

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA  
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MIXEDBLOOD METAPHORS: ALLEGORIES OF NATIVE AMERICA IN THE  
FICTION OF JAMES PURDY

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MICHAEL E. SNYDER  
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MIXEDBLOOD METAPHORS:  
ALLEGORIES OF NATIVE AMERICA IN THE FICTION OF JAMES PURDY

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY

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Dr. Timothy Murphy, Chair

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Dr. Ronald Schleifer

---

Dr. Craig Womack

---

Dr. Rita Keresztesi

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Dr. Julia Ehrhardt

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## ABSTRACT

“Mixedblood Metaphors” analyzes the Native American aspects of seven novels, one novella, and a few short stories by the U.S. author James Purdy (1914-2009). Purdy’s engagement with indigeneity includes the creation of Native American and mixedblood characters, allusions to Native history and culture, and the use of figurative language. This engagement forms an integral part of Purdy’s historical and racial allegories of America found in these works. I argue that Purdy’s allegories engage troubling aspects of American history, exposing the violence and rapacity of Euro-American colonialism, and serve as a critique of American myths such as Manifest Destiny, “wide open spaces,” and white supremacy. While most non-Native writers neglect to mention Native Americans at all or are only able to imagine them as doomed, vanished, or absent, Purdy regards Natives as central to the formation of a truly American identity. Purdy imagines a new American character potential that blends the best qualities of Europe and aboriginal America and suggests the grim consequences of our failure to meet this potential. Purdy also makes rhetorical links between indigeneity and same-sex desire, alluding to the same-sex and gender diversity traditions of most Native American tribes. Purdy positions himself as a “metaphorical crossblood,” an ethical position that builds upon what I call his “imagined ancestry,” sympathizing with Native perspectives. Although he initially focuses on criticizing Euro-Americans and pointing to Native victimization, with increased knowledge of Native literature and activism, over the course of his career Purdy’s optimism for Native Americans develops and he eventually comes to advocate Native claims, and finally, tribal sovereignty. Thus I argue that Purdy

is a non-Native writer whose work benefits from a Native Studies approach along with those of American Studies and Queer Theory. Purdy should be regarded as an exploratory figure toward what Jace Weaver, in the critical context of American Indian Literary Nationalism, has called the non-Native critical ally.

CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCTION AND CRITICAL METHODOLOGIES

We who are under the ground,  
indians & voyagers & wilderness men  
still breathe the bloom of plants in air  
and think of the running sun

—James Purdy, “The Running Sun”

PRELUDE

James Purdy (July 17, 1914-March 13, 2009) lived for fifty years in a small apartment in Brooklyn Heights, New York City. In this modest space, with a kitchen, bedroom, and workspace occupying the same room, the late author created almost all of his astounding novels, plays, and poems. I am sad that I was never able to meet James Purdy in person, not least because I came so close. It was my fortune, however, to have had a few good conversations with him on the telephone. James Purdy’s close friend, assistant, and sometime amanuensis John Uecker arranged for me to meet him and I purchased my plane ticket, but Purdy’s health declined quickly following an accident which left him with a broken hip, and I was unable to meet him. Although I was devastated by his loss, I came to feel that there was actually something appropriately Purdian about my having missed meeting him.

John Uecker, who has been an actor, acting coach, and theatre producer,<sup>1</sup> was kind enough to allow me to see James's apartment at 236 Henry Street prior to its contents being removed. After ascending a narrow, winding antique staircase, and upon entering the writer's apartment, the visitor passes a closet door on the right. It might be easy to miss the small *Diné*, or Navajo, sandpainting replica of the emblematic figure Bat which rests on the ledge over the closet door. Opening the door, one is struck by a colorful Native American-styled dreamcatcher mounted on the wall to one's left, just inside the large closet. Walking past the closet into the main apartment area, one spies framed photographs, hats, compact discs, and other personal objects covering what appears to be a Navajo rug laid across an antique dresser.

The nature of these objects and their placement in James Purdy's apartment struck me as being highly significant and symbolic for a few reasons relevant to my project. First, in James Purdy's creative works, Native American characters and tropes are often subtle or even hidden. They are fairly consistently present in his oeuvre but sometimes placed out of sight of the casual reader, just as these objects might be overlooked by a casual visitor to the apartment. Second, questions of authenticity, appropriation, and appropriateness surround such objects that are, as in the case of the dreamcatcher, simulations, or as in the case of the Navajo sandpainting and rug, removed from Indigenous contexts. Likewise, similar questions are raised by Purdy's fictional Native American figurative tropes and characters, the latter usually lacking Native communities. The lack of Indigenous communities in Purdy's works and the tenuousness of some of his characters' Native ancestry raise the crucial question of whether it is possible to be an

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<sup>1</sup> John Uecker's Running Sun Theatre Company was named after a collection of Purdy's poetry and produced some of Purdy's dramatic works.

Indian without a tribal community. Lastly, the symbolic and cultural connotations of things that are “closeted” or being “in the closet” connects to my exploration of Purdy’s rhetorical linkage of male same-sex desire and indigeneity, and his startling illustrations of the concomitant disastrous effects of denying one’s desires and one’s ethnic heritage, emphasized especially in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) and *Narrow Rooms* (1978), discussed in chapter three.

I describe Purdy’s Navajo sandpainting, which derives from Shiprock, New Mexico, as a “replica” because bona fide Navajo sandpaintings are deliberately ephemeral and not to be viewed by outsiders. They are created only by Singers, or Navajo medicine men, to heal a Navajo person who has lost balance, within a sacred ceremonial context only. The sandpaintings are meant to be destroyed after their use in the healing ceremony. During this healing process, the person who requires healing is actually seated upon the image. Purdy’s small sandpainting resting over the closet is, of course permanent; its sand granules forming Bat are glued to a small piece of particleboard. This practice of making permanent sandpaintings or weavings of their traditional patterns began only well into the Twentieth Century, and these replicas are deliberately incomplete or contain intentional errors, to avoid incurring the harm of violating taboo. A *Collectors Guide* article on Navajo sandpainting reports that “today, many Navajos create ‘sandpaintings’ with colored sand on glue-covered particleboard, a technique dating to the 1930s . . . these are commercial efforts, some quite elegant, and strictly secular: intentional alteration renders the design harmless to buyer and seller alike” (“Where”). To traditional *Diné* peoples of the Southwest, Bat is “an intermediary to the divine, bridging the supernatural distance between men and gods. Bat serves as

mentor of the night,” writes poet and Navajo Studies teacher Stan Renfro. It is appropriate that Bat was hung near the entrance of Purdy’s apartment, because in iconic sandpaintings such as “Father Earth and Mother Sky,” Bat, “the sacred messenger of the spirit of the night, guards the sand painting at the opening in its border,” Renfro writes.

The dreamcatcher hung inside the closet was a gift to James from his friend Elaine Benton, John Uecker told me. Dreamcatchers, although they have been appropriated by non-Native New Agers, have their origins in the Ojibwe (also known as Chippewa, or Anishinaabe, as they call themselves) nation. Dreamcatchers were traditionally used to ensnare bad dreams to protect the peace of sleeping children. As will be discussed, fittingly, James’s maternal great-grandmother was said by family members to have been one-eighth Ojibwe, as Purdy states in an autobiographical essay (“James” 299). The dreamcatcher that I saw in Purdy’s closet is unusual in that instead of featuring webbing strung across the hoop, a leather circle has been stretched within the larger circumference of the hoop with leather thongs, and objects are affixed to the leather. These affixed objects (a shell, a beadwork pattern, and what appears to be a small medicine bundle) reveal some general knowledge of Native American culture in the craftsperson who constructed it, but no particular tribe is suggested. The feathers that hang from the bottom of the hoop are pink, giving the object a kitschy look.

Elaine Benton, who in her correspondence with James gave herself comically Purdian nicknames, was aware of James’s interest in Native American culture and his claim of possibly having Ojibwe ancestry, and enjoyed joking with him about it. They were close during the mid-1980s, during which James was composing his novel most explicitly concerned with Native Americans, *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986), which

features many Ojibwe characters. During the composition of this novel, Purdy was sharing his stories and thoughts about Native Americans, and also manuscripts of the work-in-progress, as evidenced by correspondence of that period to Purdy from friends and editors including the Dutchman Jan Erik Bouman, Johan Polak (Athenaeum Press), Obadiah Kerr, Betsy Sussler (*BOMB* magazine), and the author Paula Fox, held by the Ohio State University Special Collections. After James had been hospitalized in 1984 to have a polyp removed from his vocal cords, Elaine Benton wrote him an undated get-well card with the message: “I continue the throat healing dance with Chief Swallow Well, who silently joins me in this nightly ritual. He is a good dancer but does not tap as well as you.” The somewhat unusual appearance of the dreamcatcher that she gave him seems to fit the tone of her card, which acknowledges but also teases Purdy’s interest in Native America.

The symbolic connotations of these objects—the sandpainting, the dreamcatcher, and the obscured Navajo rug—and their placement mirror or foreshadow aspects of Purdy’s Native American characters and tropes that I explore throughout *Mixedblood Metaphors*. These aspects include their obscured quality, their ambiguity, their isolation or lack of cultural context, and their potential controversy.

## INTRODUCTION

The past ten years have seen a growing revival of interest in the work of novelist, short story writer, playwright, poet, and artist James Purdy, evidenced by, among other signs, a recent upswing of scholarship and the formation of the James Purdy Society earlier in the decade. Two promising signs of this revival came in 2005: first was Gore

Vidal's laudatory and lengthy essay review in the *New York Times* that corresponded with Carroll & Graf's reissue of selected Purdy novels; then later that year, Jonathan Franzen, acclaimed author of *The Corrections* (2001), nominated Purdy's powerful novel *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) for the Clifton Fadiman Award for Excellence in Fiction, bestowed upon an overlooked novel ripe for rediscovery. In the award speech Franzen stated: "Mr. Purdy's novel is so good that almost any novel you read immediately after it will seem at least a little bit posturing, or dishonest, or self-admiring, in comparison" (Franzen). For Franzen and myself it was indeed this dark, witty, and insightful novel, with its character Daniel Haws—who ignores his Indigenous ancestry and denies his love for another man—that hooked us, made us seek out more of Purdy's works, in my case everything he ever published. Purdy causes Franzen and Warren French (as we'll see) to question the established reputations of writers as familiar as J.D. Salinger and Saul Bellow. Echoing Purdy's earlier advocates across the decades, Franzen stated that Purdy "has been and continues to be one of the most undervalued and under-read writers in America."<sup>2</sup> *Selected Plays*, a much-anticipated and delayed collection of four plays edited by John Uecker, was published during the completion of this project, in June 2009.

The resurgence of interest in Purdy is connected to larger changes in American Studies, evidenced by the landmark anthology *Futures of American Studies*, edited by Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman. Along with other relatively recent fields such as working-class studies and gender theory, the impact of queer studies upon American

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<sup>2</sup> For a collection of early (1950s through early 1970s) quotations by famous writers and artists, culled from letters and reviews testifying to Purdy's talent and genius, please see my "Appendix: Envoi for James Purdy."

Studies has been profound. Purdy, whose work frequently deals with sexuality, queerness, and repression, has begun to attract a bit more interest from critics in this field. This new attention is enabled by the decentering of American Studies that has been occurring since the 1960s, produced by the work of post-hegemonic and anti-hegemonic scholars and critics collected in that edited anthology.

Using eight novels, a short play, and a handful of short stories, my project discusses and critiques Purdy's representation and use of Native American characters, along with mixed-blood or crossblood "white" characters having some Native ancestry, his engagement with the history of Native-white contact, and his deployment of figurative language alluding to Indians. This project avails itself of the approaches of Native American Studies (Weaver, Warrior, Vizenor, Owens, Cox, Womack), those of American Studies (Lawrence, Fiedler, Pease, French) and Gay and Queer Studies (Sedgwick, Butler, Corber, Morrison), all of which can be productively applied to Purdy's body of work to highlight and engage the neglected social, cultural, and political contexts and aspects therein. I utilize these methods, along with more traditional literary-critical strategies such as *allegoresis*, couched in historicism, to elucidate James Purdy's engagement with Native American history, representations, identity, and culture, which are foundational to his racial and national allegories of America that challenge American myths.

Purdy hinted at such figurative resonances in his work when he stated to *World Authors 1950-1970*, "I can describe my novels as I see them as American, imaginative, symbolic" (1173). Purdy's historical and racial allegories expose the violence of the settlement of America and critique foundational and enduring American myths, such as

American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, wide open spaces, and white supremacy. These American myths have been used historically to justify colonialism and the forced acculturation of indigenes. Embracing the notion of mixed race and the figure of the mixed-blood, James Purdy argues implicitly through his allegories, especially in the novels discussed in chapter three, that America's potential can only be fulfilled with a two-way assimilation between Red and white, a spiritual, cultural, social, and even genetic merging.

Following but extending D. H. Lawrence's poetic argument for the need for a new Indianized American character in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Purdy in many of his fictions examines and sometimes implicitly endorses a merging of European and Indigenous attributes.<sup>3</sup> Evidencing Purdy's social and cultural critique, he argues that Euro-American racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia, complicit with and enabling of colonialism, have hindered this merger. Looking back at the colonizing of the Americas, Cuban revolutionary and poet José Martí in "Our America" writes: "the wise thing would have been to pair, with charitable hearts and the audacity of our founders, the Indian headband and the judicial robe, to undam the Indian, make a place for the able black, and tailor liberty to the bodies of those who rose up and triumphed in its name" (*History*).

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<sup>3</sup> My citations of D. H. Lawrence, especially in chapter three, are not meant to exalt the modernist poet and novelist or position him as above criticism. Certainly Lawrence is vulnerable to charges of exoticism or even a well-meaning form of neo-colonialism. He tended to see the Indigenous as an antidote to civilization, thus forming two sides of a problematic binary. Lawrence did however attempt to be self-critical and wrote that "White people always, or nearly always, write sentimentally about Indians . . . The highbrow invariably lapses into sentimentalism like the smell of bad eggs" (qtd. in Lincoln 6-7). I find Lawrence's poetic phraseology useful in articulating Purdy's American ideal, and feel that Purdy was influenced by his *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Native Americanist Kenneth Lincoln writes, "Drawn by what he saw as cultural animism and natural ceremony in Native American tribalism, Lawrence broke with European encrustations" (7).

But clearly this is not how colonialism worked or how history unfolded. The obstacles placed in the road toward a merger between the European and “the Indian” are seen to come mostly from the Euro-American side, but are not limited to them. Sara Winnemucca Hopkins writes in her autobiography that Paiute children “are taught to love everybody” (45), and remarks, “we call all good people father or mother; no matter who it is,—negro, white man, or Indian, and the same with the women” (39). Hopkins tells of travelling to California as a girl with a party of whites. When her grandfather witnessed the Captain whipping African Americans “who were driving his team,” he went to his fellow Paiutes and declared that “he would not travel with his white brothers any longer” (24).<sup>4</sup> The original editor of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins’ autobiography, Mary Mann (the wife of education reformer Horace Mann) wrote of the failure of white America to recognize what could be gained by mutual respect and cultural exchange: a blending of shared knowledge benefitting all. She notes that Native children are taught to study and derive knowledge from plants and animals, and continues: “It is not unlikely that when something like a human communication is established between the Indians and whites, it may prove a fair exchange, and the knowledge of nature which has accumulated, for we know not how long, may enrich our education as much as reading and writing will enrich theirs” (52). Referring to D. H. Lawrence, Philip Deloria, who is of Dakota Sioux heritage, writes that “the indeterminate nature of American identities stems from the nation’s inability to deal with Indian people” (5). Leslie A. Fiedler writes, “With the darker races, white Americans have . . . inevitably mixed, mingled, even mated . . . but *they have not assimilated to them*” (*Waiting* 115, italics in original). In crossblood Osage

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<sup>4</sup> As will be discussed in chapter five, however, many Native Americans, especially the “five civilized tribes,” owned African American slaves and supported the Confederacy in the Civil War.

author John Joseph Mathews' historical novel, *Wah'Kon-Tah*, based on the diaries of the Quaker Indian agent, Major Laban Miles, he laments, "It seemed to the Major that the two races would never meet, and that there would be no one with sympathy and understanding sufficient to interpret the Indian"; toward the Osage Miles feels "a sort of respect and admiration that was almost inscrutable" (41). As Purdy implies through the often violent conclusions of his earlier novels, the failure to realize this potential has been disastrous for America. Therefore the proposal of "two-way assimilation" is not so much about Natives needing to become more European, but Euro-Americans needing to become more aboriginal in order to become truly American.

Throughout our shared history, Indigenous peoples of North America integrated selected European technologies, forms, and practices, from the horse to the novel to the computer, while retaining a traditional base of culture. In a landmark 1981 essay, Acoma Pueblo poet and author Simon Ortiz stresses "the creative ability of Indian people to gather in many forms of the socio-political colonizing force which beset them and to make these forms meaningful in their own terms" (8). In *Red on Red*, Muskogee Creek critic Craig S. Womack argues 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," rejecting "the supremacist notion that assimilation can only go in one direction" (12). Accordingly, Purdy does not wish Native Americans or immigrant ethnic minorities to lose their traditional culture. Purdy was against full assimilation to the white dominant culture and the "melting pot" model of ethnicity in America. After James moved from Allentown, Pennsylvania to a diverse neighborhood in New York City with his partner, chemist Jorma Sjoblom, he wrote a letter of 10 August 1957 to his

friend, Welsh author John Cowper Powys: “Here I am in an entirely different world. *It is just as much a ‘melting pot’ as ever, and I don’t think they will ever get everybody ‘melted’ down here, which is good.* It will be an awful day when they get everybody MELTED!” (my emphasis). The “melting pot” model in the discourse of America promotes a homogenous, slightly off-white vision of America subservient to the norms of the dominant culture, rather than the pluralistic, multicultural model preferred by writers like James Purdy, Ishmael Reed, and Gerald Vizenor. In John Joseph Mathews’ *Wah’Kon-Tah*, just as Purdy wants to see ethnic minorities retain their special traits instead of being assimilated, the Quaker Laban Miles believes that if the Osage people “were allowed to develop in their own way, and retain their admirable characteristics, that they might add brilliance to the brilliance which he felt sure would someday be America’s” (142). Seeing the Osages as a potential contributor to a brilliant pluralistic America, Miles does not wish for Osages to be left in total isolation in a questionable state of racial “purity,” but neither does he want them to have Euro-American cultural and economic systems crammed down their throats as a consequence of white rapacity for resources, an all-too-common outcome of Westward Expansion.

Although critics have often had difficulty seeing the social and political critique in his work, Purdy stated in a letter to Webster Schott that “All of my work is a criticism of the United States, implicit not explicit” (qtd. in Schott 300). Purdy’s obsessive investigation of American origins, ancestry, and identity constitutes what he calls “an exploration of the American soul” (qtd. in Malin “James” 540). English critic Stephen D. Adams, the author of an insightful monograph on Purdy, perceptively calls this Purdy’s “cumulative endeavor to chart the ancestry of the national psyche” (*James* 113). This

concern is a vein that runs across Purdy's entire career. "You see, people say I don't like the United States. But I *am* the United States. You can only hate what you love, what you are a part of," Purdy told a Dutch television interviewer in 1990, in the only known video recording of the author.

Before elaborating my critical position and method, in this introduction I will take a lengthy detour to trace the history of Purdy's critical reception in order to explain how and why social, cultural, and political contexts have been glossed over or largely ignored in his work. The neglect of the broader relevance of Purdy's fictions is in part a product of the impoverishment of the contemporary definition of allegory. Critic Don Adams states that "Purdy's allegorical texts . . . are innately revolutionary in their implicit and explicit political argument," but this has been neglected because critics misunderstand the multiple, polyvocal qualities of Purdy's allegories (6). Then, using examples from Purdy's first collection of stories, I will suggest how approaches from Queer Studies, feminism, American Studies, and Native American Studies are illuminating and restorative of Purdy, highlighting his work's broader social and cultural contexts. Brief readings of early short stories will be undertaken to reveal how Purdy's social and cultural critiques were nearly always latent, ready to be unpacked, but overlooked.

## IMPASSES OF CRITICAL RECEPTION

Aside from a handful of recent tributes, many of the encomia Purdy received from prominent literary and cultural figures (see appendix) arrived relatively early in Purdy's career. Purdy suffered critical neglect since the mid-seventies, which is perplexing given the continuing quality and imaginative fecundity of his output. *Malcolm* (1959) was a

career-establishing work, the subject of a stack of published analyses (the abundance of extant criticism is one reason I do not analyze it here), and at one time was frequently taught in undergraduate literature courses. Although *Malcolm* is a rich, imaginative, and fascinating novel, within the scope of Purdy's entire oeuvre it does not even rank in the top tier of his novels (in this reader's opinion). So the question arises, why did Purdy not go on to become a canonical American author? Why did his work fall into semi-obscure? The answers to this question will blaze a trail leading to my central argument about Native American representations and figurations in Purdy.

The first reason for his obscurity is that his novels are difficult to categorize, working as he does in various genres and combinations of styles, including surrealism, realism, minimalism (in the early stories), postmodernism, American Gothicism, camp, classical tragedy, Jacobean revenge tragedy, satire, parody, fantasy, roman à clef, allegory, and fairy tale. Publishers and consumers like to have a "fix," a pigeonhole for writers, and Purdy's style is fluid and his works heterogeneous. To appreciate a unique author like Purdy, we must take a cue from Derrida's concept of singularity. In a dialogue with Elizabeth Roudinesco titled "Choosing One's Heritage," Derrida stated that in his readings of philosophers and theorists, he "strives" in each case "to respect the idiom or the singularity of the signature . . . Singularity as such (whether it appears as such or not) can never be reduced, in its very existence, to the rules of a machine-like calculation, nor even to the most incontestable laws of any determinism" (*For What Tomorrow* 7).

Another unfortunate reason for Purdy's neglect, in part a product of his Cold War historical context, was the effect of negative criticism skewed by homophobia, which will

be explored more fully in chapter three in relation to *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967). Don Adams writes, “Manifest and latent homophobia no doubt lies at the root of much of the neglect of and hostility to Purdy’s fiction” (2). *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* and *Narrow Rooms* (1978) represented an explicit engagement with male same-sex desire, and in the latter case, sex between men, and demonstrate the terrible effects of repression. As will be shown, these novels received censure either laced or heavily freighted with homophobia. But these reviews only brought to the surface what was latent all along: an undercurrent of homosexuality runs through his work from the beginning, though it is subtle and was not always grasped by early reviewers. One early reviewer, however, fixated upon the queer reverberations, manfully consigning Purdy to “the limp-wrist school”: “His characters are weak and indecisive, their preoccupations infantile” (Sundel 25). Alfred Sundel’s puerile homophobic invective is disturbing to read today.<sup>5</sup> “Purdy’s world is close to Capote’s—a very special one of hopelessly effeminate male imagination,” we are told (26). Sundel is blind to Purdy’s social and cultural critiques implicit in such stories as “Man and Wife,” “You May Safely Gaze,” (which deals with repressed same-sex desire), “Don’t Call Me by My Right Name,” and “Why Can’t They Tell You Why?,” collected in the book he assails. According to Robert J. Corber in his book *Homosexuality and Cold War America*, “in the 1950s, even supposedly progressive critics denied the importance of gay male writers, claiming that their criticisms of postwar American society were insufficiently political” (1).<sup>6</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> Sundel uses the word “faggot” seven times in one paragraph in facetiously summing up 63: *Dream Palace*—in 1961 the editors of *The New Leader* apparently took no issue with this deployment of hate speech (26).

<sup>6</sup> In an essay on Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal uses homophobic language rhetorically: “During the forties and fifties the anti-fag battalions were everywhere on the march. From the high lands of *Partisan Review* to the middle ground of *Time* magazine, envenomed attacks on real and suspected fags never let up. A *Time* cover story on Auden was killed when the managing editor of the day was told that Auden was a

attitude continued into the sixties, even the early seventies, as evidenced by homophobic responses to Purdy.<sup>7</sup>

Sundel and other backlash critics, although much more overtly homophobic, ally themselves with and vulgarize the conclusions of Leslie A. Fiedler, who, in discussing trans-ethnic male “innocent homosexuality” in the canon of U.S. literature in such critical works as *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), concludes that this pattern registers a lack of maturity, a flight from domesticity, and arrested development in our literature and national character. In contemporary literature, Fiedler “interpreted the popularity of gay male writers not as a sign of the emergence of a new form of politics but as an indication that left-wing intellectuals had abdicated their political responsibilities,” writes Robert Corber (1). For example, Fiedler maligns William S. Burroughs and other gay writers in his 1965 essay “The New Mutants.” In *Wising Up the Marks*, critic Timothy S. Murphy writes, “Fiedler in particular brought the moral denunciation of Burroughs full circle by aligning his aggressive homosexuality with what Fiedler piously saw as the ‘feminization’ of American writing of the sixties, a tendency Fiedler thought must be counterrevolutionary in its passivity” (8). Like Burroughs, Purdy’s representations of male homosexuality are not effeminate, but rather linked with vigorous masculinity, sometimes with the Indigenous warrior. Dismissing Fiedler, Gore Vidal remarks that “there is something wrong with a critical bias that insists on, above all else, ‘dream and nightmare, fantasy and fear,’ but when faced with the genuine article in the books of William Burroughs or James Purdy or Paul Bowles, starts to back off

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fag. From 1945 to 1961 *Time* attacked with unusual ferocity everything produced or published by Tennessee Williams” (“Some” 1136).

<sup>7</sup> Reviewer Paul Bailey complained that *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972) “is about as commanding as a limp wrist,” using the same homophobic rhetoric that Sundel deployed eleven years earlier (159). This wonderful novel was above his head and beyond his imaginative limitations.

nervously, lighting candles to The Family and all the other life-enhancing if unsmiling aspects of American life that do *not* cause AIDS or social unrest” (“William” 206).

Sundel’s was the first appearance of what might be called the homophobic critical backlash. Purdy was maligned or dismissed by certain avowedly straight male critics, who sometimes seemed to be intentionally delivering a hatchet job to degrade his literary reputation. This, however, actually provided Purdy with oppositional energy, turning him into a fighter, a “word warrior,” in Gerald Vizenor’s phrase (one to be recalled when we consider his metaphorical cross-racial identification with the Native American). Sundel makes it clear that he is reacting to the praise of Purdy’s patroness Dame Edith Sitwell (see appendix for examples), whom he mocks with sexist rhetoric. Some of the most egregious examples of homophobic backlash are Stanley Edgar Hyman’s chapter “The Correction of Opinion” in his critical collection *Standards* (1966), Geoffrey Wolff’s sneering review of *Jeremy’s Version* (1970) for *Newsweek*, and two reviews of *Eustace Chisholm* (1967) by novelists Nelson Algren and Wilfrid Sheed, the latter two discussed in chapter three. Misunderstanding Purdy entirely, and lacking a sophisticated sense of narrative, Hyman and Wolff confuse his narrators’ voices, which deploy idiom and colloquial language, with the author, and therefore speciously and absurdly conclude that Purdy has trouble writing proper English. Not only was Purdy a literary genius, he was also a polymath, who taught Spanish at Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin for nine and one-half years (1946-1956), studied at the University of Puebla in Mexico (summer 1945), and taught English at the Ruston Academy in Havana, Cuba during the 1945-1946 academic year (Miller, *Dictionary* 422). Travelling in Spain, Purdy “fell in love with” the country, along with Cervantes’s story *Rinconete and Cortadillo*” (Purdy,

“James” 299). Purdy earned a BA teaching degree in French from Bowling Green State Normal College (class of 1935), today called Bowling Green State University and taught French at Greenbrier Military School in West Virginia (Auer). He earned a Master’s degree in English from the University of Chicago (1937) and studied Spanish there during the 1944-45 academic year (Miller, *Dictionary* 422), and at one time read Ancient Greek. Purdy’s sophistication and erudition, along with his prodigious literary gifts, defy such assessments that are fuelled by rank homophobia.

A third reason for Purdy’s neglect is that Purdy is a challenging writer whose rippling symbols, allegories, and historical referents in their multiplicity can seem murky or impenetrable to the reader. As Derrida recommended, one must respect the singularity of the Purdian signature, entering the text in the spirit of openness. Reviewing *Mourners Below*, Gary Krist offers an apt metaphor applicable to several of Purdy’s more opaque works:

If critics can be likened to rock climbers, then *Mourners Below* is a sheer scree slope, offering countless apparent critical footholds, but none . . . strong enough to bear the weight of complete interpretation. The book seems to call for all manner of critical approaches—psychoanalytic, archetypal, even phenomenological—yet it cannot be made to cohere in any of these systems. The book remains elusive, and this fact, while certainly inconvenient for the critic, is perhaps the novel’s greatest strength. Unlike many works that fit neatly into the syntax of a specific critical language, *Mourners Below* is a work that cannot be easily assimilated critically. It retains its mysteries to the very end.

The key word is “easily.” As will be discovered in this dissertation, productive, sustained readings can even be derived from Purdy’s most difficult allegorical work. Purdy is not a perverse or deliberately difficult writer; rather, he is an “unconscious writer” who has

stories he must tell, as he has stated in multiple interviews<sup>8</sup> (Lane 72, Lear 60). Walter Benjamin writes in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* that “allegory emerges from the depths of being,” the unconscious (183). Like his acknowledged spiritual antecedents Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, Purdy’s prose is dense with symbolic and allegorical significance, and his allegories are subtle and complex and can operate on multiple levels. I will further discuss Purdian theory later in the introduction.

Due in no small part to the difficulty of deriving a coherent and sustained meaning or moral from the “content” of Purdy, critics have turned their attention to the postmodern, self-reflexive qualities of Purdy’s work which are said to unravel that content, especially in the novels *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964) and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967). The self-reflexivity in Purdy as viewed by such critics as Tony Tanner and Charles Newman is not a ludic language game but rather a Beckettian demonstration of the futility of language itself and our efforts to construct meaning with it. As critics such as Tanner have pointed out, most of Purdy’s novels have involved failed writers who give up their project at some point. Aunt Alma in *The Nephew* (1960) gives up her project to memorialize her nephew who has gone missing in the Korean War. The dark satire *Cabot Wright Begins* is about various attempts to write and publish a commercial book (ultimately titled *Indelible Smudge*) about a serial rapist, the title character, who is a consummate W.A.S.P. with an Ivy League education and pedigree. These attempts satirize in advance Truman Capote’s “non-fiction novel” *In Cold Blood*, serialized in *The*

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<sup>8</sup> In her memoir *Bloodlines*, Coeur d’Alene Indian author Janet Campbell Hale writes, “The intellect controls, selects, and rejects, yet the story doesn’t come from the intellect. It is brewed in the unconscious—fiction comes from the deeper, darker places in the writer’s soul, the same places that dreams come from, and, as in the making of dreams, the unconscious makes use of bits and pieces as it weaves its fiction tapestry” (11). Hale is also similar to Purdy in that she finds that there are stories that she must tell, that must flow through her: “I don’t get an idea for a story and then set about writing the story. I’ve got to let the story have its own way. I see myself, then, as the servant of my fiction rather than as using my fiction as a vehicle to convey my predetermined ‘message’” (13).

*New Yorker* the following year, and anticipates Bret Easton Ellis's urban predators (*American Psycho*, *The Informers*). The notion of a prototypical Euro-American male repeatedly committing rape should be kept in the background in considering Purdy's historical and racial allegories in the following chapters, including the Teutonic Captain Stadger's gruesome assault and violation of the assimilated indigene Daniel Haws; such scenes evoke the plundering of Native American resources, the rape of Native bodies and land. *Cabot Wright Begins* concludes with a line that Charles Newman calls "the most anticipated climax in all post-modern literature": "I won't be a writer in a place and time like the present" (228). Similarly, at the end of *Eustace Chisholm*, the title character's long poem about "'original stock' in America," which he has written on sheets of newspaper due to his poverty, goes up in flames.

In a seminal 1967 essay, Charles Newman, founder and editor of *TriQuarterly* and author of *The Post-Modern Aura* (1985), speaks of the self-reflexive turn in postmodern fiction, leading to the loss of "the omniscient voice, of admissible content itself" due to these authors' introspective doubts about being able to convey any stable meaning. To Newman, Post-Modern writers are thus epistemologically oriented and skeptical, concerned with "the nature of perception itself" (38, 42). Discussing *Cabot Wright Begins*, Newman notes that "in works as various in intention as *Pale Fire*, *Naked Lunch*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and *V.*, the greatest drama is whether the narrator will ultimately succeed in finding a form for his story," placing Purdy in esteemed company (43). Newman argues that Purdy is an exemplary postmodern writer because his authorial voice in *Cabot Wright Begins* goes "beyond omniscience," making no claims of having or being able to express knowledge via language. *Cabot Wright Begins*, an angry

exercise in satire and black humor, today seems like one of Purdy's lesser works, but it gave much food for thought to innovative intellectuals such as Sontag and Newman. In *City of Words*, a wide-ranging survey of U.S. literature from 1950-1970, Tony Tanner rated *Cabot Wright* as "one of the most important American novels since the war" (95).

Newman writes:

Cabot Wright is a parody of the archetypal American W.A.S.P. within the archetypal American picaresque—a refutation of both our national experience *and* the traditional literary embodiment of it. As in Nabokov, whom Purdy at his . . . best most resembles, a false crisis in life is the metaphor for a genuine crisis in art. Or, to put it another way, the struggle of the protagonist to overcome his environment is merely a refraction of the narrator struggling to overcome language itself. (47)

Purdy gives up all pretensions of explicative power, "every conceivable prop of omniscience" in *Cabot Wright Begins* (47). "Purdy certifies that if a novel is to mean anything in our day, it must have as its central proposition the question of its own existence," Newman writes, suggesting that Purdy was central to early theorizations of postmodern literature (47). As early as 1962, critic Eugene McNamara included Purdy among four writers that he felt, each in his individual way, represented "the post-modern novel," constituting a distinct and radical break from modernism. The only author among the other three who is considered postmodern today is William Gaddis, author of *The Recognitions*, a novel that Purdy admired<sup>9</sup> (Morrow 102). Unfortunately McNamara was unable to link the four authors thematically, or to identify attributes of this new postmodernity.

Calling Purdy's fiction "an extraordinary and original body of work which . . . addresses itself to the very problem of fiction-making itself" (85) English critic Tony

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<sup>9</sup> "I can see how William Gaddis is said to like my work, because we both come from that sort of puritanic small town in America," Purdy remarked to Bradford Morrow (102).

Tanner deployed a metaphor of “frames without pictures,” arguing that the contents of Purdy’s fictions undo themselves, dissolving what is meant to be central, the “picture.” “One of the underlying feelings in all Purdy is that while you are constructing the frame you are losing the picture,” Tanner writes (85). A gradual “inner collapse of things,” an “inward vanishing and fading away” haunts Purdy’s fiction, Tanner writes (90). In *Malcolm*, for example, Purdy “has written into the book proofs of the futility of its own undertaking” (93).

In his 1982 article “False Starts and Wounded Allegories in the Abandoned House of Fiction of James Purdy,” Donald Pease also stressed the way in which Purdy’s allegories undo themselves. Pease’s article in particular must be confronted because his argument would seek to undermine the type of project that I am undertaking (and that Don Adams has theorized). The article is derivative of Tanner and Maloff yet Pease acknowledges neither critic, nor does he significantly develop Tanner’s premise, but only paints an even gloomier and vaguely unflattering picture of Purdy. This in spite of the statement—in a 1978 piece for a reference work that Pease co-authored with Warren French—that Tanner represents “the most valuable assessment of his work so far” (409). Pease regards the production of modern allegory as inherently morbid, likening it to placing an ideal or insight in the mouth of a corpse (343). “Emptied of the possibility for any meaning but that projected onto him, an allegorical character really exists only as the allegorist’s compulsive wish to reconcile projection with character,” Pease writes (343). Pease fails to see the fecund multiplicity of Purdy’s allegories, ripe for multiple and overlapping readings. Like the early critics, Pease perceives only gloom and doom in Purdy, and claims, falsely, that Purdy, allegedly resembling his characters, is “so

detached from the surrounding world that he can mouth its language while remaining free of any commitment to it,” and says, again mistakenly, that Purdy, allegedly unengaged, is not “rebellious” (348). Pease’s interpretation here lacks imagination and acuity.<sup>10</sup>

Pease goes on to say that Purdy’s perspective is instead that of “an allegorist, but a disillusioned allegorist aware of the hollowness at the core of every idea he would project into the corpse he himself has, as we have seen, willed into existence” (348). In Pease’s ponderous if lyrical article, characterized by a portentous tone, he denies both the allegorical power and social and cultural critique of Purdy’s work. Pease also fails to acknowledge the linguistic richness, poetic qualities, and heteroglossia of Purdy’s work, reductively declaring that “Purdy’s language always works at the level of the cliché, the language of the corpse” (348). Purdy does often engage with cliché to achieve various purposes and effects, but his engagement is usually highly creative, poetic, and strategic, literalizing clichés or cleverly altering their structure to achieve particular functions, as will be discussed in chapters four and five. Pease’s assessment might have sounded brilliant and appropriate in a 1960s discussion of the early work, and is indeed relevant to aspects of his novels. But to speak of Purdy’s body of work (up to 1980, let’s say, to give Pease the benefit of the doubt) in these terms as monolithic reveals a lack of insight into Purdy’s development as an artist. Rather than using the imagination to realize the

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<sup>10</sup> Pease also speciously claims that Purdy’s point of view is “clearly not satirical,” although it patently is in certain works such as *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964) and short pieces like “Success Story” and “Mr. Cough Syrup and the Phantom Sex,” satires of the publishing industry and heteronormalizing critics. Mr. Cough Syrup, a man’s man and “normal critic,” was a parody of drama critic Stanley Kauffman. In a controversial *New York Times* article, “Homosexual Drama and its Disguises,” Kauffman argued that plays written by gay playwrights (whom, he states, do not know or care about heterosexual relationships and marriage, despite the fact that they were presumably raised within a family) such as Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, depicting the dynamics and conflicts of heterosexual couples, were really just homosexuals in drag, a “phantom sex,” to quote Purdy (Kauffman also attacked Edward Albee’s ill-fated adaptation of *Malcolm*). For an excellent rebuttal of Kauffman’s argument, see composer and diarist Ned Rorem’s *Later Diaries*, entry of 31 January 1966 (167-68).

multiple and productive allegories in Purdy, Pease reiterates the same line of critical thought that dominated the first wave of criticism, dressing it up in more poetic, sophisticated (and pretentious) language, clearly influenced by, and aspiring to, the language of then-contemporary “High Theory.” This approach is reductive and retrograde in an article published in 1982 which presumes to speak about Purdy’s entire oeuvre (Pease barely touches one of Purdy’s very best novels, *Jeremy’s Version*, and ignores two potent and mysterious novels, *In a Shallow Grave* and *Narrow Rooms*, both published in the 1970s). Therefore, even the estimable Americanist is ultimately a flawed reader of Purdy, because he fails to comprehend how allegory functions in his work and denies the work’s social, cultural, and political relevance.

