaring towards Earth. They come into land very fast in a meadow of sunflowers, head over heels, backwards or upside down.

A male voiceover begins, in English, telling and interpreting the story of the clowns and their role in Hopi culture. According to the narrator, the clowns' awkward landings represent the way life is and the tendency humans have to make things difficult for themselves. As he explains, "In order to reach something good you have to go through a lot of hardships. Normally clowns come through swinging down on ropes, crashing down, um, going backwards on a ladder, you know, or simply pushing each other over, over, over a wall." The plaza represents the world and the Kachinas represent nature and creation from a time before humanity.

As the narrator speaks, the visual shifts between various nature scenes – an eagle, a lake, a desert, a moose in a meadow – and we learn that when the clowns

⁶⁵ Topkela is the First Hopi world. See Frank Waters, *Book of the Hopi*, drawings and source material recorded by Oswald White Bear Frederick (Viking Press, 1963; Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1977; all subsequent references are to the Penguin Books version), 3-11. The Hopi Fourth world – Earth – is called Túwaqachi; see Waters, *Book of the Hopi*, 21-22.

arrived, they were greeted by the richness and innocence of nature and the Kachinas who were celebrating this in song. The clowns' journey to the Fourth World is also representative of the Hopi's journey and arrival on the same world. We learn that when the clowns arrived on the Fourth World they looked North, South, East and West, the four sacred directions, and yelled four times to let everybody know they had arrived. The narrator explains that while the people are watching the Kachinas dance their solemn songs, the yelling of the clowns focuses attention onto them, which symbolises the "me" world of contemporary society and the disruption of harmony caused by pollution and other "bad things" that "we've done to the world." As the clowns walk around their new world, they realise that there is a spiritual presence. Clowning ceremonies, the narrator explains, therefore always include a feather, which represents the breath of the Great Spirit. The clowns, like people, are curious and spend some time trying to locate the spiritual being. They then decide to sing their own songs, which represent their life plan and also the individual human ambition. The clowns' songs conflict with those sung by the Kachina, which again represents the disruption to harmony caused by human presence on the Fourth World.

The clowns eventually locate the lead Kachina who is representing the Great Spirit. The chief clown asks the lead Kachina if he is in charge, which he acknowledges by shaking his rattle. The chief clown responds by pointing out all the things he has and bragging that he is also in charge, representing humankind's love of power. Each one of the clowns has an opportunity to speak with the lead Kachina and each asks the same question "Are you in charge here?" and gives the same response as the chief clown, claiming to be in charge themselves. When the people need disciplining it is the clown chief's responsibility to call on nature to mete out

punishment and he does this by talking with the Owl. The Owl, we are told, flies to the Plaza three times.

So far so good. Non-Hopi audiences are learning about Hopi ritual clowns and getting to watch cartoons. Masayesva is drawing his non-Hopi audience into the story of how the clowns came to the Fourth World. But he has a few tricks up his directorial sleeve. The narrator is just explaining what happens the first time the Owl flies to the plaza when he is cut off by the repeated sounds of a camera shutter clicking and a visual switch to a series of sepia toned photographs depicting Hopis at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth centuries.

A new voiceover begins, a male speaking English with a German accent:

The appearance of the six men who have just tumbled into the arena is not merely strange, it is positively disgusting. They are covered with white paint and with the exception of tethered breech clouts are absolutely naked. Their mouth and eyes are encircled with black rings. Their hair is gathered in knots upon the tops of their heads from which rise bunches of corn husks. Nothing is worn with a view to ornament. These seeming monstrosities, frightful in their ugliness, move about quite nimbly and are boldly impudent to a degree approaching sublimity. These things are delightful according to Indian notions and are well suited to show how much of a child he still is. However, it must be remembered, endowed with a physical strength, passion and appetites of adult mankind.

Masayesva follows this with a visual of a modern cityscape and a group of young children wearing novelty ears, noses and moustaches. A young girl with cat face paint and whiskers speaks to camera:

Both clowning and philosophising are liminal phenomena in their respective socio-cultural context; realms of pure possibility in which configurations of ideas arise involving the analysis of culture into factors and the freedom of every and any possibility. Both are marginal, periodical and parataxical to surrounding syntax and primary text.

European-style circus music accompanies early twentieth century and contemporary footage of Hopi clowning rituals. A female voiceover with an

American accent opines that Hopi rituals are “no place for a clean thinking person.... If now our government could prohibit the presence of the clowns and the scenes they enact great evils would be removed.” Black and white early twentieth century photographs of six Hopi clowns are accompanied by the original male narrator explaining that the clowns depict immoral and crude acts because they symbolise the crude and immoral things that go on in the world. However, he also feels that the clowns are being misused and misunderstood by some young contemporary Hopis who see them merely as objects of amusement and fail to understand their educative and disciplinary role. The film closes with footage of Charlie Chaplin in a donkey cart, followed by a Hopi elder explaining the Hopi concept of Judgement Day and the sound of the sea fading into black. We do not find out what happened when the Owl flew into the plaza.

According to Faye Ginsberg, Masayesva considers the clowns “on their own terms, as they have been misapprehended by racist missionaries, appropriated by anthropologists, and as commentators on global dilemmas.”⁶⁶ By seemingly inviting us to engage with the story of how the clowns, and correspondingly the Hopi people, came to the Fourth World, the film, with its accessible narrative and cute animated clowns seems, tacitly, to be inviting us, if not quite to step into the story world of the ritual clowns, to at least engage with the narrative on a reasonably involved level. Furthermore, there is also a strong emphasis on “universality” in the sense that the clowns represent in various ways human spirit and character and the narrator frequently uses the term “we” by whom he usually appears to mean humankind in general and not just Hopis. The clown story clearly acknowledges that Hopis are a damaging force, disrupting the harmony of nature, along with the rest of humankind,

⁶⁶ Faye Ginsberg, “Culture/Media: A (Mild) Polemic,” *Anthropology Today* 10, no. 2 (April 1994): 6.

but also stresses that Hopis understand nature as a series of complex, reciprocal relationships between humans, animals, plants and the Great Spirit, rather than as something under the dominion of humans.

However, any attempt to enter into the story world by a non-Hopi viewer is soon interrupted by the clicking of the camera shutters and the foreclosure of the story about what happens when Owl flies into the plaza. Masayesva raises the audiences' expectations, and then dashes them. Rony observes that Masayesva's statement that "refraining from photographing certain subjects has become a kind of worship," flies in the face of the general Western belief that scholars should have complete freedom in terms of appropriating and disseminating information and, as such, at least from a Western perspective, comes "dangerously close to censorship."⁶⁷ Masayesva, in *Ritual Clowns*, is reminding his viewers, forcefully, that they do not have unlimited freedom to collect and disseminate information about Hopi culture.

Unlike in *Hopiit* and *Itam Hakim, Hopiit*, however, the interruption is not so shocking as to effectively foreclose the opportunity for dialogue. By contrasting the naturalistic narration of the Hopi storyteller, complete with repetitions and hesitations, with the smooth, seemingly "scripted" voices of the German and American "anthropologists," Masayesva is not only reminding us of the colonising impact of anthropology upon the Hopi people, but also illustrating a different epistemological style, in that the European/American words seem to have been "fixed," – even though they are spoken – in contrast to the narrator's more open speaking style. Ironically, of course, as director, it is Masayesva who is doing the fixing. Furthermore, by having a child wearing face-paint quote what appears to be a

⁶⁷ Rony, *The Third Eye*, 212.

highly esoteric ethnological definition of the nature of clowning, the absurdity of using hyper-theoretical language to describe a holistic and culturally meaningful act is exposed.

In *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*, Beck and Walters describe the relationship of sacred clowns to sacred knowledge. Beck and Walters note that in many Native cultures “asking why,” diminishes one’s chances of experiencing sacred knowledge.⁶⁸ The role of “asking why,” then, falls to sacred, or ritual, clowns:

They are often the only one who may “ask why” in reference to dangerous objects, or “ask why” of those people who are specialists in advanced sacred knowledge. They ask in their backwards language, through their satire, and their fooling around, the questions that others would like to ask. They say the things others may be afraid to say to those we might be afraid to speak. Even though they may not or cannot conceptualize their knowledge, the answers to these questions – the truths, the philosophy, and the wisdom – comes through to us... [sacred clowns] teach by not teaching; they make others see by stumbling around; they make others laugh by frightening them; and they take the heart of sacred knowledge and ridicule it before everyone’s eyes.⁶⁹

Thus, by engaging in Hopi-specific interruptive dialogue, Masayesva succeeds not only in presenting a sophisticated political commentary on the history of anthropological interest in ritual clowns, channelled through the clowns’ apparent tomfoolery, but also forces non-Hopi audiences to reflect on the assumptions they may share with anthropologists regarding the freedom to access and collect information about tribal cultures. Not only does he succeed in initiating internal dialogue in non-Native audiences, he also effectively frustrates closure by cutting off the story about the Owl flying to the plaza before its conclusion. In the same way as

⁶⁸ Beck and Walters, *The Sacred*, 296.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 296-297; Beck and Walters note the continuing contemporary significance of clowns in Hopi culture, explaining that the Hopi newspaper *Qua'togti* features striped Hopi clowns in a cartoon strip (298).

writers such as Sarris and Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) substitute closure with an experiential aesthetic grounded in their personal experiences as mixedblood Indians, Masayesva, as a full-blood Hopi, replaces closure with an aesthetically satisfying film narrative grounded in Hopi sensibility.