Tony Tanner wrote presciently, “Purdy has never . . . been done justice by the leading contemporary critics, and one reason . . . is that they simply don’t know how to read his work” (“James” 62-63). French and Pease, however, reckon that if critics don’t stress the gloom and doom, this must mean that we are “simply not ‘tough-minded’ enough to cope with Purdy,” evincing a risibly masculinist standard of judgment (409). Therefore they accuse the gay critic Stephen D. Adams, a superior reader of Purdy and the author of the best book to date about him, of overemphasizing the affirmative elements of Purdy’s fiction—in other words, of being too romantic (read: effeminate) about Purdy and not “tough” enough to “cope” with the “grimmer side” that Pease maintains is the important thing about him. Such a critical attitude is unable to engage the social and cultural contexts and dimensions of Purdy’s work, largely because these critics are unable or unwilling to derive stable readings from Purdy’s multiple and fluid allegories.

This attention to language is a valid aspect of Purdy's work, building upon the initial wave of Purdy criticism. Indeed, Purdy should be credited, as he hardly ever is, for being one of the original postmodernist U.S. authors, a group that includes honorary American Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, John Hawkes, William Gaddis, and Robert Coover. These authors engage self-reflexively with the writing process and with language itself.<sup>11</sup> Ihab Hassan is one of the most insightful and creative theorists of post-war and postmodern American literature and is credited with contributing to our culture's understanding of postmodernity. In his *Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel* (1961), Hassan called Purdy, alongside John Updike (also recently passed) and Philip Roth, a "promising newcomer" (332). The passing of a few years saw Hassan's regard expanding, declaring Purdy to be "one of America's best writers" and citing his "profound insight" and "uncanny technical skill" ("Of Anguish"). In a later survey of post-war American literature, Hassan calls Purdy's prose "masterly," "diabolic and tender," and is stunned by "his extraordinary vision" (*Contemporary* 47, 48). Hassan's innovative, self-reflexive work *Paracriticisms*, which presented one of the earliest definitions of postmodern literature, evidences the high regard that many critics held for Purdy, juxtaposing his name with better-known figures. Discussing the categories of post-war literature that he regards as "quaint," Hassan writes, "Certainly,

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<sup>11</sup> The novelist and critic Mathew Stadler makes the case that Purdy was usually left out of the critical essays by postmodernist writers and critics dealing with these authors. "Purdy's work had been offered as an exemplary case of postmodern fiction by Ihab Hassan, the academic whom Barth credits with originating this particular critical frame." Yet in spite of the fact that "Barth said that a central aim of [postmodernist fiction] was to 'synthesize realism and anti-realism, linearity and non-linearity,' Purdy is nevertheless nonexistent in this canon" ("Theatre" 12). "Of the many circumstances which converged to push Purdy's work into the margins, this neglect by writers [such as Coover and Barth] whose professed hopes for the novel were consonant with Purdy's achievement is among the most discouraging," Stadler writes. Early postmodernist novelist John Hawkes was an exception. In a 1964 interview he placed Purdy's name on a list of international writers that match his concept of the "avant-garde," including West, O'Connor, Heller, and himself (143).

some exciting writers of the last two decades—Mailer, Barth, Vonnegut, Nabokov, Burroughs, Purdy, Barthelme—evade the old categories” (101).

But the postmodernist approach emphasizing self-reflexivity goes only so far in illuminating Purdy, and as Purdy has himself pointed out, the fact that he continued to write is an affirmative act, affirming life, the power of language, and the worthwhile nature of the enterprise of writing fiction. Unlike his characters, Purdy never gave up his fictional project; he never refused to be a writer in a time and place like his present, despite the brickbats thrown at him. The postmodernist approach tends to ignore the richness and splendor of what *is* inside Purdy’s work, the picture, the content, the subject matter. It ignores the wider social and cultural contexts of his work, upon which I will be focusing. It also tends to downplay Purdy’s wit, humor, and compassion. These arguments are valid, but by the 1980s they had become stagnant repetitions of a critical line that is not productive for reading his later work. To persist in using metaphors of crumbling houses of fiction and dissolving pictures is to avoid dealing with the complex development of social and cultural engagements in Purdy’s work. Although Donald Pease’s 1982 article is important, it should not be considered the last word on Purdy, but rather the terminus of this second wave of Purdy scholarship. There was relatively little scholarship published on Purdy in the 1980s and 1990s, compared to the previous two decades, and Pease’s totalizing gestures may have had something to do with this.<sup>12</sup> His

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<sup>12</sup> The readings of Tanner, Pease, and Newman, emphasizing what might be called Purdy’s “self-reflexivity of futility” evolved from the first wave of articles informed by existentialism, focusing on themes of the futility of communication and alienation. These earliest articles discussed the early short stories in *Color of Darkness* (1957) and to a lesser extent, *Children is All* (1962), along with his first two novels, *Malcolm* (1959) and *The Nephew* (1960). In an early (1960) work of criticism, Paul Herr speaks of Purdy’s “small, sad” world. Like Herr, Saul Maloff a few years later compares Purdy to Nathaniel West and Samuel Beckett, but creates a more complex, poetic, and sophisticated rendering of some of Herr’s points. Purdy’s “world,” according to Maloff evolves from “an exacerbated sense of life as grotesque and painful,

article reads as though its author wished to have the last word on Purdy, shutting a door rather than opening possibilities.

The problem is that many critics did not develop any new approaches to Purdy that kept up with the development of his expanding themes. In a 1975 book on contemporary fiction Jean Kennard goes no further than Herr, Maloff, and Tanner, despite the continuing developments in Purdy's fiction since the early 1960s. Rehearsing Purdy's trope of failed writers, Kennard stresses that Purdy is obsessed with the failure of communication in love and in art. Echoing Maloff and Tanner, she writes that his novels "give us the sense of attempted expression that fails, of art against its own impossibility" (84). This reiteration of past insights is an unimaginative form of criticism that totally ignores the colorful, rococo, fluid plays of language in *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972) and gives short shrift to Purdy's masterful narrative *Jeremy's Version* (1970). Early critics, especially Maloff, Schwarzschild, and Tanner, made perceptive points about Purdy's early work, but most subsequent critics failed to keep up with Purdy, mouthing the conclusions of earlier critics and failing to engage the later work.

Beyond failing to keep up with Purdy, the early critics failed to notice the wider social, cultural, political, and historical contexts of Purdy's work that were present or in latent form right from the beginning. Critic Theodore Solotaroff typifies this limiting attitude when he writes, "Purdy has worked up his material less from a social subject as

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anguished, incoherent, void—almost entirely—of meaning" (107). Purdy's recurrent and only theme, Maloff claims, is that of "loneliness, estrangement," and, forecasting Purdy's engagement with Native American crossblood characters—"the 'problem' of identity" (109). Maloff provides a bridge to the more linguistically-oriented critics to follow: "Purdy isolates the ordinary and transforms it untouched into fantasy, his own (deliberately) awkward, bare, restrained, not-quite-right language seeming to struggle for coherence, achieving, paradoxically, a perfection of effect and perception by falling just short, seemingly, of perfection" (111).

such than from his own intensely private way of looking at things” (156). Purdy, noticing this critical gap or neglect, remarked: “I don’t think there’s any writer living that has more social content. But [critics] don’t see that” (Lear 74). (Occasionally a critic or reviewer would see this, such as author Hilary Masters, who claims that “Purdy writes out of anger toward those institutions that have orphaned the American spirit.”) This failure to register the works’ broader relevance is the most significant reason why Purdy became critically neglected. His work was mistakenly seen as only intensely personal, and therefore a fictional “world” removed from socio-political concerns and even colored by esoteric fantasy. This view is often interconnected with Purdy’s putative difficulty. Therefore, the social relevance of even the early work was ignored by the early critics, and subsequent critics failed to notice how this aspect expanded and developed.

There were some exceptions. Critic Warren French, who has published several worthy pieces on Purdy, concluded a monograph on J.D. Salinger by criticizing Salinger’s nostalgic pining for childhood, adolescence, and “agreeable illusions,” and his withdrawal and disengagement from the social and his turn to the mystic, finally comparing him negatively to Purdy. French argues that although writers such as “Norman Mailer and Jack Kerouac . . . have capitulated—in different ways—to the stress of our time as much as Salinger, I find great encouragement in the tremendously witty but caustically critical short stories, novels, and plays of James Purdy” (169). Suggesting the social and cultural engagement that many critics fail to register in Purdy, French argues that Purdy’s first two novels “avoid both the pique of the Beats and Salinger’s wistful resignation,” voicing instead “a mature anger that matches the appalling apathy of our times” (169). French’s assessment of “mature anger” can be usefully opposed to Leslie

Fiedler's critique of American literature as stalled in adolescence, and to Pease's contention that Purdy is disengaged.

## SEXUALITY AND QUEER THEORY

Even though Purdy is a man who loves men, and his work consistently deals with homosexuality, up through 2009 there have been few significant "queer readings" of Purdy, and very few article-length studies of sexuality across his work. One of the rare exceptions is Norman Bryson's sophisticated and penetrating study of "the *nature* of a homoerotic discourse" and the built-in hermeneutic resistance within Purdy's novel *In a Shallow Grave* (83). To gay literary critic Reed Woodhouse, Purdy "ought to be—but isn't—an acknowledged father of modern gay literature" ("James" 24). This lack of attention is perplexing, given Purdy's rich and sustained engagement with "queer" ideas such as fluid or indeterminate sexual orientations and gender positions, predating the contemporary theoretical sense of the word "queer" as deployed by Judith Butler and others, to which I will return. Purdy also writes sensitively and masterfully about male same-sex desire. In *A History of Gay Literature*, Gregory Woods acclaims Purdy as "one of the most eloquent laureates of homo-erotic control, after Genet" (285).

Although it is rarely noted, Purdy critiques institutionalized homophobia in his touching, early short story "Man and Wife." Purdy tells the story of a gay man who has failed to accept his desires. He is married and does his best to try to be a "normal" man, but as a result of his perceived queerness, accusations of wayward looks, he is fired from his factory job and for no other reason. He confesses his lack of normalcy and manliness to his wife Peaches Maud, who doesn't want to hear this "mental talk" (*Don't* 37). This

man struggled to normalize himself and married in spite of his self-knowledge, hoping to dispel his desire in a conventional life. Purdy is sympathetic to his plight and even absolves him of some of the blame for his dysfunctional marriage, because his wife reveals that she had been told by his mother about his queerness, but she decided to take a chance anyway; thus, they both went into it with foreknowledge. We also sense the integrity of this man victimized by homophobia when he tells his wife that he will support her regardless of whatever happens. Allowing the husband to retain dignity, Purdy critiques the widespread homophobia of the Cold War period, a time during which a man or woman could lose a job over suspicions of homosexuality with no ramifications for the employer. Given that the story was first published in 1956, Purdy seems to obliquely comment upon Executive Order 10405, signed by Eisenhower in 1953, which allowed for the government to fire employees based on homosexuality. Communism was linked with homosexuality as “deviant” in the 1950s by Joseph McCarthy and his red-baiting followers (see Corber, *Abelove* 67, and Savran 4, 84-5). Gender and sexuality conformity were a social mandate. The American Psychiatric Association regarded homosexuality as a “mental illness” until 1974 (Paller 214).

Purdy mocks these strict norms in his 1964 novel *Cabot Wright Begins* through the character of Dr. Bugleford, whose program cracks down on deviates and endorses “heterosex,” “fun” marriage for all.<sup>13</sup> Later in the story, a newspaper headline reads,

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<sup>13</sup> Dr. Bugleford is likely modeled on the Freudian psychologist Dr. Edmund Bergler (1899-1962), to whom Purdy sent his early books and with whom he corresponded. A critic of Dr. Alfred Kinsey, Dr. Bergler was the author of *Homosexuality: A Disease or Way of Life?* And other books on the subject (1956). He called homosexuality a perversion, treated it like a disease that in most cases could be cured, and denied the existence of bisexuality (Paller 120-21). In a letter to Purdy of 13 March 1961, after he had read *The Nephew*, Bergler criticized Purdy’s “morbid literary preoccupation with homosexuality,” and advised Purdy that he was “moving in the wrong direction.” Bergler apprised Purdy of “the real aim of homosexuals: suffering.” Bergler knew something about suffering, since he specialized in the subject of masochism,

“DR. BUGLEFORD JUST APPOINTED BY MAYOR TO REGISTER, CHECK, INTERVIEW, FINGER-THUMB, CODE, SENTENCE AND IF NECESSARY EXECUTE ALL DEVIATES BY MORNING . . . ALL NEW YORK ADVISED TO MARRY OR BE MENTALLY ILL . . . MANDATORY HETEROSEXUALITY IN THE Y.M.C.A. BILL PROPOSED FOR FEDERAL LEGISLATION” (189). This satire targets legislated, morality-based, state-sponsored surveillance of citizens and government employees, exaggerating the loss of jobs (such as those lost because of Executive Order 10405) and prestige into the loss of life if one is to be found homosexual by the civic and state powers. Purdy’s later novel *Garments the Living Wear* (1989), one of the few novels set in New York City, where Purdy lived for fifty years, deals with the AIDS epidemic, which its characters call “the plague” or “the pest” throughout.

Despite such politicized critiques within Purdy, gay and queer studies has barely begun to address his work. Some gay readers, desiring positive role models or seeing literature as self-affirming propaganda, have apparently not always found satisfaction in Purdy’s sometimes-tragic endings involving the deaths of repressed men who love men, such as in the novels discussed in chapter three: *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) and *Narrow Rooms* (1978). Purdy once stated that he and his friends are “too gay to be gay” or better, too queer—too odd and marginal—to really be accepted by the increasingly bourgeois mainstream gay culture (Swift 37). He is marginalized even within this marginalized group.<sup>14</sup>

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which he saw as the basic neurosis. Bergler was cited by Deleuze in his essay “Coldness and Cruelty” from the book *Masochism*, discussed in chapter three.

<sup>14</sup> George DeStephano, who in 1990 interviewed Purdy for the gay publication *Out Week*, writes that Purdy memorably “dismisses those members of ‘the gay literary establishment’ who have attacked the novels as devotees of ‘moonglow, rainbows and rectal anesthetics.’ Purdy, however, is a partisan of gay liberation. He has given readings at A Different Light bookstore in New York and the Lesbian and Gay Community Center, of which he is a member” (52).

Purdy's point of view on sexuality as evinced in his fiction is in fact too queer to be "homosexual" or "gay," which implies a stable or essential subject position. In a filmed interview of Purdy shown on Dutch television, Purdy declares that he does not believe that either homosexuality or heterosexuality exists. These terms were "invented by mechanists, psychologists, who have never understood human nature . . . there is no such thing." The wise Doctor Ulric in *Narrow Rooms* says, "I don't think of people as queer or straight . . . Not when you're as old as I. And I don't think God does either" (18). "Our psyche doesn't know straight or gay. I think everyone is both, and society pushes us one way or another," Purdy told journalist M. L. Lyke in 1993. James Morrison writes, "Generally, Purdy's work refuses binary sexual categories such as homo-heterosexual. The bisexuality [in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*] of Masterson, Haws, and Chisholm is a case in point; and the ambivalent, shifting sexual identities of, say, the figures encountered by Malcolm . . . further suggest the general fluidity of sexual identity in Purdy's work" (334). In particular, the character Cora Naldi in *Malcolm* is radically indeterminate with regard to sex and race (Purdy 17-18). These characters and ideas anticipate and welcome the approaches of Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble, Excitable Speech*) and those she has influenced working in the field of Queer Theory. Indeed in his first novel, and as late as *Garments the Living Wear* (1989), one encounters characters whose gender is difficult to determine. James Purdy was doing Queer Theory back in the 1950s, long before the New York City Stonewall Inn riots of 1969, long before anyone had ever published this phrase. "How very thrilling is your discussion of those words homo and hetero," Purdy wrote to his friend and supporter, Welsh author John Cowper

Powys, on 14 October 1957. “I really am very queer, I suppose, in that I have NEVER believed in any of those terms.”

## PURDY’S WOMEN AND FEMINIST CRITICISM

Likewise, along with the lack of attention to Purdy’s confrontation of institutionalized homophobia, the feminist aspects of his work have been disregarded or critically steamrolled. The issue of Purdy’s treatment and use of women characters is important and must be taken up in discussion of individual texts. However, accusations of outright misogyny or anti-feminism are not sustainable. The most overt accusation of misogyny in his work came from the heteronormalizing critic Frederick Karl in his longwinded study *American Fictions 1940-80*. Both Karl and critic Henry Chupack complain that Purdy does not portray “normal” love relationships between men and women or happy marriages (recalling Purdy’s satire of Mr. Cough Syrup [Stanley Kauffman], a “normal critic” and man’s man). Karl peremptorily refers to Purdy’s “hatred of women” as if it were a foregone conclusion (164). Karl sees Purdy’s women as punitive, demanding, and demeaning; he labels them “sadists, whores, demanding wives, [and] sexually insatiable” (166).<sup>15</sup> It is true that representatives of controlling, oppressive cultural forces are often gendered as feminine in Purdy. A pattern of young males struggling to find themselves in the face of mothers who are either neglectful or

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<sup>15</sup> Karl does not include much evidence to support his broad claims about Purdy’s women. Then he lumps Purdy, a gay man, into a group of heterosexual, often masculinist, younger 1960s writers—Mailer, Updike, Pynchon, Roth, Barthelme, and Heller—and claims that Purdy’s alleged “antagonism to women” is “part of the male defensive buildup to . . . female liberation in its early phases . . . an attempt to build a wall that would protect them against a feminine sensibility . . . to withstand the inroads of female analysis.” With Mailer and Roth especially this seems particularly relevant, but to someone who has read all of Purdy’s published work, this generalization simply does not ring true with reference to Purdy. It could be argued that many male writers who happen to be gay often possess more sympathy toward “a feminine sensibility” than their straight-identifying counterparts; Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote spring to mind.

overbearing can also be registered. Vince Aletti notes in an essay-review that Purdy's novels frequently include "mysterious, often fabulously (or formerly) rich older women who play unlikely sirens for the restless teen protagonists. These women—Estelle Dumont in *Mourners Below*, Adele Bevington in *On Glory's Course*, and, to a different degree, Elvira Summerlad in *Jeremy's Version*, are compulsive seductresses, but they're also manipulative sex-Moms, voraciously maternal, relentlessly demanding." Karl and Aletti are correct about some of Purdy's women characters. This, however, does not mean that Purdy is a misogynist. Purdy writes people as he sees them, and does not try to create any ideal figures for any community or minority. Purdy once told *Contemporary Authors* that activists "do not understand art, because they want writers to present people who do not exist, ideal people, or noble people that are fighting for a cause. Of course there are no such people, but I have to write about the people that I know" (392). And certainly, Purdy's men are as flawed as his women. The artist Gertrude Abercrombie and the poet and critic Edith Sitwell are two of the most important and beloved people in Purdy's life. In fact, the sharpest accusations of misogyny have come from critics who are clearly uncomfortable and even resentful of Purdy's homosexual materials and what they perceive as an attack on heterosexuality and marriage. This seems to fall back on stereotype: if Purdy and certain of his characters prefer men sexually, then they must hate women.

One way of grappling with Purdy's women characters who are linked with oppressive power is to note that Purdy's figuration of such power as feminine was fairly typical of twentieth century gay writers, and that this kind of figuration can be seen as part of a larger critique of how *patriarchal* power justifies itself as operating on behalf of

constructions of the feminine. The oppressive powers, which these writers actually know to be masculine in origin and execution, are figured as feminine in these writers' fictions to highlight the way that male constructions of femininity, which must be protected, are linked with nationhood and therefore the putative need to repress and invade in the name of these constructions of woman. Notions of domesticity, hearth and home, mother country, motherland, Mom and apple pie, and the need for their protection, are all used in the rhetoric of justification of the deployment of oppressive powers both at home and overseas. This strategy was also used by such writers as William S. Burroughs and James Leo Herlihy (in *All Fall Down*). Burroughs told an interviewer that the "worship of women that flourished in the Old South, and in frontier days, when there weren't so many, is still basic in American life; and the whole Southern worship of women and white supremacy is still the policy of America" (122). Therefore Burroughs calls American power "matriarchal" and in his fiction sometimes figures oppressive power as matriarchal, although he knows well that women are not the ones wielding this power. Another way of thinking of these figurations is in terms of gay camp aesthetics, in which oppressive male figures of power can be defused by being treated as female, referred to as "she." It is the rhetoric of closet queens in the corridors of power: "Get *her*." Purdy's oppressive women can be seen as patriarchal power "in drag."

Indeed, one of the reasons why I catalogued Purdy's critical acclaim in my appendix is to demonstrate how many women are among his champions or advocates (Sitwell, Parker, Porter, Luchetti, Sontag, Moore, Davis, Pomeranz, Fox, Abercrombie, Smith). These hardly exhaust the ranks of women admirers. Two of the four books published on Purdy, the earliest and the most recent, were written by women: Bettina

Schwarzschild's *The Not-Right House* and Marie-Claude Profit's French language study of his work. Schwarzschild, who as a Jewish child in Germany escaped the Holocaust, wrote scores of letters to Purdy that are now housed at Yale University's Beinecke Library. Purdy's relationship with Abercrombie (the Gertrude of his 1997 novel *Gertrude of Stony Island*) will be examined in chapter three. Novelist Jane Bowles was tremendously moved and impressed by Purdy's fiction. Her husband, author Paul Bowles wrote to Purdy in a letter of 15 January 1959: "The other day I noticed that [Jane] was depressed, but said nothing; a little later she said sadly: 'Malcolm's dead.' She lived in the book during the time she was reading it; she says it is one of the great books of the century. Now that she has finished it . . . I can re-read it." Playwright Lillian Hellman, who, along with her friend Dorothy Parker, admired Purdy's prose, encouraged him to write for the stage, helped secure financial support for such an effort, told him in an undated letter: "I think anything you do is worth a lot." Poet Elizabeth Bishop wrote Purdy on 3 December 1956 thanking him for the collection of stories, which she found "touching" and "very good." Alice B. Toklas remarked in a 1956 letter to Purdy: "It is surprising how much more convincing your women are than your men," testifying to his sympathy for and understanding of women.<sup>16</sup> The strapping Heathcliff of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* is an occasional allusion in Purdy's fiction. Purdy loved Dame Edith Sitwell's poetry and was a great admirer of Djuna Barnes, and his work was sometimes compared to her surrealist-modernist masterwork *Nightwood*.

Moreover, Purdy's work contains many scenes sensitively depicting women's friendship and sisterhood, and his perspective is often sympathetic to women who must

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<sup>16</sup> Other well-known women advocates have included the actresses Lillian Gish and Fania Marinoff (Carl Van Vechten's wife), Gloria Vanderbilt, and Fran Lebowitz.

struggle within a patriarchal, oppressive society. Purdy's early story "You Reach for Your Hat" is about the surprising revelations of Jennie Esmond, whose wanderings around town are a subject of interest to her friend Mamie Jordan. Jennie reveals to Mamie her lack of tender feelings—"I never loved him or anything he did to me"—towards her dead veteran husband, Lafe. Mamie is shattered to hear this, having wanted to have a "sweet memory talk" with Jennie, to allow her to unburden her grief (67, 65). Jennie complains that Lafe "wasn't actually interested in woman's charm. No man really is" (66). She recalls Lafe's constant demands for her cooking, her dependence on him, and her lack of a life outside of her marriage. Appropriate to its insight into women's lives, this story was originally published in *Mademoiselle* in 1957 (as "You Reach for Your Wraps"), as was Purdy's short play *Children is All*. His metaphysical play *Cracks*, which, like *Children*, was admired by Tennessee Williams, first appeared in *Cosmopolitan*. His 1980s novels *On Glory's Course* and *In the Hollow of His Hand* in particular depict caring relationships between women, sensitively rendered and sometimes tinged with homoeroticism. The interviewer for *Contemporary Authors*, Jean W. Ross, told Purdy that she likes Purdy's women characters in particular, how they get together and talk, finding such scenes "both funny and touching" (392). Purdy said he especially enjoyed writing these scenes. Likewise, interviewer Patricia Lear told Purdy, "you sure know about cooking and women and kitchens" (72). In interviews Purdy claimed to have a cult readership of women and these magazine placements and the jacket art for *On Glory's Course* seem to support this. It can be said that Purdy supports and identifies with the underdog in general, whether this means African Americans, poor Appalachian whites (such as the Riddleway brothers in his novella *63: Dream Palace*),

oppressed women, or dispossessed Native Americans. In 1977 Bruce Allen writes that one of Purdy's recurrent themes is "the failure of America to fulfill its promise of equality for all (white and black, conventional and 'queer')", to which he should have added, "men and women." Tony Tanner even claims that Purdy is "one of the few American writers who seem to understand women" ("James" 65).

Feminist critics have either overlooked or, in one case, condemned Purdy. The early story "Don't Call Me by My Right Name" (which first appeared in the 1956 eponymous collection, then the following year in *Color of Darkness*) lends itself, nay, *begs* for a feminist reading, especially when we consider the way it has been misread by both male and female critics. Henry Chupack, the author of a severely flawed book on Purdy, reckons that the story "portrays the stupidity and even insanity of a woman's way of thinking about her newly married state" (32). Chupack has taken Purdy's ironic title all too literally. Chupack fails to see that Purdy's early story titles are often ironic parodies of the homely titles, so appealing to middle America, that might be found in the *Saturday Evening Post* (things like, "They'll Do It Every Time"). The expectations of the reader, to find some witty tale of domestic foibles, are turned on their head when the color of darkness swaths the canvas. But Chupack takes quite literally the notion that a woman's "right name" is her husband's.

Ironically, a famous, glamorous actress of the Golden Age of Hollywood, Lillian Gish, who was introduced to Purdy's work via Carl Van Vechten, understood the feminist sentiment of this story better than any feminist critic has, at least in print. Gish wrote in a 1956 letter to Purdy: "I have enjoyed immensely the vivid way you paint with words. In the first [story] "Don't Call Me by My Right Name," it is a frightening, ugly,

but unfortunately true picture.” The protagonist of this story is ahead of her time, a career woman who resists a patriarchal society that only ridicules her anxiety. This woman, Lois, has married at an older age than most did in the 1950s, after she was already well-established in her career. “I have always been known socially and professionally under my own name,” she protests. She hates her new name, Mrs. Klein, and “she began using more and more her maiden name” (25). *Klein* means “small” in German, suggesting that losing her name in marriage has diminished her. Lois wants her husband to change his, and thus her, name, showing the nominative power given to men in a patriarchy. At a New York party she and her husband consume too much alcohol, and she becomes insistent about the name change. This leads to her husband hitting her repeatedly, and publicly, at the party and out on the street, where no one effectively defends her against him. His sexist attitude had been revealed when he remarked, “No wife of mine would ever be old or fat” (27). After multiple blows, “Her lip was cut against her teeth so that you could see it was beginning to bleed,” but she refuses to go home with Mr. Klein unless he agrees to change his name (27). As he strikes her again he repeatedly and emphatically states: “Mrs. Klein.”

Some critics have referred to this as a “comical” story but domestic violence is hardly funny, and the male partygoers’ condescending laughter at her situation is familiar, but is not laughter we wish to join. Her resistance grows even in the face of his violence: “*Our* name? I don’t know what you mean by *our* name” (27). When she seemingly randomly states that she does not want to have babies at her age, he strikes her again and she falls to the floor. Until this moment the partygoers have regarded this as amusing domestic squabbling. Outside, on the street she persists, and he strikes her a

vicious blow that sends her to the pavement. “I am not Mrs. Klein,” she tells a man emerged from a delicatessen who had remarked to Mr. Klein, “you don’t look somehow like her husband,” maddening him further. In the end she continues to resist, although he has literally put her to the pavement. She finally strikes back, when waking out of brief unconsciousness, she again declares that she is not Mrs. Klein, and “immediately then she struck Frank with the purse and he fell back in surprise against the building wall. ‘Call me a cab, you cheap son of a bitch,’ she said. ‘Can’t you see I’m bleeding?’” (31). Until this moment Frank Klein was blind to her suffering and her oppression as a woman in 1950s American society. He stands shocked and awakened to his role in the horror of this oppression.

It is not just insensitive male critics, such as Henry Chupack, who misread the story, but also one feminist critic totally missed its potential in her study of 1960s writers. Unfortunately the feminist critic Mary Allen, in the chapter “Women of the Fabulators: Barth, Pynchon, Purdy, Kesey,” from her book *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties*, in her haste to label Purdy as anti-feminist, is blinded to the pro-feminist sentiment implicit in Purdy’s story. In my reading, Purdy and his heroine are progressive, presenting a coherent feminist critique. But Allen in her book, a poor (wo)man’s *Sexual Politics*, is on a mission to condemn major male 1960s writers for their putatively reactionary sexual politics.<sup>17</sup> A certain degree of heterosexism is implied when Allen cheers Leslie Fiedler’s complaint that American literature has failed to confront mature heterosexual love (3). Unfortunately, Mary Allen imposes a stencil upon Purdy’s work, seeing him as consistently attacking vacuous, “consumerist”

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<sup>17</sup> Allen must be thanked, however, for providing clear statement in her subtitle that Purdy was considered by many critics to be a “major” author in the 1960s and 1970s.

middle-aged women, which she labels the “acquisitive Purdian female.” Allen claims that Purdy’s women are “obsessed with things, are little more than the objects around them,” but never once quotes a line to back up this dubious claim. Allen is a hasty reader wielding a pre-formed, rigid agenda, who fails to provide textual evidence or secondary critical support for her evaluations of Purdy. A reviewer of Allen’s book, Jeannine Dobbs points out that Allen’s clumsy reading leads her to specious conclusions. “Frequently Allen oversimplifies or distorts,” writes Dobbs (701). Of “Don’t Call Me by My Right Name” Allen calls the ending of the story, which I take to be a moment of resistance and resilience, a defeat in which Mrs. Klein “halfheartedly agrees to go home, her problem unresolved” (52). Yet Lois’s action is by no means half-hearted, and she *chooses* to go home, telling her husband exactly what she thinks, and vowing that tomorrow they “will have a good talk” (30). Lois has been beaten, true, but she is not beaten. Does Allen think that Lois’s brutal husband will agree on the spot to her proposition that he change his name? Allen concludes that “Purdy suggests an awful truth: what *would* Mrs. Klein be without Mr. Klein to give her a name?” (52). As stated, part of the reason Lois dislikes her name is because she is older and has established herself, as she says, professionally and socially. She does not need, and does not feel she needs, a man to give her a name and an identity. Allen misses a splendid opportunity to deploy Purdy in the service of feminism, and instead delivers a gross misreading. This “interpretation” is as good an example as the one that Dobbs uses—Allen’s overlooking a basic plot detail in Purdy’s novella *63: Dream Palace*—to illustrate how “often Allen misreads or misrepresents the texts she discusses and sometimes uses her inaccuracies to support her theses” (702). After all, this story, along with “Why Can’t They Tell You

Why?”, was included in the collection that Purdy mailed to French feminist existentialist Simone de Beauvoir, who responded in November 1956 and said that she liked the stories “very much.”

#### RACE AND ETHNICITY: AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTEXTS AND CRITICISM

The early critics tend to speak of Purdy’s “world” as if it were intensely subjective and personal, with little or no bearing on American history, racial and ethnic identity, class, gender, and sexuality. However, as John Uecker points out in his introduction to the British edition of *Moe’s Villa and Other Stories*, with great dexterity, Purdy “traverses race, gender, age, nationality and economic background as well as religious, moral, sexual and social orientations” (viii). One such major but ignored social and cultural facet of Purdy’s work is his engagement with race and ethnicity. The subject of this dissertation—Purdy’s deployment of, and allusions to Native American characters, symbols, cultural practices, and historical figures—has been almost entirely overlooked, although it appears in at least ten of Purdy’s literary productions. Throughout many of his works we find a diligent engagement with and consistent exploration of the notion of mixed race, in some cases elaborated in characters who, although they may appear or are considered “white,” possess Native American ancestry, often expressed in terms of “blood.”

The subject of race is rarely discussed in the extant scholarship. One exception is a solid and groundbreaking article by Joseph Taylor Skerrett Jr., who was the organizer of the “Assessing James Purdy” conference in 2003. Published in *MELUS*, “James Purdy and the Black Mask of Humanity” (1979) was the first essay to deal with race in Purdy in

a sustained fashion. Skerrett, an African American critic, felt that Purdy's African American characters in most cases were verisimilitudinous and displayed a complex humanity, although in some isolated cases Purdy seemed to draw from stereotype to engage the mainstream idea of Blackness.

Purdy's interest in African American culture has roots in his biography. When James was a boy, living with his brothers and mother in their Findlay, Ohio home on Lima Street that his mother Vera operated as a rooming house, she would send James out to pick up a dessert from "Aunt Lucy," an old woman who lived down the lane in a "shack" with another African American woman. He would sit and listen to their speech and stories for hours, transfixed (Canning 15). Such experiences informed his creation of convincing Black vernacular dialogue in his early short story dealing with loss, "Eventide," whose main characters are two African American sisters. In a letter of 9 August 1984 to Findlay, Ohio journalist Parker Sams, Purdy says that "Eventide" is "based on some black women I knew, but I shifted the locale to Chicago. But it is Findlay." Skerrett writes with a double meaning that "Eventide" is "fully imagined in terms of a black situation" (83). Purdy's use of vernacular was so convincing that many readers believed Purdy to be an African American. Purdy remarked to an interviewer: "people really thought I was black when *Color of Darkness* appeared. That was quite a common assumption: Carl Van Vechten thought so, Edith Sitwell, Angus Wilson, and a number of other writers. I always thought that Langston Hughes, who liked that book, thought I was a black writer"<sup>18</sup> (*Conversations* 199). In a letter of 3 December 1956 to

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<sup>18</sup> Van Vechten's friendship with and support of Purdy, along with Hughes's praise, will be addressed in chapter five. Van Vechten was a model for the character Cyril Vane in the novel *Out with the Stars* (1992).

Purdy, poet Elizabeth Bishop cites “Eventide” as her favorite of Purdy’s early stories due to its verisimilitude; Alice B. Toklas concurred in a 1956 letter to Purdy.

Growing up in Findlay, Purdy’s economic situation led him to identify with marginalized peoples. In a letter of 24 August 1984 to Parker Sams, Purdy says that living in a rooming house “very near Main Street” with his father absent was “very humiliating” for him. Purdy wrote that he was looked down upon by the children of the fairly well-to-do community of Findlay, where fortunes had been made in oil at the turn of the century before supplies were depleted. “Because my parents were divorced and we were very poor my family was more or less looked down upon in Findlay. At least this is how I felt.”<sup>19</sup> Growing up in this particular socio-economic position, Purdy began to identify with the working class, and like Jethro Fergus in *Jeremy’s Version*, James would hang out among the brown people on the “wrong” side of the Blanchard River. To use Walter Benjamin’s term, Purdy began to identify with a constellation of oppressed and disenfranchised Americans. Skerrett perceptively writes: “The powerful and unusual images of some of Purdy’s blacks must proceed from such intense emotional identification with the powerless, the stigmatized, and the frustrated” (81). Purdy’s identification with people of color must have been reinforced by being told that his maternal great-grandmother Nancy Ann “Nettie” Cowhick was one eighth Ojibwe Indian. Later his identification with people of color would also be linked to his status as a gay man in a homophobic culture, as Skerrett remarks. While living in Allentown, Pennsylvania and New York City, Purdy expressed appreciation for his ethnically diverse

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<sup>19</sup> Purdy continues in the same letter, “There were so many rich boys and girls in my class. I began to develop a deep sense of inferiority. I found the town as a whole very smug, and its values all tended toward wealth and outer respectability. There were enough people of a different outlook, though, to make up for the snobs.”

environs. Writing from Allentown to Welsh author John Cowper Powys in a letter of 14 July 1957, Purdy notes, “I am living in the Negro slums and am enjoying it.” Almost thirty years later, in his article about the Brooklyn Heights apartment where he “would write nearly all” his novels, Purdy remarked appreciatively of his view which allowed him to “look out on an endless procession of human beings of every ethnic origin imaginable” (“Literary”). Purdy was very interested in the varied ethnicities and mixtures to be found in New York City and early in his residence there, in the letter to Powys cited earlier, expressed a hope that they not be assimilated into an undifferentiated hybrid dominated by white cultural norms. This should be kept in mind as we consider his valorization of Native American identity. Purdy’s engagement with African American culture continued throughout his career. Several stories from the short story collection *The Candles of Your Eyes* portray relations between Euro-Americans and African Americans. Two older African American women and a young man would appear in his fiction as late as the last book published during his lifetime, the collection *Moe’s Villa*, in the story “Easy Street.”

Through formative experiences gained while living in the Midwest, Purdy picked up a sense of Black vernacular and rhythms. Along with his experiences in Ohio, while living in Chicago, this sense would be intensified and expanded by his exposure to several famous jazz musicians and their improvisations mostly via his good friend, the Chicago surrealist painter and jazz patroness Gertrude Abercrombie. Abercrombie regularly held jam sessions at her Hyde Park home and was friends with such musical luminaries as Dizzy Gillespie (a particularly close friend), Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Max Roach, Sarah Vaughn, the Modern Jazz Quartet, and Sonny Rollins (to whom Purdy

sent an inscribed copy of his novel with an African American narrator, *I am Elijah Thrush*). “Purdy lived here for quite a long time,” Gertrude Abercrombie stated in a short biography of the artist dated 3 February 1976. “He used me as a model in several of his works” (“Gertrude Abercrombie”). Curator Susan Weininger writes that Purdy was “one of [Abercrombie’s] closest friends of the 1930s” (Weininger 17). In Chicago Purdy once accepted the invitation of the legendary singer Billie Holliday to sit upon her lap, according to John Uecker (interview). Through these jazz singers and musicians, who would often stay with Abercrombie, young Purdy received an intensive education in African American music and culture. Tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins wrote Purdy a letter, prompting Purdy’s letter and gift in response (Purdy, letter to Abercrombie, 24 May 1972). One of Purdy’s characters, an African American jazz pianist named George Leeds (perhaps modeled on the Modern Jazz Quartet’s pianist John Lewis), would appear as a character in *Malcolm*. According to Joseph Skerrett, Purdy has a “grasp of the emotional resonance of black experience” (84). “I do not know of another white writer who has created so satisfying a gallery of black portraits,” writes Skerrett, a critic of African American ethnicity.