Siskyavi: Place of Chasms

Siskyavi: Place of Chasms explicitly and ironically explores - from a Hopi perspective and using a combination of “documentary” style footage, oral literature and live animation - the relationship between “art objects” and identity both in Hopi culture and in museums.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the film interrogates, on a level open to non-Hopi viewers, the tensions between Hopi and European American pedagogy and epistemology. The film opens with a grandmother, Cordy Pahona, telling, in English, the story of how the Flute Clan came to Wálpi, emphasising the importance of oral tradition and perhaps signifying Masayesva’s increased willingness to engage with a non-Hopi audience.⁷¹ The main body of the film, however, recounts the experiences of a group of Hopi High School students who travel to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., to study and analyse Hopi pots as archaeological artefacts. Masayesva contrasts their experience to that of one of their classmates, who stays at home and learns about pottery making and Hopi culture from her grandmother.

The students at the Smithsonian receive systematic instruction in the scientific procedures used to date and analyse the pots, contrasting sharply with the more holistic teaching and learning relationship existing between the grandmother

⁷⁰ Victor Masayesva, Jr., (director) *Siskyavi: The Place of Chasms* (Hotevilla, Ariz.: IS Productions, Hotevilla, Arizona, 1989).

⁷¹ Mrs Pahona is not identified in the narrative, but is named in the closing credits.

and granddaughter. As the grandmother instructs her granddaughter in the techniques for extracting, preparing and working the clay, she also recounts Hopi myths and explains important rituals. This includes a baby naming ceremony, footage of which is incorporated into the narrative, during which the baby's head is washed four times with a corn and suds mixture made in a pot fashioned by the baby's grandmother, before the grandmother names the baby according to her clan. The inclusion of this sequence is significant because it places the Hopi pot within its specific cultural context as a functioning and dynamic "object" infused with value and meaning, contrasting starkly with the pots in the museum, which are disconnected from the cultural contexts that gives them meaning and value.⁷²

Masayesva's innovative use of animated sequences of patterns based on Hopi design, interwoven throughout the narrative, underscores the interpretation of the pots as constituent parts of a vibrant cultural identity. Masayesva subtly compares this conception with the presentation of the Hopi pots at the Smithsonian as decontextualised artefacts. The implied critique of the institutional approach to indigenous objects is an artful manoeuvre by Masayesva, given that *Siskyavi* was originally commissioned by a museum.⁷³

Despite the clinical environment in which they receive their instruction, the students at the Smithsonian frame their responses to the pots firmly within a Hopi worldview, commenting that the pots are "examples of what our life is made of." They implicitly perceive the pots as integral components of their cultural identity and, in fact, understand them as transcending the present moment into a perpetual

⁷² See Sarris *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 51-62 in which he discusses the decontextualised representation of Pomo baskets in museum exhibits and the unwillingness of Pomo basket weaver Mabel McKay to discuss her basket weaving in any context other than one deeply informed by her understanding and experience of Pomo culture.

⁷³ Weatherford, "To End and Begin Again," n.p.

and dynamic “narrative continuum” of Hopi-ness.⁷⁴ Not only do the pots “tell” the Hopi story, they are also a fundamental, reciprocal component of the continuing Hopi story.

Once again, oral literature provides the framework for this film and, as before, the storyteller is a respected elder, emphasising the importance of storytelling as Native/Hopi pedagogy. Furthermore, the animated sequences also serve as a contrast to the scientific and anthropological language to which the students are exposed when they visit the Smithsonian. Interestingly, Masayesva makes no overt editorial judgment on the respective merits of the different pedagogical systems, preferring simply to juxtapose them and leave the viewers to draw their own conclusions. In this sense, then *Siskyavi*, is aporetic, initiating in viewers an internal dialogue regarding the relationship between the two pedagogical discourses and, as such, I would argue that an interruptive approach works well for this film because Masayesva has provided just enough entry into the narrative to highlight the differences between Hopi and Euro-American pedagogies, and to enable non-Hopi viewers to engage intersubjectively with the narrative. Limits on access still remain, however, for example, the animations based on Hopi designs are esoteric and unlikely to be meaningful to the uninitiated viewer.

Mrs Pahona’s story of how the Flute Clan came to Wálpi, with which Masayesva opens the film, provides an interesting symbolic link to the relationship between Hopi and non-Indian philosophies of knowledge, which may or may not be intentional on Masayesva’s part. The Flute Clan comes to Wálpi, but are refused entry by the grandfather of the Snake Clan because of their poor reputation. The

⁷⁴ Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 71.

Flute Clan cry and wail and make a fuss, so eventually grandfather gives the leader of the Flute Clan an emblem and charges him with the responsibility for keeping his people in order and making sure they never discourage or hurt anybody. This story hints at the accountability inherent in entering the territory – literal or literary – of another and the importance attached to one’s own responsibility not to cause harm. Masayesva’s qualified invitation to engage with a Hopi pedagogical perspective perhaps represents an emblem similar to the one given to the leader of the Flute Clan by the grandfather of the Snake Clan that serves as a reminder of one’s responsibilities for conducting ethical scholarship.

George Burdeau

In contrast to Masayesva’s generally Hopi-centred focus, George Burdeau has built a career out of directing and producing documentary films for a wide range of different tribal cultures. I will analyse four films created by Burdeau, *A Season of Grandmothers* (1976), *Pueblo Peoples: First Contact* (1990), *Backbone of the World* (1997) and *The Witness* (1997, co-directed with Kieth Merrill) in an attempt to explore the implications of Burdeau’s cross-cultural orientation for the development of a context-specific approach to Native American film criticism. Leuthold notes that, despite Burdeau’s pioneering involvement with the development of Native American film and video, comparatively little criticism has appeared in relation to his works. Leuthold speculates that this may be a result of Burdeau’s more “mainstream” approach to documentary-making compared to, for example, Masayesva, whose Hopi-influenced aesthetics present, at least to non-Native observers, a more obvious representation of a uniquely “Native” way of seeing, and

thus makes for a more attractive critical subject.⁷⁵ Burdeau's style, notes Leuthold, unlike Masayesva's meditative "strong visuals," is more overtly filmic, "adeptly [manipulating] the flow of imagery through editing and special effects."⁷⁶

Like Masayesva, though, Burdeau is a fervent believer in the potential of film and video as means for Native peoples to make their voices heard and to tell their stories in new ways. Kilpatrick notes Burdeau's work as a teacher at the University of Washington and as a director of the American Indian Film Institute in Santa Fe and describes his attitude to learning as "a Native approach based on traditional ways of working together, creating a circle of community that shares a creative vision."⁷⁷ Burdeau embraces new technology and believes it is the key to "creating a system by which we can once again effectively communicate, not only in our own individual communities, but also in our regional and national communities, and to the world at large."⁷⁸ In the following readings of Burdeau's films, I will consider how his explicit cross-cultural orientation influences the interruptive, tribal-specific and conversive characteristics present in his film narratives.

A Season of Grandmothers

A Season of Grandmothers, is one of Burdeau's earliest films, made in 1976, and is also, according to Kilpatrick, the film of which he is most proud.⁷⁹ Grandmothers from the Coeur d'Alene, Colville, Kalispell, Kootenai, Nez Perce and Spokane tribes of the northwest plateau recount their experiences and memories in a seamless

⁷⁵ Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 108.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁷ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 221.

⁷⁸ George Burdeau, quoted in Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 221.

⁷⁹ George Burdeau (director), *A Season of Grandmothers: The Real People Series* (Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1976); Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 220.

interweaving of myth, legend, oral literature, communal and personal memory and sacred objects. The film begins with an origin story narrated by Johnny Arlee (Flathead) explaining the special purpose of each animal and bird. A special person from the old world was saved for the new world, a special person who created beauty, happiness and laughter and the old ceremonies. The special person, we are told, was a grandmother.

One grandmother explains that a baby board is part of a tree and symbolises the protection of the child. She also remembers her own mother tying crawling babies to the centre post of the tepee to keep them safe. In a later scene, two grandmothers are making traditional beadwork on buckskin shirts and dresses while babysitting for their children who have gone to a dance. They talk about the impact on tribal dances following conversion to Catholicism by “Black Robe,” but recall that their ancestors told them they continued to dance in secret. Another grandmother recounts, in her Native language, how a game warden shot her family in 1908 because he said they had killed too many deer. A voice-over narrated in English explains the importance of grandmothers to indigenous cultures:

Here are the mothers of our own mothers. Their stories have been told time and again. Blood from every grandmother and grandfather back flows in every vein of our child’s bodies. The blood of grandmothers flows warm, strong in our hearts now. Grandmothers teach us how to make our fingers dance, creating worship and ceremonial clothes, weaving ears of corn as if weaving time. And long ago when corn was first eaten she sits and sings and shows us how to bead designs from bitter roots and shooting stars. Grandmother is guardian of the sacred. She teaches us how to respond to rhythms of the moon, to seasons of the salmon. She teaches us how to dance in ancient movements of time and space. Because she has lived, been nurtured by sun, the shadow of grandmother is her very own, her moccasins touch the earth. Now, if we all live right with one another we too can be so privileged to live among grandmothers and grandfathers. You see, Indians are alive. We are here, we are now, and we live in seasons and this is winter, our season of grandmothers.

A Season of Grandmothers, in which stories, ceremonies and knowledge symbolically flow from the blood of grandfathers and grandmothers into the veins of their grandchildren, has an indigenist focus, positing a “special” kind of knowledge connecting across a number of specific tribal cultures, in this case knowledge about the special qualities of grandmothers. The narrative subtly reinforces a continuous Native presence on the American continent, articulating the power of words and stories that Vizenor refers to when he writes that, “Native selves are stories, traces of discourse, and the tease of presence.”⁸⁰ To a viewer familiar with Indians only through one-dimensional Hollywood portrayals where, noble or savage, Native humanity is mediated through a prism that is firmly oriented to a non-Native perspective, the experience of listening to and watching the grandmothers talk about their lives is powerful and affecting.

Despite the power of seeing/hearing the grandmother’s stories and the film’s implicit challenge to the tendency of popular culture to dehumanise Native Americans, I would argue that Burdeau is not taking an overtly interruptive approach. His purpose seems to be to encourage viewers to identify with the women, rather than to consider their personal complicity with the colonising force that has to some degree shaped these women’s experiences. Unlike the Hopi-centred focus of Masayesva’s early films, *A Season of Grandmothers* has a universal appeal and seems to invite interaction from its audience, by reminding them of their own grandmothers and the stories they tell, Native or non-Native. As the grandmothers in the film talk about their lives, they recall happy, sad and tragic events. This has the dual purpose of reminding the viewers of the oppression suffered by Native American peoples as a result of colonisation and, because the grandmothers are

⁸⁰ Vizenor *Fugitive Poses*, 20.

telling their own stories, they are also reminding the viewers of their own grandmothers, or other elderly relatives, and thus drawing them into the stories.

The tribal affiliations of the grandmothers interviewed in the film are listed in the closing credits, but for the duration of the narrative, the viewers are not told specifically which tribal cultures the stories these women are telling arise from. Their stories are personal testimonies and thus powerful and, from a conversive perspective, interconnected. Not only are all of their stories connected in the sense of their various experiences of colonisation, they also act as a link between the past and the present, between *creation* and the present – as we are told, the first Grandmother was a special person saved from the old world. Thus, the grandmother's provide a focusing point for blood memory that runs not only through the "blood" of their own tribes, but also between all the different tribes, and perhaps between all grandmothers, Native or non-Native.

Burdeau has stated that the grandmothers featured in the film taught him much about the art of filmmaking by showing him that "the real power of creativity lies in people and their relationships with each other and the natural world."⁸¹ This interconnected focus is typical of Burdeau's films, ranging as they do across many different cultural experiences, and also emphasises the potential for conversive interpretations of his films, as a way of accessing the meaningfulness located in the people's "relationships with each other and the natural world."

Pueblo Peoples: First Contact

Burdeau's Emmy-award winning film *Pueblo Peoples: First Contact*, echoes Masayesva's *Hopiit* and *Itam Hakim, Hopiit*, by immediately drawing our attention

⁸¹ George Burdeau, quoted in Kilpatrick *Celluloid Indians*, 220.

to the accumulated wisdom of a respected tribal elder, the Zuni House Chief Mecalita Wystalucy.⁸² Mr Wystalucy, dressed predominantly in white, is sitting on a wooden chair in a bare, white room, telling a story in the Zuni language. The camera focuses on the flickering flames, which fade into an image of clouds floating across a bright moon, followed by a thunder and lightning storm played back in slow motion, and then moonlight reflected on still, black water. Chanting and singing accompanies the image of Mr Wystalucy's face fading in and out of focus over the reflection of light in the water.

A number of indicators as to potential interpretive approaches can be located in this opening sequence. Like so many other Native films including, for example, *Inuqqaain: From the First People* and several of Masayesva's films as discussed above, the film narrative is framed by the telling of a creation/migration story. Mr Wystalucy describes, in Zuni, how the Zuni ancestors came up from the four worlds below and his words are translated into English by Conroy Chino, a television newscaster who is a member of Acoma Pueblo and the film's narrator/presenter.⁸³ In this sense, one could argue for an indigenist approach to the film, which emphasises the special and unique nature of Native or, more specifically, Pueblo knowledge. In relation to *Pueblo Peoples* and the earlier series of videos *The Real People*, of which *A Season of Grandmothers* was a part, Leuthold is admiring of Burdeau's "attentiveness to interior settings and details [that reveal] aspects of his subjects' lives and thought beyond the spoken narrative."⁸⁴ In this way, and with the lingering

⁸² George Burdeau (director), *The Pueblo Peoples: First Contact* (Albuquerque, N.M.: KNME-TV, Albuquerque and the Institute of American Indian and Alaska Native Culture and Arts Development, 1990).

⁸³ For a biographical sketch of Chino, see Joe S. Sando, *Pueblo Profiles: Cultural Identity through Centuries of Change* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 1998), 281-285.

⁸⁴ Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 110.

facial shot showing Mr Wystalucy's age-wrinkled face, Burdeau intimates that Mr Wystalucy's wisdom is the result of a lifelong immersion in Zuni oral tradition. Wisdom is a condition that accumulates over time, and that resides in the stories that are the fabric of Pueblo culture.

The emphasis on wisdom and knowledge through the storytelling of an elder that occurs in *Inuqqaain*, *Itam Hakim*, *Hopiit* and *Pueblo Peoples*, could be interpreted as a pan-tribal epistemology, and therefore open to a conversive reading. However, Burdeau underscores tribal specificity with the "shots of sparse, clean, geometric interiors... [that] express the highly ordered and contained nature of the Pueblo worldview."⁸⁵ Burdeau's formal linking between the images of the fire, the moon, the thunderstorm and the moon shining on still water also invite a conversive interpretation, with their emphasis on relationality between all elements of the universe.⁸⁶ However, as the narrative unfolds, what Leuthold notes as the centrality of landscape "to Burdeau's visual repertoire," becomes a reciprocal relationship between a geocentric Pueblo landscape and the Pueblo people.⁸⁷ Thus, any conversive reading needs to be bounded by an understanding of the specific Pueblo aesthetics from which Mr Wystalucy's story is emerging.

Images of the landscape fade in and out and we see Chino for the first time, sitting on a rock looking out over the land, and talking about stories:

As children growing up, we are told stories. Words are sacred to a child. We have grandmothers and grandfathers who instructed us, who taught us, who gave us words. They are the elders of our communities, of our villages, of our homes. We grew up with elders always around us and then, one day it's our turn and we have children all around us, hungry for words, hungry for stories, but, what do we tell them, what do we say to them? We tell them how the word first came into being, that listening is the very first step toward

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 10-111.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 110.

making that discovery. That everything is connected to a movement, to a life-giving force set in motion by that first breath begun so long ago. Maybe we point to a piece of landscape – a mountain, a mesa, a river, river flowing through mountain valley – to a real place on earth and we tell them how we're connected, how we're rooted to the earth. Elders say that's the continuum. That's the order of things that we as human beings live by, and it's simple. They say we've held onto it, because it works.

Chino's words underscore the importance of landscape to tribal tradition, in much the same way, as I discussed in Chapter 4, that Womack argues that Creek geography is so central to Louis Oliver's intellectualism that it literally *becomes* his method. Furthermore, in Chino's words, blood memory is invoked, with the flow of communal memory between generations a key feature. A predominantly conversive reading would emphasise the focus on connections between all elements of the universe, right back to the first movement, created by breath and words long ago. A tribal-specific reading would emphasise Chino's description of their rootedness to the specific natural landscape around Zuni and other pueblo cultures. Thus, an approach restricted to one or other of these methods would close off potential avenues of understanding. In some contexts this element of closure would be a desirable outcome, for example in Masayesva's Hopi-centric narratives, but *Pueblo Peoples* was made by KNME-TV in Albuquerque for broadcast on PBS and is clearly intended for a wide-ranging audience, within a broad cross-cultural context.

As the narrative progresses, Chino narrates the pre-contact history of the Pueblos, and there are interviews with respected Pueblo scholars such as Joe S. Sando (Jemez Pueblo) and Alfonso Ortiz (San Juan Pueblo), who explain the history, religion and worldviews of the various Pueblo cultures. The people's special relationship to the landscape is emphasised by Chino who states, "The story of my people and the story of this place are one single story. No man can think of us without thinking of this place." Relationality is emphasised in other ways. For

example, Leuthold notes Burdeau's frequent use of dissolves to indicate a sense of interconnectedness between the Pueblo people and their art, intercutting images of people with images of objects or architecture. A portrait of a Pueblo Indian dissolves into an Anasazi bowl, which then dissolves to a photograph of three more Pueblo Indians. As Leuthold notes, the "bowl's circular form exactly encompasses the pyramidal form of the three Indians, formally expressing the close integration between art and life in traditional Pueblo cultures."⁸⁸

Further details of Pueblo history and culture are provided, including information about the diversity of Pueblo cultures and languages prior to contact with the Spanish. What is particularly significant about the construction of this historical narrative is the way in which the origin/migration story told by Mr Wystalucy, in Zuni, with translations provided by Chino, is alternately faded in and out with a more "conventional" version of history provided by Sando and Ortiz. At first, it seems that the two stories are unconnected. Mr Wystalucy speaks of a giant who could not be killed, even with arrows. The historians tell of the arrival in Zuni of Estevanico, the Moroccan slave who, as part of Fray Marcos de Nisa's expedition, was imprisoned and eventually killed by the Zuni. We learn that Estevanico took with him to Zuni a sacred gourd for power, but the Zuni were not afraid of him and broke the gourd. It is only as Mr Wystalucy's story continues, describing how the people asked the Sun Father if he knew how they might kill the giant and the Sun Father replied that the giant's heart was in the gourd rattle which he held in his hand, enabling them to defeat the giant, that the viewer comes to understand the symbolic link between Mr Wystalucy's version of the Zuni migration story and the story of Estevanico's arrival in Zuni in 1539.