Yet literary biographer and heteronormalizing critic Frederick Karl would complain not only about Purdy’s negative characterization of a satirized New York publisher as Jewish in *Cabot Wright Begins*, but also about Purdy’s treatment of African Americans. He makes an almost totally unsupported reference to “Purdy’s established pattern to locate [Blacks] as criminal types or figures of fun,” which rings false to those who know Purdy’s career well (324). Ironically, Henry Chupack, apropos of nothing, would complain that Purdy fails to create any Jewish characters (128), missing this

publisher that Karl is sure is Jewish. Chupack also fails to consider the possibility that in “Don’t Call Me by My Right Name,” Lois’s husband Frank Klein is Jewish. The criticisms of Chupack and Karl (or collectively, “Churl”) of Purdy’s “ethnic” characters simply do not hold water.

## NATIVE AMERICAN CONTEXTS AND CRITICISM

While the African American characters and aspects in Purdy have received at least this much critical attention, the Native American characters and aspects of his work, like other social and cultural facets, have been almost entirely ignored. If Purdy’s use of vernacular was inspired by his experiences among African Americans, then to a larger and more powerful degree, a great swath of his fiction, especially after the 1960s, is based upon the stories told to him by his supposedly crossblood Ojibwe maternal great-grandmother Nancy Ann “Nettie” Cowhick and grandmother Minnie Mae Otis. Purdy grew to sympathize with Native American perspectives, and began to critique Euro-American colonial assumptions. In his fiction Purdy exposes chapters of American history that are difficult to face, especially for Euro-Americans. Through his historical allegories he reveals uncomfortable truths behind the mystifying, justifying myths of America, emphasizing Euro-American violence toward Natives, and the forced removal and acculturation of indigenes coterminous with white settlement and westward expansion. As Sara Winnemucca Hopkins (Paiute) writes in her 1883 autobiography, “It is always the whites who begin the wars, for their own selfish purposes” (51). If Purdy’s earlier work emphasizes whites’ victimization of Native Americans and points to the fragmentation and assimilation of Native Americans and their communities, in his later

work Purdy becomes increasingly optimistic about contemporary Native Americans and their prospects for the future. Two works in particular produced during the final quarter century of his career, *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe's Villa*, implicitly advocate Native American perspectives and emphasize Indigenous influences upon American culture.

Throughout his work, Purdy emphasizes mixed race, specifically between Native American and Euro-American. The mixture that Purdy implicitly prescribes for America involves spiritual, cultural, philosophical, as well as genetic blending. The notion of the Native mixedblood, or as Ojibwe novelist and critical theorist Gerald Vizenor has it, the *crossblood*, becomes a metaphor of this aspect of his fictional project and his critical position, which consistently opposes itself to notions of racial purity and “uncontaminated” bloodlines of (usually, but not limited to) European “original stock.” Throughout his work Vizenor celebrates the border-crossing, liminal qualities of the crossblood, which reverses the stereotypes of mixedbloods as tragic or confused about their identity. Emphasis upon racial “purity” has fostered degeneracy and propagated racist ideology, Purdy implies. This ideology appears even among Native Americans, as in *In the Hollow of His Hand*, where Decatur’s Ojibwe grandfather’s vile hatred of mixedbloods and his verbal and physical abuse of his grandson and great-grandson seem to suggest that Purdy’s critique applies equally to any ethnicity: the rigid insistence upon racial “purity of blood” is a harmful essentialism across the board. In the essay “Theorizing American Indian Experience” from *The Native Critics Collective’s Reasoning Together*, Craig S. Womack writes, “Identity does not have to be based on opposition, on pitting an ‘us’ against a ‘them’ or arguing for a radical incommensurability

between communities of people” (387). The oppositional view embracing purity is ultimately “a debilitating perspective.” To Womack, “identity must be seen as a transformative process rather than measured in terms of its purity” (387). A dogmatic and literalist valorization of the purity of race, from any ethnic or cultural perspective, is oppressive and carries chilling racist undertones.

With reference to historical and mainstream midcentury Euro-American cultural values, Purdy’s critique goes against the grain, challenging the myth of white supremacy. Corresponding to this myth, the figure of the mixedblood in American literature has often been seen as an admonitory “grotesque,” a troubled and often itinerant figure, for example Joe Christmas in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*. Faulkner treats miscegenation as “a curse and punishment for a curse,” according to Leslie Fiedler (*Love* 209). An example contemporaneous with Purdy is the character Tombaby Barefoot in James Leo Herlihy’s novel *Midnight Cowboy*, a queer mixedblood who exacts revenge on the “cowboy,” Joe Buck, by drugging and violating him in the brothel that his mother Juanita operates. Absent from John Schlesinger’s film version of *Cowboy*, Tombaby is described by his mother Juanita as mixed-blood, but is a “light-haired, pale, oddly constructed halfbreed” (81). Indian but white, male but female, with double earrings and a “soft and high” voice, Tombaby—a beauty school dropout—is a queer but ultimately sinister and depraved character. While Tombaby is arguably a travesty and satire of Fiedler’s theory of canonical trans-ethnic same-sex unions, he is also another example of a patently grotesque mixedblood character produced by a Euro-American author.

Instead, James Purdy, like Gerald Vizenor with his emphasis upon the liberating, fluid quality of the crossblood, subverts the American literary tropes of the past that

predominantly suggest that there is something degraded or tragic about mixed race. Purdy and Vizenor, in their own respective inimitable styles, both create fictional “revisions and subversions . . . of the colonial mythology of Eurowestern conquest,” to use the words of James Cox in *Muting White Noise* (204). Cox demonstrates how American literature has all too often served the ends of colonialism. Even when a canonical Euro-American author’s perspective is valorizing or defending of “the Indian,” often he or she, intentionally or not, serves a colonialist and racist project by assuming and asserting that the Indian is “vanishing,” thus failing to imagine a future for Native American communities. Purdy and Vizenor’s embrace of the crossblood militates against the “vanishing” trope by showing that crossbloods represent a new kind of Indianness and a widespread presence. Crossblood identity opposes racial binaries and stereotypical thinking.

Traditionally, white American authors have not embraced mixed blood and have clung to the trope of inevitable Native absence. Among these authors are Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper’s Leatherstocking, who seemed to blend the Indian and the white in Natty Bumppo’s hardy character, outlook, and appearance, actually expresses a dread and “horror of miscegenation,” according to Leslie Fiedler (*Love* 207). Leatherstocking bonds with Chingachgook, uniting “in the virgin heart of the American wilderness,” forsaking all others in “a pure marriage of males” (*Love* 211) “for the sake of the austere, almost inarticulate, but unquestioned love which binds them to each other and the world of nature” (192). But when it comes to heterosexual unions Natty Bumppo is actually “a fanatical exponent of racial purity” (210). According to Fiedler, Natty “with almost maddening repetitiousness” stresses in *Last of the Mohicans*

that he is “a white man without a cross,” that he has “no taint of Indian blood” (210). In *The Deerslayer* he avows, “I am white, have a white heart, and can’t in reason, love a red-skinned maiden,” although he allows that he is “a little red-skin in feelin’s and habits” (qtd. Fiedler 210). Cooper ultimately assumes that both the Indian and his Indian-like frontiersman Natty are doomed by the force of westward expansion, foreclosing on a Native future and perpetuating an American myth. A critic of Cooper, Mark Twain manifestly hated Native Americans, as evidenced by his sinister character Indian Joe in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* but more because of his acerbic and slanderous 1870 essay, “The Noble Red Man” (among other pieces that emphasize Indian degeneration). In the latter essay Twain viciously maligns both Native Americans and Cooper’s alleged romanticization of them (Twain also gave Cooper a verbal lashing in his essay “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses”). Obviously Twain, as an obsessive and “absolute Indian hater” from “the very beginning of his career,” opposes mixing in any sense between white and Indian (Fiedler *Return* 122, 123).

When James Purdy explicitly updates Leatherstocking as Roy Sturtevant in *Narrow Rooms*, discussed in chapter three, he will have a very dark complexion and black hair—an actual, rather than merely figurative, Native crossblood character. Purdy’s mixedbloods subvert the stereotype that assumes that racial mixing produces degeneracy; rather Purdy suggests that such mixing, social, cultural, or genetic, provides energy to a fatigued homogeneity, a sapped family line. Purdy therefore in this respect resembles Leslie Marmon Silko, whose *Ceremony* is “a novel that argues for hybridization and heterogeneity as sources of power and rich potential,” according to Choctaw crossblood critic Louis Owens (35).

On the whole, scholarship on the figure of the Native American mixed-blood in American literature (as opposed to Indigenous literature) is lacking, especially with regard to the merger of white and Native. Native Americanist Chadwick Allen writes, “surprisingly little sustained scholarship has been produced on the figure of the Indian mixed blood in American literature” (144-45). The small amount that has been produced up until very recently is dominated by a non-Native perspective. “We still very much need innovative analyses of mixed-blood figures in U.S. literatures (and other discourses) from all historical periods, and we are still waiting for theory that can adequately address the symbolic, discursive, and rhetorical complexity of the idea of mixed blood,” Allen writes (145). Purdy’s work contributes in an often subversive, novel fashion to the discourse on mixed race and encourages further theorization of same.

#### TOWARD THE NON-NATIVE CRITICAL ALLY

Due to Purdy’s sustained engagement with the crossblood and advocacy of Native perspectives, my study positions Purdy as an exploratory figure toward what Cherokee literary critic Jace Weaver has called the non-Native “critical ally” (*American* 11). Purdy’s sympathetic position towards Native perspectives, his exposure and critique of Euro-American transgressions and violence against tribal peoples, and his eventual support of tribal sovereignty and insistence on a Native presence, among other aspects, is articulated in seven novels, a novella, a play, at least one poem, and two short stories. This body of work taken as a whole supports my positioning of Purdy as an exploratory figure aiming toward the contentious position of the non-Native critical ally. I use the term *exploratory*, because there were few activist precedents or role models among non-

Native creative writers. James Cox implies that, with the exception of Ken Kesey and Oliver La Farge, pretty much all Euro-American literary authors have only imagined either a Native absence, or a Native presence whose sole function is to be “exorcised” or made to vanish (248). Although Cox’s implication seems overly totalizing or hasty, given the position of Purdy and other authors whose work dealing with Native Americans is not yet well-known, Cox makes the important point that such allies were scant. Few examples of non-Native critical ally precedents, especially among novelists, can be identified.

The theorization of the non-Native critical ally is relevant to my own critical position, one sympathetic with the aims of an open and “compassionate American Indian literary nationalism” (Womack, *American* 168). The recent work of Cherokee critic Jace Weaver, in his chapter “Splitting the Earth: First Utterances and Pluralist Separatism,” in the book he co-authored with Craig S. Womack and Robert Warrior, *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, opens up possibilities for Native literary nationalism. Weaver calls for “simpatico and knowledgeable” non-Native critical allies to contribute to the discourse. In Craig Womack’s essay from the same book, “The Integrity of American Indian Claims,” the Muskogee Creek and Cherokee novelist and critic, while perhaps embracing separatism more than Weaver, yet acknowledges “the validity of non-Indian involvement in literary criticism of Native works” (166). Crucially, when Womack elaborates “some flexible tenets for a compassionate American Indian literary nationalism,” he addresses these not only to Indigenous critics but also to “those who might want to be our allies” (168). Weaver encourages both critical allies and nationalist critics to investigate non-Native authors who create Native American characters and

themes, such as William Faulkner, whom Weaver gives a “red reading,” the latter a term deployed by non-Native critic James Cox (and derived from Ojibwe scholar Jill Carter), who is cited by Weaver as a notable younger critical ally (11). In my own case, Jace Weaver, upon hearing me deliver a talk on the Native American aspects of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* to be discussed in chapter three, encouraged me to further engage Purdy within the context of Native American Studies.

My approach to James Purdy, which views indigeneity and the Native crossblood as important and sustained subjects of a great deal of his fiction, is informed by, if not fully adherent to, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s, Jace Weaver’s, and James Cox’s “Red readings” of non-Native-authored works engaging with the Indigenous.<sup>20</sup> Cox wishes to “attempt to privilege Native literary and intellectual contexts . . . to prevent the erasure of Native voices in scholarly studies about Indians, and to focus on an American Indian future” (204). Preventing such erasure is indeed a crucial goal. Weaver, who expresses appreciation for James Cox’s reliance upon Indigenous sources, writes that American Indian Literary Nationalism, “a set of critical strategies, growing out of the concerns and issues of Natives,” can “also include sympathetic non-Natives” and “is equally as applicable to analysis of Cooper, Faulkner, and Rudy Wiebe as it is to Momaday, Silko, and Sherman Alexie” (Weaver, *American* 73-74). Sam McKegney, a non-Native critic subscribing to Weaver’s point of view, maintains that “those non-Native critics willing to put in the time and effort in terms of research, dialogue, social interaction, and community involvement can approach valid cultural understandings” (57). Since I am analyzing and writing about representations and figurations of Native Americans and the

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<sup>20</sup> The Mohawk poet Maurice Kenny, a friend of Purdy’s, performed a groundbreaking Native American critique of a canonical American author in his “Walt Whitman’s Indifference to Indians,” first published in 1987, predating many other “Red readings” of non-Native literary works.

subject of mixed race, one that has been historically vexed, I wish to do so with respect to Indigenous North American peoples, attention to Native criticism and voices, and in a spirit of alliance. Weaver writes: “We only ask that non-Natives who study and write about Native peoples do so with respect and a sense of responsibility to Native community” (11).

This being said, it should be clarified that there is a difference between an ally and an uncritical camp follower. Sam McKegney writes that in engaging Indigenous literature, “an ally privileges the work of Native scholars, writers, and community members—not as a political gesture, but as a sincere attempt to produce the most effective criticism—yet she or he does not accept their work uncritically; she or he recognizes that healthy skepticism and critical debate are signs of engagement and respect, not dismissal” (63-64). Addressing both nationalists and would-be allies, Womack stresses that the discipline needs to grow, and this can only happen if scholars in the field “learn to interrogate each other’s work as much as celebrate it” (*American* 169).

With that dictum in mind, I won’t hesitate then to state that the logic of non-Native adherents to nationalism can sometimes become stretched and strained. For instance, referring to James Cox’s argument in his chapter “Unmaking the Conquest” from his on the whole groundbreaking *Muting White Noise*, we find the following scenario: Cox, a white critic, tells white (and other non-Native) critics and scholars— aspiring “critical allies”—that when they write about white authors (who write about Natives), their criticism will “benefit” from a general dismissal of white critics or any scholarship not written by bona fide Native Americans. Cox argues that these white critics should instead build their readings *solely* upon “a critical context based in the work

of Native writers” (204). It is important to seek out and listen to Native voices, and to integrate Indigenous critical approaches, when dealing with literary and cultural representations of Natives. Yet, rather than dispensing with non-Native criticism, it seems more productive to take in a broad range of voices, drawing from the history of discourse on a given non-Native author promulgated by generations of scholars, which is surely not *all* “white noise”—while simultaneously paying special attention to what Native voices have to say about these representations and figurations of Native Americans. Besides, from the start the issue of what “white” and “Native” mean and how they blend and signify complicates such a race-based endorsement. An overzealous effort to be critically “pure” in one’s critical alliance with Native Studies, just like an obsession with being racially “pure,” risks having a stultifying effect. The veteran Native Americanist Arnold Krupat is particularly critical of such logic, stating that it leads to paradox. “In the coyly titled recent book *Muting White Noise* (2006),” Krupat writes, “James Cox, a non-Native scholar, makes the arbitrary determination—based, he claims, on ‘respect for Native voices’—to use non-Native criticism, scholarship, and theory as little as possible, thus ‘muting’ all ‘white noise’ except his own” (142). Although Krupat’s tone is dismissive, if Cox’s logic is strictly followed, and taken to its fullest extension, then he is possibly writing himself and other worthy non-Native critics out of much future discourse.

In the case of non-Native authors and critics who write about indigenes, recently Sam McKegney has provocatively argued that in the past several years, anxious non-Native critics, in a desire to be respectful and unpretentious and to be accepted as critical allies, have tripped over their own feet in their efforts, limiting the usefulness and

force of their critical endeavors. It is a given that any intellectually rigorous field of study will welcome diverse perspectives and critiques, to avoid insularity and stagnation. The recent work in the field is now asserting that Native American literary nationalism never excluded non-Natives, but that, given the historical discursive domination of the field by non-Native scholars, it was necessary to privilege and centralize Native voices. Now that Native American Studies has firmly established the need to privilege critical voices from within the community, and has established an ever-expanding canon of Indigenous critical and literary texts, many thinkers in the field are broadening or redefining notions of separatism. This suggests that at a certain none-too-distant historical moment, a more radically separatist impulse or gesture constituted a necessary strategic essentialism. But today, Womack avers that academe offers tremendous possibilities to Native scholars and critics: “Simply whining about the ways the university fails to acknowledge or appreciate indigenous knowledge often overlooks the fact that it gives us virtually free rein in producing it ourselves” (*American* 92). Louis Owens writes of Osage critic Robert Allen Warrior’s *Tribal Secrets*, “separatist intellectual sentiments are easy to understand but difficult in the end to ratify entirely” (52). Today, judging from presentations delivered at Native literature and Native Studies conferences, and recent books by Daniel Heath Justice, James Cox, and the Native Critics Collective (*Reasoning Together*), the nationalist view has become prevalent and central, with Weaver, Womack, Warrior, and Justice frequently cited. David Treuer’s recent, controversial book *Native American Literature: A User’s Guide*—which argues that Native American literary studies should deemphasize the biography and tribal affiliation

of the author, and instead focus on the style and aesthetics of the text itself—is a reaction to the prominence, even dominance that literary nationalism now boasts in the field.

Therefore my critical approach is informed and enriched by and sympathetic with Native American Literary Nationalism, but not limited to it. Purdy must be read in his singularity, not as a synecdoche of an oppressive white America. Cox writes that “In terms of critical practice, a red reading from the perspective of [contemporary] Native writers encourages a focus on the many ways that non-Native authors imagine domination, narrate and justify a violent conquest, and foreclose on a Native future” (206). These authors emphasize a Native absence rather than presence, Cox argues. His first point has the most bearing upon Purdy; however, as will be argued in this project, Purdy critiques and exposes American narrative and mythic attempts to justify conquest and colonialism. The third point has bearing on Purdy’s earlier historical and racial allegories *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, *I am Elijah Thrush*, and *Narrow Rooms*, which emphasize the violence of dispossession and the repression of Indigenous ethnicity, and seem to envision an unpromising future for Native Americans, who are perceived as profoundly victimized. While condemnatory of Euro-American colonization of Indigenous land and resources, these could be taken to be calling into question, not “the possibility that there is a future for Native communities” itself, but rather the vitality and cohesion of these communities (Cox 206). But as Purdy’s career and vision develops and expands, he increasingly emphasizes Native presence over absence, and advocates tribal sovereignty, which is evident in *In the Hollow of His Hand* and culminates in *Moe’s Villa*, as will be argued in chapter six.

## THE MIXEDBLOOD IMAGINATION

Intertwined with his exploratory role toward being a non-Native critical ally, I position Purdy as a metaphorical crossblood, to which my title for this project refers. Purdy makes an ethical choice to position himself as an advocate of Native perspectives, in a sense metaphorically identifying as a crossblood Native. To Vizenor the crossblood is fluid, liminal, a crosser of boundaries, yet attached to a tribal perspective: Vizenor is White Earth Anishinaabe, or to outsiders, Ojibwe (also spelled Ojibwa and Ojibway) or Chippewa. In *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*, Ojibwe critic Kimberly M. Blaeser writes that “the metaphor of the mixedblood itself represents a confluence in Vizenor, standing as it does not merely for the conditions of race but also for the mixed conditions of culture, spiritual values and traditions, sites of knowledge and truth, and personal and social motives, as well as for the mixed conditions of literary traditions” (156). In his introduction to *Crossbloods*, Vizenor writes that the “stories and totems” of crossbloods “are indwelt, a new survivance that enlivens an interior landscape. Crossbloods hear the bears that roam in trickster stories, and the cranes that trim the seasons close to the ear. Crossbloods are a postmodern tribal bloodline” (228). This notion of a “bloodline” being “postmodern,” and thus fluid and ludic, raises interesting questions. The idea of mixedblood persons constituting their own bloodline deconstructs the binary of pure and impure blood, of having to be X, Y, or a compromised “halfbreed.” Advocating a crossblood critical stance, the philosophy that Vizenor and Purdy oppose is that which obsesses over the purity of bloodlines, whether emphasizing Native or Euro-American purity.

Considering Purdy as a metaphorical crossblood of imagined Ojibwe ancestry, the notion of a “postmodern tribal bloodline” also raises the possibility of identification with the mixed-blood Native, one devoid of posturing and bad appropriations, instead based upon ethical grounds. Time and again in his work Vizenor celebrates the liminal qualities of the crossblood at the treeline. I argue that Purdy takes on this role metaphorically, in that he has chosen to devote much energy in his creative work towards confronting and engaging history, and creating Native characters that surprise and subvert stereotype. He reveals how America has gone wrong with regard to Indigenous peoples among other ways.

Euro-American author John Updike provides a useful contrast to the sympathetic and imaginative self-positioning of James Purdy. In her review of Purdy’s novel *On Glory’s Course* (1984), author and critic Gloria Glendinning compares Purdy to John Updike (another recently passed major post-war American writer) because both work on a mythological scale in limning “obscure” American lives: “But Updike seems bleached in comparison,” Glendinning writes, adding that “most novelists would seem colourless after Purdy.” Although Glendinning is not referring to race specifically, she presents a wonderful metaphor for my positioning of Purdy as a metaphorical crossblood, an imagined crossblood Ojibwe. (I will further explore this act of the imagination in light of N. Scott Momaday’s theory momentarily.) The prodigious and prolific author Gore Vidal also compares Updike unfavorably to Purdy and argues that Updike is conformist, unquestioningly obeys authority, and lacks empathy for people who are unlike himself. In Vidal’s essay-review “Rabbit’s Own Burrow,” he criticizes Updike’s general support of the Vietnam war and cites a statement of Updike’s that expresses his offense at “a

cheerful thought by James Purdy” that was published in a book querying both authors, *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam*: “Vietnam is atrocious for the dead and maimed innocent, but it’s probably sadder to be a live American with only the Madison Avenue Glibbers for a homeland and a God” (qtd. in Gore 248). Vidal writes acerbically, “Rabbit will go to his final burrow without ever realizing the accuracy of Purdy’s take on the society in which Updike was to spend his life trying to find a nice place for himself among his fellow Glibbers” (248). Unlike Purdy, Updike is ignorant of “history and politics and of people unlike himself,” and therefore lacks empathy for them, Vidal claims. Only his familiar world is “real” to Updike; therefore, “because of this lack of imagination he can’t really do much even with the characters he does have some feeling for because they exist in social, not to mention historic, contexts that he lacks the sympathy . . . to make real” (259). Critic Jerome Charyn called Purdy “America’s outlaw of fiction,” Vidal notes in his article on Purdy. “Presumably, making John Updike our supreme in-law,” Vidal quipped. As Glendinning and Vidal imply, Purdy’s metaphorical crossblood perspective aligns him more closely with people of color than his Euro-American contemporaries.

Although Purdy did not have widespread ties to Native American communities, Ojibwe or other, in his social and professional life Purdy allied himself with the Mohawk poet and prose artist Maurice Kenny. Kenny, in the capacity of co-editor for the *Contact/II* journal and press, published some of Purdy’s poetry including Purdy’s collection *The Brooklyn Branding Parlors* (1986). Maurice Kenny, whom gay author and activist Will Roscoe once hailed as “the recognized elder of gay native writers” (114), holds James Purdy in very high esteem and places him in exalted literary company.

In Kenny's "Introduction: A Memoir," from *On Second Thought*, he writes that when his friend, screenwriter and novelist Paddy Chayefsky, was travelling to Russia on a cultural exchange, he asked for Kenny's help in assembling a collection of great contemporary American writers. Along with O'Connor, Capote, and Faulkner, "certainly James Purdy's masterpiece, *Malcolm* was suggested" (*On* 39). Years later Kenny was introduced to Purdy by the African American author Willard Motley (*Knock on Any Door*) while he was living in Brooklyn Heights, the neighborhood where Purdy lived in a modest Henry Street apartment for very nearly fifty years. Then, Maurice and James "bumped into each other at a secondhand bookstore and became friends," writes Kenny, who was proud to have co-published Purdy's collection (*On* 37-38). Kenny explains in the preface to *Rain*, his collection of short fiction, that he has never thought himself as a master storyteller but rather as a "singer of poetic song," yet Kenny stresses that he takes seriously all genres in which he writes. In the opening paragraph Kenny uncannily ties together himself, his sense of place, James Purdy, and the place where my own words are now being written, upon what was once called Indian Territory:

Writing is my life, and life is a most serious matter indeed. Not writing is like ceasing to breathe, as important as my morning stroll down my Saranac Lake hill or the Oklahoma University campus walk through flowering ovals, the listening to bird song, water rapids, flutes and guitars, the human voice. All writing is of equal importance, although one form may prove to be of higher quality than another. My regret is that I could never present these stories to James Purdy, Faulkner, Maugham, Chekov, for either their pleasure or their critique. (9)

In the next paragraph Kenny humbly enumerates some of those he regards as his "fictional betters": Simon Ortiz, Peter Blue Cloud, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn. Very soon Kenny mentions Purdy yet again, juxtaposing him with this group of respected Native authors. Kenny calls narrative both a challenge and a

“morning exercise,” one in which he purges his poetry of the prosaic statement. He then remarks, “James Purdy once confided that his morning exercise is to write poetry to rid his prose of lyric overture” (9-10). Purdy, mostly known as a fiction writer, uses poetry to perfect the genre on which he has focused his energies; Kenny, known mostly as a poet, uses prose to perfect the genre he has privileged. These two authors and friends, each a poet, fiction writer, and playwright, have both chosen to write of Native Americans and crossbloods and male same-sex desire in their work, often in conjunction, and use parallel techniques to perfect different genres.

During their friendship, James Purdy and Maurice Kenny shared many conversations that covered various subjects, Kenny told me in telephone interviews. One of them was Native American ancestry, not surprising given Kenny’s pride in being Mohawk. In 1984 Kenny wrote to Purdy, saying that he was “very excited about doing our/your brief collection of the five poems.”<sup>21</sup> Kenny’s construction of “our/your” in modifying the noun “collection” suggests a unity between the two writers who identify with, as in the case of Purdy, or as, Native Americans.<sup>22</sup> During a telephone interview, Kenny told me that Purdy had revealed the claim made by some of his family members of having Ojibwe ancestry. Although Kenny is skeptical of such claims from Euro-Americans, he told me, “I had no doubt that James probably had blood” (4 May 2009). Kenny told me, “I have no reason to doubt it and I had no reason why I would want to disprove it in any way. I always found James a very honest man and insightful into human nature,” Kenny told me (17 May 2009).

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<sup>21</sup> Suggesting the personal nature of their correspondence, Kenny added that he was distressed to hear that James was to have surgery performed.

<sup>22</sup> Another correspondent of Purdy’s, a certain Logan Smiley of Miami, signed a postcard, “Mr. Cherokee Redindian,” though the origin of this jocular moniker is unknown since I have been unable to contact him.

Purdy's sympathy with Indigenous peoples of the Americas was also likely intensified and enriched by his experiences prior to publishing books, when he was studying at the University of Puebla in Mexico and teaching English in pre-Castro Cuba. In a piece on Purdy written for the collection *The Fifties*, Donald Pease writes that Purdy "deliberately balances" insights gained in Mexico "with America's cultural decadence" (146-47). While Purdy's experiences and friendships help to establish him as a metaphorical crossblood, because of Purdy's lack of sustained community engagement with Native Americans, according to Weaver and Womack he cannot be called a strong critical ally of Native American Studies. Community activism, what Weaver in his book *That the People May Live* calls "communitism," is an important criterion for would-be allies, according to the nationalists. But in his compositional action and ethical position, Purdy in effect identifies with Native perspectives in a productive way, as an ethical choice informed by knowledge of history and a sense of responsibility to Indigenous people, and not a manifestation of some dubious racial fantasy (like Norman Mailer's "The White Negro"). This identification should rather be likened to how Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* explain the identification of the elite class with the proletariat:

In times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour, the process of dissolution going on within the ruling class, in fact within the whole range of old society, assumes such a violent, glaring character, that a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands. Just as, at an earlier period, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have trained themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole (19).

Purdy, well versed in history, literature, and American Studies, has the training, the sympathy, and the motivation to identify with and advocate for Native Americans as an ethical act. Part of the point of the quotation above is that being a good ally, identifying with the aims of those of a different class or of a different ethnicity, is difficult work that requires such rigorous training. This is the side of the battle that Jose Martí's "Sons of Mother America" are on, the side that "will be saved by its Indians and is growing better" (qtd. in Madsen 117). Similar to Marx and Engels, in "Our America" Martí writes, "Common cause had to be made with the oppressed in order to consolidate a system that was opposed to the interests and governmental habits of the oppressors" (*History*). In such a self-positioning, the point is not to speak *for* Native Americans, although the work may advocate Native claims. In a conversation entitled "Intellectuals and Power," philosopher Gilles Deleuze appreciatively told Michel Foucault that Foucault was the first to point out "something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others. We ridiculed representation and said it was finished, but we failed to draw the consequences of this 'theoretical' conversion—to appreciate the theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf" (Foucault 209).

Of course another factor in Purdy's self-imagining is the maternal family story that claimed Purdy's great-grandmother Nancy Ann "Nettie" Shouf Cowhick<sup>23</sup> was "one-eighth Ojibway Indian" ("James Purdy" 299). While this is admittedly an intriguing story, my argument is not premised upon its veracity or lack thereof. As early as the mid-1970s, Purdy, who was reticent about his upbringing, told *World Authors*, "my great-grandmother, on my mother's side, was said to be part Indian" (1172). If this is true, and

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<sup>23</sup> *Shouf* is also seen spelled as *Shauf* in some sources.

Purdy believed it to be, this only grants more depth to his critical position, but this position by no means relies upon the factual veracity of this family claim.<sup>24</sup> Although Purdy is mostly of “Scotch-Irish stock” and of a Presbyterian family, the author explained in an autobiographical essay: “My great-grandmother (whom I knew as a child) was said to have been one-eighth Ojibway Indian, and when I was difficult to manage my mother would say my Indian blood was showing itself” (“James Purdy” 299). The stories that Purdy’s imagined crossblood Ojibwe maternal great-grandmother Nettie Cowhick and grandmother Minnie Otis<sup>25</sup> told him as a child would inspire his powerful Midwestern novels (303).

I have spent much time conducting genealogical research and making various inquiries about James Purdy’s family in the hopes of shedding some light on the family story. I have been able to trace most of Purdy’s ancestors back into the dim past, usually back to Europe. An exception is Nettie Cowhick’s father, Purdy’s great-great-grandfather, John Breckenridge Shouf. If there is real Native ancestry, it may well come from him. While it would be interesting to know, this ambiguity is beside the point of my argument and does not diminish the force of Purdy’s self-positioning. Purdy has never claimed to be a Native American or a Native writer, nor has he cited archival or tribal enrollment evidence that would vouch for the accuracy of the claim of the Ojibwe bloodline. He does, however, possess personal anecdotes and family stories that testify to the claim, which will be rehearsed in the body chapters. Purdy told me he has been informally “recognized” as an “Indian” a couple of times in his life, once by a dark-

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<sup>24</sup> For many reasons, a putative Ojibwe ancestor may not ultimately be provable by census records or tribal enrollment data. For example, if a child were conceived out of wedlock with an Ojibwe mother or father, then raised as “white” within a Euro-American family, there would be no written trace. Purdy imagines this hypothetical scenario in his novel *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986).

<sup>25</sup> Minnie Otis’s nickname in the family was “Cutie.”

complexioned armchair anthropologist who stated that he had Native ancestry himself (discussed in chapter three).

Though Purdy did not refer to himself as an American Indian, in a manner that seems either unconscious or subtle and private punning, Purdy has referred to himself in private communications using the phrase “native American,” without explicitly connoting “Indian.” In his frequent railings against “the New York literary establishment,” Purdy often criticizes how Eastern establishment critics and publishers fail to understand his use of “American” or “Midwestern” vernacular and idiom. In several letters and conversations from the early 1970s, Purdy almost seems to pun to himself, slyly suggesting his identification with his imagined Ojibwe ancestry. Such plays on language reinforce how deeply Purdy considers Indigenous peoples to be a major part of what he considers valuable about America. Exaggerating this sentiment, his American aristocrat Lady Tuttle in the short play *Wedding Finger*, an allegorical character representing Manhattan and by extension America, claims to have Indian ancestry herself and says that she opposes everything contemporary. “I go just as far as the Indians, and after the Indians I do not find history to my taste,” Lady Tuttle says (107). In critic Frank Baldanza’s typed notes of a telephone conversation with Purdy from 13 September 1970, he writes that Purdy “sees himself as an especially native American writer . . . and he blames his lack of recognition . . . on the inability of leading parochial critics to understand and appreciate the native idiom.” In a letter of 17 January 1971 to Baldanza, then a Bowling Green State University English professor, Purdy claims that “anything native American . . . is banned” by the mainstream communications media. In a short piece written for *Observations of American Writers*, Purdy says that a characteristic of

“the U.S. Publishing Monopoly” is its “outlawing of native vision and speech.” In a letter of 17 February 1973, to Robert Wilson, Purdy writes that despite a “New York literary establishment” that tries its best to keep readers ignorant of his work, “every so often my native American speech is heard by a few.” It is as though in his iteration of this phrase Purdy is hinting at an inextricable link between his representation of the “Native” speech and culture of “America” and the Indigenous. It is thus most significant that Purdy repeatedly refers to himself as “native American,” without, of course, explicitly calling himself “Indian.” Such signs are scattered across his unpublished communications like Easter eggs pointing toward his metaphorical crossblood position.

Regardless of the status of his genealogical claim, Purdy makes an imaginative, ethical act in his creative work, an identification linked with his opposition to colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, and (last but not least) homophobia. Such an imaginative act has parallels in Native American literature and criticism. “We are what we imagine ourselves to be,” Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday contends (“First” 39). In his powerful memoir *The Names*, Momaday writes that sometime during the late 1920s his mother began envisioning herself as Indian: a “dim Native heritage became a fascination and a cause for her” and “she imagined who she was” (25). In his seminal lecture “The Man Made of Words,” Momaday states, “Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and *that* we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined” (167). Purdy’s metaphorical identification with the crossblood is an imaginative and ethical act, not a product of shallow fantasy or fascination with an exotic Other. Of his mother, Momaday writes that her “act of the imagination” of herself as a Native “enabled her to

assume an attitude of defiance, an attitude which she assumed with particular style and satisfaction” (25). Likewise, Purdy’s identification with the crossblood Native and the warrior is linked with a defiant and rebellious attitude, as he militates against American norms policing race, gender, and sexuality, and against unimaginative and stodgy publishers and critics. With regard to Purdy’s ethical self-positioning, locating an ancestor’s name on tribal rolls or possessing other such hard evidence of Native ancestry (deferring, ironically, to the authority of the federal government) is not a prerequisite to its formation. As Momaday said to Charles Woodard in a 1989 interview, “I would not like to know everything about my heritage. I want to be absolutely free to imagine parts of it. The facts are not important. The possibilities are everything” (4). Again, while Purdy does not claim to be, nor am I claiming him as an American Indian, Momaday’s words still have bearing upon Purdy’s imaginative, ethical stance as a metaphorical crossblood.

The influence of Purdy’s imagined tribal ancestry comes into play specifically in the first of two novels involving crossblood Ojibwe characters, *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986). Purdy’s most “Indian” novel by far, this picaresque, magical realist-inflected novel has barely been addressed in the Purdy scholarship. Set in the 1920s, the story opens in a small Midwestern town, Yellow Brook. The novel’s major conflict is produced by the reappearance of an Ojibwe Indian man, Decatur, who fourteen years earlier enjoyed a clandestine tryst with laudanum-hazed Mrs. Eva Coultas. The result is fourteen year-old Chad Coultas, who was always treated as the progeny of Mr. Lewis Coultas, a Euro-American man. Returning from the Great War, dark-skinned Decatur begins slowly but surely to claim his offspring. Decatur is an example of a modernist

type of Native protagonist, similar in some ways to the haunted returned veterans and other alienated heroes of canonical Native American novels including John Joseph Mathews' *Sundown* (1934), D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* (1936), N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), and Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). Louis Owens writes that Mathews and McNickle "took on much of the hard-surfaced fatalism of the Hemingway noir era of modernist naturalist" and notes, "no writer exists or creates in a vacuum, regardless of what ethnic group or marginal culture he or she inhabits" (58). To Owens, *House Made of Dawn* is "the first, and perhaps the only, almost perfectly crafted modernist American Indian novel" (61). *In the Hollow of His Hand* is similarly modernist, because Decatur struggles with his identity in the midst of Euro-American occupation of former Ojibwe land, and he is alienated from many of his tribal traditions. Yet Decatur voices resistance: "I belong here more than any of you do," he declaims. "This is where I grew up. This is where my people used to be—all over this territory, the dry land and the water too" (32). As for Chad, following a surreal, winding journey north into "Indian country" that initiates him into both Ojibwe identity and manhood, the boy ultimately chooses his Ojibwe heritage over his mother's, leaving the Coultas family behind as he joins Decatur. Later Purdy created another character with Ojibwe heritage, Harlan Yost, in a novel set in mid-1960s New York City, *Out with the Stars* (1992), discussed in chapter four.

Euro-American writers have regularly made problematic or presumptuous choices in their characterization of Native Americans in fiction, or in appropriating Indian identity or spirituality, as critiqued by Indigenous theorists such as Gerald Vizenor (*Fugitive Poses* and *Manifest Manners*), Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (*Why I Can't Read*

*Wallace Stegner*) and Jace Weaver (*That the People May Live* and *American Indian Literary Nationalism*), along with the non-Native critical ally James Cox (*Muting White Noise*). These hurtful representations of Native Americans made by Euro-American writers were noticed as far back as the early nineteenth century by Washington Irving, who wrote that “the unfortunate aborigines of America” have been “doubly wronged” by Euro-Americans. “They have been dispossessed of their hereditary possessions by mercenary and frequently wanton warfare: and their characters have been traduced by bigoted and interested writers. The colonist often treated him like beasts of the forest; and the author has endeavored to justify him in his outrages” (90). Of course, despite Irving’s words of defense and praise for “the Indian” and his “character,” he served the colonialist project by labeling Natives “savages” and iterating that “they will vanish like a vapor from the face of the earth” (99).