⁸⁸ Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 111-112.

Because *Pueblo Peoples* was specifically designed for a general audience, an overtly tribal-centric approach such as that adopted by Masayesva in *Hopiit* and *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* would likely be too alienating for mainstream viewers. But neither does *Pueblo Peoples* represent a wholly conversive narrative. What Burdeau achieves, in effect, is a subtle, but powerful juxtaposition of images, some that would be familiar to non-Native or non-Pueblo viewers and some that would not. Conroy Chino, for example, is a familiar face to non-Native Americans through his broadcasting career, but is also a member of the Acoma Pueblo, demonstrating that Native people can and do enter into high-status, high-visibility careers. The interweaving of the two versions of Zuni history is also extremely subtly achieved, using not only the narrative but also visual techniques such as high-contrast shots and dissolves. Thus, the realisation of the convergence of Mr Wystalucy's Zuni migration story and the more "textbook" rendition offered by Ortiz and Sando (and remember, they are also both members of Pueblo cultures) is extremely subtly achieved. One result of this convergence is the emphasis on the dynamic and adaptable nature of Zuni storytelling, whereby the story of Zuni origin/migration has developed to negotiate and mediate the shocking consequences of the arrival of the Spanish in Zuni territory.

What I am suggesting here is that by combining a conversive perspective with a tribal-specific approach, those elements that are common to both frameworks – the special and unique nature of tribal knowledge and a tribal epistemology arising out of a reciprocal relationship with nature – become moderated by those areas that are not common, such as the differing degrees of boundedness on an interlocutor's entry into the narrative. The result of this moderating effect, I am arguing, is that

there is ebb and flow to a viewer's interaction with the narrative that results in a subtly interruptive outcome.

Occasionally, however, Burdeau employs more overtly "interruptive" strategies, such as his technique of having the camera move across terrain and through tall grass as the narrative describes the arrival of Coronado's soldiers in Zuni territory, summarised as follows by Leuthold:

As the grass topples forward with our forward motion, we become the advancing Spanish. This sequence is followed by a close-up shot of a native hand sprinkling a sacred cornmeal line on the earth as a warning to stop advancing. The director then cuts back to the point of view shot, achieved by the relentless advance of the camera through grass and shrubs.⁸⁹

As Leuthold notes, Burdeau's choice of viewpoint may be inviting white viewers to consider their complicity in the European invasion of Pueblo land.⁹⁰ This, I would argue, is not interruptive in the classic sense practiced by Sarris; Burdeau's intent here is not to shock non-Native viewers into a reflexive stance, but rather it is to invite them to participate in the narrative of first contact between the Pueblo peoples and the European invaders, to emphasise the devastating impact of this contact for the indigenous peoples and to experience in a limited way the experiences of the Pueblo peoples, "without being encouraged to feel a part" of that world.⁹¹

Backbone of the World

Burdeau's 1997 film *Backbone of the World*, filmed on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana represented, for Burdeau, a return to the cultural and spiritual home of his

⁸⁹ Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 113.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ King, "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," 14.

people.⁹² At the time of filming, the sacred treaty land of Badger Two-Medicine was threatened by proposals for oil and gas development and one of Burdeau's primary motivations was "to give the Badger a voice in this film." The intricate relationship between place and identity for the Blackfeet people results in the "voice" of the Badger Two-Medicine becoming indistinguishable from the communal "voice" of the Blackfeet as Burdeau and his young team of Blackfeet videographers subtly interweave visual images with oral literature and personal testimony.

Backbone of the World opens with the voice of a tribal elder explaining, in English, the importance and difficulty of storytelling.⁹³ Her generation learned the stories from their grandmothers and her role is to pass the stories along to her grandchildren. As she speaks, a member of the film crew carefully cleans the camera lens with a cloth, symbolically, "wiping the warpaint" (of the invented Hollywood Indian), "off the lens."⁹⁴ The narrator then tells the legend, in her native language, of Scarface the Saviour, who received the gift of the Sun Dance on behalf of the Blackfeet people, as a montage of beautiful images of Blackfeet land fade up onto the screen. A further male narrator translates her words into English. The combination of storytelling through the male and female narrators and, finally, Burdeau and his film crew stresses the communality of storytelling and the "authorless" origination of the story. They are all conveyors but not originators of the story, which forms part of the body of Blackfeet oral tradition.

The Scarface legend not only frames the narrative and establishes the importance of oral literature to Blackfeet culture and identity, but also engages the

⁹² George Burdeau (director), *Backbone of the World* (Bozeman, Mon.: Rattlesnake Productions, 1997).

⁹³ The credits name the narrator as Mollie Kicking Woman.

⁹⁴ This image provided Singer with the title of her volume, *Wiping the Warpaint Off the Lens*.

audience in an active and reciprocal role by extending to them the opportunity to become part of the collaboration, their responses to the stories dialogically becoming an integral part of the storytelling process. As I have noted above, many Native made films employ the device of framing a film narrative with storytelling, and not all of them represent such an inclusive invitation to participate in the storytelling process. However, *Backbone of the World* is clearly intended for a wide-ranging audience and, as the continuing narrative makes clear, emphasises a willingness to engage Blackfeet worldviews and discourse in relation to the broader non-Blackfeet community, the storytellers' relationships with the audience becoming an active part of the narrative.

The sense of cultural dislocation experienced by some members of the contemporary Blackfeet community is a constant theme and is expressed using words, images and camera techniques. A group of men, including the film crew, stand in a forest copse during winter. The camera is beneath them, pointing up at their chins. They talk about how hard it is to know how one should act when "out in the woods" because they no longer "know who [they] are... I don't know what ...to do sometimes. I think like I'm upside down." The camera beneath them rotates in an upside down circle, mirroring the confusion and dislocation of identity created by the tensions between American Indian and Euro-American discourses which, in turn, is symbolised by the struggle to protect the Badger Two-Medicine. The men pace back and forth, tossing into the symbolic arena created by the copse disembodied and truncated remarks that represent the conflict at the core of contemporary Blackfeet identity. "You're lost, you're in a circle." "You're still lost, you don't know where you're at half the time." "This is the way the sun hits your face." The film and its attempts to resolve these issues becomes an act of self-determination, a struggle to

“heal and forge a new identity,” which both parallels and encompasses the struggle to protect the Badger Two-Medicine.⁹⁵

Burdeau and his videographers are included within their own narrative on a number of occasions. For example, footage is included of the crew discussing a technical problem that occurred when they were filming a group of old women talking and obtained a visual but no audio recording. They decide to include the silent images of the “beautiful old women” which are run concurrently with the discussion. During another scene, when a woman pauses to consider an answer during her interview, Burdeau is heard to say, “Give me a wider shot,” and the camera pans around to him, members of his crew and technical equipment, recording them in the act of receiving her “story.” Members of the crew also contribute personal opinions and remembrances and are portrayed interacting with other members of the Blackfeet community within a “social” as well as “storytelling” context.

Personal testimony, tribal memory and communal history also provide important voices within the narrative and reveal the frictions and ambiguities that afflict the struggle not only to protect the Badger Two-Medicine, but also to reorient Blackfeet identity. As Burdeau films a ceremony, honouring those who died in the Baker Massacre of 1869, he muses on the problems of using film as a tool to represent and interpret the experience of a colonised culture. He questions whether it is “appropriate even to shoot [the ceremony]” and confesses to “having a hard time trying to follow in the old ways of filmmaking...I just can’t attach myself to it anymore.”

⁹⁵ Independent Television Service, “Backbone of the World,” n.p., available at <http://www.itvs.org/backbone/> accessed on 22 September 2001.

This combination of modern and traditional methods of storytelling parallels the interweaving of ancient legends and contemporary stories that signify the Blackfeet experience, but also places Burdeau in the role of elder or mentor teaching his skills to the young videographers, providing them with a new way of telling their stories. By self-consciously situating themselves within their own “storied consciousness,” the filmmakers acknowledge that the Blackfeet story is “them”, but that they are also the Blackfeet story. By appropriating and dialogically engaging with the language of film and interlacing it with traditional Blackfeet discourse Burdeau and his team of “modern storytellers” collaboratively succeed in supplying a voice for the Badger Two-Medicine, while simultaneously conveying both personal and collective narratives that cut right to the heart of Blackfeet identity.⁹⁶

It is likely that Burdeau, in wanting to give the sacred region of the Badger Two-Medicine “a voice”, wished that voice to speak to, not only members of the Blackfeet community, but also to those who desired to promote oil exploration in the region (the oil companies and the US forestry commission, for example) and also to raise awareness of these issues among liberal PBS viewers. The “willingness to engage Blackfeet worldviews and discourse in relation to the broader non-Blackfeet community” is born out by a comment made by Darren Kipp, one of the videographers who contributed to the making of the film both behind and in front of the cameras, in which he remarks that the sacred experience of Badger Two-Medicine is not confined to the Blackfeet, but is, in his opinion “a human issue,” particularly in terms of “defending the cultural rights of all peoples.” The narrative seems to me to be inviting its “audience” to consider the threat to the Badger Two-Medicine within the context of what is sacred in their own particular cultures.