In the past, Euro-American literary representations of Native Americans portrayed them as brutal, immoral, and incorrigible, and thus fit subjects for removal or annihilation. More recently, as argued by Cox, most Euro-American writers have only been able to imagine vanishing or absent indigenes. Yet Purdy is sympathetic to Native perspectives and issues, and his rendering of Native characters is complex. Especially in his later work, Purdy gradually comes to emphasize sovereignty and presence, doing the opposite of what Euro-American authors are said to do with regard to Native Americans. In the later novels especially, Purdy consistently alludes to or confronts issues of interest to Native American Studies such as federal and state government jurisdiction, Indian gaming, the criterion of “looking Indian” in discussions of authenticity, and the historical problem of non-Natives “playing Indian.” In these later works Purdy espouses a more

positive, optimistic view of contemporary Native Americans. As will be argued, the racial and historical allegories suggested by his earlier novels, such as *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, tend to emphasize the historical victimization of Natives by Euro-Americans. As Purdy's perspective evolves, however, his later work also affirms contemporary Native presence and survivance over and against what Vizenor calls a "victimist" perspective, and advocates tribal sovereignty.

#### A KEY TO PURDIAN ALLEGORY

This project discusses and analyzes how Purdy's Indigenous and mixedblood characters, along with Purdy's references to Native American history and culture, figure into his racial and historical allegories of America. These allegories expose our violent foundational past and critique the American myths whose goal is to justify and mystify the colonization of Indigenous land and the dispossession and forced acculturation of American Indian peoples. Through his fictional racial allegories Purdy obsessively traces the origins and the ancestral history of America. "As I see it," Purdy said, "my work is an exploration of the American soul conveyed in a style based on the rhythms and accents of American speech." He added, "I believe my work is the most American of any writer writing today" (Malin 540). As will be shown, Purdy's idea of America incorporates Native Americans as crucial and foundational rather than conquered or alien relics of the past. What we might call Purdy's unconscious theory of allegory therefore must be discussed; due to the singularity of Purdy's vision, a Purdian allegoresis must be articulated.

Etymologically, allegory means to say or tell something otherwise, or in another way (Lanham 4). Through his allegorical fictions Purdy therefore revises the history of race and tells the story of America in another way, one which sympathizes with the perspectives of the oppressed and dispossessed. Therefore Purdy's allegories are transformative and redemptive. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin writes, "at one stroke the profound vision of allegory transforms things and works into stirring writing" (176). As in Benjamin's reading of the German *Trauerspiel*, Purdy presents time and history "as something that has to be confronted, recovered, and by means of that recovery . . . transformed and redeemed," in the words of critic Ronald Schleifer (69). Purdy, like Benjamin, devised "representational tactics that might offer possibilities . . . of recovering meaning in history" (Schleifer 85). Via what Benjamin calls allegorical arrangements or *constellations*, "the present can change the past, give it a different issue, in the meanings that flash up and are recognized in relation to that past's future" (Schleifer 100).

Throughout James Purdy's career, book reviewers commonly referred to his novels as allegories, or less accurately, as parables, but few attempted to explicate how the allegory functions, or meditate upon the meaning(s) of the given fictional allegory. This goes back to the beginning of Purdy's career. In critic William Peden's review of *Color of Darkness* (1957), he writes that Purdy's fiction "suggests an almost-medieval allegory of a universe where sickness is king and despair his consort" and his review of *Malcolm* (1959) calls the novel both "a parable of the loss of innocence in a murky world" and "a compelling allegory." Regarded by some as Purdy's classic novel, *Malcolm* is often referred to as an allegory of lost innocence in a corrupt and corrupting

world. In 1964 cultural critic Jonathan Cott writes that *Malcolm* is “an allegory in the fullest sense and one of the most extraordinary literary creations of our time . . . an allegory of *growing up*” (501). Stressing the lack of a feeling of place, Cott says that Purdy “does away with the physical plant” in order to “invent an allegorical structure,” as he does in the short play *Cracks* from the collection *Children is All* (501). In his 1961 article “James Purdy: An Assessment,” Del Kolve says that the “surfaces” of Purdy’s early work “build on parable” (476). To Kolve, *Malcolm* “is a comic novel because it is fundamentally allegory in which none of the props and furnishings are what they seem” (477). The various eccentric characters that young Malcolm encounters on his picaresque, surreal urban adventure are, like Purdy’s other allegorical characters, more than just stand-ins for an abstraction. Reviewers and critics would also describe *In a Shallow Grave* (Grumbach) and *I am Elijah Thrush* (*Virginia Quarterly*) as allegorical, the latter mixed with Firbankian fantasy (*TLS*).

Purdy’s extended tropes, his allegories of race and nation, are signaled through the repetition of emblems, similes, and metaphors. This reiterated figurative language links characters to Euro-American whiteness or Indianness as the case may be, and the given character comes to represent more than his individual qualities. As Walter Benjamin writes, “even the absolutely singular, the individual character, is multiplied in the allegorical” (193). Especially in the earlier work, some characters who stand in for “the Indian” are not *explicitly* characterized as Native American, but they are linked with indigeneity through the narrator’s or other character’s repeated descriptions of him as an Indian or resembling an Indian. Through this repetition, the reader can conclude that

such characters possess at least some Native American ancestry and figure as Indian within Purdy's fictional allegory of race in America.

Purdy engages stereotype and cliché in his allegories of race with the ultimate goal of fighting against racist stereotype. It must be understood that Purdy's occasional use of certain stereotypes is deliberate and carries an anti-racist rhetorical function. It must also be understood that Purdy is critiquing how notions of race *function* in American discourse and that he does not believe in race as a fixed or defining attribute. Rather, Purdy critiques how concepts of race operate, how they are deployed by power to oppress subaltern groups. Purdy was interested in souls and psyches, not surfaces. Crucially, in an autobiographical statement Purdy writes, "John Cowper Powys' description of my work as exploring human beings 'under the skin' was an insight which I greatly appreciated then and which I cherish to this day" ("James" 30). In fact, in a letter from Purdy to Powys of 14 October 1957, Purdy states that he does not believe in racial labels. After stating that he does not believe in the terms "homo" or "hetero," Purdy writes, "*I don't believe in words like Jew or Negro or any of them*" (my emphasis). Purdy is interested in the marginalized and the oppressed, but he is not an essentialist and does not believe that there is anything inherent about one ethnic group or another that would make it superior or inferior. Therefore when Purdy creates allegories of "whites" and "Indians" it must be recognized that these are figurations, and in order for these figurations to be recognizable, Purdy sometimes draws from stock images or widely recognized symbols. For example, the feather is commonly used as a symbol of indigeneity by both Native and non-Native authors and artists. Once it is recognized that the figures of "the white" or "the Indian" are allegorical, these labels are seen as

emblematic and incorporate a stockpile of received images that Purdy ultimately subverts. Therefore when Purdy uses the word *Indian*, it is as if there are invisible quotation marks wrapped around it.

Purdy's fictions invite allegorical readings, but they do not correspond to a widely-held but debased contemporary definition of allegory in which there is a single, and patently authorially-intended one-to-one correspondence between characters (or other fictive elements) and concepts or abstractions. Purdy's allegories are more ambiguous, subtle, and polyvalent. They may be usefully perceived in terms of Walter Benjamin's "allegorical constellations," as discussed in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (196). The "arrangement" of a constellation of stars, the image or idea it produces, can change depending on how one connects the dots. "For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of the elements," Benjamin writes (34). Ideas "exist in irreducible multiplicity" (43).

Similarly, multiple allegorical readings can be derived from a single Purdian work. Where one critic finds allegories of love or growing up, another discerns allegories of race and nation. The potential for multiple allegories was perceived by D. Keith Mano, a reviewer of *I am Elijah Thrush*, but Mano was frustrated by the fact that, while he distinctly sensed allegorical reverberations in Purdy's short novel, he was not clever enough to derive a coherent reading of it. Purdy's novels "feed on the manifestos of nineteenth and twentieth century symbolist authors—either consciously or unconsciously," Mano claims. "The emblems in *I am Elijah Thrush* are X's that might

satisfy any number of quadratic equations” (961). Thus, unlike the old-fashioned religious allegories, Purdy’s allegories are not pure or transcendental, but transitory.

Moreover Purdy’s allegories, unlike traditional allegories, do not dispense with nor deemphasize the importance and pleasure of the surface text, as allegory is often presently thought to do. For example, despite all of the labeling of *Malcolm* as a classic allegory, the novel is not merely gesturing toward abstractions illustrating a moral or ideal: the plot, setting, and characters work on the surface level too. Donald Pease, however, unfortunately possesses only a “narrow contemporary” conception of allegory that denies “this power of ambiguity,” to use the words of Don Adams from his essay “James Purdy’s Allegories of Love” (3). The critics who have emphasized the negatively self-reflexive, postmodern aspects of Purdy’s work have theorized Purdy’s novels as damaged, incomplete allegories, dilapidated “houses of fiction” that undo themselves, self-deconstructing. From this view it is impossible to derive a coherent, sustained allegorical reading of a Purdian text. This is the perspective of the erudite, linguistically sophisticated school of Tanner, Newman, and Pease. Tanner, for instance, argues that *I am Elijah Thrush* (discussed in chapter five) is a novel “that devours its own allegories” (64).

Bolstered by Don Adams’ fine essay, I strongly disagree with this assessment of Purdy’s allegories, especially with regard to anything Purdy wrote after the mid-1960s. Adams argues that a “pervasive and generic cause for critical misunderstanding of, and negativity of response to, Purdy’s work . . . is the failure [of critics] to recognize the allegorical nature of Purdy’s fictionalizing, and to alter their critical assumptions and habits of reading in order to get his fiction to work for them in an enlightening and

rewarding fashion” (2). While the triad of Tanner, Newman, and Pease constitutes an important branch of thinking on the early works of Purdy, I side with Don Adams, who in his recent (2008) landmark long article argues that Purdy’s fictional allegories, rather than being “wounded,” are multiple, his texts polysemous and fluid. Although Adams’s article was published after my racial and historical allegorical readings of Purdy were formulated, my project represents praxis that is supported by his graceful theory of Purdian allegoresis.

Don Adams helpfully theorizes Purdian allegory but usually does not offer extended readings of individual works, indicating that this is a critical project that should be elaborated, as the critic recommends. Focusing on allegories of love and personal identity and the near-impossibility of their fruition, Adams does not adequately explore race, class, and history in Purdy’s allegories. Referring to the earlier critics, Adams argues that the problem is not in Purdy’s supposedly damaged allegories, but rather “it is our understanding of allegory that is at fault” (3). To Purdy’s fictional allegorical project Adams deftly applies Maureen Quilligan’s breakthrough study *The Language of Allegory* (1979), which theorizes a post-structuralist theory of allegory, applying it to Thomas Pynchon’s postmodern novels *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* in her fourth chapter. Quilligan argues that it is our contemporary view of allegory that is faulty; allegory encourages a multiplicity and a plurality of readings, and does not diminish the so-called “surface” text. According to Don Adams, to read Purdy properly, in order to “understand this multiple-signifying process in allegory, we must rid ourselves of the notion that allegory proceeds on two simple, clear, and distinct levels—one of material things and one of abstract meanings—and pay close attention, rather, to the literal,

horizontal, accreting, ‘interconnecting and criss-crossing’ surface of the text” (Adams 4, quoting from Quilligan 28). Ronald Schleifer writes, “the complexity of allegory—and above all its temporal complexity of turns and changes—is a scandal to the simplicities of Enlightenment understanding,” and unfortunately it is this simplistic understanding that still dominates thinking on allegory (94). Don Adams argues that “it is a mistake to conceive of this ‘other’ realm to which allegories refer as a world of final ideas fixed in abstract stasis. Rather it is a realm of radical signification, in which potential meanings coexist and coincide, as on the other side of Alice’s mirror” (10-11).

My project, although largely composed before Don Adams’s article appeared, attempts to realize within a certain scope the call to action contained in his article. For while Adams brilliantly analyses how allegory functions in Purdy, he does not carry out full allegorical readings of novels, and some of the shorter readings he conducts can seem idiosyncratic. For example, he states that the character Elijah Thrush, who is decrepit, highly theatrical, effeminate, and queer, represents an “eternal masculine principle” (8). Adams does not deal in a sustained fashion with race, class, gender, and sexuality, nor does he fully deliver upon his implied promise to reveal the political and social argument found in Purdy. He does, however, briefly mention that Purdy’s fictions show the disastrous effects of queer men’s self-hatred, which is a result of institutionalized and internalized homophobia. Granted, Adams’s fine article is not a book and he stresses that a great deal of work is left to be done along these critical lines. “Purdy’s rich texts are in need of a sustained critical analysis focused on the workings of allegorical arguments in each and throughout—a comprehensive and systematic symbolic analysis as ambitious and thorough as Frye’s reading of Blake . . . We have only begun to detect the full range

of symbolic complexity in Purdy's novels, and have yet to comprehend the multiple implications of their allegorical nature, which Purdy himself has pointed out" (6). While I do not presume to offer a scope that broad, my work helps to fulfill Adams's proposition.

Therefore I will begin with an allegorical reading of one of Purdy's earliest stories, to suggest the way in which both sustained allegorical approaches and Native American aspects of Purdy's work have been neglected. Since Purdy's novel *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) was his first work of fiction to include a character identified or explicitly described as "Indian," it is something of a surprise to discover that the seed of Purdy's racial allegories of Native America found in several of his later novels is sown in one of his earliest stories, "Why Can't They Tell You Why?" (1956), though this has never been noticed by the critics. "Purdy's themes and techniques lie in the short stories, as if waiting for orchestration in the novels," writes Webster Schott in his strong article "James Purdy: American Dreams" (301), and one of these "themes" turns out to be indigeneity. The story first appeared in the independently-published collection *Don't Call Me by My Right Name* (1956); those stories plus two and the also independently-published novella *63: Dream Palace* (1956) comprised New Directions' *Color of Darkness* (1957). The power and durability of this story, pointing to its strangeness, enigma, and lack of transparency, are demonstrated by its reprinting in at least six anthologies of short fiction between the years 1967 and 1993 and in Black Sparrow's later collection *63: Dream Palace: Selected Stories 1956-1987*, according to Ohio State University librarian Jay L. Ladd's bibliography of Purdy (32-33). Here I present a new, allegorical reading of the story that contains within it the seed of Purdy's

entire project involving Native American characters and themes that I will be discussing throughout this dissertation.

“Why Can’t They Tell You Why?” depicts the alienated relationship between a callous young widow and mother, Ethel, who is concerned with maintaining her youth, and her sickly son Paul, who becomes obsessed with a boxful of photographs of his father, who died in the war before the boy could know him. Paul spends countless hours poring over the photographs, much to his mother’s chagrin and resentment. Finally Ethel, unable to force the boy to explain his attachment to the photos, cruelly attempts to make the boy pitch them into the flames of the basement furnace, which leads to an intense and disturbing climax.

On the surface “Why Can’t They Tell You Why?” is concerned with parental cruelty and lovelessness, and can be seen as depicting the psychological abuse of a vulnerable, sickly child. This is a powerfully-expressed theme that I do not deny. Henry Chupack, author of the *James Purdy* volume of Twayne’s United States Authors Series (1975), praises the economy and precision of the story: “in a mere six or seven pages, Purdy has written a masterpiece that depicts the plight of all unloved children” (30). English critic Stephen D. Adams, author of the sensitive and perceptive monograph *James Purdy* (1976), describes the story as a “harrowing account of the chaos brought in the wake of a father’s disappearance” (14). Adams notes the narrative’s signs of what he takes to be the mother’s mental illness, and Purdy’s compassionate rendering of not only victimized or neglected children, but also the absent and failed “parent figures” (15). Stephen Adams’ reading is, as usual, careful and thoughtful. Psychoanalytic critic Stanley Renner argues that the story centers on the mother’s revulsion at, and repression

of, the boy's maleness and burgeoning male sexuality. He claims that the story in its concise and contemporary frankness "exposes the true story of [Henry James's] *The Turn of the Screw*: the dramatization of the terrible developmental damage done to children" by Victorian sexual "squeamishness" and repression (212).

These readings, despite their many merits, fail to pick up Purdy's subtle signs that indicate the operation of his allegory of race. Granted, this allegory is much more legible in hindsight, looking back upon this early story from the perspective of having traced the growth and development of Purdy's Native American thematics throughout his lengthy career. In a similar manner, I will argue in chapter five that the Native American characterization of Elijah Thrush and Bird of Heaven and the racial allegory contained within *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972) are rendered more legible via a reading of a later novel, *Out with the Stars* (1992), that reworks some of the same themes and ideas as its predecessor (Elijah Thrush even makes a cameo appearance).

In "Why Can't They Tell You Why?", through the repetition of descriptors of Ethel's whiteness and the repeated link between Paul and the symbolic Indian blanket, the two agonists come to represent respectively a cruel, cold white oppressor and a neglected, oppressed Native American whose history has suffered erasure at the hands of his colonizers. The repeated sign of the Indian blanket, protecting and offering shelter to Paul, calls attention to the allegory's operation. This detail is not only repeated within this story, but also its importance is underscored in retrospect by the fact that Indian blankets reappear in at least three subsequent Purdy novels, taking on symbolic significance in each.<sup>26</sup> The Indian blanket is a cultural signifier, a text legible to tribal peoples. In his book *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, Oglala Lakota author Luther Standing

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<sup>26</sup> *Jeremy's Version*, *On Glory's Course*, and *In the Hollow of His Hand*.

Bear discusses “the language of the blanket,” stating that it was used among the Plains Indians almost daily “as a means of conversation” across distances and enumerates the various functions and significances of the blanket to the Sioux people (79-80). In general, the blanket figures into various tribally-specific practices, ceremonial traditions of giving, honor, and familial dynamics, and it signifies shelter, survivance, and Indigenous tradition itself, as connoted in the expression, “going back to the blanket.” Standing Bear writes, “According to the white man, the Indian choosing to return to his tribal manners and dress ‘goes back to the blanket.’ True, but ‘going back to the blanket’ is the factor that saved him from, or at least stayed, his final destruction . . . clinging to Indian ways, Indian thought, and tradition . . . many an Indian has accompanied his own personal salvation by ‘going back to the blanket’” (90). With regard to Ethel’s meanness in Purdy’s story, it is ironic that in traditional Ojibwe culture, during a boy’s sixteenth year he receives a three-cornered blanket from his mother, “serving as his coat, blanket covering, and cushion. The blanket was a gift, a symbol of love and an emblem of an attachment. With the gift of the blanket was signified partial dependence, partial independence,” writes Ojibwe author Basil Johnston in his book *Ojibway Heritage* (125). As will be seen, Purdy deploys the symbol of the Indian blanket in various novels published across the span of his career. In conjunction with this culturally significant item, Purdy here alludes to the historical practice of scalping and the scalp in a way that subverts egregious stereotypes: recall that scalping was performed *upon* Natives by Europeans, not only *by* Natives.

These signs point to a novel way of reading this rich story as a historical and racial allegory, one which lays bare the horror and violence at the heart of the settlement

and expansion of the United States of America. The nocturnal incident, the focus of the story, is precipitated by Ethel rising in the middle of the night, “feeling a pressure in her scalp and neck. She walked over to his cot and noticed the Indian blanket had been taken away” (*Color of Darkness* 44). The close juxtaposition of “scalp” and “Indian” are the first suggestions that Purdy is up to something figurative. Ethel searches the house and finally finds Paul on the “backstairs,” recalling the many times the boy has taken shelter there with his beloved photographs. The definition of the word *backstairs* includes denotations of something secret, furtive, or scandalous. Paul has sought this shelter due to his mother’s repeated disapproval of his perusal of the photographs. When Ethel finally locates Paul, the “sweet but threatening sound” of her voice awakes the boy “from where he had been sleeping, spread out protectively over the boxes of photographs, his Indian blanket over his back and shoulder” (44). In this second reference, the manner in which the blanket covers Paul suggests the traditional practice of many tribal peoples.

Once the association between Paul and Indianness has been established, it is possible to make further connections relating to education and cultural recovery. Paul, who is said by Ethel to be “a sick kid,” has been absent from school for months, and Ethel seems not to care since she “never talked with Paul about why he was home sick from school” (43). His truancy, which presages the truancy of the crossblood youths Chad Coultas (*In the Hollow of His Hand*) and Rory Hawley (*Moe’s Villa*), shows a disinterest or even rebellion toward the public school, significant in that public and boarding schools have been historically forces of assimilation, forbidding Native youths to use their tribal languages, wear traditional clothes or hairstyles, or practice their Indigenous religions. School was also the means of indoctrination into the colonists’

version of U.S. history. In his alternative reading of American history, *No More Lies*, African American activist and entertainer Dick Gregory asks: “Why do Indian children fail to take advantage of the white man’s educational offerings? Look in on a Chippewa [Ojibwe] reservation classroom . . . The children are busily writing a composition. Their topic is scrawled out in chalk on the blackboard: ‘Why we are all happy the Pilgrims landed’” (58). Paul’s almost total lack of knowledge of his father, who as a fallen war veteran figures as a warrior, parallels the cultural and historical erasure that Native American peoples have suffered as a result of Euro-American educational institutions. Paul’s mother’s lack of enforcement of his school attendance does not reveal an antagonism on her part towards this institution but rather sheer indifference to the fate of the Native following his forced acculturation. Paul attempts to remedy this in an autodidactic process. Paul’s obsessive desire to diligently study and understand his father, the subject of these photographs, signals the long and difficult project of historical and cultural recovery, all the more challenging when performed without the aid of community—a key issue when considering Purdy’s representations of Native Americans. Given the 1950s context of the story, Paul’s cultural alienation and isolation could be seen as an allusion to the negative effects of contemporary Federal termination and urban relocation policies that were legislated in the early years of that decade.

Paul’s knowledge of his history, signified by his father, was scant, and his mother has seemingly repressed his memory. The story opens: “Paul knew nearly nothing of his father until he found the box of photographs in the backstairs” (43). These photos, the only mementos of Paul’s father, are not proudly displayed in an album on the shelf or in a chest, but rather stashed away in the secluded “backstairs.” Annoyed by Paul’s

obsession, over the phone Ethel complains to her friend Edith Gainesworth, “my God, I’ve hardly mentioned a thing to him about his father” (43). “She would suppress all evidence of his relation to her,” Stephen Adams notes (*James* 14). Lacking knowledge of his warrior father, Paul lacks knowledge of himself. Purdy makes a homophonic pun when Paul tries to prevent Ethel from approaching him and taking the photos: “Don’t, don’t!” Paul protests, “Don’t do anything to me, Ethel, my eye hurts” (45). This can be heard as “my ‘I’ hurts,” since Paul feels only emptiness and hunger where his sense of self should be.

The recovery of the past is initiated by Paul’s action, his discovery of the boxes. In the scene examined here, his recovery is associated with his protective Indian blanket. The work of historical and cultural recovery, following the depredations of Euro-American soldiers and settlers and forced acculturation and assimilation, is difficult and arduous, Purdy suggests. After young Paul discovers the photos, “from then on he looked at them all day and every evening” (43). His preservation efforts are symbolized by his removing the photos from the old shoe boxes they had been carelessly stored in, and transferring them into “two big clean empty candy boxes” (43). In doing so Paul takes ownership of his past and his father’s legacy. He becomes an archivist, an excavator of his heritage. When Ethel tries to seize the boxes from his hands, he protests, “Ethel, those are my candy boxes” (45). Rewarding lessons from the past are internalized as Paul studies the photos. His time spent communing with the past are hours of sweetness and light illuminating his past, in a world swathed in the color of darkness. This metaphorical internalization is later literalized, as will be seen.

The fact that Ethel hides these photos and never mentions the father suggests a desire to conceal the past, which is exacerbated into an active effort to obliterate that past. Her attempt to incinerate them is an effort to destroy Paul's patrimonial Indigenous history and render it irrecoverable, irretrievable. Linked with whiteness and paleness, Ethel's actions align her with historical forces of white colonialism and cultural imperialism that sought to fully assimilate Native Americans, alienating them from their culture, and covering up or justifying the bloody history of westward expansion as "destiny." If Paul is figured as Indian then Ethel is his white oppressor: "Paul crouched almost greedily over the boxes when he saw this ugly *pale* woman in the man's bathrobe looking at him" (44, my emphasis). Ethel's face is later described as "white" (48).

Although she was married to Paul's father, Ethel is utterly detached from his memory and "had always referred to him as *your father*" to Paul (43, italics in original). Vain and obsessed with youthfulness, Ethel also forbids Paul from calling her "Mama," demanding that he call her Ethel and not even "Mama Ethel," scolding him, "you must think I'm a thousand years old" (45). The difference in the racial figuration between Ethel on one hand and Paul and his father on the other is underscored in a crucial passage. This occurs after Paul makes a declaration of ownership of the boxes, the tie to his indigenous ancestry, as she rapaciously scoops them up. Purdy writes, "She looked down at him as though she was seeing him for the first time, noting with surprise how thin and puny he was, and how disgusting was one small mole that hung from his starved-looking throat. She could not see how this was her son" (45). Ethel has in effect repudiated her son, severing her bond of ethical responsibility to him, supporting my reading of their discrete racial figurations. In the allegory then, her repudiation, her

refusal to recognize her son, suggests that Euro-Americans, in their historical project of conquest, colonization, and acculturation, have failed to recognize the common humanity of Indigenous peoples. Paul “could not be recognized as her son,” Purdy writes towards the visceral conclusion of the tale (49). Looking back on the story after reading later works such as *In the Hollow of His Hand* and the novella *Moe’s Villa*, one even considers the possibility that Paul is not actually her biological son, that he may a stepchild whose birth mother’s name and ethnicity is unknown.

Paul’s neglected and sickly status suggests that Purdy in his critique emphasizes the victimization of Native Americans, as opposed to also acknowledging Native American presence and survivance, as he would do later. In the racial and historical allegories I delineate, and discuss in earlier novels such as *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* and *I am Elijah Thrush*, Purdy by implication seems to hold a pessimistic view of contemporary Native Americans, one that Vizenor would criticize as overly “victimist.” In fact, Vizenor in his theoretical text *Fugitive Poses* raises a criticism that could be applied to Purdy’s earlier novels involving Native characters: “Natives are ever and again the national allegories of discoveries, decimation, dispossession, dominance, and tragic victimry” (70). As will be shown, this implied view of Natives evolves and is revised over the years, becoming affirmative and optimistic by the mid-1980s with *In the Hollow of His Hand*, positive in *Out with the Stars* (1992) and perhaps even celebratory by the twenty-first century with the novella *Moe’s Villa*.

The corruption and malignance of this “white” threat to the boy in the Indian blanket is unfortunately couched in misogynistic language. “There was a faint smell from her like that of an uncovered cistern when she put on the [man’s] robe,” Purdy

writes (44). Such disturbing language, although it corresponds with the rottenness of her character, is troubling and presents issues that will be dealt with in subsequent works discussed in this dissertation, such as Purdy's association between oppressive social forces and the feminine. Ethel can thus be seen as a precursor to the white women characters who present threats to Purdy's male Native characters, from Millicent De Frayne in *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972) to Olga Petrovna in *Out with the Stars* (1992), and also the neglectful or domineering (or both) mothers of young white male characters who possess some Indigenous heritage, and are figured as Indian within Purdy's racial and historical fictional allegories, including *Jeremy's Version* (1970) and *Moe's Villa* (2004).

Paul's refuge in the backstairs where he peruses the pictures of his father, engaged in the work of recovery, can even be seen as his attempt to establish sovereign territory, a reservation of sorts where he hopes to remain unmolested in his work. His mother's intrusion and expropriation of the photos can be seen as an unmerited transgression into his psychic space. As he spends his hours with these photographs, he rejects the dominant culture's institutional education and in a sense "home-schools" himself. When Ethel encroaches upon his space, she invokes an aunt of his who was placed into a mental institution, and threatens to do the same to him if he won't tell her why he endlessly peruses the photographs (47). This reference suggests that Ethel herself may be on the verge of mental illness, but it also represents the looming historical threat of the forced institutionalization of Native Americans, the virtual kidnappings of Native children bound for Indian boarding schools. Such a notion of a metaphorical sovereign space is more fully suggested by Elijah Thrush's Arcturus Gardens theatre in *I am Elijah Thrush*

and Moses Swearingen's Villa in *Moe's Villa*, a saloon and gambling parlor operating in the twenties, when spirits and gambling were illegal.

A second allusion to the scalp and thus "scalping" is made as Ethel takes hold of the boy's hair and "jerked him by it gently as though this was a kind of caress she sometimes gave him," causing the boy to tremble "under her hand" (44-45). Although the practice of scalping is popularly associated with the "Indian," students of American history know that the practice was used by both European frontiersmen and Native warriors, and that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, colonial governments in America paid cash bounties for Indian scalps. The logic of Purdy's allegory makes it clear that it is the Indian boy who is being "scalped" by this "pale" figure. The symbolic threat of scalping can also connote castration. This symbolic link between scalping and castration has a sustained literary precedent in the fiction of Hemingway, according to Carl P. Eby in *Hemingway's Fetishism*. The stripped-down quality of Hemingway's fiction had an influence "at least technically" on Purdy's early work "because he leaves *out* so much," Purdy told interviewer Bradford Morrow (97).

The process of this metaphorical "scalping" includes her attempt to incinerate the photos, as she forces Paul to carry the boxes down to the basement. Native youths were forcibly shorn of the long hair that is a marker of tribal identity upon entering Indian Boarding Schools; Ethel attempts to forcibly remove the photos, and thus the reminder of his Native ancestry, from his person. Her racial signification is underscored in the narrator's description: "He held them before him and when they reached the floor of the basement, she opened the furnace and, tightening the cord of her bathrobe, she said coldly, *her white face lighted up by the fire*, 'Throw the pictures into the furnace door,

Paul'" (48, my emphasis). The detail of her face being "white" at first seems superfluous here, since she had already been described as "pale," indicating its role as a signal to the reader that there is a story behind the story, this allegory of Red and White. "They're Daddy!" Paul cries out, of the photographs. They embody the full extent of Paul's knowledge of his father, who is the source of Paul's Indigenous history and ancestry. Paul "had looked amazed at his father in his different ages and stations of life, first as a boy his age, then as a young man, and finally before his death in his army uniform," Purdy writes (43).

It is true that Purdy's view of the contemporary Native American at midcentury can be taken to be bleak if Paul is the emblem: neglected, culturally ailing, and vulnerable. Yet at the same time, Paul performs a striking act of resistance in the story, and the reader does not see the photographs burnt within the frame of the story, barring a few. As Ethel commands him to put the mementos into the flames, Paul begins running "round and round the small room with the boxes of photographs pressed against him" (48). Paul's movement even suggests a ceremonial Native American round dance, a circular motion working toward healing in the face of the encroacher. The narrative connects his circular motion to what I call his recovery efforts: as he moves rapidly, "some of the pictures fell to the floor and these he stopped and tried to recapture, at the same time holding the boxes tight against him" (48).

Paul's last act of resistance "made her stop" and it is left unknown whether Ethel manages to incinerate the rest of the photographs. I posit, however, that Paul manages to save the archive with his radical act. He crouches on the floor, bends his stomach over the boxes, and hisses at her like a snake, as though he has shape-shifted. This disturbing

sight causes her to “stop short, not seeing any way to get at him, seeing no way to bring him back” (49). Now that Paul has realized his repressed Native ancestry, he cannot be brought back to pure whiteness. The boy’s investigation of his father and thus his repressed ethnicity is linked with his own burgeoning manhood. Paul is becoming a new man with a new sense of ethnic identity. As Paul cries out that the photographs are “Daddy,” he speaks “in a voice neither of them recognized” (48); his voice has changed, reflecting his newly recognized crossblood identity and his emerging manhood. Ethel thinks that “he no longer looked like a child” (49). Then, topping that, Purdy creates a searing, unforgettable image: “from his mouth black thick strings of something slipped out, as though he had spewed out the heart of his grief” (65). Earlier Paul said that he was sick to his stomach, plus he placed the snapshots in candy boxes. It would seem that Paul has literally internalized one or more of the photos of his father, symbolizing the internalization of his Native ancestry. The ending suggests the desperation and poignancy of the boy’s need of his father and symbolically, his Native American heritage.

This story, in my allegorical reading, becomes a metaphor of Purdy’s entire fictional project, as it engages with Native American themes and characters over the course of his career. In my allegorical readings of Purdy’s novels, echoes of this seminal early story will be heard. The racial and historical allegory of this story, as earlier mentioned, is registered by subtle signs, and is therefore more legible when read in retrospect, after having knowledge of how Purdy’s engagement with indigeneity evolves and becomes more explicit over the decades, eventually creating full-fledged Native American characters who acknowledge their ethnic heritage. This story provides a sort of

encapsulation of the basic ideas behind Purdy's novelistic racial and historical allegories, and shows that, while Purdy didn't create a character recognized as Indian until Daniel Haws in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967), he was already working through these ideas a decade earlier. From the alpha to the omega, Native Americans were a sustained subject of Purdy's historical acumen and his sympathy.

My exploration of this subject in Purdy's work, my working toward coherent allegorical readings, has not been a lengthy and soul-searching process. When a productive, meaningful reading finally arrives, I am reminded of the words of Sioux doctor and author Charles Eastman's father: "The way of knowledge is like our old way of hunting. You begin with a mere trail—a footprint" (28). The first footprints appear there in "Why Can't They Tell You Why?", a story that critic Warren French calls "a key to his work" ("Quaking" 114). "If you follow that faithfully, it may lead you to a clearer trail—a track—a road. Later on there will be many tracks, crossing and diverging one from the other," Eastman's father told him. These tracks recall the multiple possibilities for allegorical and other readings of Purdy. "Then you must be careful, for success lies in the choice of the right road." Purdy never makes things easy for the reader, as has been known to toss out a red herring. "You must be doubly careful, for traps will be laid for you" (29). These are sound words of advice, an apt metaphor for literary interpretation that is especially relevant to the following chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WAYS OF LOOKING AT WHITE BLACKBIRDS: THE CHALLENGE OF CONSTRUCTING RED READINGS

V

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after

VI

Icicles filled the long window  
With barbaric glass.  
The shadow of the blackbird  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Traced in the shadow  
An indecipherable cause

—Wallace Stevens, from “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”

Big bears whose snouts are smeared with honey and gray

mice asleep in clover,

Gray wolves whose eyes whirl and turn like red spools

And hidden beasts whose cries call to fools

Are waiting, are waiting in the hidden land.

And you'll come won't you now?

—James Purdy, untitled, from *On the Rebound*

As I hope my reading of the early story “Why Can’t They Tell You Why?” shows, James Purdy’s Indian signifiers often serve as indicators that an allegorical mode is being entered. My reading of that story also showed how elliptical such allegories can be, signaled by few nailed-down signifiers. That story at least had the repeated detail of the “Indian blanket” among other signs. This chapter examines a character from the novel *On Glory’s Course* (1984) and the short story “The White Blackbird,” which was collected in *Moe’s Villa and Other Stories* (2004) but was first published in 1990 in *Conjunctions*. The scenes that I will be discussing make very few explicit references to Native Americans or Indians, and are therefore extreme cases, constituting a special challenge to my interpretive approach. They are also extreme in the sense that they work with material that could be seen as controversial or offensive, linked to characters I read as Native American: the possibility of shape-shifting and trans-species sex, perhaps another reason why these characters are not explicitly identified as having Native blood. The difficulty and controversy of Purdy’s texts present an element of risk to the reader analyzing symbol and allegory. Oscar Wilde writes in his preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “All Art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface

do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril” (4). This chapter therefore does not present a coherent and collective theorization of these texts, but rather unites them because of their “hidden” Indians, to use the diction of the untitled poem I chose for an epigraph to this chapter, originally published in *On the Rebound*. The speaker of the poem warns us that “cries call to fools” from “hidden lands.” The scenes I will read in this chapter highlight especially the challenge that Purdy’s texts pose to the kinds of readings I undertake in this project, by focusing on two difficult subjects that seem to invite yet resist such an approach.

In the novel *On Glory’s Course* (1984) a seemingly Native American character, Val Dougherty, has a strange and enriching relationship with a central young male character, Ned Cottrell, fifteen years of age. In “The White Blackbird,” first published six years later, a seemingly-crossblood-Native young man is intimately linked with a white bird, and the mystery of the disappearance of his beloved godmother’s jewels. When I say “seemingly,” this is an acknowledgment of my critical subjectivity and the fact that a prior interest in critically exploring Purdy’s engagement of indigeneity may predispose one to form readings emphasizing this focus. For a skeptic might point out that nowhere in the text, with specific reference to these characters, does the narrator or any other character directly use the words “Indian” or “Native” or any tribal name or overt tribal reference—except for the detail of young Ned Cottrell throwing an “Indian blanket” over Val Dougherty at a crucial point in the narrative of *On Glory’s Course*. Rather, in both cases there is an accumulation of signs, or in Benjaminian terms, a constellation, the effect of which is especially evocative in the later work, “The White Blackbird.” Yet in spite of Purdy’s elliptical approach to characterization, I hope to show

that the indigeneity-minded approach is valid for these works, despite these being the most “hidden” examples of what I read as Native Americans in Purdy’s writing. They highlight, along with “Why Can’t They Tell You Why?”, the challenge that Purdy’s difficult texts present.

In *On Glory’s Course*, nominated for the P.E.N.-Faulkner award in 1985, young Ned Cottrell collects more than one substitute father who is figured in terms of the Indian to make up for his absent father. Prior to his close relationship with the damaged World War I veteran Keith Gresham, who will be discussed in chapter four, Ned spent a great deal of time with the former “Iceman,” horse breeder and trainer Valentine Dougherty, who is figured as Native American without the characters or the narrator explicitly saying so. To an extent Val resembles Daniel Haws from *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967), discussed in the next chapter, except in Val’s case, no one, not even the narrator, specifies Val’s race or ethnic heritage as Native American.

Val gradually comes to be adopted by Ned as an Indian father and at first reluctantly takes on this role. Ned Cottrell and his family had known Val in the past as “the iceman” who visited their home regularly (47). Like Keith Gresham, Val was also a warrior, a veteran of the Great War, since we learn that he socializes with “old army buddies” and that he “wanted to forget the war” along with his marriage (259). These days Val mostly just counts the money derived from his ice delivery business, and spends as much time as possible with the horses that he loves so much at his stables. Ned develops a closer relationship with Val because Ned has put Val’s foster daughter Marilyn Dougherty “in the family way,” and Ned comes to Val to discuss this predicament, which begins a series of visits from the teenager to the strapping older man.

Since Marilyn has left town with Val's white wife Maude due to what was then regarded as the scandal of the teenage girl's pregnancy, Ned and Val are alone during these scenes. Although Ned getting Marilyn pregnant at first seems like it might be a major conflict, after she and her mother Maude leave for Colorado, they do not figure into the story prominently. Although the older woman Adele Bevington, who had been involved in a scandal in her own youth, and Ned's mother Elaine Cottrell are central characters in the novel, Marilyn and Maude (like, as we will see, Vickie in *Jeremy's Version*) are secondary to the relationship between the male characters in their lives.