⁹⁶ Independent Television Service, “Backbone of the World,” n.p.

Backbone of the World, then, is highly conversive in orientation. Although positing an indigenist conception of “special” and “unique” knowledge, the audience are invited into not only the stories told in the film, but into the story of the making of the film. The audience are explicitly invited to closely identify with the Blackfeet for the duration of watching the film, to become co-defenders of the Badger Two-Medicine. There may be a political motivation to this highly inclusive stance, as the film was part of a campaign by the Blackfeet to bring a halt to the drilling but, nevertheless, this narrative, I would argue, achieves a strongly conversive perspective in both production and performance.

However, although the narrative structure is explicitly inclusive, it is worth emphasising once again that *context* is crucial in shaping the meaning of an oral storytelling performance (and *Backbone of the World*, I would argue, is exactly that). The film was created by Burdeau and his videographers for the specific purpose of conveying a political message about the threat to Badger Two-Medicine. In another context, a very different interpretative approach to the story of Scarface bringing the Sundance to the people might be appropriate. For example, the Sundance religion is, of course, of absolutely crucial significance to many Blackfeet people, and thus the story of how Scarface brought this religion to the people is of equal significance. The story is part of a larger web of Blackfeet oral tradition and becomes more meaningful in relation to that larger web. In *The Sun Came Down: The History of the World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It*, by Percy Bullchild (Blackfeet), the story of how Scarface brought the Sundance religion to the Blackfeet people occupies the last sixty-three pages of a three-hundred and ninety page book that recounts a Blackfeet “history of the world.”⁹⁷ Lengthy in itself, Bullchild’s version of the Scarface story

⁹⁷ Percy Bullchild, *The Sun Came Down: The History of the World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 327-390.

is the product of all of the preceding stories, with context building up context building upon context. A reading of Bullchild's version of the story, I would argue, would be unlikely to be enhanced by adopting a conversive methodology because this would risk filtering out much of the tribal-specific grounding that provides the story with its meaning and power.

Furthermore, as is depicted in *Backbone of the World*, the surrounding landscape, both the land inside the boundaries of the Blackfeet reservation and areas, such as the Badger Two-Medicine, that have passed out of Blackfeet control have intense religious significance for the people. This is underscored in an interview with Curly Bear Wagner during which he likens drilling for oil on the Badger Two-Medicine to bulldozing a Christian church. The non-Native oil executive to whom Wagner makes the observation rejects the comparison but, as Burdeau's purpose is to cast the oilmen as the villains of the piece, it behoves him to encourage his viewers to identify with his Blackfeet collaborators and thus any sense that non-Blackfeet viewers have only limited access to Blackfeet tribal aesthetics is kept to a minimum. In *Backbone of the World*, then, Burdeau demonstrates that oral tradition can be manipulated and presented in specific ways to "outsiders" in order to achieve a specific political goal, emphasising the importance of taking context into consideration when developing interpretive methodologies for Native narratives.

The Witness

Burdeau's 1997 film *The Witness*, co-directed with non-Native Kieth Merrill, was specially commissioned by the Mashantucket Pequot as one of the exhibits in the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, which opened on the

reservation in 1998.⁹⁸ What is of significant interest about this film is that it can *only* be seen in the museum as part of the exhibits and it is therefore contextualised in a particular and unique way. The museum is adjacent to the Foxwoods Resort and Casino situated on the Mashantucket Pequot reservation in Connecticut, and is funded by profits from that enterprise, as was the making of *The Witness*.⁹⁹ As a result of the excellent funding available, the production qualities of the film were unsurpassed, and involved a cast and crew of over four hundred members.¹⁰⁰

Filmed in 70mm IMAX format, the thirty minute film runs continuously on two screens in the heart of the Mashantucket Museum.¹⁰¹ The museum is organised in such a way that visitors must negotiate a generally chronologically arranged series of exhibits providing detailed information not only on the history of the Pequot peoples up to and including the Pequot War, the subject of the film, but also the *place*, the specific geography of the area that now encompasses the Mashantucket Pequot reservation, from the ice-age onwards.¹⁰² Having reached the IMAX cinema, the corridor in which audiences must wait for the next screening is a continuation of these exhibits, contextualising the events – political and historical – leading up to the

⁹⁸ George Burdeau and Kieth Merrill, *The Witness* (Mashantucket, Conn.: Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, 1997).

⁹⁹ Foxwoods is the most financially successful Native American casino, with estimated profits in 1998 in excess of \$1 billion. The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center (MPMRC) opened in 1998 at a cost of \$193 million and is the largest museum owned and operated by Native Americans in the Americas. Figures quoted in John D. Bodinger de Uriarte, "Imagining the Nation with House Odds: Representing American Indian Identity at Mashantucket," *Ethnohistory* 50, no.3 (Summer 2003): 549-550.

¹⁰⁰ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 226, 228.

¹⁰¹ "Museum Documentary: *The Witness*," *InCamera* (October 1999): 21; Scott Marshall, "Super Panavision 70 on an Indian Reservation," *70mm: The 70mm Newsletter*, no. 63 (2000), available via <http://hjem.get2net.dk/in70mm/mgazine/backissues/2000/63/witness/witness.htm>, accessed 4 March 2002.; Rod Miller, "*The Witness*," *70mm: The 70mm Newsletter*, no. 60 (2000), available via <http://hjem.get2net.dk/in70mm/magazine/backissues/2000/60/witness/witness.HTM>, accessed 4 March 2002.

¹⁰² A discussion of the specifics of the exhibits is beyond the scope of this chapter. See the museum website at <http://www.pequotemuseum.org> for detailed information.

war, on both macro and micro historical levels, through a series of fixed and interactive exhibits including interactive video screens where “talking heads” – historical figures played by actors – deliver their perspective on events.

A brief consideration of the genesis of the Mashantucket Museum and Research Center is necessary in order to understand the context behind the making of the film. The Mashantucket Pequot reservation, which currently has a population of over three hundred and fifty, had, in 1972, only two permanent residents, following a series of historical circumstances from colonisation onwards that had led to Pequots and their descendents being scattered over a large area, and often associated with other tribal cultures. The state of Connecticut planned, on the deaths of the two residents, to turn the land into a state park. When Elizabeth George Plouffe, died in 1973 her grandson, Skip Hayward, returned to the reservation and implemented a repopulation programme that consisted of inviting current and potential Pequots to return to live on the reservation. Various business enterprises were incepted and efforts made to gain federal recognition and the return of illegally seized lands, both of which were successful in 1986.¹⁰³ Because of this unique history and partially as a result of challenges to the Pequots’ policies for attracting and authorising potential tribal members, Bodinger de Uriarte argues that the museum represents,

an important site wherein the Mashantucket Pequot produce authenticating narratives and images, both as American Indians in general and Mashantucket Pequot in particular....The MPMRC indicates how the Mashantucket Pequot utilize discourses and practices of museum curatorship and science – including anthropology and archaeology – to further validate their claims to a historical continuity with both putative Mashantucket Pequot ancestors and with the larger community of Indian peoples on the continent.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, personal visits; Further information on the history of the Pequots is available at the museum website, <http://www.pequotmuseum.org>; see also Bodinger de Uriarte, “Imagining the Nation with House Odds,” 557-560.

¹⁰⁴ Bodinger de Uriarte, “Imagining the Nation with House Odds,” 550.

This brief contextualisation provides the background for the genesis of both the museum and the film, with obvious implications for how a context-specific approach to interpreting the film might develop. The film opens with a caption explaining that in 1634 the Pequot sachem Tatobam was kidnapped, ransomed and murdered by the Dutch. Tatobam's son, Sassacus, the new sachem, retaliated by killing an English Captain, John Stone. Attentive viewers, in fact, will already know this, because, as noted above, the route into the cinema contains an exhibit that contextualises the historical background to the Pequot war and the main players. The timeframe jumps forward to 1697 and an old man, Wampishe, the Story Keeper of the Pequots, walking through a forest with his grandson. Wampishe gives his grandson ceremonial wampum and tells him the story of the massacre, symbolically passing on the role of Story Keeper to the child. "Listen with your ears and with your heart," Wampishe tells his grandson, as his voice fades away and the action cuts to Wampishe as a young man, walking through the same forest in 1636. In what Kilpatrick refers to as a "blending of oral tradition and film art," Young Wampishe does not speak throughout the film, but the narration is continued by the older Wampishe – "As a boy I had dreams that spoke to me in ways I didn't understand" – as he passes the story on to his grandson.¹⁰⁵ The emphasis here is on Wampishe's role as a *witness* to history and as such, he does not need to speak. Only as he passes on the story he has kept all his life do his words become of crucial importance to the life of his tribe. With the exception of Old Wampishe's narration, most of the Pequot characters in the film speak their Native language, translated into English via subtitles.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 225; Kilpatrick's analysis of the film is excellent, but is based on access she had to the rushes during the making of the film, and does not therefore consider it within its specific contextual location as part of the museum's exhibits.

Young Wampishe watches the beautiful and impressive English ships sail up the Pequot river carrying men, money and guns. Sassacus decides to send Kipoquam, a respected member of the tribe who is like a father to Wampishe, to speak to the English. This angers Uncas, Wampishe's uncle and a Mogehean sachem. Uncas was a real person who played a significant role in the eventual defeat of the Pequots. According to Kilpatrick, he was banned from his own tribe on five occasions, each time managing to get himself reinstated. Eventually he organised the mobilisation of the Narragansetts and the Mohegans against the Pequots on the side of the British, adding a thousand more men to the one hundred and sixty brought by the English.¹⁰⁷ Historical contextualisation in the narrative, however, is kept to a minimum, because this information has already been presented to audiences in the preceding exhibits.¹⁰⁸

Wampishe is assigned the role of the Keeper of the Story because, as Old Wampishe tells his grandson and the audience through his narration, "It is through the story that we survive." Young Wampishe accompanies Kipoquam to the English ship as a "witness" to events. Kipoquam boards the English ship in full ceremonial dress and asks the English Captain what they have come for. The Captain replies that they seek justice for the murder of an Englishman, specifically for "the heads of the killers of Captain Stone." Kipoquam explains that Captain Stone was killed because their own sachem, Tatobam, was murdered, flashback footage of which is shown, in black and white. The Captain responds, "They were Dutch, not English." Kipoquam replies, in English, that "Dutch and English both strange to Pequots," but

¹⁰⁶ The language used in the film is actually the related language of Passamaquoddy, as the Pequot language has been largely lost.

¹⁰⁷ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 225.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

agrees to negotiate with the English, if only to buy a little time. The Captain is wryly amused by Kipoquam's unwillingness to distinguish between the Dutch and the English but the irony here is clear, given the tendency of contemporary Europeans and Americans of European descent not to differentiate between distinct Native American cultures.¹⁰⁹

The English, led by Captain John Endicott, subsequently ignore Kipoquam's offer of negotiation and attack the Pequot encampment, killing thirteen Pequots. Sassacus seeks an alliance with the Pequot's longstanding enemies, the Naragansetts, but, as old Wampishe tells us in his narration, the "Naragansett resolved to join the English. They remembered the long hostility with the Pequot." As Kilpatrick correctly observes such details help to undermine the stereotype that the "New World" was "a Garden of Eden populated by innocents" and instead reinforces the concept that the American continent, and in this case the northeast, had a long and complex pre-contact history of its own.¹¹⁰

In response to the English attack, the Pequots ambush the English settlement of Weathersfield, kidnapping but not harming a number of women and children to exchange for Pequot prisoners. Wampishe picks up a bonnet dropped by one of the kidnapped English girls and later gives it to his little sister in the fortified palisade village in which they live. Later, partly in slow-motion and to the accompaniment of an impressive score, the Pequots lead the English soldiers into a brutal ambush, the Pequot warriors having concealed themselves in the fallen leaves of the forest. Such contrasting behaviour reinforces the complexity of culture and history and underscores Pequot responses to the English settlers and soldiers. Even Uncas is

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 226.

represented as a character of contrasts and conflicts as his request to John Mason, the English Captain brought in to end the siege, that women and children be spared because “it is our way.” Mason’s dismissive response, “Of course,” is later shown to be false as women and children in the Pequot village are brutally murdered. In another scene, Uncas bursts into a meeting of the English leaders and deposits a sack of Pequot heads on the table in front of a surprised but approving Mason.

Kipoquam and Wampishe are sitting by the embers of a fire. A dog barks and they look up to see the English advancing. Wampishe hides under a bearskin in a house as the English attack the Pequot settlement. Kipoquam threatens revenge as the whole village is burned. Wampishe’s mother is shot as she runs out of a burning house with her back on fire and her daughter in her arms. A soldier stands over her and shoots again, killing her daughter. We see a corn dolly resting by the dead child’s hand.

An injured Kipoquam instructs Wampishe to flee. He must survive because he is the Keeper of the Story. Wampishe runs through the burning village and escapes over the defensive palisades. At sunrise, Wampishe walks through the charred remains of the village, ashes and burned bodies litter the ground. He finds the bodies of his mother and sister and weeps as he places the corn dolly in his dead sister’s arms. We learn from Old Wampishe’s narration that “over six hundred of our people were killed at Mystick Fort. In the year that followed, many of our people were hunted down, killed or sold into slavery. Sassacus was murdered by the Mohawks and his head was given to the English.” The penultimate scene of the film portrays a soldier reading the terms of the Hartford Treaty to surviving Pequots in chains. “To establish peace among the remaining tribes, captive Pequot shall be given as slaves to the Naragansett, the Mohegans and the English....use of the name

Pequot is herewith forbidden forever.” In the final scene, Old Wampishe sits with his young grandson by a river and waterfall. He says to his grandson, “You are Pequot. You are a child of our ancestors. You must honor them and preserve the land where our people lie buried. You must keep this story. You must keep the land. Now you are the Keeper of the Story.”

Flora E.S. Kaplan, in an essay that considers museum exhibitions as “communicative media,” points out that exhibits,

communicate through the senses...by a process that is both cognitive and cultural. This process encompasses the way people think about what they see and the meanings they attach to it. Thus, within given historical and cultural contexts, exhibitions are kinds of public, secular rituals in the Durkheimian sense of social representation of collective “self.”¹¹¹

Kaplan goes on to describe how the message conveyed by a particular exhibit is facilitated for the viewer by the contextualising and placing of it in relation to other exhibits.¹¹² Kaplan’s observation is crucial in terms of developing a context-specific strategy for interpreting *The Witness*. The process of positioning of exhibits to which Kaplan refers has implications for the way in which audiences may engage with the film as exhibit. As noted above, prior to seeing the film, historical and cultural contextualisation is provided through a series of exhibits detailing Pequot land and Pequot life from pre-history, through to the seventeenth century when the events depicted in the film occurred, and, having exited the cinema, though onto the present day. However, what is unique about the Pequot museum and the film’s strategic positioning within it is (1) that the museum is located on or near to the land where the events took place and (2) the stipulation that one must visit this precise

¹¹¹ Flora E.S. Kaplan, “Exhibitions as Communicative Media,” in *Museum, Media, Message*, ed. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 37.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 41.

geographic location in order to engage with the film.¹¹³ As such, the juxtaposition of exhibits as cultural communication to which Kaplan refers extends beyond the confines of the museum space and outside into the larger environment of the Pequot landscape.

As Womack has argued, tribally-specific epistemologies often arise out of an indigenist relationship to landscape, which may or may not be the landscape of a given tribe's original homelands. However, the Pequots' relationship to their tribal homelands has been disrupted, almost to the point of permanent foreclosure, which likely has negative implications for the manifestation of a specifically Pequot tribal intellectualism based on a relationship with the land. Bodinger de Uriarte notes a certain degree of flexibility to Pequot survival strategies, which he argues are "framed within an elastic identity... able to shift tribal affiliation or ethnic identification while maintaining a recognition of significant antecedents and a sense of remaining Mashantucket Pequot."¹¹⁴ He goes on to add that the reassembled Mashantucket community "owes as much to genealogical and biological reckoning as it does to a recognition of an imagined community."¹¹⁵ I would append his observation to note that it is also dependent on a reassertion and reimagining of Pequots' relationship with the land and that by permitting audiences to watch the film only in the one specific location, they are not so much inviting audiences to participate in this reimagining, but positioning the audience as *witnesses* to the

¹¹³ It is unlikely that many of the museum's visitors have travelled specifically to see the film. The majority of the museum's visitors are tourists visiting the adjacent Foxwoods Casino, scholars visiting the museum's substantial research centre, or organised parties of local schoolchildren. Bodinger de Uriarte notes that the museum is within two hours driving distance of over twenty million people, so the pool of "local" schoolchildren is quite substantial. See Bodinger de Uriarte, "Imagining the Nation with House Odds," 559.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 551.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

process. Not only is Wampishe a witness to the history of the Pequot War, the museum's visitors are witnesses to the tribe's attempts to forge and authenticate a new cultural identity. The tribal specificity here comes not from an implicit understanding of what it means to be Pequot, in the way that Masayesva innately understands what it means to be Hopi, but from the confluence of historical, cultural and geographical conditions that have led to the current and ongoing effort to define and authorise what it means to be Pequot.

Conclusion

Despite the ambiguities inherent in the relationship between American Indian discourse and film and the cultural responsibilities incumbent upon American Indian filmmakers, Masayesva regards the medium as a force for “radical empowerment,” and stresses the impact for indigenous cultures of experiencing their own language and people on screen. He argues that, “experimental films and videos can be defined by the degree to which they subvert the colonizer’s indoctrination and champion indigenous expression in the political landscape.”¹¹⁶ Masayesva recalls an incident following a recording session with Mr Macaya, who later suggested that they record certain elements he had omitted from his story that day and splice them back into the sequence. Masayesva recalls that this was the point when he realised Mr Macaya had become an active participant in the filmmaking process rather than a passive subject.