The narrator depicts Val somewhat objectively, not speculating upon his ethnicity. Val is described as having a "swarthy complexion" (47). When he and his wife Maude stand together, "she so delicate and fair, he so swarthy, almost black, people would wonder how such dissimilar persons could ever have met, let alone married" (47). The racial boundaries and mores in the setting of the town make it difficult for those of different races even to meet, the narrator implies, implying the racist assumptions of the town. When Val drops in on Elaine Cottrell to discuss their shared dilemma and he drops a sugarcube that Elaine gives him, "his thick fingers . . . looked almost black against the whiteness" (53). The narrator remarks that as Val becomes wealthier, rather than becoming "sleeker," "he grew wirier, more rugged, and if possible swarthier in aspect" (48). As he gains independence he seems to become "more himself" ethnically and interestingly, gradually loses interest in both his lily-white wife and daughter. Val himself has no demonstrable intimation of Native American or African American blood, but rather "blamed his swarthyness sometimes on his Welsh ancestry and his coming from a long line of coal miners and seamen" (48). Like Daniel Hawes from *Eustace Chisholm*

*and the Works*, who is also from a line of coalminers, Val refuses to publically acknowledge Indigenous heritage in his makeup, claiming a European source. The cause of his dusky complexion is something to “blame” and downplay rather than claim or celebrate in a society and community that privileges whiteness. Like his Midwestern predecessors Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, Purdy criticizes the prejudices and repressive forces exuding from Middle American communities.

Val’s mysterious racial heritage is complex, but these references to his dark skin are among others that Purdy makes that establish that Val has Native American blood. The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of *Jeremy’s Version* had spoken of “crypto-incest” and “crypto-homosexuality” in Purdy’s plot; historians have discussed “crypto-Jews”; here, I argue, we find a “crypto-Indian.” Like Daniel Haws and Mohawk poet Maurice Kenny’s father, Val apparently sees no benefit, living in the white-dominant social and cultural milieu that he does, to broadcast his Indianness. He knows that he does not fit in with the mainstream, and once he has the money to do so, tends to stay away from this society, opting to spend time alone with his beloved horses on his own property, a reservation of one. Despite this, Val’s isolation raises the question of to what extent can there be an Indian without a tribe or community.

In my presentation of a series of signs of Val’s ethnicity, it should be understood that no single clue is meant to be conclusive or even terribly forceful in itself. In general the most convincing indices are of course those signifiers that are clearly marked as Native American. It should be recognized that other signs, especially with regard to the two examples I discuss in this chapter, are more ambiguous. For example, Val has black hair, but of course, so do many other ethnic groups. Daugherty, however, possesses

“crow black hair,” and this adjective may allude to crows in traditional Native storytelling or even the Crow tribe along with emphasizing the darkness of his hair. The narrator refers to Daugherty as “the iceman” repeatedly. Thinking of Val in terms of the crypto-Indian, while it might seem a stretch, *the iceman* almost seems an orthographic encryption of *the indian*, another seven-letter word beginning in “i” and ending in “an.” Val also prefers not to wear clothes, opting to go about nude in his home and out on the horse track, like a semi-assimilated Native American warrior, chafing under the collars of Western garb.

Another of Purdy’s signs is the role Valentine Daugherty plays in a turn of events that parodies the genre of Historical Romance novels, in which a white woman swoons in the arms of a swarthy Indian “buck” who has no doubt captured her. One evening Val pays Adele Bevington a visit, perhaps because he is hoping for guidance regarding his daughter’s predicament from this woman who faced scandal and shame herself due to an unplanned pregnancy in her youth (73). Adele offers Val money, and he in turn swears that he will find her lost son. Then suddenly this man, who seems to have no interest in his wife, is overcome by lust for Adele. Purdy’s depiction of the “savagery” of his love seems to allude to the “bodice-ripper” genre novels illustrated by a strapping brown feathered man with bulging pectorals on the cover:

Without warning he took her in his arms. He put his mouth to hers. She had not been kissed so since that night, now also an age past, when she had fallen, as from a great height, a fall deliberately taken, nonetheless. [ . . . ] She almost felt at first he meant to wound her with his teeth . . . She felt he had a desperate need at that moment to possess her, that he could not leave her until he had, could not, indeed, take her money until they had had this union. He carried her into the bedroom . . . Then she felt the full weight of his desperateness, his need for some immediate human closeness, while she experienced, along with the vehemence and wild pleasure, the sense that lightning had struck her in a deep forest, that she

was buried under countless trees, branches, eaves, from which she would never rise . . . The next day she could not remember much of it, except for the actual wounds he had left on her body. And where he had cut her flesh with his kisses, she felt undetectable cuts far below the surface of the skin . . . Her iceman had brought her fire. (76)

With this last line especially Purdy is echoing parodically the language of the genre romance novel. After these purple passages packed with savage love and “wild pleasure,” with a connection made between Val and the “deep forest,” we might expect “her iceman” to read instead, “her indian.” Like the swarthy hunks of romance novel cover artwork, Val is indeed a paragon of masculinity, born with “the build of a wrestler, which had been further developed by his years of lifting the cakes of ice” (47).

Reading this scene with Purdy’s one-act play *Wedding Finger*, an absurdist racial allegory of New York City and America, collected in *A Day after the Fair* (1977), helps to bring to the surface the Indianness of Val. Purdy deploys a parodic rhetoric similar to that in the love scene in *On Glory’s Course* in *Wedding Finger*—which, like the rest of Purdy’s many plays, I unfortunately do not have the time or space to investigate fully in this project. The play was composed around the same time as *I am Elijah Thrush* and bears some interesting resonances with it (*Thrush* will be discussed in chapter five).<sup>27</sup> The character Emmaline Van Nostrand Vandervelde,<sup>28</sup> known as Lady Tuttle to her friends, seems to represent Manhattan but also America more broadly: “I am the island, you know . . . America’s most important island” (101). She claims to possess Native American ancestry (“I am an aboriginal Indian”), appropriately enough if she embodies the island of Manhattan (104). Lady Tuttle is being impressed into a marriage with a

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<sup>27</sup> *Wedding Finger* also incorporates much of the short fictional piece “Q&A,” published by *Esquire*.

<sup>28</sup> The name Vandervelde especially makes one wonder whether Purdy was not to some degree using Gloria Vanderbilt as a model for Lady Tuttle. Vanderbilt admired Purdy’s writing, especially his poetry, and wrote him letters.

Black Prince, born in Africa and raised in Haiti, who can comingle his soul with that of animals. As an allegory of Manhattan, however, she has been married off scores of times before. In a section labeled “LADY TUTTLE’S HEGIRA” she describes her marriage to the Indian Chief Za-ha-Lunnie, who walks upon the stage naked while she reminisces, in terms that ironically satirize stereotypical Romance genre language and allude to nineteenth-century captivity narratives:

I had run off from my protectress. I wanted to be free to meet love unbargained for, you see. I was after all an Indian, although this, like all else of import, had been kept from me by my white upbringers. Yet finally. . . (*Here Chief Zah-ha-Lunnie comes on stage.*) And at last, and in one time, my Indian soul emerged. I knew my real bridegroom could not be far . . . (*The Chief approaches her quickly, and takes her in his arms*) My chieftain appeared with his feather trimmed headgear. We walked through the forest paths. The mourning dove warned us, but we wanted only love, not safety. I went into his Hogan, which is Indian for house, and like him wears feathers on its head. Here I experienced the unendurable weight of love . . . It was October’s golden moon. The corn and beans, squash and melons had been stored for winter fare. (105)

Parallels between the scene in *On Glory’s Course* and the explicitly Indian love scene here are clear. Purdy almost seems to be faintly echoing, in a comic mode (not to say parodying), the love scene in Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968) between the Euro-American woman Angela Grace St. John and the Native protagonist Abel. If Adele Bevington feels as though she is buried underneath fallen trees and branches, and Lady Tuttle feels “the unendurable weight of love,” then during Angela’s tryst with Abel, whose body is “lean and hard and vital” and “his dark skin . . . warm and wet and taut with excitement,” she feels “the weight of his shoulders and chest” bearing “slowly down upon her until it seemed . . . that she should soon be crushed beneath him” (*House* 64).

Purdy’s love scene in *Wedding Finger*, already imbued with humor and excess, becomes farce as young Lady Tuttle’s involvement with the chief causes his horrific

death, one which echoes that of Daniel Haws at the close of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967). The Medicine Man decides that she is evil, “a Raven woman disguised as an Indian maid.” She is able to escape death through bribery, “with the help of the eagle,” but “could not bribe them for the life of my lover” (106). Tuttle’s language gestures at Native spirituality with this allusion to “the eagle” but rather seems an attempt at mystification, since the eagle on U.S. currency seems the most accurate referent here. The audience then sees the Medicine Man lopping off limbs, and finally the head, from Chief Zah-ha-Lunnie’s torso, which recalls Daniel Haws’s gruesome death in *Eustace Chisholm* (discussed in chapter three). More closely, the play interconnects with the contemporaneous *I am Elijah Thrush*. Lady Tuttle, like the Euro-American, aristocratic Millicent De Frayne, causes the Indian to be “cut . . . to mincemeat,” as Elijah puts it (118). When Lady Tuttle returns to civilization, her “arrival was more like a funeral than a homecoming”: “For only in the Hogan of the Chief had I been alive, only in the arms of an Indian. Everything since then has been waking death . . . But thank all gods at least once I was alive in his brown arms. Then I saw the embers of all the stars. Against the iron nipples of Zah-ha-Lunnie. I will meet my chief again beyond the stars” (106). Purdy’s language is clearly hyperbolic and parodic, and is consistent with the rest of the play, which edgily engages and lampoons racial stereotype. Reading the love scene between Val and Adele with *Wedding Finger* helps to bring out the Indian in Valentine.

Despite Val’s masculinity and lust for women like Elaine Cottrell and especially Adele Bevington, Val’s relationship with Ned Cottrell takes on slightly homoerotic resonances even though he is a substitute father to Ned. As mentioned in the introduction, Purdy’s characters are often indeterminate in their sexual orientations.

During Ned's visits with Val, Ned, a seemingly "white" boy, and the "almost black" older man eschew women and same-sex desire underlies their relationship. This recalls Leslie A. Fiedler's famous and controversial reading of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in his essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" which argues that homoeroticism lurks beneath Huck Finn and Jim's relationship.<sup>29</sup> Such "innocent homosexuality" was a thread running through the American literary canon, according to Fiedler, indicating puerility and a flight from domestic maturity in his evaluation, which was typical of Cold War attitudes. Purdy even alludes to *Huckleberry Finn* when we see Ned helping himself "to a mammoth piece of huckleberry pie" (143).

Same-sex tenderness, indigeneity, and transgression are bound up together in a disturbing scene and its ensuing revelations. These experiences transform Ned and connect Valentine Dougherty in a perhaps problematic way with Indian attributes. In this small-town Midwestern novel, which engages with and satirizes genres of melodrama, romance, and realism, and alludes to the gothic qualities of William Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson, everyone has a secret. Adele Bevington was put "in the family way" by an older wealthy and prominent friend of her father's when she was a youth, a "scandal" that has defined her for the rest of her life. Val Daugherty's secret, which Ned gradually comes to understand, is that he loves his horses. Roughhewn Val, associated with forces of nature like ice and fire, loves them in fact much more than polite society allows.

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<sup>29</sup> Fiedler's title, by the way, was not a line taken from Twain's novel, nor did Fiedler in this essay bother to cite textual evidence that he might have used to bolster his argument. Fiedler often seems more interested in controversy than coherence and clarity, sometimes painting with a rather broad brush. Fiedler, along with Hemingway and other commentators, might have also noticed that *nowhere* in Twain's novel is Jim ever referred to as "Nigger Jim," not by other characters or Huck's narration. This is simply a racist, extra-textual tradition in the scholarship.

Val's deep connection with horses is a further association with the "Indian" reinforced by the fact that Val is seen riding bareback. This practice of riding sans saddle specifically recalls Plains Indian practice. The way of life of the Plains Indians was changed dramatically by the introduction of horses, and due to the common representation of Plains Indians in fiction and film, the "Indian" in general has come to be linked with the horse. Val is "like his father, his uncle, and his grandfather before him, a breeder of horses" (171). He owns a stable, spends little time at his Icehouse or with his wife and foster daughter, choosing to be with his horses, his passion. "Man and wife seldom spoke to one another," we are told, and Val sees his daughter "Marilyn even less frequently than his wife" (48). Rather, Val dreams of "lighting out" in what Fiedler calls a "flight from the domestic." A rugged "Indian" quality is suggested in his wish "to go far north and live off the land" (55), "far north" perhaps suggesting Indian country in Canada, as "the north" sometimes connotes in Purdy's Midwestern fiction such as *In the Hollow of His Hand*. When Ned asks Val if he and Marilyn, whom he has impregnated, should get married, Val scoffs, "Marry? I wouldn't wish marriage on my worst enemy, let alone a young fellow like you that is only earning his spending money and living under the roof of his widowed mother. Married, hell. Nobody should get married, if you ask me. *Married* is for steers" (58). Val suggests that the institution of marriage is a mechanism of social control that regulates reproduction and controls male sexuality.

One evening Ned approaches Val's residence when the older man is not expecting him. Ned hears Val's "husky voice" speaking to his mare but was "not prepared to see" Val "stark naked": "both the mare and he showed the effects of extreme exertion, the

mare snorting and letting huge strings of white stuff fall from her mouth, and Val in a state of near collapse, wet with sweat” (150). After dismounting, Val

took the horse’s head and brought it to him. He kissed her and held her tightly against his chest. Then it appeared that he covered her eyes with kisses, as one would a person who was dearer to a man than the whole world . . . Then the man and the mare walked together for a while listlessly, aimlessly, stopped as if they were imparting some message to the other, and then they both went resolutely to the stable. (150-51)

Val exits the stable after a short while and enters his house. After hiding outside for a spell, Ned knocks on his door, and after he enters Val informs the boy that he saw him spying outside. “Horses is my all, do you hear?” Val confesses, speaking “savagely,” the narrator again alluding to the Indian stereotype. Purdy had already made a link between notions of the Indian and perverse horse-loving in *Jeremy’s Version* (1970). In young Jethro’s journal are accounts of running wild with a gang of boys led by Hardin Lincoln, “the wildest boy” in town. In one account, Hardin “had posed as some kind of Indian” as he “enacted a gruesome ceremony” involving masturbation and “later Hardin made them witness his mounting a young mare” (258). During their discourse Val says he’s glad that his wife Maude and daughter Marilyn have decamped, leaving him with the stables and the land. “What do I need them for when there’s all that and the mare and the rest of the horses?” he asks suggestively (153).

This reply plus what Ned has seen sets the lad to groaning and wailing, which in turn inflames Val, who has always deplored emotional display in his wife (this may allude to the often cited, supposedly Indian attribute of poker-faced stoicism). Telling Ned again to quit his racket, “He struck him once, then again, then several times. The blood rushed to the surface of the boy’s cheeks” (153). Seeing this, Val says, “Good . . . You look better with the blood running over your face” (153). Throughout his fiction,

Purdy associates the Native with “blood” and vigor. This is a deeply disturbing moment, this brutality. It is hinted that Ned, like Jethro Fergus in *Jeremy’s Version* (1970) before him, is undergoing a strange initiation, a blood rite that changes him forever. Indeed, after he returns home late that night Ned says aloud to himself: “I am not the same fellow . . . Maybe I am not even me” (150). The blood Valentine’s violence brings to Ned’s cheeks causes a white countenance to turn Red.

Then, after Val stares at the boy gloomily, the next section of the ritual begins.

Something seemed to break in the horse fancier. His pupils narrowed, his mouth worked violently as if a torrent of words was struggling to rush out.

Without warning he picked the boy up by the scruff of the neck and held him up as one would a doll, and gazed into his eyes. Then he lifted him high in the air and looked at him as he held him aloft. Then almost dropping him, he quickly shifted him so that Ned was sitting on his lap. The boy’s groans and sobs ceased as quickly as they had begun. (153)

Val takes on the role of a totemic father to Ned. As Ned promises that he won’t tell what he has seen, Val touches his face and hair. Val states that Maude left him, among other reasons, because of his horseplay, “But I can’t help bein’ me, now can I?” (154). Rather than seeing his love of horses as perverse or pathological, he proclaims it defiantly to Ned as an intrinsic part of his “bein.”

Ned’s response to all this reveals that Val has become through this experience an Indigenous—if not identifiably tribally-specific—father figure to the boy. “Ned knew he should feel terrified and sick at what he and heard, but whether it was because he had never known his own father, or whether he could remember Val more clearly from further back even than his own so-often-absent father, he felt now totally at ease with this wild unbalanced man who had punished and abused him, then petted and comforted him, and who now held him tightly to himself as if he were his own,” Purdy writes (154). To

Ned, Val, who has been familiar to him through the years, has through this ritual become an Indian father, which, as will be discussed, is symbolized by Ned placing an Indian blanket over Val's shoulders (154). This foreshadows scenes from his next novel, *In the Hollow of His Hand*, discussed in the next chapter.

After this incident, Ned continues to visit Val despite his mother's proscription, and the older man teaches Ned how to ride his beloved horses. Val displays a rough, animal-like tenderness: again "He took Ned by the scruff of the neck and shook him hard, and then, letting him go, he stared at him, and burst out laughing. It was the first time Ned had ever heard Val laugh a real good open laugh" (262). In many ways the relationship benefits both Ned and the Indian father figure he adopts. Val's figuring as Indian involves the notion of Natives being closer to natural feeling or what Vizenor calls "natural reason" and less repressed by the demands of "civilization."

Val's unconventional and *unbridled* sexuality is one of the more extreme examples of Purdy's theme of love's many courses, the strange paths of desire. Even Val's erotic feeling toward a horse is regarded as fate, part of Val's being. Ned doesn't really believe that Val actually has sex with his mare until Val confesses that, although he has stopped doing it, and didn't do it the night he was observed, "I used to do it, may as well tell you. Used to, every so often" (168). This brings cries of protest from Ned, who demands that Val reverse his statement. "I thought you knowed . . . I was with the mare every so often" (169, ellipsis in original).

Purdy has elsewhere in his fiction demonstrated that one's self, one's desires are beyond one's control, that a person is driven and shaped by mysterious forces. Daniel Haws, who could not acknowledge his Native American heritage although it is

recognized by others, is an example. Daniel was destroyed because of his inability to accept or act upon his desire for Amos Ratcliffe. The “midget” painter Kermit Raphaelson in *Malcolm* is another example. He is both small and although married, seems to be what was once called “lavender,” like the endpapers of *Malcolm*’s first edition. His unacknowledged homosexual desire also seems to be alluded to when he denies that physically, he is any different than anyone else. Val, on the other hand, although his desires are lawless, accepts them. After his confession to Ned, he tells the boy, “You got to get the stardust took out of your eyes some day anyhow . . . People can’t help bein’ what they are. You expect too much from your elders. People have got to be what they are” (169, ellipsis in original). This reference to “elders” also seems to carry a Native American connotation due to the Native cultural emphasis upon venerating elders, but if so, Purdy subverts what has become a Native stereotype, since Val reminds Ned that even elders are only human, with flaws and quirks.

Val’s bizarre and complicated sexuality is also an example of what critic Frank Baldanza called “Northern Gothic.”<sup>30</sup> Baldanza compared Purdy with his Ohio literary antecedent Sherwood Anderson, whose early works such as *Poor White* and *Winesburg, Ohio* were important to Purdy and his gay Midwestern contemporary James Leo Herlihy (*Midnight Cowboy, All Fall Down, Blue Denim*).<sup>31</sup> Purdy’s sometimes grotesque subjects can recall those of the Southern Gothic literary tradition: William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, and Flannery O’Connor among them.

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<sup>30</sup> See Baldanza’s essay of that title.

<sup>31</sup> Herlihy quoted *Winesburg, Ohio* in two separate epigraphs. Though Herlihy grew up largely in Detroit, he spent time with relatives in Chillicothe, Ohio, where his parents grew up and relatives lived. Chillicothe was once a prominent Native American settlement.

But another view of Val's bestiality sees his practice rather in terms of traditional Native American storytelling, considering that he is figured as Indian through Purdy's accumulated hints. Specifically, he can be seen as a variant on an Ojibwe trickster figure, Naanabozho, since his sexuality is fluid and diverse. "The tribal trickster is a liberator and healer in a narrative, a comic sign, communal signification and a discourse with imagination," Vizenor writes in his essay "Trickster Discourse" (187). This may seem at first an offensive, even repellent link, for what does bestiality have to do with Native American culture? For one thing, Val's close relation with his horses suggests the intimate interconnection and continuity that Natives felt with other species prior to the influence or imposition of Western ontology. The medicine man Black Elk is quoted as saying: "Once we were happy in our own country and we were seldom hungry, for then the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds lived together like relatives. And there was plenty for them and for us. But then the Wasichus [whites] came, and they have made little islands for us and other little islands for the four-leggeds" (Neihardt 8). Val's lustiness and sexual trickery (as with Adele) fit into the mold of transgression that is typical of trickster stories, especially those of the Ojibwe, which can involve scatology, rape, incest, and bestiality. Writing of Vizenor in "The Trickster Novel," Alan Velie notes, "the trickster is traditionally a priapic figure, having sex anywhere, anytime, with anything" (134). A tendency to shape-shifting, a common attribute of the trickster, is implied when we are told that Val had shot a bear at fifteen, "and had crudely cleaned and dressed the skin to fit his body. It was the only garment he had ever liked" (308).<sup>32</sup> N. Scott

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<sup>32</sup> In some tribal cultures, one would not want to shoot a bear, however, because the bear is seen as too close a relative to humankind.

Momaday in *The Ancient Child* and Leslie Marmon Silko in “Story from Bear Country” have told Native American stories about transforming into a bear.

Val is linked with the horses so strongly, which he calls his “all,” that it is as though he becomes a horse himself. Indeed, the text asks us to see Val in terms of tales or myths. English author and reviewer Victoria Glendinning, who wrote a biography of Purdy’s patroness Dame Edith Sitwell, says that “Val is a centaur” due to his “stark naked” bareback horse riding. Ned will ultimately reveal Val’s secret while talking in his sleep; overheard by Elaine, the story begins to travel. Ned reflects: “He was like one of those men he had read about in those books on ancient myths he had borrowed from Adele” (161). In the context of his suggested Native heritage, with his lusty carnality and relationship with animals, Val can be seen as Purdy’s take on a Native “myth” (although this is not quite an accurate word): the trickster figure and culture hero Naanabozho who appears in traditional Ojibwe stories. While Purdy is a Euro-American author, as noted, he occasionally shared that he had been told he possessed some Ojibwe ancestry. With his obvious interest and pride in what I call his imagined ancestry, it would not be surprising if Purdy, a voracious reader and intellectually curious man, had researched Native American traditional stories. This argument will be extended in chapter six, where I demonstrate that Purdy rewrites or alludes to traditional Ojibwe stories in his subsequent novel *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986).

In Ojibwe crossblood author Gerald Vizenor’s postmodern novel *Bearheart: the Heirship Chronicles*, a woman character named Linda Mae Ferrier has sex with two dogs. This scene has caused protest among feminists and other troubled readers. Vizenor asserted to Abenaki author and storyteller Joseph Bruchac in an interview that the scene

is not “pornographic, obscene, or bestial” because in tribal cultures “animals are not lower in evolutionary status” (Bruchac 196). According to critic Patricia Linton, Vizenor “argues that reception of the passage is essentially a question of worldview—readers who are offended are incapable of accepting mythic truth as concrete and real. He points to a cultural tradition in which all creatures are regarded as exercising consciousness and agency. Responding . . . to questions about the passage, he mentions tribal stories in which there is sex or marriage between humans and animals” (9). With his imagined Ojibwe identity, Purdy inscribes his own version of such a tale with his trickster Valentine Dougherty. In his essay “Trickster Discourse” Vizenor writes, “the trickster is a communal sign in imagination, a comic holotrope and a discourse that endures in modern literature” (205).

With Val’s Native identity established through accumulation of signs (not surprisingly, completely missed by the book critics), Purdy has his Indian confront a representative of the U.S. government, Judge Hitchmough, to bring him to justice in Val’s one-man tribal court. In doing so Purdy critiques American jurisprudence and its favoring of white male landed gentry, and its marginalization of the poor, female, and people of color. This theme will be picked up in his next novel, *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986), which dramatizes how the justice system works in the favor of white men and specifically against Natives. While circumambulating his property in the nude, as is his wont, Val discovers the Judge trespassing on his land, encroaching on Indian land, about to commit suicide by leaping into a quarry. Val saves him, if only for the satisfaction of bringing this representative of the government and white “justice” his due.

Now the Judge must face Indian justice: “You are in my court,” Val tells him, slapping him across the mouth (310). The racial dimension of this exchange is suggested when Val quips, “I wouldn’t allow your whited sepulcher of a body to befoul my quarry waters, Judge” (309-310). Whiteness is connected with death (earlier Elaine Cottrell had gone “ashen pale”). First, after dragging the Judge away from the edge of the quarry, Val punishes him for “trespassing on private property,” his encroachment on “Indian” land: “he kicked the prostrate figure, and demanded, ‘What are you doin’ on my land? Didn’t you see my signs, you!’” (308). He kicks the judge twice more, screaming, again, “What are you doing on my land. Hey? Have you read so much law by day you can’t see a No Trespassing sign by night?” (309). Val’s repeated emphasis on sovereign land and his anger at the government violating his rights suggests an allegorical reading. “You are under my domain and my right of property,” Val tells him, still naked; this is his reservation, the place where, like Elijah Thrush in his Arcturus Garden (as we’ll see), he can be himself, unmolested by the dictates of Euro-American civilization.

Valentine Dougherty lambastes Judge Hitchmough with accounts of his hypocrisy and selfishness, calling him a bully, a crook, and a cheat during his “trial.” “This court is in session,” he roars (311). Figured as an Indian, Val speaks on behalf of others who have been mistreated and marginalized by the “justice” of a racist, wealth-worshipping society. Val says that suicide is too good for the Judge, who has “sent the poor and the hungry and the jobless to jail these thousand times” (310). Finding the Judge “guilty, guilty, guilty!” Val thunders, “You know you always found anybody but the rich and powerful guilty even before the proceedings got under way in your court. For the first time in your life, Hitchmough, you are free to admit the truth: that you never allowed

justice to be done or heard or pronounced once you put on your black robes and called your court into session” (313). Purdy aligns his sympathies with the poor, the marginalized, those who are abused by a corrupt system that serves the rich and powerful, who, especially in 1930, tend to be white. In a telephone interview Purdy told me that he feels more comfortable with “lower-class people”; he has long been interested in African Americans<sup>33</sup> and Native Americans as outcasts or outsiders to a white-dominated society that he condemns as rapaciously capitalistic, plastic, and soul-destroying (most interviews with Purdy eventually get around to his invective against contemporary America). The Judge even comes to admit, “Let him have his say . . . I have deserved this. I take cognizance I have not been the man I thought I was” (314). Then Ned Cotrell arrives, nervously asking Val to please put on some clothes (311). This “trial” serves as an education for Ned, part of his initiation into Indianness through Val.

Before leaving Valentine, I want to return to the scene that follows Ned’s discovery of Val’s equine predilection. After Ned falls asleep and finally frees himself of snoring Val’s grasp, “Ned stood some time looking at him with a kind of wonder and gradual kindling admiration . . . Looking about the room, Ned saw a frayed Indian blanket. He threw it over the sleeper, and then went on watching his ‘captor’” (154). The detail of the Indian blanket at this key moment juxtaposed with the description of Val as a “‘captor,’” further evidences Val’s Native American heritage. Purdy here alludes to Native American “captivity narratives,” often popular accounts of Euro-American females (less often, men) being abducted by indigenes and forced into a tribal lifestyle. Often fictions based upon a factual incident, captivity narratives were used as

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<sup>33</sup> See Skerrett’s “James Purdy’s Black Mask of Humanity” for an excellent overview of this topic in Purdy’s early work.

“evidence” that Natives are untrustworthy “savages” in order to justify further colonization of Indigenous land. Purdy’s placement of the word “captor” within quotation marks reveals the irony of this allusion in light of Val and Ned’s close relationship and Val’s condition. The detail here as in “Why Can’t They Tell You Why?” takes on an elevated significance. The phrase to go “back to the blanket,” which signifies a tribal person’s return to traditional ways, seems to be evoked here.

Toward the end of the novel, Ned “lights out” for the territory of Canada. This is where his father used to hunt. All that Ned has ever wanted to do, he figures, is go hunting with his father, but “his dad had run out on him and died instead! He had only Keith, and when he was in his right mind perhaps Val, but he knew they really cared very little for him” (362). Ned’s ersatz fathers Keith and Val do care for him, but not as a father can, and Ned perhaps thinks he can imbibe some of his father’s essence by going to his favorite place. “A few months after Adele’s death Ned Cottrell quit school and went to Canada. He told his mother he wanted to visit the places where his father had so often gone hunting” (375). There is perhaps a Native connotation here, as if Ned’s departed father had gone to the “happy hunting ground” after leaving this world, the phrase referring to the afterlife to many traditional Plains Indians and Ned is going to commune with him. The “wildness” of Canada, its Ojibwe people and other First Nations, plus the fact that Ned’s substitute fathers have been figured as Indian (in Keith’s case purely figuratively) all suggest the possibility that Maurius Cottrell, Ned’s father, may have had Native American heritage himself. “It’s in the boy’s blood,” his mother says to her friend. “His dad, you know, and before him his dad’s father, and his father before him—they were all [warriors] and hunters” (371). During the course of *On*

*Glory's Course*, Ned has been connected to two "Indian" father figures, "war whoops," and two Indian blankets, which might support such a conjecture. Ned never met his father, and his mother, like Ethel in "Why Can't They Tell You Why?", never speaks of him. This hint, of a white boy discovering a repressed Native American father, is developed into a central problem of *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986), the novel which followed *On Glory's Course*, and also in Purdy's final longer work of fiction, the novella *Moe's Villa*. With regard to Purdy's view of the contemporary status of Native Americans and tribal communities, *On Glory's Course* is a development from the somewhat similar *Jeremy's Version* (1970), a step toward the overt Native characters and advocacy of Native claims and communities found in *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe's Villa*. *On Glory's Course* will be picked up again in chapter four, discussed alongside its predecessor *Jeremy's Version*. The next step in Purdy's development on this score is his short story "The White Blackbird," in which the young male character I read as Native returns to maintain ancestral land at the close.

Like Purdy's later novella *Moe's Villa*, the plot of the short story "The White Blackbird," collected in *Moe's Villa and Other Stories*, centers on a mystery involving jewelry, and is about the value of a shared secret. In the novella, the issue is the authenticity of a box of rubies that were given to a boy. In the story, the question is what happened to centenarian Delia Matlock's valuable family jewels, which have been gradually disappearing from the attic. Because these stories are concerned with family heirlooms, they are implicitly about inheritance. With great subtlety and skill, both "The White Blackbird" and *Moe's Villa* valorize Native ancestry and suggest that instead of the "rubies" that Rory's putative father gives him, or the ruby necklace that Delia loses

among other jewelry, the “real wealth,” the real “red gift” is that of Rory and Clyde’s Indigenous presence. In “The White Blackbird” Delia loses his presence, but in *Moe’s Villa* Rory is reunited with Moe, whom I argue is his crossblood Shawnee father.

Although Native American contexts are important to both narratives, in the short story there is no direct reference to Indians or Natives, while in the novella the title character is said by the townspeople to possess Shawnee Indian heritage. In “The White Blackbird,” through an accumulation of signs one can come to understand that Delia’s godson Clyde Furness is figured as Native American and gifted with special ancestral powers linked with traditional Native American medicine. Purdy’s enigmatic, elusive short story “The White Blackbird” at first seems impenetrable, but considered within Native American contexts, various possibilities for interpretation present themselves. Without understanding Clyde’s link to indigeneity, however, the story may remain a hazy mystery. Since the story is intrinsically concerned with the value of mystery and the secret, it is only appropriate that the text is mysterious and secretive. Jacques Derrida in “I Have a Taste for the Secret” remarks that “one does not always write with a desire to be understood” and sometimes experiences “a paradoxical desire not to be understood” (30). If everyone understood everything about the text immediately, “if such a transparency of intelligibility were ensured it would destroy the text, it would show that the text has no future [*avenir*], that it does not overflow the present, that it is consumed immediately” (Derrida 30). If this is the case, then it is game over for that text. Yet a text’s radical reluctance to yield to the reader can cause it to be frustrating and harder to value at first; for a long time I considered “The White Blackbird” to be a lesser story.

Clyde is paired with Val from *On Glory's Course* in this chapter because they are both not identified as having Indigenous heritage by the narrator or characters in the story. There are reasons for this lack of overt identification, both within and without the text, for aesthetic and political reasons. Clyde and Val both make good transitional figures in tracing the development of Purdy's representations of Native Americans, registering his shift from victimization and pessimism to presence and optimism. Clyde and Val, although they both represent Native survivance (as opposed to Daniel Haws and Elijah Thrush), are crossblood Natives lacking a community—and connection to and investment in community is crucial to most definitions of a bona fide American Indian identity. Moreover, the tendency of non-Native authors to create such Natives lacking community has been criticized by James Cox in his strong study *Muting White Noise* (206). Crucially, however, in the two works discussed in chapter six, *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986) and the novella *Moe's Villa* (2004), the beginnings of the re-establishment of community do occur, even if it is only the re-uniting of an Indian father and his son. Purdy provides the reader with some hope in these later works.

An important aspect of the story that comes to light with indigeneity in mind is how the character Dr. Noddy has learned, we infer, from Indigenous medicine, bringing together European and Native practices. In doing so he comes to embody a sort of transitional figure towards the blending of Red and White that Purdy advocates in his emphasis on mixed race. Purdy's doctors tend to be relatively enlightened individuals. Similarly Dr. Cressy in *Mourners Below* (1981) defends a traditional Indian woman midwife's reputation, saying she would do a better job of delivering a baby than many of the medical school graduates would nowadays. Dr. Noddy is a transition figure toward

the character Dr. Cooke in *Moe's Villa*, who is explicitly described as resembling a Native American, and who highly regards the healing powers of Moe Swearingen, a crossblood Shawnee man who began, but didn't complete, medical school. Noddy, however, due to (as we will see) both his persistent Western rationalist drive to penetrate the secret instead of recognizing the value of the secret, and his bad temper, approaches but does not meet the ideal merger that Purdy infers. Like Derrida, Purdy has "a taste for the secret" that opposes exhibition and the culture of confession; for both men the right to the secret is connected to what democracy, and thus for Purdy, America, should be. I think that Purdy would likely agree with Derrida that "the demand that everything be paraded in the public is a glaring sign of the totalitarianization of democracy . . . if a right to the secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space" (*Taste* 59). Western Enlightenment rationalism in its extreme form leads to totalitarianism. On the other hand, Dr. Noddy respects and learns from Native medicine traditions, we gather. He acts as a mediator between Delia and Clyde, opting not to call attention to Clyde's Native medicine powers to Delia, rather explaining it in rationalist terms to Delia as best as he can.

Although "The White Blackbird" was collected in *Moe's Villa & Other Stories*, not published in America until 2004, it first appeared in *Conjunctions* in Fall of 1990.<sup>34</sup> The short story was thus likely composed in the late 1980s, after *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986) and prior to the novella *Moe's Villa*, in other words written not too long

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<sup>34</sup> In my discussion of this story and the novella, I refer to the page numbers of the Carroll & Graf American edition of *Moe's Villa and Other Stories* (2004), in spite of the fact that it followed the British, Australian and New Zealand version by four years. No hardcover edition was published anywhere to my knowledge, and the American version is easily obtainable, unlike the British text, which includes a sharp and brief appreciation of Purdy by his close friend, assistant, and sometime-editor, John Uecker. The lack of a hardcover issue of this fine collection of Purdy's later work perhaps indicates the degree to which Purdy's reputation suffered in his later years.

after a period when Purdy was thinking about Native Americans intensively. “The White Blackbird” takes place in Delia’s large, grand old home “on the edge of the Canadian wildlands,” also suggesting First Nations peoples, perhaps Ojibwes who were (and are) found north of Ohio (and circa 1800, in Ohio) and across Canada. The story is narrated by a woman over one hundred years old, Delia Matlock. Her age and thus the question of her reliability as a narrator is one factor that comes into play as the reader attempts to make sense of the story. In part because of its difficulty and ambiguity, “The White Blackbird” is one of Purdy’s works that greatly benefits from approaching it from a perspective that recognizes his interest in and concern for Native Americans.

While there is not enough evidence to claim Dr. Noddy as having Native American ancestry, a series of signs link twenty-year-old Clyde with indigeneity. As always, the title is a good place to start. The title refers to a white bird feather that was found in Delia’s attic, near where the jewels were stored. The feather takes on great importance for all of the characters involved, and can almost be considered to be another character in the tale. The feather seems to create a bond between Delia Matlock and her godson Clyde, along with the “secret” of the missing jewels. The feather is linked with special healing powers, Native medicine (called “hypnotism” by Delia), a change in consciousness, and it seems to vibrate with energy. “A strange calm descended on us both after Clyde found the white feather. At first I was afraid to touch it. Clyde coaxed me to take it in my hand . . . At that moment the calm descended on me as many years ago during one of my few serious illnesses old sharp-eyed Doctor Noddy had insisted I take a tincture of opium” (149). The feather is linked in Delia and Clyde’s minds with the cause of the jewels’ disappearance. Delia says that the calm feeling brought about by

the feather made it feel as though they had actually “found the jewels, or at least had come to understand by what means the jewels had been taken” (149). In many tribal cultures the feathers of certain birds, such as the eagle or hawk, are regarded as highly sacred and possessing consciousness (a topic that I expand upon in my discussion of *I am Elijah Thrush* in chapter five). “The feather had changed everything,” Delia tells us. “I must have looked at it every time I went near the piano. I touched it occasionally. It seemed to move when I picked it up as if it had breath. It was both warm and cool and so soft except for its strong shaft. I once touched it to my lips, and some tears formed in my eyes” (153). The feather is vibrant and very powerful.

In philosophical discourse the idea of a “white blackbird” or a “white crow” is a classic example of something anomalous especially with regard to Aristotelian definition and categorization. One might claim that “All blackbirds are black,” but then in rare cases, white blackbirds have been seen in nature. A white blackbird then becomes an emblem of extreme rarity, something queer and quite special, and as Dr. Noddy puts it, “a sport of nature.” The anomalousness of the white blackbird lends it mystical reverberations too.