These are the moments when collaboration between the camera and the subject truly begins. The participants become engaged in circular time, in which space is no longer separated forever into past and present but becomes unified in community time – when the elders pass on their knowledge to the new generation of knowledge holders,

¹¹⁶ Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism,” 233-234.

when patient camera technique and the relating of minutely observed events ensures survival.¹¹⁷

Masayesva's observation about Mr Macaya's transformation from subject to participant is significant in understanding the relationship between the interactive, culturally meaningful practice of storytelling, and the collaborative and interactive process of film and video making in Native American communities. Burdeau notes, from a pan-tribal perspective, the "incredible, empowering capability" potentially offered by modern technology in terms of interactive communication.¹¹⁸ Any attempt to interpret Native American film narratives, then, must strive to account for this interactive orientation, in terms of its implications not only for the production of film narratives, but also in terms of their performance, and the strategies undertaken by filmmakers in order to control the flow of information, depending on the context.

There is a clear divide between the films of Masayesva and Burdeau, in that Masayesva seeks to create a Hopi aesthetic for a predominantly Hopi audience, whereas Burdeau seeks to communicate with a broader, more diverse audience. The films of both directors function as resistance to colonialism, despite their seemingly diametrically opposite approaches to presenting Native experiences on film. In terms of similarities between the two, I would argue that both directors exhibit an indigenist orientation that posits special or unique Native knowledge. The difference is that Masayesva, in accordance with the secretive nature of Hopi culture, reflects that unique knowledge back in on itself, whereas Burdeau takes a more inclusive approach, with the clear intention not only of making Native films for Native people, but to teach non-Natives about Native American cultures as well.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 114-115.

As such, there is a clear demarcation between the effectiveness of the three methodological strategies for interpreting Native American film. For example, because Masayesva is overtly tribally-centred in orientation, obviously, a separatist, tribal-centric approach provides for an effective reading. However, because of the specific nature of Hopi attitude towards knowledge, a separatist approach provides very little potential in terms of cross-cultural readings undertaken by non-Hopis. Sarris's storytelling approach provides a useful supplement. However, the discussion regarding Bahn-Coblans's imposition of a film protocol indicates that even where a narrative is interruptive, exposing the interlocutor's limited understanding, the steps the interlocutor takes to rectify that limit may seek to replicate old patterns of dominance, as in the case of Bahn-Coblans, who sought to re-gain "control" over Masayesva's narrative.

Conversive approaches are particularly problematic when faced with a tribal-centric view such as the Hopi that values secrecy and privacy, as they require the scholar to enter into the storied world of the narrative. Not only would Hopis probably regard this as unethical, I suspect it would be a near impossible project on the part of a non-Hopi scholar. Conversive approaches work very well for Burdeau's narratives as they are by definition cross-cultural projects, as well as being inclusive and opening in orientation. However, by considering each of the narratives on an individual basis it becomes clear that, for example, *Backbone of the World*, is open to tribal-centric interpretations, based on the body of Blackfeet literature that is used to frame the narrative. Thus, even in the case of individual filmmakers, authors, or artists, I would suggest, it is not possible to select a standardised approach and I would conclude that treating each narrative on a context-specific basis provides the best opportunity for tailoring an effective methodological framework.

CONCLUSION: SYNTHESISING A CONTEXT-SPECIFIC
APPROACH TO INDIGENOUS NARRATIVES

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

Thomas King (Cherokee), *The Truth About Stories*

You sound strange.

Old Indian Man in Santa Fe

Vine Deloria, Jr., (Standing Rock Sioux) in *Red Earth: White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact*, argues that the primary function of graduate education is to “ensure that people wishing to become scholars and scientists are rendered socially acceptable to people already entrenched in the respective traditions.”¹ Deloria goes on to explain his view that the requirement in doctoral study for “creative and original scholarly work which advanced the knowledge of the world in some significant way,” has fallen by the wayside, replaced by a process of filtering out potential candidates whose radical positions might “disrupt the discipline.”² Clara Sue Kidwell (Choctaw-Chippewa) and Alan Velie point out, somewhat less polemically, the unique challenges facing graduate students in Native American studies programmes:

Although they may find supportive mentors in certain departments, they are held to standards of scholarship that reflect institutional values and norms. When they come with specific ideas about the kind of research that they feel needs to be done for the benefit of their communities, they may meet with resistance from faculty advisors. If a student has a predetermined conclusion, the advisor has reason to believe that the research cannot be objective. The

¹ Deloria, *Red Earth, White Lies*, 38.

² *Ibid.*, 38-39.

future of the discipline of Native American studies depends upon the development of new methods in the training of graduate students, methods that will balance the demands of the academy for objective research with the culturally-based knowledge of community needs that Native students bring to universities.³

Developing just such a balance, between the requirements of the academy – which I have characterised as the acquisition of knowledge that is explicit and unambiguous and therefore communicable in written research papers – and the nature of knowledge in Native epistemologies – that tends to be implicit, ambiguous and subject to a long process of reflective cognition within culturally meaningful settings – has been a major concern of this dissertation. One of the key paradigms for discussion identified by Kidwell and Velie is the tension between *advocacy* and *objectivity*. This involves recognising that while their stated position that indigenous studies is an expression of sovereignty is a political position and an act of advocacy, it ought to be taken as a given and not have to be *proven*, in the same way that the stance of objectivity, which should also be considered a political position, has for centuries also been taken as a given.⁴

The issue of advocacy is a difficult one for non-Native scholars working in the field of Native American studies. There is something vaguely patronising about the concept of non-Native scholars *advocating* in support of Native communities and, as scholars such as Deloria, Devon A. Mihesuah (Choctaw), Kidwell, Angela Cavender Wilson (Dakota), Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), Donald L. Fixico (Creek/Seminole/Shawnee/Sac and Fox), Craig S. Womack (Creek-Cherokee) and Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) have demonstrated, non-Native scholars do not need non-Native scholars to speak for them. A more acceptable definition of advocacy, then,

³ Clara Sue Kidwell and Alan Velie, *Native American Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 135.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

might be for non-Native scholars to acknowledge and respect indigenous sovereignty and epistemologies and to consciously work to highlight the limits on scholarship that arise out of conflicting epistemologies, and to developing methodologies that seek to bridge indigenous and academic philosophies of knowledge. Of course, this definition, and its assumption that bridging the gap between indigenous and academic philosophies of knowledge is a good thing, is not entirely without its problems.

Mihesuah and Fixico have both raised the important question of who benefits from research into Native American communities – the researcher or the community?⁵ In terms of anthropological or historical research that involves scholars interpreting specific tribal cultures the issue of who has benefited, the community or the scholar, is fairly simple to quantify.⁶ In the field of literary and film criticism, excluding ethnologically oriented analyses of oral traditions, the issue of what constitutes the Native “community” is difficult to define. Would this community be, for example, the tribal affiliation of a given writer or filmmaker, or the tribal culture about which she or he creates narratives, if different? Or would this community be more amorphous, incorporating tribal peoples more generally? A third option exists, which is to view Native filmmakers and writers as constituting a specific type of community in their own right. This, of course, raises the additional question of how Native writer-filmmaker communities themselves relate to tribal-specific or pan-tribal communities. As Louis Owens (Choctaw-Cherokee) notes in *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, a very significant proportion of publishing Native writers hold university degrees and often, also,

⁵ Mihesuah, introduction to *Natives and Academics*, 8-10; Fixico, *The American Indian*, 126.

⁶ See Mihesuah, introduction to *Natives and Academics*, 8-10 for examples.

graduate degrees, and their experiences and sensibilities do not necessarily reflect those of other tribal members.⁷

With regards to who benefits from this particular piece of research, my own position is that, of course, I have benefited. My research will hopefully result in a doctorate, perhaps a job teaching in a university and, if I'm lucky, a book contract. However, there is also a more abstract benefit to me, as an individual, in that researching Native American narratives has been a mind-broadening experience, in the sense of learning about cultures and worldviews other than my own, but also in the sense of having been prompted to reflect on my own culture and my position within it. Who else will benefit from this research? I hesitate to make grandiose claims about fostering intercultural understanding and breaking down barriers of communication. I see no direct benefit, for example, to the Hopis in my interpretations of Victor Masayesva's (Hopi) films. However, there may be an indirect benefit in that by conducting the research, I have come to understand that, as a non-Hopi scholar, certain limits apply on my access to and interpretation of Hopi culture, which must be a positive outcome from the perspective of Hopis who wish to promote "cultural property" as a means to protect tribal cultural knowledge. If I can successfully communicate in relatively unambiguous terms what I have come to understand implicitly, experientially and through reflection over a period of several years study then, yes, I would hope that my research benefits not only myself and other scholars but also Native peoples in general. Here, I support Greg Sarris's (Kashaya Pomo/Federated Graton Rancheria) contention that scholarship in a Native American context should be an ongoing "endeavor aimed not at a final transparent

⁷ Owens, *Other Destinies*, 7.

understanding of the Other or of the self, but at continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both.”⁸

Kidwell and Velie argue for an interdisciplinary approach to Native American studies, which, because it encourages students to develop “a variety of ways of thinking about a single subject,” complements the exposure to a variety of tribal cultures and epistemologies that students may encounter.⁹ Kidwell and Velie make their comments in relation to the broader field of Native American studies, but I would argue that their observation is also resonant in the specific endeavour of creating cross-cultural strategies with which to approach interpreting Native American narratives. In other words, on a microcosmic level, a strategy that draws on a variety of approaches enables the development of customised critical frameworks that are informed by the precise context of the production and interpretation/performance of a given narrative. Development of such a strategy, and an exploration of its potential and limitations, has been the principal goal of my research.