Clyde is repeatedly associated with “the white blackbird” and its feather, and by implication, something powerful and difficult to explain rationally by Western epistemologies. Often times those with special talents, gifts or powers, whether they be seers, visionaries, outsider artists, or paradigm-smashing scientists such as Albert Einstein, are misrecognized, especially in their youth, as mentally challenged, fools, or madmen. Likewise, Clyde’s now-deceased uncle had confessed his belief to Delia that Clyde is “somewhat retarded” (143). In religious discourse those who have been the

subject of transcendental visions are understood to be disconnected from quotidian life for a while. This happens to Black Elk after he experiences his ornate spiritual vision as a nine-year-old boy (Neihardt 36-37). This was usually understood and supported in aboriginal cultures. Mourning Dove writes in her autobiography, "Parents usually knew when children had found a spirit because they acted in a dreamy, hazy mood upon their return to the tipi. They did not play, preferring to sit around in deep thought" (36). In one sense, as a "white blackbird," Clyde can be viewed as a man of color, a mixed blood Indian, one who appears "white" on the outside but is a man of color on the inside.

The lack of references to or knowledge of what I take to be Clyde's Indigenous heritage can be explained by several factors. For one thing, Clyde never knew his parents, and he has been raised by his now-deceased Uncle Enos, whom he does not really miss, he frankly confesses to his godmother Delia. Enos may well have possessed Native heritage, but this cannot be determined from textual evidence, and he dies before he can impart much to his young nephew. One clue that Enos may have had such ancestry, or some tie to Indigenous or at least esoteric knowledge, comes when Delia wishes that Enos were still among the living so that he could help to explain what the white feather means, implying that he would have some insight into this matter (158-59). After Enos's death Clyde's godmother Delia takes responsibility for him, and he eventually moves into her grand residence from the property he inherited from Enos.

In spite of the lack of explicit acknowledgement of Clyde's ancestral Native blood, several physical details and other indices taken together provide support for a reading of him as a crossblood. These signs in themselves may seem tenuous or ambiguous, but they are meant to have a slow, cumulative effect. Clyde possesses "long

chestnut hair” and we are told repeatedly he has “hazel eyes.” Purdy’s carefully chosen iterated adjectives are derived from the natural world (the chestnut tree and the hazelnut bush) and point to Clyde’s affinity to that world and by association, indigeneity. The reference to eye color may seem casual, but when reading this story in light of the crossblood Native characters in Purdy’s *In the Hollow of His Hand*, in which Chad’s blue eye turns dark, and the novella *Moe’s Villa*, in which Moe’s eye changes color from light to dark throughout the day, the reference takes on greater significance, since it becomes clear that in Purdy, eye color is a particularly important symbolic index of indigeneity. The dictionary says that *chestnut* describes a “grayish to reddish brown,” suggesting a blend of genetic influences, and also connotes the color of a horse, often linked with Natives, as I argued to be the case with Val Daugherty in *On Glory’s Course*.

Additionally, Clyde does not seem to have learned anything from the Western educational system. For all we know, Uncle Enos or more likely, another relative—we learn that Clyde had lived somewhere else prior to residing with Enos—may have been instructing him in an Indigenous pedagogy. Because Enos is dead and Delia is our only source, the reader is limited in her knowledge of Clyde’s past. Moreover, we are told that Clyde “spends all his time in the forest” (143). Dr. Noddy, who late in the story declares that it is Clyde who should explain the white feather and the missing jewels, declares that Clyde “was known from the time he came to live with Uncle Enos as a true son of the wildlands. A boon companion to wild creatures and the migratory fowl” (164). Like the aboriginal North American “people of the forest,” Clyde is closely connected to animals and the natural environment. This love of nature and his closeness to animals and birds obviously has many tribal precedents. Nineteenth-century Ojibwe author George

Copway (Kahgegagahbowh) in his autobiography declares, “I am one of Nature’s children” (73). Copway describes how he would listen for spirits in nature to teach him how to be a hunter and warrior (69). He later remarks, “I was taught to believe that the gods would communicate with me, in the shape of birds, animals . . . When I fell asleep in the woods and dreamed some strange dream, I felt confident it was from the spirits” (87). Mourning Dove describes how children were sent into the forest at night to look for the spirit from nature that would impart a vision to them, setting them on the path to medicine power.

Dr. Noddy is implied to possess knowledge of Indigenous medicine, although the source and the amount of this knowledge is unknown. In this respect he bears some similarity to the merging of Indigenous and European traits that Purdy endorses. In the story the concepts of “medicine,” “hypnotism,” and “the feather” are all linked together. Delia calls Dr. Noddy “a kind of outdoorsman” and “a naturalist [who] studies animals and birds” (156). In this setting near the “Canadian wildlands,” upon entering the room Dr. Noddy recognizes the feather and its importance right away, in a scene that strongly recalls a scene from Purdy’s 1972 novel *I am Elijah Thrush*. Elijah Thrush, described in terms of the Indian, as we shall see in chapter five, responds in an accusatory manner upon spying the Golden Eagle feather that falls away from Albert Peggs’ Black body, thinking it a sign of Indigenous medicine power (in my reading). Like Thrush, as soon as Noddy spots the feather he stares at it intensely. He demands to know where the feather came from, “in almost angry, accusatory tones,” and again “in a kind of tone of rage” (155). When Clyde remarks that the white feather is a “clue,” Dr. Noddy “almost roared” (155). After the doctor has left with the feather, Delia recalls that Noddy had been

“accused a half century or more ago of practicing hypnotism on his patients . . . His taking the feather had brought back this old charge” (161). When Delia tells Clyde about it, the young man’s “mouth came open, and then he closed it tight. I thought his lips had formed a cuss word” (161). Clyde’s response to this mention of Noddy’s powers suggests that he is realizing what he is up against with Noddy. Clyde now seems to understand that Noddy uses Indigenous methods (perceived as “hypnotism” by suspicious townspeople) and is thus capable of comprehending Clyde’s powers, which the young man might not altogether understand himself. The memory of hypnotism worries both Clyde and Delia, but Clyde seems to know more than he is saying. Pondering the connection between the feather and hypnotism, Delia says that while she doesn’t understand the meaning of the connection, she feels strongly that it exists. Clyde “smiled a strange smile,” perhaps a Mona Lisa smile indicating enigmatic knowledge (163).

Although some might be skeptical of Purdy’s link between Native medicine powers and hypnotism, both Native and non-Native authors have linked the powers of Indigenous medicine men to “hypnotism.” In his autobiography, Sioux author Dr. Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa) characterizes himself as amenable to working with traditional Indigenous medicine men although he is highly trained in Western medicine, and there seems to have been a mutual exchange of knowledge between Eastman and these healers. “I had some interesting experiences with the Indian conjurers, or ‘medicine men,’ to use the names commonly given. I would rather say, mental healer . . . further he practiced massage or osteopathy, used the Turkish bath, and some useful vegetable remedies. But his main hold on the people was gained through his appeals to the spirits and his magnetic and hypnotic powers” (122). Recalling such men’s acute relation to nature’s

offerings, Dr. Noddy, who is said to use “hypnotism,” implies he is an extraordinary person indeed when he remarks, “In our part of the world nature sometimes is enabled to work out phenomena not observed by ordinary people” (163).<sup>35</sup> This reference to “our part of the world,” near “the Canadian wildlands,” perhaps connotes Indian Country.

Although Dr. Noddy has appropriated Native medicine, he remains quite Western and rationalist in the sense that he is anxious to penetrate Delia’s secret, to get to the bottom of things. This desire to penetrate the mystery, to “strike through the mask,” recalls Melville’s Captain Ahab, with the white feather taking on the symbolic qualities of the white whale.<sup>36</sup> Dr. Noddy’s removal of the white feather “had spoiled something,” Delia tells us. The disappearance of the family jewels had been a secret between Delia and Clyde, which was a bond between them. The feather was a “clue” which possesses the power to bond them even more tightly. After telling Clyde about the missing jewels, she remarks, “I had given out, at last, my secret. He had accepted it; we were, I saw, like confederates, although we were innocent of course of wrongdoing ourselves. We shared secretly the wrongdoing of someone else. Or was it *wrongdoing* I wondered. Perhaps the disappearance of the jewels could be understood as the work of some blind power” (144). This “blind power” can be likened to “that inscrutable thing” against which Captain Ahab rails and which Noddy seeks to understand (Melville 178). The jewels in themselves actually mean little to Delia, who claims to have never cared for possessions.

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<sup>35</sup> Following Purdy’s passing David Breithaupt writes: “We both grew up in Ohio and he often spoke on the phone about his childhood memories such as visiting herb doctors in the country with his mother who was an early believer in holistic healing (at least in Ohio).”

<sup>36</sup> In “The Quarter-Deck” chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Ahab tells the crew: “Hark ye yet again,—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me” (Melville 178).

Delia tells us: “I cared little for real property, farmlands, mansions, not even dresses. Certainly not jewels” (145). Delia is over one hundred years old, and she has no cherished living relatives left to whom to will the jewels, leaving only her godson Clyde. What is most important to her is her relationship with him: “My real wealth was in Clyde,” she tells us (146).<sup>37</sup> Clyde, like young Rory in *Moe’s Villa*, is the “Indian giver,” the real Red gift. Dr. Noddy’s intrepid investigation threatens the secrets that bond Delia and Clyde, however, and they sense this threat. Delia says, “He is making us feel like the accused . . . He acts more like a policeman or detective than a doctor where the feather is concerned” (158). “Dr. Noddy having found the clue, the feather, began to dig and delve, uncover and discover, sift evidence, draw conclusions and then shatter all our peace and love . . . All was to be spoiled, shattered, brought to nothing,” Delia narrates (162).

What Noddy brings to light is an explanation that the jewels had been stolen by white crows or blackbirds that flew in the attic window, irresistibly attracted to the shiny objects, and cached them one by one in the ruined Bell Tower on the property. But this explanation is couched in terms that are nearly accusatory of Clyde, implying that he is an accomplice of the avian thieves. Noddy launches into a discourse “about Nature’s often indulging in her own schemes and experiments, indifferent to man” (163). He continues, sounding like a milder Ahab, claiming that nature “can in the end only baffle us. Our most indefatigable scholars and scientists finally admit defeat and throw up their hands to acknowledge her inscrutable puissance . . . The feather is one of her pranks” (163-64). Then Noddy says that rather than himself, Clyde should be the one to “expatiate on Dame Nature’s hidden ways and purposes” since he has been long-known

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<sup>37</sup> Delia is a kindly, anti-materialist, generous woman, countering, as do other female characters in the later stories collected in *Moe’s Villa & Other Stories*, charges that have been made that Purdy’s women characters are always negatively drawn.

as “a true son of the wildlands, a boon companion to wild creatures and the migratory fowl” (164). This description recalls the title of one the very earliest Native autobiographies, *A Son of the Forest*, by early nineteenth-century Pequot author William Apess. Confronted with the charge that he must have seen the birds then, Clyde gasps and then drops a wine glass.<sup>38</sup> Noddy gradually persuades Clyde to admit, seemingly using hypnosis, that the youth had seen the white crows or blackbirds flying into the Bell Tower, a site fearsome to Delia because her great uncle committed suicide there and another relative died in an accident in the tower.

Considering the odd circumstances surrounding this “explanation”—including Noddy’s link between Clyde and the anomalous birds’ “theft” of the jewels, and Clyde’s dramatic response—the story opens itself up to multiple interpretations. One way of reading it is to accept that white blackbirds were indeed responsible for the theft, and that while Clyde may have known this was happening, he knew that Delia didn’t care about the jewels, had no relatives left to will them to, and most importantly, that this mystery would give them something to talk about and bond over. But this reading is not satisfactory, because it doesn’t account for the dramatic, enflamed way that Dr. Noddy reacts to the sight of the white feather (just as does Elijah Thrush). Noddy understands that the feather is imbued with special powers; this is knowledge that his study of Indigenous traditional medicine has presumably given him. Nor does this reading explain why Clyde reacts so dramatically and emotionally to Noddy’s linking of him and the white birds, and why Noddy’s explanation is directed toward Clyde in a confrontational way in the first place.

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<sup>38</sup> Throughout the story one finds color symbolism of red and white suggestive of the dynamics of ethnicity explored therein. Delia and Clyde sip aged red wine together as a “ceremony” (145). Delia spills red wine on her clean white dress, which Clyde wipes away “painstakingly” (150).

It could also be argued that Noddy's explanation to Delia was a ruse to protect her, that Clyde was actually stealing the jewels and stashing them in a place that he knew Delia feared and where she would never look, the Bell Tower. The white feather then was a red herring. But the same objections arise about Noddy's reaction to the feather, plus Delia's perception of the seeming vitality of the feather itself. Also, Clyde is portrayed as loving of his godmother. His fears that Delia believes him to *be* "the white blackbird," the thief, cause him anxiety, and he eventually leaves Delia's house to return to his Uncle Enos's property. Clyde charges, "in your deepest being, in your troubled sleeping hours, Delia, I feel you think I am the white blackbird" (169). Their special bond has been "spoiled" through nosey Noddy's investigation.

These intersecting ripples of elusive signification, signaled by the characters' odd behaviors and intimations, are best explained by following the trail of signs that connect Clyde with the feather and the white blackbird. The reader gathers from the text the contradictory notion that while Clyde may be "the white blackbird," he is not really guilty of "wrongdoing." This can be explained by concluding that Clyde literally is, or becomes, the white blackbird. His spirit has merged with that of the white blackbird, who acts as a spirit guide imbuing him with visions and powers. Like the Native children Mourning Dove described, Clyde spent a great deal of time in the woods, studying and intermingling with its creatures, and I posit that Clyde received his own spirit and realized his perhaps ancestral talent for shape-shifting. Delia gives another clue linking him with the bird when she tells us that "Clyde had one of the most beautiful voices I have ever heard" (151). Clyde is thus a shape-shifter, a trickster of sorts. Native Americanist Elaine Jahner calls the trickster a "shapeshifter who mediates between man

and nature, man and deity, who challenges us to reimagine who we are” (152). Like Naanabozho in the Ojibwe traditional stories, Clyde is part of a “trick” in the sense that he becomes a bird that removes the jewels. According to one traditional Ojibwe story, “Naanabozho spent much time with the birds and learned their ways by watching them. He talked with the birds and asked them to teach him how to fly. So the birds taught Naanabozho how to fly” (Coleman et al. 81). In another Ojibwe story a little boy shape-shifts into an oriole (Coleman et al. 38-39). As in many stories of such transformation, on Clyde’s part there seems to be no real intention here; he just becomes an anomalous bird, one irresistibly attracted to these shiny things. As Delia put it, “the disappearance of the jewels could be understood as the work of some blind power” and thus not connected with culpability or “wrongdoing” (144). So while intentionality doesn’t seem to be part of it, Clyde is still a trickster in a positive sense (tricksters are often amoral or downright nasty) in that his transgression offers a gift—a “subject,” a bond, a secret that unites godmother and godson and gives their life together a certain mystery.

Although one would expect this to register a happy ending, the restoration of the jewels is accompanied by alienation, then separation, between Delia and her godson. This split is due to Clyde’s misgivings about the subtle suspicions he perceives in Delia, and his odd and perhaps to him, unclear role in the whole business. Clyde returns to his Uncle Enos’s property. Although the ending is sad for Delia, it can be argued that it is affirmative for Clyde. This is because Clyde is returning to family land, which is his ancestral gift. He takes his responsibility seriously: “I have . . . a bounden duty to see his property is kept as he wanted me to keep it” (173). Contemporary nationalist definitions of tribal sovereignty link communities of Natives with specific pieces of land. While

Clyde lacks a community, he possesses the ancestral land. As for his days with Delia, the evenings of wine sipping and parlor songs, although pleasant, they could not last forever, like everything in life. Having established Clyde as a crossblood Native, it is possible to read the ending as positive for him. He owns a plot of land on which he possesses a kind of sovereignty. No one may bother him there. He is maintaining familial continuity and ties to the land. But Clyde, like Val Daugherty, is still an Indian without a community, in many ways paradoxical, but still surviving, gifted with vision and medicine, and tied to the land. This lonely situation begins to be remedied with *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe's Villa*, discussed in chapter six. The "Native sons" in *On Glory's Course* and "The White Blackbird," Ned and Clyde, reclaim their birthrights and their paternal legacies as the first step toward rejoining the community.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### “‘ORIGINAL STOCK’ IN AMERICA”: *EUSTACE CHISHOLM AND THE WORKS* AND *NARROW ROOMS* AS TRAGIC NATIONAL ALLEGORIES

Whatever the summer has said

winter will correct.

Whatever spring gave

summer will crowd.

All the west wind thought

the south wind took back.

The butterfly has not been warned.

He has not heard the midnight owl

Or the silence of the quail.

—James Purdy, “Are You in the Wintertree?”

In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) and *Narrow Rooms* (1978), Native American characters, allusions, symbols, and motifs contribute to Purdy’s obsessive investigation of American origins and identity, what Stephen D. Adams in his fine, articulate monograph *James Purdy* calls “his cumulative endeavor to chart the ancestry of the national psyche” (113). Purdy operates in the mode of the metaphorical mixed-blood,

aiming to be a Weaverian “critical ally” of sorts, sympathetic to Native American perspectives, and eventually, issues. The Native American materials of both novels are essential to Purdy’s historical and racial allegories that critique American myths such as white supremacy and Manifest Destiny. In the brutal, violent conclusions of these allegorical novels, Purdy creates what Leslie A. Fiedler calls “a truer metaphor” of white interaction with and treatment of Indians historically, profaning the cherished, mystifying, self-serving myths of Pocahontas, Sacajawea, and others.

In both allegorical novels, Purdy implicitly emphasizes the need for white and Indian cultures and identities to unite and merge to realize the potential of America. So far this potential has been unfulfilled, to disastrous effect, Purdy implies in these two novels. In a review of *Eustace Chisholm*, James M. Lindroth writes, “The pilgrims’ dream of the new Eden and the failure of this dream have been enduring themes in American literature. Among contemporary writers, it is James Purdy who has perhaps established himself most firmly in this tradition” (20-21). A new nation calls for a new identity and consciousness, as D.H. Lawrence points out in his seminal work *Studies in Classic American Literature*. For America to be truly democratic, it must reject racism, sexism, and homophobia. Euro-Americans’ historical rejections of, for example, Indigenous matriarchal or matrilineal power structures and two-spirit/gender diversity traditions indicate how sexism and homophobia are part and parcel of the racist ideology that attempts to justify dispossession and even genocide. If Euro-American and Native American can truly unite, spiritually, culturally, and/or genetically—as opposed to Indians’ forced assimilation to white culture—then “a new great area of consciousness” can appear, “in which there is room for the red spirit too” (Lawrence 52). If this potential

were to be realized, then “the gorgeous American pattern of a new skin” will manifest, Lawrence prophesies (51, 53). According to Philip Deloria in *Playing Indian*, Lawrence shows how Euro-Americans see “the Indian” as embodying the spirit of the new continent and representing freedom and instinct over a stringently logical outlook. Euro-Americans have desired this freedom, but have “invariably failed to become aboriginal” and have thus remained “unfinished” (3).

A failure to “become aboriginal” involves a rejection of intermixing, culturally or genetically. On the level of “blood,” the insistence upon “purity of race” and mono-racial “original stock” will inevitably lead to stagnation and degeneracy, eventually catastrophe, Purdy implies in these novels and elsewhere. In discussing the concept of “stock,” Stephen D. Adams writes that Purdy suggests “the need for new life to be injected into the national bloodstream, for new strains to be propagated from a depleted species” (*James* 94). “Until the white men give up their absolute whiteness,” Lawrence warns, “America is filled with latent violence and resistance” (51). Fiedler writes, “In the very greatest American writers, we discover the full realization that until [America] solves . . . the ‘Indian problem,’ the white American cannot be a whole man” (*Waiting* 126). The implication of Fiedler’s word choice “whole man” suggests that for him and Lawrence, American masculinity is unfinished, ill-defined, and thus at stake in this problem.

The failure of America to meet this potential goes beyond a failure for whites to reach wholeness in Purdy’s view; it is disastrous on a national scale, symbolized by the Great Depression setting of *Eustace Chisholm*, and the catastrophic allegorical endings of these two novels. Purdy intimates that unless America dramatically changes tack, it is doomed. Referring to Amos’s links to Ancient Greece but equally applicable to

Indigenous America, Warren French writes, “Purdy insists that we must go back to the very beginnings of our culture and start all over again” (“Horrible”).

The failure of Amos and especially Daniel to accept the love between them, their failure to create a new relation, therefore takes on broader allegorical significance. To Eustace, their chronicler, “the whole U.S.A.” becomes “nothing but Daniels and Amoses whispering and muttering to him in the falling darkness,” unable to connect and merge with each other (182). The vague outlines of Purdy’s racial and national allegory were first briefly suggested by the astute English critic Tony Tanner at the close of his chapter on Purdy, “Frames without Pictures,” in his landmark study of U.S. fiction from 1950 to 1970, *City of Words* (108). Amos, connected with Ancient Greece, represents the ideal traits and traditions of Europe available to the New World, such as metaphysical philosophy and beauty. Evoking a Platonic ideal, Amos is “celestially good-looking, *too* good-looking for real,” Eustace says (19). Stephen Adams writes that Amos represents the “promise of love and beauty, the lost spirit or soul of that utopian dream of America” (*Homosexual* 67). Daniel represents some of what are implied to be the best qualities of Indigenous America, including endurance, strength, and practical knowledge. Adams writes that Daniel’s attributes “mark him out as the inheritor of America’s ‘original stock’” (*James* 99). Considering his grounded practicality, the fact that as a coalminer he worked in the earth and is now a “landlord,” Daniel is thus connected to the land, the “American soil” as Lawrence puts it, although he is urban. To Tanner, Daniel represents “the material and physical potentialities of the North American continent” (108). As a Native “landlord” in Chicago, Daniel’s presence there alludes to the displaced

Potawatomi, Miami, Fox, and other tribal peoples who lived on that land prior to removal.

Purdy implies that the potential of America cannot be met until these two entities, represented by Daniel and Amos, unite. As Stephen D. Adams writes of Daniel and Amos, “Each needs to enter into relation with the qualities the other possesses” (*Homosexual* 67). But historically, as *Narrow Rooms* also testifies, in America, racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia keep them separate. Rather than trying to blend cultures, creating a mixture<sup>39</sup> that draws from the strengths of both races, the dominant culture of America has insisted on racial purity and a belief in the superiority of its of value systems and cultural practices, rejecting and displacing the Indian. Fiedler writes that the white American has rejected this merger “for reasons he does not ever understand” (*Waiting* 115). This merger with the Indian is necessary for America to break away from dependence on a rigid Anglo model of identity rooted in Puritanism, to form a new national character, one that is inclusive, anti-racist, and anti-homophobic. “Then the true passionate love for American Soil will appear,” Lawrence writes (51). But with regard to Daniel and Amos and their failed potential for merger, in her monograph on Purdy Bettina Schwarzschild writes, “what could have been a creative well-spring of life had it been acknowledged and responsibly directed, now turns into a poisonous secretion,” leading to tragedy (61).

James Purdy insisted to interviewer Don Swain that his most “Indian” creation, *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986) was based on a story his grandmother told him as a child.

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<sup>39</sup> I prefer to use the terms “mixture” or “merger” over “hybrid” because the latter term is so closely associated with the Postcolonial hybridist theory which has been critiqued by Craig S. Womack, Geary Hobson and others as ultimately Eurocentric.

Swain did not follow up, typifying the indifference of critics to Purdy's Native American materials. This lack of critical attention to Native American aspects begins earlier, evident in the discourse on Purdy's electrifying, controversial *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967), which actually has been repeatedly discussed, unlike most of Purdy's novels that followed. Purdy's engagement with questions of indigeneity in relation to American history, character, and inheritance, explored in this groundbreaking novel, have been glossed over or ignored by the three Anglophone book-length studies of Purdy (S. Adams, Chupack, Schwarzschild) and in several critical essays. In 1993 James Morrison called *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* "Purdy's most consolidated work, bringing together as it does the major strains of Purdy's fiction" (Morrison 329).

Among the major characters that orbit the poet and title character Eustace "Ace" Chisholm, the swarthy landlord Daniel Haws is the most recognizably Native American. Purdy rhetorically links Daniel's failure to acknowledge his own Indigenous background with his failure to admit his desire and love for other men, specifically for the young and handsome major character Amos Ratcliff. This double denial leads to Daniel's destruction at the hands of Captain Stadger, following his re-enlistment in the Army to escape admitting his love to Amos. The scenes depicting Stadger's surveillance, persecution, torture, and murder of Daniel Haws constitute a historical and racial allegory of the violent white colonization of Indigenous homelands.

No doubt in making this rhetorical link, Purdy, a well-read gay writer whose great-grandmother was said by family members to possess Ojibwe heritage, and who was obsessed with questions of Americanness, was well aware of the existence of male same-sex relationships and eroticism among indigenes of the North American continent. The

subject had been treated three years earlier in Thomas Berger's acclaimed novel *Little Big Man* (1964), set in the mid nineteenth century, which includes a cross-dressing male Cheyenne character who fills the bill.<sup>40</sup> Purdy was also friends with the Mohawk writer Maurice Kenny, whose groundbreaking essay "Tinselled Bucks," originally published in 1975, opened up discourse on this then-taboo subject. "Homosexuality was found in all American Indian tribes, although perhaps it was kept to a small number in particular tribes," Kenny writes (18).

It has been argued that many traditional Native American tribal societies recognized an antecedent of later *two-spirited people* (or GLBT or Queer indigenes). This alleged earlier model of homosexuality was what French traders, anthropologists, and other Western writers would label the *berdache*—which is now considered an offensive term, because it has derogatory and shameful connotations, derived from its Persian roots as something like "kept boy," or "sex slave boy" (Womack 302, Jacobs, et al. 3). The putative precedent of the male *two-spirit* appeared among many North American tribal peoples and was known by various tribally-specific names. Frequently, but not always, he was a man who, such as Berger's Cheyenne character, identified and dressed as a woman, took women's roles in the tribal community, and sometimes held special spiritual roles, giving this person a recognized status in many tribes. This person "was often the tribe or band's medicine man, doctor, story teller, matchmaker, or leading scalp dancer," Kenny writes (20). In some tribes a male-identified man would marry such a person, and the two would live together as a recognized couple. But sex with men

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<sup>40</sup> Both Vine Deloria Jr. and Professor Geary Hobson of the University of Oklahoma (in a seminar), both important figures in Native American criticism and intellectual history, have praised Berger's novel as dealing with Native American subjects appropriately. To Deloria, *Little Big Man* "gives a good idea about Indian attitudes toward life" (23). In his essay "Tinselled Bucks" Maurice Kenny praised this "highly researched" novel as "an important major novel of the twentieth century" (27).

was only one attribute, along with androgyny, women's work, and spirituality, according to anthropologist Walter L. Williams (127). Ojibwe author Midnight Sun claims that "occupation, dress, and demeanor were more important than sexual preference" (47).

Positive roles associated with same-sex desire would be eroded or proscribed by Euro-American and Christian influence. Ojibwe sociologist Duane Champagne claims that Native Americans "religions traditionally reaffirm, respect, and honor" two-spirited people (xviii). However, as white and Christian influences grew, Indian attitudes toward queerness in many communities became less favorable. Writing in the 1970s, Kenny claims that "many traditionalists have become racist and sexist, and are generally disquieted when among homosexuals" (29). Native and lesbian writer and critic Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo/Sioux) in *The Sacred Hoop* argues that homophobia among groups of Indians is linked to the degree of Christianization and colonization a particular tribe experienced (198). In *Becoming Two-Spirit*, anthropologist Brian Joseph Gilley writes, "From the time of the first contact with Europeans, gender diversity and same-sex relations were repressed by religious condemnation and violence" and even "became a central reason to justify the conquest of North America" (13). Eventually, Gilley writes, "once Indians began to convert to Christianity en masse, they also accepted ideologies about the sinfulness of same-sex relations" (15). This led to what queer crossblood poet and critic Qwo-Li Driskill has called a "colonized sexuality" in which aboriginal people "have internalized the sexual values of dominant culture" (55). For Daniel Haws, a fully assimilated Native American, acting on homosexual desire is unthinkable, indicating the degree of the colonization of his mind.

Daniel Haws's denial or lack of acknowledgement of his Indigenous heritage implicitly involves a denial and disavowal of this homoerotic aspect of it, although he is unaware of any such connection. Historical same-sex love among many tribal peoples and its singular status is a subtext of Purdy's rhetorical link between male same-sex love and indigeneity. Purdy's imagined crossblood tribal ancestry was Ojibwe; according to Kenny this tribe "accepted the berdache," which was called "akogwa" (25). The pain that Daniel Haws experiences in his struggle with his fate—"I was meant to love Amos Ratcliffe, without ever being a boy-lover, and that was written down in my hand" (193)—recalls the anguish that some tribal male youths felt after experiencing a dream-vision, in some cases (such as in Osage tradition) of a Moon-being, a sign that they were to take on the clothes and roles of women, perhaps even to become the lover of a man (Fletcher and La Flesche 132-33). The import of this vision was inexorable, regardless of the youth's sexual preference or sense of his masculinity; just as Daniel's love for Amos is represented, this is fate. Because this kind of queerness was often regarded as involuntary in many tribal contexts, this tradition complicates the conceptions of queerness theorized in non-Native "queer theory," which emphasizes personal autonomy and fluidity.<sup>41</sup> Purdy in fact links indigeneity and male same-sex desire explicitly or figuratively in several novels including *Jeremy's Version* (1970), *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972), *On Glory's Course* (1984), *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986), *Out With the Stars* (1992), and *Moe's Villa* (2004). Throughout his work Purdy stresses the necessity of accepting one's self, one's ethnicity, one's sexuality. Purdy's work often suggests that a

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<sup>41</sup> Contemporary Queer Theory also sees "queer" as oppositional to the heteronormative mainstream American culture, which embraces binaristic categories of sex and gender, whereas within many traditional Native cultures, same-sex desire "functioned within the tribe," according to Maurice Kenny ("Tinselled" 20). As Womack points out in *Red on Red*, in Muskogee Creek culture and cosmology, the anomalous serves to reinforce traditional Creek norms, not dismantle them (244).

person does not choose to be who he is, that larger, deeper, archetypal forces work upon us. For Purdy, acceptance of oneself is the prerequisite to survivance.

Purdy's link between the Native American man and same-sex desire does not emphasize or explicitly allude to the effeminate so-called *berdache* figure, but rather the masculine warrior. "A number of males who practiced homosexuality were fierce warriors and were not effeminate, transvestite homoerotics," Maurice Kenny writes ("Tinselled" 18). Purdy's Native men who feel desire for other males, such as Daniel Haws and Shelldrake in *In the Hollow of His Hand*, are characterized as hardy and strong warriors. Rugged Haws is closely associated with the military, and the gay Ojibwe outlaw Shelldrake carries on his own one-man war with the police and the government. In the historical record, the homosexual warrior could be the male-identifying man who lives with the transgendered man, or in some cases, the latter person. Examples of queer warriors defy the belief that Indigenous men who loved men were "cowardly in battle" and therefore forced to live as women. Yellow Head (Ozaw-wen-dib) was an Ojibwe *akogwa* who was openly flirtatious with men (Kenny 26-27). According to Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, however, he was also a fierce warrior with a reputation for being "very courageous in battle" (Kenny 26). Author and activist Will Roscoe reports that "in the early eighteenth century, Ojibway men had sex" with Yellow Head in order to acquire the acclaimed warrior's courage and battle skills via intimate relations with him (9). Gay anthropologist Walter Williams tells of a successful Osage warrior who followed a vision telling him to take on women's roles and clothing. "But he loved warfare so much," Williams writes, "that he periodically put on men's clothes and led a raid" (68). Moreover, same-sex desire among indigenes did not have to occur within a gender-

bending context. The Ojibwe author Midnight Sun, who emphasizes historical materialism in considering Indigenous sexuality, writes, “homosexual relations were accepted without the requirement to cross-dress and were not considered the basis of sexual orientations” (47).

In his emphasis upon warrior masculinity over the transgendered effeminate male, Purdy can be compared to his contemporary, gay writer William S. Burroughs, who, as Jamie Russell points out in *Queer Burroughs*, militated against the “effeminate” model of homosexuality theorized by American psychoanalysts and Cold War popular culture and instead embraced masculinity—although Purdy is not as extreme in this embrace. Burroughs satirizes the way in which the American psychiatric and political institutional state apparatuses enforce the effeminacy of gay men, thus robbing them of strength and agency. While Purdy was by not exactly “effeminophobic,” as Russell calls Burroughs, he embraced the masculine as a male-indentifying gay man and rejected the label of “camp stylist” that would sometimes be affixed to him.

Purdy, although sometimes starkly portraying queer self-hatred, emphasizes accepting one’s desires. In sometimes painful and grotesque manifestations, he reveals the tragic consequences of failing to know oneself, failing to give and accept love, regardless of the sex of the loved other. In doing so Purdy implicitly and explicitly critiques the American state, police, religious, medical, and psychiatric apparatuses that surveille and pathologize same-sex love. This critique of institutionalized homophobia, although rarely commented upon, goes back to his earliest short stories published in the 1950s, such as “Man and Wife,” discussed in the introduction. This critique employs Purdy’s counterstatement locatable in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*: there is

something pure, ancient, and foundational about same-sex love and desire. This Purdy rhetorically links to American “original stock,” Native Americans.

Purdy’s Native American materials and themes engage and subvert Fiedler’s influential and controversial thesis expounded in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, *The Return of the Vanishing American*, plus essays in *An End to Innocence*. In his seminal readings of numerous canonical American novels, Fiedler discovers a pattern of “chaste male love” or “innocent homosexuality” occurring between couples invariably constituted by a white man and a man of color. He famously returns to Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook from Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, Ishmael and Queequeg, and Huckleberry Finn and Jim. This male love is found in the context of a flight from feminine and domestic values typical of Huck’s dreaded “sivilization.” The man of color is secondary, offering serviceability and succor to the white protagonist. In *The Return of the Vanishing American* (1968), a study that focuses on images and uses of “the Indian” throughout non-Native U.S. literature and culture,<sup>42</sup> Fiedler, like other critics, did not discuss such features in the then-recent *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*. He is, however, aware of Purdy’s importance, since he quotes from Purdy’s previous novel

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<sup>42</sup> Fiedler’s title, *The Return of the Vanishing American*, refers to a wave of representations of Natives in then-contemporary non-Native literature that he discusses. Although Fiedler states that Natives have begun to reinvent themselves (12), he does not deal with any Indigenous writers and seems totally unaware that Natives were publishing poetry and fiction, building up to what would very soon be called the Native American Literary Renaissance (encompassing Silko, Vizenor, Welch, Ortiz, Hale, and others). Fiedler seems to be ignorant of Native novels published earlier in the century, such as Mathews’ *Sundown* and McNickle’s *The Surrounded*. Ironically, *Return of the Vanishing American* was published in the same year as N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968), a Pulitzer Prize winner the following year. Fiedler seems unable to conceptualize Natives as writers or poets in 1968. He states that “some Indians have survived among us: emasculated Indians, White Indians, Indians drunken and desolate and entrapped, knifing each other in sullen resentment, or piously praying in Baptist pews” (76). He is also completely unable to imagine the Native resistance and activism which had been growing and would manifest in the seizure of Alcatraz in the following year. “For a while the nightmare of . . . resurrection of Indian power through Red rebellion . . . continued to haunt us; but finally even that ceased to operate” (76). Such statements make one wonder if the Blackfoot tribe that Fiedler claims “adopted him” may have later had second thoughts!

*Cabot Wright Begins* (1964) as an updated example of how, since Mark Twain's Jim, "the legendary colored companion of the white fugitive had been turned from Red to Black." Fiedler notes, "in such sophisticated fiction as James Purdy's *Cabot Wright Begins*, the color scheme demanded by the exigencies of current events is observed" (177).

Leslie Fiedler's work was seminal and groundbreaking, and can now be seen as an early discussion of sexuality in American Studies. Fiedler, however, problematically concludes that this pattern registers an infantile lack of heterosexual maturity in American literature and its creators, along with the American character in general (see especially *Love and Death* 12-13, 24, 273, 289-90, and "Adolescence and Maturity in the American Novel" in *An End to Innocence*). As Fiedler rues in his famous, scandalous essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!", in American literature, "everything goes except the frank description of adult heterosexual love" (*End* 144). To Fiedler, America stalled in arrested development, never reaching adult maturity, which he defines as strictly heterosexual. In Fiedler's Freudian view, the "love that dare not speak its name" is merely a stage one must work through on the way to mature heterosexuality. Homosexuality was seen as narcissistic and effeminate, and its society hermetic and escapist. Therefore, gays were dismissed as weak, self-absorbed, and politically inefficacious. It is ironic that, while Fiedler became famous with his controversial claim that the U.S. fictional canon is shot through with homoeroticism, his dismissive attitude towards real "homosexuality"—a "stubborn social fact" as he puts it in "Come Back to the Raft"—is revealed through his use of such phrases as "fag bar" (in the original 1948

*Partisan Review* publication of “Come Back”); “queer as a three dollar bill” (*What Was Literature?* 15); “faggot half-breed” (*Return* 154); and “neurotic queer” (*Return* 163).

In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, however, Purdy subverts Fiedler’s heterosexist conclusions while corresponding roughly to the pattern his literary criticism identifies. Purdy is subversive, first, in creating men in couples, especially white-Indigenous ones, who desire other men in a not-so-“innocent” manner, unlike the literature Fiedler surveys; second, by placing them in an urban jungle (of Depression-era Chicago) rather than in an idyllic wilderness or on a watercraft; third and most crucially, he subverts Fiedler by implicitly presenting same-sex love as potentially fulfilling and as valid as heterosexuality. Purdy’s implicit stance is legible in spite of many critics’ misreading of him as obsessed with the “unnatural,” “perverse,” and “grotesque.” Homophobic critics complicit with hegemonic Cold War values disparaged the novel (and the later *Narrow Rooms*) because, despite its sometimes campy or deadpan tone and its corporeal horrors, Purdy ultimately dares to take love between men seriously. In the late 1990s, a perceptive writer for the gay-oriented publication *The Advocate* would hail *Eustace* as “what may in retrospect prove to be the first fully realized modern gay novel” (Plunkett 91). But at the time of its publication, it received some harsh censure. The negative reviews—and even some of the positive reviews—were laced with homophobia.

Even the author of a monograph on Purdy for the United States Authors Series criticizes the focus on same-sex love in *Eustace Chisholm* and in general maligns the “condition of homosexuality” as “horrible and anguished” (Chupack 102). Amidst 1970s Gay Liberation, this critic wonders “whether a novel almost totally involved with this subject is not inflating an aspect of human existence that is at best only an abnormal

sexual experience” (104). Although this critic understands that the novel intends to dramatize the consequences of the failure to give and accept love, he remarks, “When we are told that the theme of the novel is love [ . . . ], we wonder whether it is not lust and the strong sexual desire attendant upon it that is meant,” as though desire and love were discrete categories (104). Chupack is unable to take same-sex love seriously, and is thus frequently an inept reader of Purdy, as Morrison and Purdy himself have commented (Lear 73). Claiming that there is “very little” caring between the men (104), he misses the numerous subtle signals and tensions between Daniel and Amos.

Likewise, novelist and critic Wilfrid Sheed, reviewing the novel for the *New York Times*, presented similar doubts that the novel deals with “real” love (Daniel and Amos “allegedly love each other,” we are told) while offering praise of Purdy’s risk-taking intensity. Purdy remarked to an interviewer, “If you write about homosexual love, [the critics] don’t like that. They don’t believe that that is love” (Lear 65). Later Purdy would deride Sheed as “a paid hatchet man for the New York establishment” and commented, “he uses the word ‘homosexual’ to mean that if you are a homosexual or if you write about homosexuality, you are *ipso facto* deprived of any basic true judgment or vision. Now no one would dare say because you’re a Jew or black your vision is impaired . . . So I am glad to see that gays are now marching against [homophobic] critics and newspapermen” (*Conversations* 188). A review by novelist Nelson Algren (*The Man with the Golden Arm*), whose urban realism often shared with *Eustace Chisholm* the backdrop of inner-city Chicago, is vitriolic and churlish: “the author is unaware of anything preposterous about men who believe so firmly in both prayer and faggotry that they can go from sex to penitence without getting off their knees” (68). While less

vituperative than Algren, the jocosely normalizing reviewer for *Time*, deploying phrases such as “pederast pedestal,” is likewise blind to the relevance of Purdy’s novel. One positive review that remarked upon the novel’s “imaginative richness” and “adroit and surprising” language noted with some surprise: “It tells of homosexuals, but is not soft or faggy” (Wolffe). The headline for this review reads, “A Novel About Homosexuals,” indicating, comically, the relative rarity of a novel focusing on queer characters in the pre-Stonewall sixties and the culture’s anxiety to pigeonhole such as novel.

Such attitudes were typical of reviewers who seemed to resent Purdy’s queer materials<sup>43</sup> as well as his supposed attack on heterosexual relationships (Maureen O’Dell’s abject illegal abortion, which foreshadows Daniel Haws’ terrible death, is often cited)<sup>44</sup>. In an autobiographical piece, Purdy wrote that *Eustace Chisholm* “especially outraged the anesthetic, hypocritical, preppy, and stagnant New York literary establishment, especially that part of the book which sympathetically narrates the passionate love between two young men . . . Such love, unless treated clinically or as a documentary cannot be tolerated by the New York literary Powers-That-Be” (“James” 303). Moreover, not surprisingly, none of these critics says a word about the significance of Purdy’s Native American characters and thematics. The Indian is as invisible to them as the worst of them think “the homosexual” ought to be. The homophobic attitude of these American reviewers is typical of the Cold War, a time in which the “deviance” of communism and homosexuality were rhetorically linked. Such Cold War socio-political views were reinforced by a complacent literary-critical apparatus, along with the then-

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<sup>43</sup> “I was burned at the stake,” Purdy told interviewer Donald J. Gavron (2). Purdy does acknowledge, however, that novelist Angus Wilson praised the novel in *Life*, and it received some good reviews in England (Purdy “James” 303). Many of Purdy’s best commentators have been British or continental: Tony Tanner, Stephen D. Adams, Angus Wilson, George Steiner, and Bettina Schwarzschild.

<sup>44</sup> Karl, Chupack, and the *Time* reviewer (among others) all resent Purdy’s alleged denigration of heterosexuality.

“institutionalized” phase of American Studies that was at that historical moment beginning to be challenged (Pease and Wiegman 7). To these critics, Purdy’s Native American remains “vanished.”

Purdy’s apocalyptic conclusions (*Eustace Chisholm, Narrow Rooms*) involving violent deaths of queer men dramatize his key stance: the dreadful consequences of the failure to give and accept love, or accept one’s love-object (see Schwarzschild, Morris, Pomeranz, Skerrett). In an interview published in 1998, Purdy told Christopher Lane that Daniel Haws “can’t reconcile the fact that after nothing but sexual experiences with women, he suddenly realizes he’s in love with this young boy. He can’t face that in himself” (Lane 75). Contrary to the critics who see same-sex love as an isolated minority aberration, Purdy states: “this problem is everybody’s problem. We can’t face what is most ourselves, what is deepest in ourselves. Like Mac Duff, who was from his mother’s womb untimely ripped, we want to rip out the really delicate, beautiful things in us so we will be acceptable to society” (75). As in *Narrow Rooms*, Purdy’s sometimes wrenching endings, to some critics’ dismay, can be gruesome and disorienting, as is the case in Captain Stadger’s ritual of debasement and torture of Daniel Haws in *Eustace Chisholm*, but as Purdy here explains, by no means do they suggest that there is something intrinsically tragic or destructive about same-sex love in itself.

In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, a novel mostly set in a squalid neighborhood in Depression-era Chicago, Purdy creates an unlikely underlying story about the true American “original stock”: Native Americans. The concept of “original stock,” early American origins, is an obsession with poet and acerbic bisexual raconteur Eustace Chisholm (or “Ace” as some call him), who, because he cannot afford proper paper,

inscribes his Work, “his long poem about ‘original stock’ in America,” on old newspapers (5). Late in the novel, connecting “original stock” with Indians and referring to the frequent letters that Daniel has been sending him, Eustace says that he is “on Daniel Haws now full-time” and is “soaking all he tells me right up and pouring it right back into those,” nodding toward the newspapers upon which he has laid his poetic palimpsest (159). Although never referred to as Native American, Eustace, with “his thatch of black straight hair” (18) later described as “long” (160), implies he has distant Indigenous heritage: “Ace would look at his hands thoughtfully . . . and say, ‘Look at that classic American hand’—holding out his palm—‘pure stock from back to the Indians, shaking now like an aspen leaf’” (23).

Purdy’s references to pre-Revolutionary American families and “original stock” in his work are subversive in that he adds to the connotative valorization of early (northern) European ancestors a valorization of Indian ancestors, the oldest American families of them all, the most “original stock.” For example, in *Moe’s Villa*, Moses Swearingen is said to possess Shawnee Indian heritage. “Moses Swearingen belonged to one of the most respected families in Gilboa. His ancestors went back before the Revolution,” we are told, which slyly implies both Indigenous and European ancestors (221). In *Narrow Rooms*, Sidney De Lakes, a young man with an “extremely dark complexion” and dark hair (23) is called “pure American stock back to the Revolution or before” by a white character, Gareth Vaisey (162). Purdy subverts the lily-white rhetoric of the D.A.R. (Daughters of the American Revolution) and “know-nothing” nativism, which emphasize continuity of bloodline, to celebrate instead mixed-blood, shared Native- and Euro-American ancestry. White racism and an obsession with white racial

purity in America linger in the background during the plot's unfolding; the character Maureen O'Dell, an artist in the circle who had been Daniel's lover, casually mentions that "some Nazis were living in her building," and it is revealed that the Ku Klux Klan is a popular organization in the rural Illinois town where Amos grew up. In one scene, the aristocrat Reuben Masterson mumbles to Amos, dismayed, "You like colored people, don't you?" (129).

Let us return to Eustace Chisholm's relation to Native America. Along with his dark hair, the writer is attracted to Native American men, and becomes obsessed with the story of Daniel Haws that he chronicles. A bisexual (or better, queer) man whose wife Carla left him and returned to find him living with a man, Eustace cruelly tells her, "while you were off on your adultery trek, I got this severe crush on a boxer name of Pete Jemenez . . . I'm sure he has Indian blood, and I'm crazy about Indians, as you probably recollect. I followed him around in the street until he finally took notice of me. Can you imagine then—he invited me up to his room" (12). Eustace, who takes on the role of "writer" as an epic poet, serves as a hub for a circle of young queer marginalized men, influencing and catalyzing them. As the novel progresses, he takes a less central role as the focus of the novel shifts to the aborted love between Amos Ratcliff and Daniel Haws, and then to Daniel's punishment at the hands of Captain Stadger.

While Eustace's connections to a Native American ancestry may appear tenuous, several characters recognize Daniel Haws, a dark-skinned, raven-haired young veteran and landlord, as "Indian," although Haws professes no knowledge or interest in such a legacy. Purdy, referring to Daniel's "walnut complexion," writes: "Eustace Chisholm claimed that, by living with Daniel [as tenant], Amos had crossed the color line. Daniel

was aware of Eustace's jibe, but [it] only amused him. He said he had always looked dark as far back as he could remember. All year long, even in mid-winter, he looked like a man who had just returned from basking in the Gulf of Mexico sun" (32). The descendant of coal-miners, Haws, with "dark skin and fine black hair," never contemplates or investigates his ethnic origins (65). Instead, he devotes himself to a highly disciplined routine that mirrors his time in the army. This discipline that he imposes on his roomers, along with his arithmetic exercises, fills his time and obviates self-reflection. Even in his civilian life he adheres to military discipline, and although he doesn't know what tribal heritage he shares, he proudly sports an American flag tattoo. With his subjection to patriotism and military discipline, Purdy suggests that the Indian in Haws has been colonized and assimilated. With allegiance to "America," and a dearth of interest in his heritage, his past, and thus self-knowledge, his tribal heritage has suffered erasure: "I do not know what I am," he admits (123). Once, when Amos asks him if he has Indian blood, Haws sardonically replies: "I'll write the Department of the Interior about it" (55). His remark, although meant to be comical, furthers the notion that he has been interpellated by his colonizers, and regards the federal government as an authority on his identity, aligning with its military apparatus.

Purdy here as elsewhere forms a link between ignorance or denial of one's heritage and the denial of one's sexuality. "I'm not an Indian giver, if that's what you're driving at," Daniel tells Amos when the golden-curved youth tenderly inquires about Haws's ancestry (55). This engagement with the stereotype "Indian giver" is a wonderful example of Purdy's habit of literalizing clichés, in this case a racist one: Daniel refuses to acknowledge his *Indian* heritage just as he refuses to *give* his love to Amos. As

Derrida suggests, not engaging with one's heritage is not a viable option, since heritage always already "elects us" (*For What Tomorrow* 3). Likewise, neither can one's love or desire be effectively repressed or rendered invisible. Purdy shows this to have disastrous consequences.

Despite Eustace's professed desire for Indian men, it is not Ace but rather the beautiful boy Amos Ratcliff who falls deeply in love with the swarthy Daniel Haws. Amos is linked to Ancient Greece, another originary, "pure" source of same-sex love and eroticism. Daniel's beloved Amos tutors Eustace in Ancient Greek, has curly light shocks of hair, and is classically beautiful—an American Adonis. This ancient Greek connection also foreshadows the classically tragic conclusion of the novel, one in a series of what novelist and critic Mathew Stadler would call "a kind of neo-Greek theater of American Speech" ("Theatre" 8). Amos and Daniel Haws are the two sides of this coin illuminating what Purdy regards as the natural, originary nature of same-sex desire. As we will see, Daniel and Amos come to represent the two halves of Purdy's vision of the potential of America in this racial allegory.

Amos, through association with Daniel, is also linked to American indigeneity. Eustace tells him he is "good old American stock" (65), and Maureen O'Dell teasingly calls him "Bow-and-Arrows" (106) and refers to his shoe as a "moccasin" (48). Incidentally, among Maureen's collection of antiques and unsold paintings are "wood statues of Indians" (68). After Amos resigns himself to the belief that Daniel will never return his love, he becomes the kept boy of Reuben Masterson, a decadent millionaire heir.<sup>45</sup> But Amos can never forget his love of Daniel. Therefore, at Masterson's

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<sup>45</sup> Reuben is most likely modeled upon Purdy's friend and benefactor, the wealthy heir, financier, and literary critic Osborn Andreas, as was Girard Girard in *Malcolm*.

grandmother's house, where Amos is staying, Amos appears in "an Indian bathrobe" (145), resembling an Indian blanket (as mentioned, a symbol that appears sporadically but consistently in Purdy's work, dating back to 1956). An emblem of indigeneity is linked to same-sex desire, since the "Indian bathrobe" swaths Amos's "nocturnal erection" as he strolls out to Masterson's Swedish gardener's cottage, with seduction in mind (145). Likewise, later we see him sitting bare-chested "on an old buffalo rug in the center of the room" (152). Even when Daniel is absent from the scene, references to Native American attributes, images, or symbols are never far away within the narrative, underscoring the centrality of indigeneity even in an urban Chicago novel.

Like James Purdy himself, young, innocent, handsome Amos in the 1930s travels to Chicago, fleeing his small Midwestern hometown, studies the Classics, and is educated at the University of Chicago. The Indian ancestry that surrounds Amos is a result of Purdy's projection of his own imagined Indigenous heritage onto Amos, and an exaggerated version of it upon Daniel as well. As in many of Purdy's novels, his characters are modeled after himself and people he has known, as Purdy has noted repeatedly in interviews. These models, of course, are transmuted by the alchemy of Purdy's art, and he transcends the genre of roman à clef. In this case his old circle of friends in Chicago were an important source. Eustace Chisholm, like Mr. Cox in *Malcolm* and Parkhearst Cratty in *63: Dream Palace*, is modeled on Wendell Wilcox, who like Ace was a failed writer. Unpublished in the 1930s, Wilcox would publish only one novel in his lifetime, *Everything is Quite All Right*, set in Chicago (1945).<sup>46</sup> Maureen O'Dell, like Eloisa Brace in *Malcolm*, is modeled on Midwestern surrealist painter and

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<sup>46</sup> Wilcox would contribute a short "Remembrance" of Abercrombie for a 1991 exhibition catalog, *Gertrude Abercrombie*.

jazz aficionado Gertrude Abercrombie (Miller, “James Purdy’s Fiction” 150-53), who is also the “Gertrude” of Purdy’s late Chicago novel *Gertrude of Stony Island Avenue* (1997).<sup>47</sup> In the mid-1930s, “While living in her new apartment, Abercrombie met writer Wendell Wilcox, artist Karl Priebe, and writer James Purdy, who would become her close, life-long friends. Purdy, then a student at the University of Chicago, later included Abercrombie as a character in several of his Chicago-based novels” (Huston). While composing *Eustace* Purdy wrote Gertrude a letter on September 17, 1965: “You will like my new book—the one I’m writing right now—it has the old real you in it—describes your first abortion and your gay life before you married those dumb men. You must be you again. You’re too great for men. Come back, Gertrude, come back! You can!” He added in the margin, “I LOVE YOU!” My own archival research has revealed that Daniel Haws was based to some degree on a real young man named Daniel Haws that Purdy knew in Findlay, Ohio, who was sent to reformatory school, which I have confirmed with census records (Purdy, letter of 15 December 1984 to Parker Sams).

While Daniel Haws feels the same love for Amos that the beautiful youth feels for him, he cannot acknowledge his feelings, and would rather die than admit them to the youth. At night, however, he repeatedly sleepwalks into Amos’s room, caressing and kissing him. Daniel’s desire and love for Amos are repressed into his nocturnal ramblings, of which he avows no memory. In fact, consciously, Daniel purports to be a red-blooded American homophobe: “Awake, he never made a single pass at Amos

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<sup>47</sup> Abercrombie painted a wonderful portrait of James in the mid-1930s, which he hung over his mantel in his Brooklyn Heights apartment, and a portrait of James’s older brother, the actor Richard Purdy, in 1955 (*Gertrude* n.p.) For more on Gertrude Abercrombie and Purdy’s 1997 novel, see Paul Miller’s essay “James Purdy’s *Gertrude* (1997): A Visit to Chicago Painter Gertrude Abercrombie in Hades.”

Ratcliff but seemed to keep a gulf between them all the time” (33). Daniel is the product of twentieth-century American compulsory heterosexuality:

Unable to take his eyes off the boy’s face, he could not admit that the feeling that seized him was love—he regarded it as some physical illness at first. Indeed, from the first beginning and hint of his manhood he had always had girls, had passed for girl-crazy in his family, and had committed his fornications like a good soldier until the present with habitual tireless regularity. [ . . . ] That his whole being was now taken up with a mere boy was simply the last of the long series of disasters which had been his life. (88)

Although Daniel has always regarded himself as exclusively heterosexual, the language of “passing” for “girl-crazy” suggests both Daniel’s “passing” for heterosexual and his attempted ethnic passing as generically “American,” or ethnically unmarked instead of being of a Native American tribe. The link between Daniel’s heterosexual “fornications” and his being a “good soldier” also points to the compulsory heterosexuality demanded by homosocial institutions that seek to conceal the inherent homoeroticism that underlie such formations, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (I will elaborate upon this concept shortly). Ironically foreshadowing his and Captain Stadger’s deaths, Daniel “once said of a newspaper scandal story about two men who had killed themselves over their love that he was opposed to physical relations between members of the male sex, and they ought to electrocute faggots” (33).

Daniel’s internalized homophobia is also enacted in an incident in chapter six. This chapter can be read as an ironic reversal of Melville’s “A Bosom Friend” chapter in *Moby Dick*, in which strange “bedfellows” Ishmael and Queequeg are “married.” Ishmael feels “strange feelings,” a “melting” in his heart because the world is redeemed by “this soothing savage” (57). “Thus, then, in our heart’s honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair,” Ishmael tells us (58). As an ironic recasting of “A

Bosom Friend,” Purdy in this chapter satirizes the tradition that Fiedler has identified. Purdy’s chapter presents an allegory of race and class in which the marginalized Native American working-class man, Daniel, descendant of a line of coal-miners, is forced by his boss at the men’s club where he works to assist the inebriated, decadent millionaire heir Reuben Masterson to a bed, “somewhere, anywhere, Daniel’s own quarters if possible” (56). Daniel protests, but his boss reminds him that numerous young men are lined up to take Daniel’s job as host.

Masterson, with his symbolic name, stands in for a degenerate, anemic American aristocracy. Reuben represents “another strand in the pattern of national failure,” Stephen Adams writes. “He bears the imprint of the native tradition whereby a few families accumulate vast wealth at everybody else’s expense” (*James* 103). This is suggested by the narrator’s placing within quotation marks such descriptors as this “this ‘scion of a great American family’” (56) and “the son of one of ‘America’s front families,’” the ironizing qualification of these phrases emphasizing the decline of the ruling class and their tie to national disaster. The designation of “front” families is “an apt denomination for the splendiferous façade that conceals vacuity,” Stephen Adams writes (103). “I believe the human being under capitalism is a stilted, depressed, sick creature,” Purdy wrote in a letter to critic Webster Schott (qtd. in Schott 300). Daniel’s role as a working-class man of color is underscored by the narrator’s statement that Masterson “had valued Haws . . . as a model of the male servant rather than someone to spend the night with, but now he found the closeness of his presence a more than agreeable sensation” (57). Until Reuben regains consciousness, Daniel is literally forced to shoulder the burden of this aristocrat like a cross. As opposed to affectionate Queequeg, Daniel is “sullen” (56) and

expresses “disapproval” (57) at the spoiled heir Masterson and feels “resentment” toward his wealth (59). Despite these signs, as Daniel tucks Masterson in, the heir “threw his arms about him ardently and gave him a watery kiss” (59). Daniel wipes his lips “with slow thorough caution” (59). When Masterson apologizes twice, demanding a response from Haws, Daniel whispers that “people will do anything when they’re drunk” (59). Masterson says Daniel is wrong, and retorts that “it must have been something in you made me” (59). Sensing that Masterson is implying that there is something gay “in him,” Daniel strikes him across the mouth, manifesting his “homosexual panic,” exacting revenge for his subjugation, and becoming an anti-Queequeg.

Even Amos, an emblem of Greek ideals and male love, is repressed, and takes measures to assure that no one calls him gay: “Everyone said he was too good-looking for an American boy, and yet few failed to learn quickly that he possessed vivid musculature and a hard fist, and nobody made a mistake with him twice” (20). Amos and Daniel exemplify Eve K. Sedgwick’s concept of “homosexual panic” (*Epistemology* 185). Purdy writes, “Nobody could be sure on meeting Amos whether he was queer or not, because he was so fierce to approach and those who did so uninvited were injured” (20). Upon falling for Daniel, however, Amos wants to act upon his love. When Daniel does finally acknowledge his love of Amos, in letters to Eustace, he articulates it as pathological: he is “boy-sick” (193). Purdy here as elsewhere presents a critique of the institutionalized homophobia underlying homosociality (see Sedgwick) that Haws has also imbibed and internalized, which leaves him seething with self-loathing.

Daniel therefore is unnerved by the classically beautiful Amos’s gaze. While allowing Amos to stare, “on account it’s probably harmless,” Daniel tells him, “I want

you to know I'm aware of it, and I ignore it" (35). So much is communicated under the surface of these laconic words, somehow invisible to the critics. Amos responds:

"I like to look at an American face, Daniel," he said bravely.  
Daniel touched his mouth with the back of his hand, and shook his head.

"Do you have some little strain of Indian blood in you by chance, or don't you know?" Amos inquired in a sudden flight of boldness that surprised even himself.

Calm under the onslaught, however, Daniel got out: "Don't know rightly who my ancestors were, to tell the truth."

Daniel rose, pushed out his chest, and . . . stretched out his arms until the billowing folds of Old Glory tattooed on his forearms were visible . . . (35-36)

Amos, in repeatedly engaging with the subject of Daniel's Indianness, assumes the courage of a warrior in asking starkly "such a maladroit question" (36). In Purdy's pun, Amos pursues dusky Daniel "bravely," i.e. as a Brave himself. Displaying his U.S. flag tattoos proudly, almost a defensive gesture against Amos's tender inquiry, Daniel himself takes no interest whatsoever in his ethnic heritage—he thinks he can ignore its election of him—and this is again linked to repression of same-sex love in light of the context of Amos's bold flirtation.

Interestingly, Amos's staring at Daniel and his recognition of Daniel's indigeneity has precedent in Purdy's biography. Just as this Chicago novel is largely about the Indigenous, the period of Purdy's life in Chicago connects to his imagined Native American ancestry and influences his characterization of Daniel Haws as a crossblood. During both of our phone interviews James Purdy told me a story of being locked out of his apartment in Chicago when he was a young man. While waiting for the landlord to arrive to let him in, Purdy met an older man named Romero who said he could get the door open. After this was achieved, and Purdy invited him in, the man kept staring at

him, making Purdy feel uncomfortable. When James asked why he was staring, Romero portentously announced: “You have Indian blood.” When Purdy asked him how he knew, the older man replied, “Your cheekbones give you away. No white man has cheekbones like that.” The man, who was from New Orleans, said that he was an uncredentialed anthropologist. When Purdy joked that his interlocutor didn’t “look so white” himself, Romero said that he too had Indian ancestry. Purdy and his character Haws are similar in that while neither would speak of a Native American heritage, others “recognize” this ancestry in them.<sup>48</sup>

Yet in one sole instance, Daniel’s ancestral blood seems to rebel against his refusal to pursue his love and accept himself. As noted, same-sex desire was accepted by most North American tribes within specific cultural contexts. In one critical moment Eustace tells Daniel what he most dreads hearing, that Daniel must “go home and take [Amos] in your arms and tell him he’s all you’ve got. That’s what you are to him, too . . . so why spend any more of your time, his, or mine” (92). With this terrible knowledge in his head, Daniel heads out into the street “like a drunken man” and “then without warning a cry came from his lips. It was a sound that he had perhaps longed to utter since his earliest recollection, back to the time in the coal mines, back to his childhood with his mother and brothers, no, further back, before memory, the cry carried him” (92). With origins preceding consciousness and memory, this pained cry wells up from the repressed depths of his ancestral Indigenous blood.

The concatenation of denied homoeroticism and repressed ethnic heritage constitute the thematic heart of the novel. Yet critics have provided little insight into the novel’s Indian materials and motifs. Stephen D. Adams, a highly perceptive reader of

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<sup>48</sup> Purdy remarked that this is one of his favorite stories.

Purdy, slips when he writes: “Eustace, although it may be wishful thinking on his part, likes to think of Daniel as having some Indian blood in him” (99). Yet at least two other characters believe he possesses Indigenous heritage, and critic Tony Tanner, one of the few to even mention it, notes, “it is established that he is of American Indian descent” (106). Moreover, James Purdy revealed to interviewer Christopher Lane that Daniel Haws “is really an Indian chief” (75). This remark deepens our sense of the tragedy of Haws’s denial of his ethnic heritage, and connects to *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986), wherein it is revealed that Decatur and Chad are descended from Ojibwe chiefs, according to Decatur’s wizened grandfather. Daniel’s tribal background is one that others around him recognize: “Amos felt that Daniel Haws looked as handsome as a Pawnee brave in the subdued light from the alleyway,” Purdy writes, placing his Indian in an unlikely urban backdrop (51). This is a striking instance of the Native “warrior masculinity” that Purdy links with same-sex desire over and against effeminizing Cold War constructions of male homosexuality, somewhat reminiscent of William S. Burroughs.

Another character who perceives this is the sadistic, self-loathing Captain Stadger, whose confrontation, mastery, sexual abuse, torture, and murder of Daniel make up much of the novel’s final chapters. Stadger is a fascinating example of queerness within the state and military apparatus, exemplifying the homosexual desire that underlies homosociality, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Guy Hocquenghem’s theories on homosexual desire and Sedgwick’s later theories on male homosocial desire that follow his logic reveal how the patriarchal system is based on male homosocial bonds that retain masculine power and dominance, excluding women and openly gay men. Because of the

necessarily close relationships between men, male homosocial bonds carry a (disavowed) homoerotic component or undercurrent. Thus patriarchal hegemony demands compulsory heterosexuality and a rigid homophobia which aims to conceal its homoeroticism (*Between Men* 3). One result of men's "accession to this double bind" of homosociality and homophobia is a spilling over of the "reservoir of potential for violence caused by the self-ignorance this regime constitutively enforces," as Sedgwick elegantly puts it (*Epistemology* 186). The risk for violence is most intense in the most intensely homosocial milieus, such as the military. The horrible, spectacular failure of Captain Stadger and Daniel Haws to consummate their mutual desire in a way that is not mutually annihilating points to the failure of a patriarchal system that seeks to maintain power among straight-identifying men exclusively, but represses the desire that such a system encourages. The result is violence, often sexualized—towards women or other men.

Captain Stadger, who comes to play a hyperbolic Claggart to Daniel's Billy Budd,<sup>49</sup> perceives Daniel's heritage, but is presumptuous and fancies himself some sort of white "Indian expert." One recalls that the Bureau of Indian Affairs, like its predecessors, was a part of the Department of War originally, and that "Indian agents" were given officers' ranks. Captain Stadger's claims of knowledge about Indigenous ancestry connect him with bureaucratic, federal, and military machineries of dominance that fastidiously record and document Indigenous peoples to better manage and control them. Like an element of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, this categorizing impulse is part of a Western scheme of objectification and classification of ethnic Others

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<sup>49</sup> "Daniel had what...the captain must have been powerless not to linger over, a perfection—compact of blood, bone, flesh—that was the target attracting destruction," Purdy writes (227). This allusion to Melville has been noted also by James Morrison and George-Michel Sarotte (87-8).

in the service of hegemonic control. Attempting to escape having to admit his love to Amos, Daniel re-enlists in the Army and leaves Chicago for the base at Biloxi. Daniel writes to Eustace: “[Stadger] keeps after me. Says he knows I got Indian blood. Named the tribe, too, Cherokee, as he claims he’s an expert on blood train. Always hanging around watching me” (178). Here Purdy satirizes the figure of the white “Indian expert” who, rather than helping actual indigenes, actually harms them (examples are corrupt Indian agents, and anthropologists who desecrate or expropriate remains, impinge on ceremony, or improperly expose tradition). Moreover, the reference to the Cherokee tribe has comic overtones, since many Natives have joked that when Euro-Americans make claims of having Indian ancestry, almost always the Cherokee tribe is invoked. In his landmark work *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Vine Deloria, Jr. says that whites frequently told him of their alleged Indian heritage: “Cherokee was the most popular tribe of their choice, and many of them placed the Cherokee from Maine to Washington State” (3).

Captain Stadger, like Eustace, fetishizes Native men, but unlike Eustace, he is tortured by his desires for men and is unable to give real love that is not tainted by dominance and abuse. As he gazes upon Daniel’s naked chest, Stadger remarks: “‘Developed yourself quite a bit in the coal mines, didn’t you?’ The captain kept his eyes on his body. ‘Or is it just the Cherokee Indian blood after all?’” (215). To Stadger, like Amos and Eustace, there is something intrinsically masculine and sexy about Daniel’s Indian “blood.” However, Stadger’s attraction to Native “blood,” and all that he spills in his desire’s truly perverted manifestation, in its figurative and allusive power takes on heightened allegorical meanings. Purdy’s historical and racial allegory is already

suggested when Daniel writes to Eustace, “I’m in a real ghost world down here, Biloxi, Mississippi, Spanish moss hanging from the trees” (179). “Ghost world” recalls D.H. Lawrence’s repeated reference to the “unappeased” indigenes of America as “ghosts” that haunt the present (51). *Biloxi* is also the name of a tribe, now linked with the Tunica. The specters of America’s violent past seem to possess Stadger and Daniel.

Two blocked same-sex relationships involving Daniel, those between him and Amos and between him and Stadger, present a dilemma or complication to Purdy’s racial allegorizing. Amos and Stadger, representing affirmative and negative characters and relations vis-à-vis indigeneity (as embodied by Daniel) respectively, present two faces of whiteness, two sides of a coin that are paradoxically in many ways similar. Clearly, Amos’s curly hair and Greek language studies link him with the better aspects of Europe, whereas Stadger’s militarism, fascistic behavior, and Aryan looks link him with the worst. In some ways, however, it seems that they are physically interchangeable, one threatening to morph into the other. At one point, Daniel rests under some shady bushes while he suffers from fever. He sees Stadger’s boots, and, “rising to salute him, Daniel felt, as in a revelation, that he was seeing the officer for the first time. What now attracted his eye was . . . his smooth fair face” and “hair as yellow as cornsilk; whereas before he had seen him as without age, Daniel saw him now almost as youthful as Amos, and at that moment of looking at him, Stadger showed no trace of cruelty on a face smooth as a linen sheet”<sup>50</sup> (230). Daniel’s deep and enduring if physically unconsummated love of Amos is always on Stadger’s mind when Stadger thinks of Haws or threatens, abuses, and tortures the “real American Indian.” It is not so simple a matter

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<sup>50</sup> Keep this simile in mind for the next chapter, wherein Purdy’s use of variations on the cliché “white as a sheet” to connote ethnic whiteness will be examined.

as to say that whiteness equates to exploitation, colonialism, and/or degeneracy, for complicating matters such as this resemblance between Amos and Stadger give us pause. The affirmative Athenian face of Amos signals the possibility of alliance and the merger of Red and white. The face of Stadger signals negation and annihilation. Because one doesn't know which side of the coin will face up, as it were, this presents an implicit dilemma to Native Americans and other U.S. persons of color and an obstacle to the construction of mutually beneficial trans-ethnic alliances.<sup>51</sup>

Purdy provides various textual signs that a historical and racial allegory are operative. With his "fair" skin and "blond straight hair," Stadger embodies Euro-American militaristic and colonizing imperialism as he gradually takes Daniel over, body and soul (230). The first time that Daniel sees Stadger, the Captain gazes at the Indian "as though he had seen him years ago in some ancient dream" (191). His domineering behavior, torment, abuse, and persecution of Daniel, whom he calls "a real American Indian," suggest a historical allegory enacting the violent and sometimes genocidal white settlement of the United States (181). In a letter to Eustace, Daniel had already complained of his abuses at the hands of the U.S. Army, including "having my arms and thighs shot full of cow-pox and typhoid," recalling how small-pox and other diseases decimated tribal populations, in some cases introduced intentionally (122). As Daniel removes his clothing, the racial dynamics of the allegory are manifest: "As if maddened anew by the sight of his rich brown flesh, the captain now whipped him with the pistol across the shoulder blades and spine and buttocks" (226). Stadger is seen from Daniel's point of view as "the white figure," suggesting his allegorical weight (244). Reinforcing

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<sup>51</sup> In a later novel, *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986), Purdy also complicates his usually positive connotations and representations of the Indigenous by creating a negatively drawn Ojibwe elder, Decatur's unnamed grandfather, crossblood Chad's great grandfather (discussed in chapter six).

Stadger's racial meaning, earlier the Captain was described leaping up "like a wire suddenly galvanized into white hot death" (200) and Eustace compares Stadger's punishment of Daniel to "a touch from his white-hot iron" (202). Later, as the Captain sexually abuses Daniel he is seen wearing "dazzlingly white shorts" (232). The Southeastern locale of the army base and the Cherokee references evoke the historical tragedy produced by President Andrew Jackson's illegal and immoral Indian Removal policies and the resulting Cherokee Trail of Tears (which affected other tribes too). Gore Vidal, our most prodigious writer who is also a "same-sexer," to use his term, senses an even deeper allegor(e)ical resonance in Purdy's book, alluding to the beginning of white-Native contact. To Vidal, the torture scene evokes "tales of Indians and Puritans tearing each other apart long before the Western Reserve was peopled by usurpers" ("James").

Purdy's narrative of Stadger's sadism, torture, and murder lends itself to an allegorical critique of these European "usurpers of the plains," a phrase from Virgil that Eustace has memorized (252), to which Vidal refers. "What Purdy communicates" in such horrific scenes "is deep moral revulsion at man's predilection for violence and hate," James R. Lindroth writes, but this takes a specific form that refers to history and colonialism (21). Eustace's reflections and uncanny extra-sensory perceptions further signal the historical allegory. With a touch of magical realism, Purdy suggests that an African American soothsayer, Luwana Edwards, passed her "Mantle" of clairvoyance to Eustace (presumably after she foresaw Daniel's sticky end). Thus able to glimpse the future, Eustace envisions Daniel's life at the "ghost world" of the Biloxi, Mississippi army base. Clairvoyantly seeing and smelling the lush and fragrant magnolias, azaleas, and oaks, Eustace "remembered without knowing that there had once lived down there

Indians who passed the time of day in the shade of those oaks on the shore of the Bay” (206). Daniel is figuratively returned to his tribal homeland, only to be “removed” forever in a gruesome allegorical revisiting of American historical trauma. The author of a strong 1974 dissertation on Purdy at the University of Chicago, Marjorie Luchetti bolsters my sense of the figurative power of the scene: “Having laid the groundwork for what is to come by his use of foreshadowing and prophecy, Purdy further distances and stylizes the abhorrent action by placing it in a remote, gothic setting and emphasizing the symbolic and ritualistic aspects of the events which precede it” (156). Yet even with such literary effects the climax makes for traumatic reading.

Daniel Haws, returned to a figurative homeland, unlike Eustace experiences no such visions or insights into himself or his heritage. Having internalized mainstream American culture’s pathologizing of same-sex desire, rejecting the two-spirit traditions of his ancestors, and failing to accept the love of the one person who could have saved him, Haws eventually welcomes his own demise, giving himself over in his self-loathing to a fatal masochism. According to Deborah L. Madsen in her book *American Exceptionalism*, Jose Martí, in his seminal 1892 essay “Our America,” rhetorically asks who are the real sons of Mother America: “These sons of Our America, which will be saved by its Indians and is growing better; [or] these deserters who take up arms in the armies of a North America that drown its Indians in blood and is growing worse!” (qtd. in Madsen 117-18). Deserting his Indigenous heritage, and joining the army that drowns him in blood, Daniel makes the wrong choice. To Purdy, this refusal to enact love, this refusal of Indigenous ethnicity, this choice of self-destruction over self-realization is the real perversion. Critic Warren French stated that all of the characters in this novel are

“perverted”; however, “to Purdy perversion is not an end in itself, but only the symbol of what people make of themselves and their heritage” (“Horrible”). Instead of the merging of Indigenous and European cultures, souls, and possibly genes that Purdy imagines as the potential of America, a different and perverse literal merging of blood ironically occurs. In one of the horrific encounters between the men, Captain Stadger slashes both his own and Daniel’s chest, and presses their wounds together (235). Stephen Adams writes, “the merging of souls symbolized in the blood-letting ceremony of *blutbruderschaft* takes on a horrific literality” (*James* 106). Having initiated the relationship by sleepwalking into Stadger’s bunk, eventually Haws nihilistically accepts Stadger’s assault, one of the most brutal scenes in all of literature, climaxing in evisceration and disembowelment. Stadger hides himself and commits suicide immediately after his misdeed.

Captain Stadger’s suicide further evidences Purdy’s subversion of Fiedler’s thesis. In the pattern that Fiedler reveals, the man of color is serviceable to the white, and the white outlives his partner in “chaste male love.” “Typically,” Fiedler writes, “Chingachgook has predeceased Natty, and Queequeg, Ishmael; typically Huck had been younger than Jim . . . Everyone who has lived at the heart of our dearest myth knows that it is the white boy-man who survives, as the old Indian, addressing the Great Spirit, prepares to vanish” (*Return* 183). But in this case, we have two such pairings—Amos and Daniel, and Stadger and Daniel—and neither fits this criterion of Fiedler’s thesis; rather, these three men die violently, just as do the four men who love men in *Narrow Rooms*. They are tragedies, after all. Although Amos is younger than Daniel, neither survives in the end. Rather than pursuing his fled lost love, Amos resigns himself to

being the kept boy of the aristocratic Reuben Masterson. In Chicago Amos is mistaken for a robber and shot by the police. Beyond the portrait of the police as incompetent, they are critiqued as a normalizing institutional apparatus which constantly surveilles and even physically separates male couples they suspect to be “perverts.” “Cops can’t understand why anybody is ever out of his workshop, house or penitentiary,” Eustace complains to Amos, after they have been forcibly separated by a policeman who suspects Amos of “picking up rough trade” (207). In the second pairing, the macabre Captain Stadger is older than the Indian, and after he kills Haws, he proceeds to shoot himself directly (226). So we have no close parallel to Ishmael, Huck, or Natty—all three “lovers” are dead at the end. The failure to accept oneself and one’s desires cuts both ways; here as in *Narrow Rooms*, Euro-Americans are not exempt.

Moreover, unlike affectionate Queequeg or Chingachgook, Purdy’s indigene Daniel is unable to give love to either Amos or later to Stadger. What he gives to Stadger is a masochistic physical surrender and submission, excepting one crucial demand of Stadger’s. When Daniel refuses to deny his love for Amos, he refuses to give Stadger what he really wants at bottom: Daniel’s total loyalty and love for him. Stadger repeatedly demands that Daniel renounce his love for Amos and declare his allegiance to him:

“How did you show Amos Ratcliff your love?” Captain Stadger’s voice came like the thunder behind them, while with pitiless savagery he held open the mutilated man’s eyelids.