Arnold Krupat notes that the three categories of cosmopolitanism, indigenism and nationalism, into which he argues the majority of contemporary approaches to Native American studies fall are “overlapping and interlinked so that each can only achieve its full coherence and effectiveness in relation to the others.”¹⁰ As such, by definition, the borders around Krupat’s categories are somewhat nebulous and objections may arise to my choice of categorisation of each of the three works, Sarris’s *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*,

⁸ Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 6.

⁹ Kidwell and Velie, *Native American Studies*, 135.

¹⁰ Krupat, *Red Matters*, 1.

Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez's *American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition* and Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*.

Sarris's interruptive storytelling practiced in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, for example, is cosmopolitan in the sense that Sarris takes an explicitly cross-cultural, mixedblooded, borderlands perspective. However, it must also be noted that Sarris eschews the assumption of hybridity that underpins Krupat's definition, rather focusing on difference and the exposure of preconceptions. It is also worth noting that for the main, despite his mixedblooded perspective, Sarris grounds his discussion specifically within a Pomo context, and his experience, as an individual of mixed ancestry, within a Pomo milieu. As such, a tribal-specific reading of *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* offers interesting possibilities.

Brill de Ramírez's conversive literary scholarship is undoubtedly based on a conception of indigenous knowledge as special and unique and, in that sense, represents an indigenist approach. However, indigenist approaches are also often characterised by an epistemology arising out of a geocentric relationship with a specific cultural landscape and Brill de Ramírez's focus on universality and the entry of non-Native scholars into tribal story worlds undermines that geocentric impulse. It must also be said that, despite not being explicitly located within a cosmopolitan, bicultural or mediative methodology, Brill de Ramírez's insistence on unreflectively penetrating Native story worlds represents what Womack might identify as an attempt by a non-Native scholar to create a place for herself within Native American literary criticism.¹¹

Womack's literary separatist stance undoubtedly falls within Krupat's definition of a nationalist approach. However, given that Womack's nationalist,

¹¹ Womack, *Red on Red*, 141.

sovereign approach to interpreting Creek literature is predominantly born out of an immersion with Creek oral tradition that arises out of a geocentric relationship with Alabama and Oklahoma, clearly an indigenist methodology is also an appropriate choice.

In terms of my own research and my aim of synthesising a flexible critical approach incorporating the most valuable elements of interruptive storytelling, conversive literary scholarship and tribal-specificity, on a context-specific basis, it would seem, according to Krupat's definition, that I am a comparative cosmopolitanist:

The cosmopolitan is more nearly – to coin an oxymoron – a well-organized *bricoleur*. Aware that casual eclecticism can lead to critical and political irresponsibility, and doubting the flexibility of a true *ingénieur*'s systematicity, the cosmopolitan would cobble her criticism out of a variety of perspectival possibilities... the cosmopolitan takes very seriously nationalist and indigenist insights, although her own position is that it is unwise to be bound too rigorously by either the nation or traditional knowledge.¹²

A comparative cosmopolitanist I may be, but, like Sarris, I would challenge Krupat's assumption of hybridity as a condition of all Native American discourse, emphasising rather that, within a cross-cultural context, as all my interpretations by definition are, the choice of either a methodology that stresses hybridity, or a methodology that is itself hybridised (synthesised) out of a number of strategies is a context-driven choice, and not necessarily a given.

A significant problem that my research has highlighted relates to the difficulty, for non-Native scholars, of substituting a satisfying experiential aesthetic for intellectual closure, which, I have argued, is compromised by non-Natives' outsider status because they lack the cultural authority required to meaningfully incorporate their personal narratives into a dialogue with Native narratives. As

¹² Krupat, *Red Matters*, ix.

Deirdre Keenan notes, insider/outside status “raises serious issues about the relationship between knowledge and experience.”¹³ The problems associated with incorporating personal narrative into scholarly writing do not, of course, mean that scholars should abandon a reflexive approach, but they do raise questions regarding how much reflexivity is appropriate and in what way it should be recorded.

Although a scholar, as audience member, is jointly responsible for the construction of the meaning of the story, the unique context of each encounter ensures that the only interpretation of any text I can be authoritative about is my own specific and unique interaction, with the proviso that I acknowledge the context which means I must be honest about the places in the story I cannot go, as well as the places I can. I have, on a number of occasions throughout this dissertation, discussed “the audience” for given Native narratives and the implications the demography of certain audiences has for interpretation. My reference to those audiences in the third person, does not, of course, mean that I am outside of the audience and not complicit in its contribution to meaningfulness, but I would question the value of continual self-reference by non-Native scholars. Not only does it make for very dull reading, it also risks achieving the opposite of its intended effect and drowning out Native voices.¹⁴ Furthermore, as my discussion of Sonja Bahn-Coblans’s “film protocol” relating to Masayesva’s *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* (1984) in Chapter 5, indicates, being aware of one’s own epistemic location does not necessarily ensure that what Elaine Jahner calls “reflexive resonance,” will be achieved.¹⁵ Synthesising a context-

¹³ Keenan, “Trespassing Native Ground,” 182.

¹⁴ See David Brumble, *American Indian Autobiography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 88-83 and Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 84, n.5 for a discussion of Vincent Crapanzano’s self-reflexivity in *The Fifth World of Enoch Maloney* and *The Fifth World of Forster Bennett*.

¹⁵ Sonja Bahn-Coblans, “Reading with a Eurocentric Eye,” 47-60; Jahner, “Trickster Discourse and Postmodern Strategies,” 38.

specific approach, I hope I have demonstrated, allows for non-Native scholars to develop “reflexive resonance” without resorting either to navel-gazing, or to presenting second-rate facsimiles of the mixed-genre approaches of scholar-writers such as Vizenor, Sarris and Owens.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn argues that there are two fundamental stages of scientific knowledge. “Normal science,” during which theories and research tools operate within paradigms attracting broad consensus, and “extraordinary science,” during which these previously dominant paradigms cease to function effectively and are replaced with new paradigms. The new dominant paradigms are said to be incommensurable with the former dominant paradigms and thus a scientific revolution occurs.¹⁶ I hope this research has contributed to the ongoing efforts of scholars in the field, both Native and non-Native, to highlight the incommensurability of Native American and academic philosophies of knowledge, and the need to strive for a paradigmatic revolution in which the explicit, unambiguous closure valued in academic discourse no longer occupies a position of authority over the experiential, implicit reflection of Native epistemologies.

There is an epilogue to my meeting with the old Indian man in Santa Fe. On enrolling at the University of New Mexico the following week, I dropped my intended class on the Vietnam war, and picked up instead a class in Native American literature, where I had the great good fortune of being taught by the late Professor Louis Owens. I still do not know what my encounter with the old Indian man meant, and writing it down in this dissertation has not closed the experience for me, but it

¹⁶ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Maurice Charland, “The Incommensurability Thesis and the Status of Knowledge,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 36, no. 3 (2003): 248-263.

transpires that the lady psychic who took the old Indian man's place on seat was right when she told me I would soon be going on a journey.

In honour of Professor Owens, and all the other writers and storytellers who have shared their stories with me over the last eight years, I would like to share a story of my own. It was told to me by a schoolteacher of mine, when I was about thirteen, during an art and design lesson. I cannot remember the teacher's real name, only that we referred to him, disrespectfully, as Jesus, on account of his long hair and beard. "Jesus" was an accomplished artist and had decorated a screen in the class, all green and grey whorls, in the midst of which he had painted an egg. One day, probably when we were being particularly inattentive, "Jesus" told us the story behind the painting.

Merlin was walking across the moor. He did not know how he had come to be there, and the mist was dense, settling around him like a bright cloak, so that he was walking almost blind, finding his way only by the thud of his feet against the ancient rocks that scattered the moor, rocks that were the backbone of the world. He carried an egg in his hands, but could not remember how he came to have it. It was precious, that much he did know. The egg was leathery in Merlin's hands and it glowed, a warm, green radiance that suffused into the swirling mists. Merlin held up the egg and the light intensified, so that it lit up the bones beneath the flesh of his fingers. He peered closely into the egg, and fancied he saw a shimmer of movement within. Then he blinked and the egg was still and cool.

Merlin walked. He walked for days without stopping, sleeping, eating. He walked through the bright mists for so long that he forgot his mother's name, and his own name. And all the time, he cradled the egg in his palms. And then, in an instant, the mists melted away, and it was a spring morning. The egg began to warm,

a hint of green light shimmering across the leathery shell. Merlin started to dig a hole. He placed the egg carefully in the crook of a rock, knelt, and dug with his hands, tugging up the worms and the rich, dark earth. And he buried the egg, deep down at the bottom of the hole. As he covered the egg, pressing the earth down on top, the loam glowed green with the power of the egg. Merlin covered the place with a stone, brushed the earth off his hands and looked at the dirt beneath his fingernails. He could remember his name again, and thought that his mother's name would probably come to him with time. Merlin began to walk, to where he didn't know. It was the beginning of a journey.

The story about Merlin and the egg haunts me. I would like to tell you what it means but, like my encounter with the old Indian man in Santa Fe, I'm still thinking it over.

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