“I never gave him love,” the soldier said. “I failed him as I failed myself.”

Pulling out of his pocket a photograph of the dead boy, Captain Stadger thrust it in front of the soldier.

“Prefer me to him now, and you’re free, Haws.”

When Daniel did not reply, he rained one blow after another upon his prisoner until the bark of the tree ran red. (246)

Notably, it is Stadger and not the American Indian who behaves with savagery. Daniel, although giving his body and life totally to Stadger, never betrays Amos. Neither Stadger nor Haws are able to positively act upon their love, their desires, and Purdy reveals the gruesome consequences, as he would in *Narrow Rooms* a decade later. Amos faces similar consequences, is killed off in the end, receiving no love or serviceability from his Indian except for somnambulistic petting. Haws abjectly failed to do anything to stop Amos—his true love—from taking up with a wealthy older gay man, the decadent and aristocratic Reuben Masterson, and subsequently reenlisted, beginning his end.

Purdy's antihegemonic historical allegory in the final sequence points to something crucial that Fiedler perceives about the uses of "the Indian" in non-Native writing, in *The Return of the Vanishing American* (1968). In the then-new literature of the 1960s, writers labeled as Black Humorists or early postmodernists such as Thomas Berger (*Little Big Man*), John Barth (*The Sot-Weed Factor*), James Leo Herlihy (*Midnight Cowboy*), and Ken Kesey (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*) were beginning to satirize and deconstruct the old myths of "the Indian" and the West, a trend whose prototypes, according to Fiedler, were Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust* and Hemingway's *Torrents of Spring* (Return 143-49, 150-58). Dark humor and irony were injected into new and subversive fictional and cinematic treatments of the West.<sup>52</sup> The old white American myths—the Good Guy cowboys in white hats; the Pocahontas-John Smith and Sacajawea myths of the serviceable, devoted Indian Princess; the myths justifying or mystifying the dispossession, genocide, and colonization of Indigenous people—were all being turned into anti-myths by these early postmodern U.S. writers.

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<sup>52</sup> To Fiedler's examples I would add Andy Warhol's homoerotic underground film *Lonesome Cowboys*.

With their dark anti-myths these authors “treat the oldest American myth of the encounter between whites and Indians as farce: to replace nostalgia with parody, sentimentality with mockery, polite female masochism with gross male sadism” (*Return* 150).

Purdy follows this pattern in the earlier Masterson-Haws chapter and his allegorical Stadger-Haws scenes toward the close of *Eustace Chisholm*, but as usual delves much further into the darkness than his contemporaries. Fiedler describes such an anti-myth in John Barth’s *Sot-Weed Factor*, in which John Smith is brutally successful in deflowering his Indian Princess; her hymen was thought to be “so surpassingly stout, as to render it infrangible” (qtd. in Fiedler 152). This is more than lascivious humor:

It is a counter-parable, an anti-stereotype of our beginnings in Virginia, in which Pocahontas’ relationship to John Smith is portrayed not as an act of pure altruism and pity, but a sexual encounter so mechanical, so bestial, that it seems an assault rather than an act of love—and therefore, a truer metaphor of our actual relations with the Indians than the pretty story so long celebrated in sentimental verse. (*Return* 152)

This “assault” rends asunder the “legend of the redemptive Indian girl . . . Both Pocahontas and Sacajawea are, of course, Protestant versions of the encounter with the Indian, WASP fantasies of reconciliation in the wilderness,” Fiedler writes (78). Likewise, the reader attentive to the racial and historical dynamics at work in Stadger’s disavowed love, one that is perverted into an assault, can intuit Purdy’s allegory to be a destruction of such cherished myths. We are confronted with a brutal, shocking, “truer metaphor” of American colonizers’ history of displacement, exploitation, dispossession, and massacre of tribal peoples. Purdy’s allegories are a conscious attack on the previous myth embedded in the canon, the motivation behind which Fiedler articulated so memorably in “Come Back to the Raft”: “Behind the white American’s nightmare that someday, no longer tourist, inheritor, or liberator, he will be rejected, refused, he dreams

of his acceptance at the breast he has most utterly offended. It is a dream so sentimental, so outrageous, so desperate, that it redeems our concept of boyhood from nostalgia to tragedy” (*End* 151).

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Purdy’s chilling novel *Narrow Rooms* (1978), the haunting story of the entangled relationships of love, hate, and desire between four young men in a small, remote mountain town in West Virginia, shares with *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* a concern with the effects of repression and of individuals’ attempts to circumvent their desires. Both novels end tragically in harrowing, blood-letting deaths and self-sacrifice, bearing weighty allegorical significance. Both dramatize the tragic cost of the failure of Indian and European to unite to fulfill the potential of America. *Narrow Rooms* may be placed in the gothic horror genre and was aptly referred to by reviewer James M. Martin as a “skincrawling succubus of a novel.” Like its brother volume *Eustace*, it focuses on men who love and desire men and the costs of repression. In a letter of 28 December 1977, Purdy wrote to his bibliographer Jay L. Ladd, explaining that *Narrow Rooms* “is in the vein of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*.” Purdy’s description of *Narrow Rooms* also recalls *Eustace Chisholm*: “It’s one of those violent love-hate relationships, the hero-slave relationship between two men who can’t admit they really love one another,” he told interviewer Cameron Northouse (*Conversations* 206). Purdy is referring to the strongest relationship among this dark quartet, one disavowed by one of its participants—the powerful dynamic of attraction and repulsion between the former high school football star Sidney De Lakes and the dark, intimidating Roy Sturtevant, called “the renderer” by

the villagers because his grandfather had the stigmatized occupation of rendering animal carcasses into soap. This moniker comes to take on heavy symbolic significance, suggesting connotations of “to render,” involving notions of debt and payment (one character controlled by Roy is named McFee), cleansing, and profound transformation. Purdy’s prose style is more lean and succinct than his earlier work, and his use of Appalachian dialect is sharp-eared and convincing.<sup>54</sup>

As was shown to be the case with *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, the significance of Purdy’s deployment of Indian references, characterizations, and literary allusions in the service of his larger allegorical project critiquing American myths has been almost totally overlooked. In his book *Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945-1995*, critic Reed Woodhouse, failing to see Purdy’s crucial critique of classism, racism, and internalized homophobia in *Narrow Rooms*, says that the novel “takes place almost entirely without reference to the social world which we live in and which most ‘realistic’ novels anatomize” (95). Purdy hinted at the novel’s connection with indigeneity and deep historical forces when he told interviewer Richard Canning that he was dealing with “something very archetypal and ancient” (15). The English critic and novelist Paul Binding, in his introduction to the Gay Men’s Press (GMP) re-issue of the novel, is one of the few to discuss, if only briefly, Purdy’s engagement with race and Indian themes. In the context of his discussion of the powerful character Roy Sturtevant, “the renderer,” Binding notes that Purdy “is at pains to remind us of Cooper’s Leatherstocking . . . and, further back, the entire Amerindian race (whom his features recall)—despised, displaced, but the receivers of the original American mysteries” (i-ii).

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<sup>54</sup> In 1985 French scholar Philippe Cantie published a dissertation focusing on *Narrow Rooms* which poetically concludes, “Purdy is like a composer with several strings missing on his instrument but whose rasping instrument is all the more gripping and poignant.”

Little scholarly work on the novel has been published, and only Stephen Adams' groundbreaking study *The Homosexual as Hero in Contemporary Literature* (1980) makes much headway in analyzing this difficult work, a narrative that challenges the reader on many levels. Purdy's work published after the mid-seventies, which continued to grow and develop, has typically suffered undeserved critical neglect, a gap that my project attempts to remedy. Having said this, these racial allegories, while they represent new and invigorating ways to read Purdy, are obviously not the only way to read Purdy. For example, *Narrow Rooms* can also be read as religious allegory. Purdy's texts are so rich that they sustain a variety of interpretations; yet it is fair to say that his racial allegories are a crucial part of his entire fictional project, one that has been largely ignored.

Purdy's most explicitly homosexual and violent novel, *Narrow Rooms* caused a great deal of critical controversy upon its publication, indicating the extreme nature of the material. In her study *James Purdy: Les cauchemars de papier*, Marie-Claude Profit remarks that in *Narrow Rooms*, "Purdy, par l'écriture, exorcise ses fantômes" (9).<sup>55</sup> One positive review by editor and critic Paul Bresnick noted that *Narrow Rooms* is "clearly his most explicit, graphic treatment" of the recurrent subject of "the love between men" (15). Reviews were often negative. While acknowledging that "Purdy's fiction is haunting, menacing, [and] brilliantly conceived," and realizing that "homosexuality flourishes in his fiction," reviewer George Cohen in the *Chicago Tribune* was disgusted by Purdy's limning of sex between men: "Unfortunately . . . the couplings are described in excessive detail"—actually, they are not described in detail. In his introduction, Paul Binding counters that "the novel could not work on us unless we were made to share the

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<sup>55</sup> "Through his writing Purdy exorcises phantoms."

emotional and sexual experiences of the central characters” (iv). Feminist critic Katha Pollitt in the *New York Times* dismissed *Narrow Rooms* as “a tale of love among the bondage-and-discipline crowd in, of all places, West Virginia,” calling it “strangely bodiless.” Pollitt seems to willfully misrepresent the novel, except for the “tale of love” part. To describe the tumultuous and torturous events in this novel as a manifestation of consciously sado-masochistic gay sex is to trivialize Purdy’s “identification of love with suffering, an identification more religious than pathological,” according to Reed Woodhouse<sup>56</sup> (*Unlimited* 89). Perhaps the best indicator of its transgressive power, *Narrow Rooms* was the subject of an obscenity trial, which occurred in Germany. “One day the police appeared in all the bookstores there and seized *Narrow Rooms*,” Purdy told interviewer Richard Canning (22). The book was cleared by a sympathetic judge.<sup>57</sup> Using the same phrase he had used to describe the critical reception of *Eustace Chisholm*, Purdy told interview Patricia Lear that he “was burned at the stake” for *Narrow Rooms* (68) as a literary heretic, and told Richard Canning that “the critics thought that was a disgraceful book and the author was utterly irresponsible and mad” (15).

Yet other reviewers were ecstatic in their praise of the novel, especially gay critics and artists who acclaimed the book as nothing less than revolutionary. In England, acclaimed and accomplished gay art-film director Derek Jarman was very interested in directing a film of *Narrow Rooms* for the BBC, and a screenplay was written, but the project did not come to fruition. Stephen Everson in the *New Statesman* called it

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<sup>56</sup> Don Adams writes, “it is a sad commentary on the state of our literary sophistication in regard to reading contemporary allegory that Purdy’s painfully revealing tragic allegorical novels have been received by many reviewers as sensationalistic sadomasochistic romps” (24).

<sup>57</sup> This trial places Purdy’s writing in a category of experimental works such as *Ulysses*, *Howl*, and *Naked Lunch* that have been the subject of censorship trials. The fact that this occurred after the late seventies, in a country known for its liberalism regarding erotic material, indicates the severity of grotesque violence that occurs.

“extraordinary” and a “brilliant achievement.”<sup>58</sup> Many of the positive reviews lauded Purdy’s frank and extreme treatment of homosexuality. Reviewer Paul Bresnick claims that “*Narrow Rooms* is the most thorough, honest, *human* treatment of homosexual love by a writer of serious fiction, period . . . Purdy must be praised for having the courage to examine a hitherto ignored area of human experience in a serious novel—for illuminating these passions in a ‘bright book of life.’ If only for this, Purdy’s novel deserves to be recognized as groundbreaking, revolutionary, even” (16). Gore Vidal provided this pre-publication quotation: “Over the past quarter century James Purdy has created an American language which was always there but never noticed . . . *Narrow Rooms* [is] a dark and splendid affair by an authentic American genius.” Gay critic Jack Collins for the San Francisco *Sentinel* acclaims the novel as revolutionary and liberating: “We have been waiting for a novel like *Narrow Rooms* for a long time.”<sup>59</sup> Binding concludes that “*Narrow Rooms*, even when placed in the context of Purdy’s generally so bold and honest *oeuvre*, constitutes a new landmark in the serious and poetic treatment of homosexual behavior” (v).<sup>60</sup>

Despite the perceptive comments from gay reviewers and critics, which help to justify the extremes of Purdy’s novel, no one has analyzed the novel as an allegory of,

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<sup>58</sup> The reviewer perceptively observes, “Purdy creates a world in which passion is a force of nature . . . Judgment has no place here; we watch the tragedy unfolding as we might watch a hurricane descend upon a city” (27).

<sup>59</sup> Collins claims grandiosely that Purdy’s four interwoven male characters “accomplish in their brief but intense lives . . . nothing less than the overthrow of our culture’s basic unit: the American family,” and writes that “if Purdy has offered us an intensely personal vision that frequently dissolves into nightmare, he has also carefully created images that embody a terrible, agonizing aspect of love that we have all experienced but seldom permitted ourselves to perceive, let alone describe.”

<sup>60</sup> Purdy noted on the final corrected typescript of *Narrow Rooms* that the novel was begun in his home base of Brooklyn in 1975 and completed in Berkeley in 1977 (University of Delaware, James Purdy papers, box 1, folder 3). One wonders if the author’s experiences, especially in the San Francisco area during the flowering of gay liberation, may have influenced the direction of the novel. Purdy told interviewer Cameron Northouse, “I find San Francisco a more free city to live in, in many ways, than New York . . . it’s less oppressive” (*Conversations* 201).

race and ethnicity in America. In *Narrow Rooms*, as in other works, Purdy explores and privileges the notion of mixed race, specifically a merging of European and Indian blood. The blending of the ideal qualities of tribal peoples and Europeans represents a potential for America to Purdy, building upon D. H. Lawrence's sentiments. This potential is one that Purdy shows has been squandered as a result of Euro-Americans' clinging to white supremacy (linked to American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny), classism, and homophobia. The character Sidney De Lakes, as will be shown, embodies this potential, but also demonstrates how it has been squandered. Former football hero Sid is called "All-American" and at first one might guess him to be ethnically white, but is described as having long, dark, hair and "a very dark complexion" despite having blue eyes (23). Granted, Sid's long, dark hair and very dark skin are not conclusive evidence that he has Native American ancestry; in themselves these are ambiguous signifiers. But within the context of the novel, and within the larger context of Purdy's oeuvre, which engages so frequently with indigeneity, with great subtlety Purdy encourages the reader to understand Sid in these terms. Sidney's hair is especially important, because it will change color to blonde following Roy's crucifixion, indicating that hair color, like eye color, is for Purdy a symbolic index of ethnicity. Sidney's sustained public rejection of the Indian Roy Sturtevant's love (even when he benefits from it surreptitiously) and his ignorance of his own ethnic background, which is never mentioned by anyone besides the narrator, suggest an internalization of Euro-American racism and classism, despite Sid's obvious mixed ancestry.

Purdy's allegory conveys the critique that, rather than trying to blend cultures and create a mixture that draws from the strengths of both races, the dominant culture of

America has insisted on racial purity and a belief in the superiority of its value systems and cultural practices. In referring to strengths of races, Purdy is working with tropes and archetypes that draw from the popular consciousness. Therefore he should not be taken to be making essentialist arguments about attributes of race, a category that, as I argued in the introduction, Purdy does not regard as fixed or defining, but rather with radical skepticism.

The failure to merge has resulted, Purdy suggests, in the decline and degeneracy of America. Symbolizing his rejection of his Indian blood that Purdy implies is mixed inside him, and his sustained rejection of Roy, who is figured as “Indian,” after Sid nails Roy to a barn door (upon the latter’s request), Sidney De Lakes’ long black hair turns into yellow curls—a detail that no critic seems to have noticed. The renderer has rendered Sid white. After Sid becomes white, the allegorical dimensions of the crucifixion scene come to resemble that of Captain Stadger’s torture and murder of Daniel Haws. The failure of Sid and Roy to create a relationship from their mutual love, which is denied by Sid until the end, parallels the failure of Daniel Haws and Amos Ratcliff to do the same. “Sid is like Daniel Haws of *Eustace Chisholm*,” Purdy told interviewer Jere Real, “he distrusts his basic nature” (28). Purdy’s remark applies to both his ethnicity and his sexuality. All of these characters—Gareth Vaisey, Brian McFee, Sidney, and Roy—whose disavowed relationships cannot last are destroyed in the end, which becomes a warning of what could befall America if it refuses to recognize, embrace, and merge with its Indigenous people, to meet the potential that D. H. Lawrence suggests.

It is easy to understand how and why Sid and Roy would repress their Native American ancestry. Historically, West Virginia, nicknamed “the mountain state,” as it is referred to in *Narrow Rooms*, was not a good place to celebrate one’s Native American ancestry, even during the 1970s time frame of the novel. West Virginia was at one time or another the home or hunting grounds of the Shawnee, Cherokee, Delaware, Seneca, Wyandot, Ottawa, Tuscarora, Susquehannock, Huron, Sioux, Mingo, and Iroquois tribes (“Native”). By 1600 the Shawnees and Cherokees had an especially strong presence. But by the nineteenth century, there were no remaining Native claims in this region as a result of the Indian Wars and the Treaty of Greeneville (1795). As in Ohio and other places from which Indians were removed, invariably some Natives were able to stay and some married into white families, but sentiment against Indians was strong. Even during the twentieth-century post-war era, West Virginian Natives suffered prejudice and abuse. Shockingly, an article published on a West Virginia Division of Culture and History website states: “according to newspaper reports, individuals were being shipped away to Oklahoma reservations as late as the 1950s. Until 1965, it was . . . technically illegal for a Native American to own property in West Virginia” (“Native”). Even though Purdy sets the 1978 novel in the present, in the conservative environment of West Virginia, the pressures motivating these young men to suppress their Indian ancestry, along with their sexuality, is appreciable. Purdy knew something about the cultural climate of the state, since he taught French at Greenbrier Military School in West Virginia for a time during the late 1940s (Auer).

As is the case with novels like *I am Elijah Thrush* and the story “Why Can’t They Tell You Why?”, Purdy’s racial and national allegory in *Narrow Rooms* deploying Native

American characterization, references, and literary allusions is more readily legible viewed in hindsight. This is largely because later works feature characters that are identified *explicitly* as having Native ancestry, which is not so in *Narrow Rooms*. The light that later works shed upon *Narrow Rooms* is in fact emblemized by a phrase found within that novel that includes the title of a future work centering on overt, fully-fledged Ojibwe characters: *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986). This later novel focuses on the efforts of an Ojibwe man, the returned veteran Decatur, to reclaim his teenage son, Chad, whom he fathered by a married white woman, and has been regarded as the husband's natural son. At the close of the novel, choosing his Indian blood and identity over his white family, Chad decides to leave with Decatur. By the end it could be said that Decatur has Chad "in the palm of his hand." Likewise in *Narrow Rooms*, Sidney De Lakes suggests to Gareth Vaisey that Roy Sturtevant, "the renderer," possesses powers beyond human ken, power that, as will be shown, are implicitly connected to his submerged Native American heritage. "You know, Garey," Sidney says, "you feel like me he is more than human and can't be dealt with like any other man . . . I know now he holds my life in the hollow of his hand" (133). This reiteration was also noted by French critic Marie Profit, who published a monograph on Purdy in 1998: "'Il' alors, c'était Roy. Ici, c'est Decatur. Mais le mouvement est le même: un personnage fuit celui qu'il croit haïr pour découvrir que c'est lui seul qu'il aime" (15).<sup>61</sup>

Reading the earlier novel with two later novels' emphasis on Native themes and characters in mind suggests that Roy Sturtevant is not only an Indian, but also the descendent of powerful Natives, chiefs or medicine men. In the novel *In the Hollow of*

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<sup>61</sup> "Here, 'he' refers to Roy, and there, Decatur. But the movement is the same in either case: a character tries to flee the person he thinks he hates, only to find that he loves only him.

*His Hand* Decatur, and thus Chad, are said by Decatur's traditional grandfather to be the heir of full-blooded Ojibwe chiefs. The connections between Roy Sturtevant and Decatur (and his son Chad Coultas), and also between Roy and Moses Swearingen (and the boy that I will argue is his son, Rory Hawley) from *Moe's Villa* (2004), suggest that these characters possess medicine power derived from a Native American inheritance. Similarly, hidden ancestral powers or talents were suggested in *Eustace Chisholm*, at least in the author's mind: recall that Purdy remarked in an interview that Daniel Haws was "really an Indian chief." In *Moe's Villa*, Rory Hawley and Moses Swearingen possess uncanny psychic and healing powers, which are implicitly connected to Shawnee medicine men and Shawnee leader ancestors. Reading Roy Sturtevant (whose name, according to Collins, literally means "astounding king") with *Eustace Chisholm* and the later works *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe's Villa*, we realize the degree to which Roy is figured as "Indian," and we may fairly conclude that Purdy is implying a special Indigenous heritage in Roy's case that would explain his mysterious powers that enable him to control those around him.

With its explicit homoeroticism combined with Native American references and attributes, *Narrow Rooms* again forms a rhetorical link between indigeneity and male same-sex desire, alluding to historical Native American cultural practices that integrated gender diversity and homosexuality. But why is it that the Native American aspects of this narrative have been even more ignored than those of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*? For one thing, they operate on a much more subtle level, and characters are not explicitly identified as, or asked about being, Native American, unlike Daniel Haws in the earlier novel. Purdy's engagement of race and its figurations ties in closely with his

critique of class and social status prejudice. For Roy Sturtevant, although financially well-off, is looked down upon because of the occupation of his ancestors—rendering, regarded as unsightly dirty work. When Gareth begs Roy to release his hold on Sidney, to let Sid “off the hook,” Roy explodes with class consciousness: “What about the hook up my ass? Did you landed gentry ever think of that hook?” (122). Paul Binding in his introduction perceptively writes:

In considering Roy . . . we have to remember his parents—his outcast father who killed himself; his gentle, adored mother who left him at such an early age—[and] remember too the whole “rendering” family from which he came and their calling, needed but not accepted by society. We have to recall that this family lived, pariah-like, on the wrong side of the railroad tracks in the community, actually and symbolically cut off from the more respectable stock such as the De Lakes and Vaisey families, and appreciate the wounds caused by such segregation. And then, beyond this family itself, we have to see the whole armies of the ostracized and outlawed of America . . . (i)

Binding then refers to Purdy’s links between Roy and Cooper’s Leatherstocking, and between Roy and Native Americans. Purdy presents in his novel an allegorical critique of the abuses and prejudice that Native Americans have received over history, connecting race and socio-economic status. If Daniel Haws in *Eustace Chisholm*, as Indian and member of the working class, must shoulder like a cross the burden of servitude to a degenerate aristocratic class, represented by Reuben Masterson, then similarly Roy Sturtevant is first figuratively crucified by the stigmatization of his community—specifically and most hurtfully manifested by his beloved Sidney De Lakes spurning his love and repudiating him publically—then Roy is literally crucified on a barn door. His specific desire to be crucified signifies his internalized colonialism.

It is necessary to step back at this point and trace out the novel’s plot before examining how Purdy constructs his allegory of race and class and engaging with

indigeneity. Purdy's story is intense, extreme, and menacing. Reed Woodhouse writes that "like *Tristan*," the plot "combines a hypnotic languor with an overwhelming suspense. In a series of dreamlike incidents, Roy gets literally closer and closer to Sidney, haunting him like a hungry ghost" (*Unlimited* 90). Like many of Purdy's works (and like many Native American novels including classics *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*), the plot is propelled by the return of a young man to his community. Usually in Purdy the youth is returning from war (*In a Shallow Grave*, *In the Hollow of His Hand*) or prison (the short play *Children is All* collected in the book of the same title).

Sidney De Lakes had been incarcerated for shooting the even younger man Brian McFee, who, it turns out, had tried to shoot Sidney at Roy's command (Roy also sent Sidney an anonymous note saying that Brian would soon attempt to murder him in the vicinity of the Bent Ridge Tavern). With his brother Vance De Lakes' help, Sidney has been pardoned and released. It transpires that Brian was Sidney's lover, but Brian had been sent by the command of his first lover, Roy Sturtevant, the renderer, as a kind of proxy, to love and then destroy Sidney on Roy's behalf. Roy Sturtevant has been in love with Sidney De Lakes since eighth grade, and over the years Roy helped the attractive but not book-smart Sidney with his homework, and has even occasionally convinced Sidney to let him sexually pleasure the "football hero." In public, however, Sidney rejects Roy and will have nothing to do with him, which only exacerbates Roy's desire and need for him. Sidney is characterized as a hunky, all-American boy, and like Jack Kerouac, a former football hero. On the day of their graduation, Sidney delivers a stinging blow to Roy's face; Roy had become the valedictorian only to gain Sidney's notice, but receives public humiliation instead. After being released from prison, Sidney is offered a job

taking care of another young man, his old friend and lover, Gareth Vaisey, who was the psychological and perhaps physical victim of a terrible car-train accident that killed his brothers and father, and a subsequent horse-riding accident. Gareth is said to be an invalid, but later it seems that at least some of his symptoms may be psychosomatic. It is revealed that Gareth and Sidney had been lovers in the past. Gareth's mother Irene catches them in a homosexual act, which causes Sidney to lose his job for a time, before the powerful Roy Sturtevant has him reinstated.

Therefore there are, or have been, relationships between Roy and Brian, Sid and Brian, Sid and Gareth, and Roy and Gareth, for "Gareth had also been *his* pupil," and also clandestine, disavowed (by Sid) sex acts between Roy and Sid (30).<sup>62</sup> The most potent and central relationship is that between Roy and Sidney, denied until shortly before their deaths. Sidney comes to feel that he has no choice but to confront the renderer, who has been pursuing him all these years. The magnetism and friction between these "two men who can't admit that they really love one another" (*Conversations* 206) leads inexorably to the apocalyptic conclusion of the novel, which is every bit as harrowing and scarifying as that of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*.

By reading *Narrow Rooms* alongside the other novels I have mentioned and paying careful attention to the repetition of signs and symbols, Purdy's racial and historical allegory emerges. About a third of the way through the novel, which the author has actually referred to as "a kind of allegory" (Real 77), Purdy interjects an unusual

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<sup>62</sup> I refer to the text of the British first edition (Black Sheep/Ram, 1980), published two years after the American first edition, because Purdy has complained of errors in the American edition. Purdy wrote to his bibliographer, the late Ohio State University librarian Jay Ladd in a letter dated 9 Oct 1980: "The British edition of NARROW ROOMS is the only correct text of the novel. The American was full of errors, etc." The Gay Men's Press (GMP) paperback re-issue uses the identical text and pagination of the novel and adds Paul Binding's perceptive preface.

authorial interruption that directs our attention to allegorical reverberations in the work. Buffered by white space, this interruption whispers in Faulknerian italics: “*Behind this story so far is another story, as behind the girders of an ancient bridge is the skeleton of a child which superstition says keeps the bridge standing*” (58). Purdy’s metaphor for narrative, a bridge takes you over a barrier, from one place to another. Supporting the bridge according to legend is “the skeleton of a child,” suggesting an old and concealed crime, a violation of innocence. Binding writes that the image evokes “ancient crime and suffering, conditioning subsequent life, indeed generating it” (ii).

In my reading, the story, the bridge, is America, the structure built by Euro-Americans on top of the land stolen from Indigenous people, via the stolen or exploited paid labor of African and Asian people. The bridge stands on a foundation of exploitation and death, a palimpsest built atop the preexisting and expropriated civilizations of the Indigenous tribal nations of North America. The image of the “child” connects to white paternalism towards indigenes and Blacks, their projections upon them of romantic innocence and naiveté. To keep the structure standing, in the sense of maintaining Euro-American hegemony, American myths must be maintained, the skeleton of history sealed in the bridge, walled up behind a madman’s freemasonry as in Poe’s tale “The Cask of Amontillado.” The skeleton embedded in the bridge is the skeleton in the closet, for stakes are high and silence is death.

Purdy’s engagement with indigeneity here is not limited to his characters’ features or attributes, but rather, as in *Eustace Chisholm*, runs throughout the novel. In fact, what seems to be a trivial detail announces this theme at the very beginning of the novel. The

spare and lean style of *Narrow Rooms* is frequently noted.<sup>63</sup> The novel opens with Vance De Lakes in Dr. Ulric's waiting room, anxious to tell the doctor, who has known all of these young men all their lives, that his brother Sidney De Lakes has been released from prison. "There were extremely few magazines" there, we are told, "and most of these were of interest only to farmers. *The National Geographic* was the only reading matter Vance could stand to open but 'The South Seas Today' and 'The New Eskimo,' and the disappearance of the puffin, to tell the truth, did not mean too much to him" (1-2).

Although at first seeming utterly trivial, this detail stands out as unusual in Purdy and invites a closer look. The references to contemporary Indigenous peoples suggest by association the presence and enduring influence of Native Americans, inaugurating the text's engagement with indigeneity. The reference to "the disappearance of the puffin" moreover recalls the nineteenth and early twentieth century rhetoric of "vanishing" Indians. Such associations are encouraged when we learn that a place near which many key events unfold, near the village community in the "mountain state," is Warrior Creek. The name not only alludes to the fact that the land was once owned by Native Americans, but also suggests the battles and struggles that occur between the warriors Sidney and Roy Sturtevant, both figured as having Native American ancestry.

It is significant that these themes do not "mean much" to Vance De Lakes, because Vance is figured as one of the "whitest" characters in the novel, and also the straightest. Fair-haired Vance loves his older brother but does not want to know about his queerness, his love for other men. Vance "had never begun to understand or wanted to understand" the tension and dynamic between his older brother and the "renderer,"

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<sup>63</sup> "No irrelevant details intrude into Purdy's concise narrative as it moves to its chilling and grotesque climax," writes reviewer David Bianco.

Roy. Purdy conveys much in this moving dialogue, which evinces his deft use of American vernacular:

“You know about me anyhow, don’t you, Vance?” came his smothered voice. “Don’t you?” he cried on, pressing his mouth against his brother’s mended jacket. “You’re so good, Vance, it’s hard to feel worthy of you. You’re so straight and upright . . . I guess maybe you suspicioned about what I am, and must have guessed the truth about Brian and me, that we . . .”

“It don’t matter now.” Vance broke away from his brother’s close embrace. His voice rose to an almost hysterical wail. “We won’t think about any of that . . . It’s over and done with . . .”

“No, Vance, it’s not over and done . . . I’m trying to level with you, see, to explain to you . . .” (14-15).

Vance, anxious to reclaim his brother, wants to contain his brother’s homosexuality, to silence speech on this subject. In doing so he attempts to relegate this aberrant sexuality to the past, which Sidney won’t let him do so easily. “I don’t believe you’re queer anyhow, or gay, or whatever they call it . . . Prison made you think that,” Vance tells Sid. “Oh, Vance, Vance . . . I am, I am, I am,” comes his older brother’s rejoinder (41).

Vance’s attempts to closet his brother’s sexuality are linked with his whiteness and his disinterest in Indigenous people, which will become clearer as we examine the characterization of Sidney and Roy. It is implied that Vance and Sidney may be half-brothers, or that one of them is adopted; Mrs. Vaisey can find “very little if any” resemblance between them (51). This explains the difference in the way they each function in Purdy’s racial allegory. For the time being, it is enough to see the parallels between Vance’s response to the Indigenous (as represented in the magazine articles) and his response to the idea of homosexuality conveyed in his speech to his brother, which suggest both Euro-America’s historical erasure of indigeneity and same-sex desire.

Vance’s words and response to one conveys his attitude to both: “we won’t think about

any of that . . . that's over and done with"; "[it] did not mean too much to him." Straight-laced Vance, the least ambiguous representative of whiteness, seeks to relegate both homosexuality (via his brother) and indigeneity to the past. Vance's conventional morality, connected to America's Calvinist and Puritan roots, is later referred to by the narrator as "his old-maid prissiness and Presbyterian stiffness" (182). Although Vance loves his brother, his implied disapproval of his brother's sexuality is destructive: "it was better to eat humble pie with Roy Sturtevant than face Vance's pure and noble wrath and bloodless judging forgiveness," Sidney figures (59).

In Purdy's allegory the character Sidney De Lakes, with his combination of European and Native attributes, at first embodies what Purdy imagines as the potential of America, a potential that tragically, is not realized. Purdy suggests in *Narrow Rooms* that racism, classism, homophobia, and concomitant self-hatred have stood as barriers thwarting this potential. "I suppose one of the themes of my work is you must accept yourself and others, whatever they are," Purdy wrote in a 1964 letter (qtd. in Schott 302). Gareth calls Sid "the hero of the football team, the diver and swimmer, the pure American stock back to Revolution or before" (162). This statement echoes dark-haired Eustace Chisholm's description of himself as "classic American . . . pure stock from back to the Indians" (23). At first such language would seem to valorize only WASP ancestry and racial purity, and one might guess that Sidney is ethnically white—but again, Purdy describes Sid as having long, dark hair and very dark skin. As in *Eustace Chisholm*, Purdy subverts the nativist language which valorizes northern European "original stock" and the continuity and purity of bloodline by suggesting that the most original stock of all are Native Americans, privileging Indigenous ancestry and the mixing of blood. Instead

of concealing one's Indian ancestry in shame, it is to be celebrated. Purdy suggests that a meeting and intermixture of the best of Europe and Indigenous American attributes and cultures is the key to realizing America's potential, forging a robust, authentically American character.

In rejecting Roy, therefore, Sidney is also rejecting part of himself—his sexuality and his crossblood Native identity. This is suggested by the fact that Sid has “marks or scars” all over his chest and back: “red wales as come from scourging were visible” (11). Unable to accept his love and desire for the pariah “Indian” Roy, and hating his own “very dark complexion,” Sidney's body bears the trace of his self-hatred. Gareth tells Sidney accusingly: “you've been torturing him all your life” (162). Both men have been torturing themselves as well over their inability to love each other. Sidney's scars are paralleled by Roy's own self-administered punishment; this scarring is one of many connections between Sid and Roy that suggests their mutual, and repressed, mixed-blood identity. Foreshadowing Roy's barn door crucifixion, and echoing Captain Stadger's cutting of his own chest along with Daniel's, Roy “slashed then his wicked arms which had enjoyed the weight of the gas-pump attendant, and when these bled to his satisfaction he slashed his feet and their veins for having admired the naked feet of Sidney De Lakes, and then he slashed the flesh over his heart for, despite all of the warnings to his heart, it had continued to love and adore his arch-enemy” (114). This scourging, self-cutting conveys each young man's intense guilt and repression.

Both men's appearances are figured as mixedblood Native American in some ways. Roy becomes increasingly Indian but Sidney is ultimately rendered white. Roy, like Sidney De Lakes, has black hair worn long (114, 136). We are told that as Roy

grows older, “he looked more and more like an Indian. There was not an extra ounce of flesh on his spare sinewy body” (114). Likewise, Amos had described Daniel Haws as “all sinew and bones” (32). In considering this male Indian body, Purdy’s prose becomes lyrical. A baroque passage stands out amongst the novel’s usually leaner prose style, comparing Roy’s brown body to “certain trees or vines so austere in their configuration that it is said even birds dare not alight on their branches and animals pause on confronting them and then make a detour around them” (114). Another shared (and problematic) attribute that Purdy associates with Indians is dirty, broken fingernails, which he seems to have derived from James Fenimore Cooper. Decatur, the Ojibwe father in *In the Hollow of His Hand*, is also described as having black fingernails. “Sidney always had a tendency to keep his nails poorly, with black dirt underneath them, and the thumb nails more apt than not to be broken” (23). Likewise Roy shows Brian McFee his “blackened nails” (76). Later “he put his fingers and hands in soapy water, and tried to manicure his nails which like wild creatures suddenly trapped and tamed by men remained no matter what was done to them indomitable and black” (114-15). Roy’s dirty nails also signify his marginalized class status in the community. Even though Sid works at a gas station, his family’s social status is much higher than Roy’s. When Brian tells Roy that Sid works at a filling station, Roy laughs. “Call that work, do you, huh? Look at my hands if you want to see work. See them?” the renderer asks Sid (76).

Roy is also associated with Indianness via a literary allusion to James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*. Twice Roy is compared to Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, the rugged white frontiersman hero —whom like “the renderer” is throughout the series reduced “to a stock periphrasis of himself,” to use the phrase of reviewer Stephen

Bender: “the Deerslayer,” “the Pathfinder,” and “the trapper.” Along with associating him with an exile, a rejected wanderer, as Binding points out, this allusion, due to the fact that Natty lives and to an extent dresses like a Native American and is closely associated with his friend Chingachgook, links him with indigeneity. Accordingly, when Brian McFee is reminded of Leatherstocking by Roy’s appearance, it is “a more savage” version that comes to mind (75). The face of Leatherstocking is rendered Indian on the renderer, “his face again like Leatherstocking, a brown, motionless mask” (90).

The reference also recalls, of course, Leslie Fiedler’s discussion in *Love and Death in the American Novel* and elsewhere of the homoeroticism latent in the white and Indigenous men’s relationship in Cooper and Melville that is subverted in Purdy. But rather than the white youths Brian McFee and Gareth Vaisey benefitting from their relationship with the Indian as in Fiedler’s schema, both die young as a result. Although his review is marked by a tone of perplexity and is somewhat negative, English critic Stephen Fender acknowledges the novel’s “rich intertextuality” and guesses, “it may even be that the mysterious bond between Sid and Roy has something to do with the homoerotic friendships between red men and white in classic American fiction . . . Perhaps *Narrow Rooms* is Purdy’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*.” Although Fender seems defeated by the difficulty of the novel, he tried, even citing the chapter on Purdy in Tony Tanner’s *City of Words*, and formed a tentative insight.

That Roy Sturtevant is meant to be figured as Indian is suggested not only by his appearance, but also by association via allusion and other characters’ racist rhetoric referencing “Indians.” One hint is given by the fact that despite his social rejection, he is in possession of some wealth, and is revealed to be a “landlord”—like the “American

Indian” Daniel Haws, reclaiming land that was once his ancestors’. Gareth’s mother Irene Vaisey had been struggling to keep her family’s fine home, and it transpires that “the renderer” had purchased her home, giving him power over this fallen aristocratic woman and her attractive and seemingly invalid son (110). The idea of “landlord” of course connects to his metaphysical role as a dark lord, a controller of others’ behavior and destiny. But when “the renderer” becomes “the landlord,” Roy, this avenging character figured as Native has, like Nora Bythwaite in *The House of the Solitary Maggot* (1974), figuratively re-possessed some of his ancestors’ land from which they were dispossessed, “for both the woods and the property were his” (110). “*After all,*” Roy remarks, “*I am on my own land*” (110, my emphasis).

Despite Roy Sturtevant’s wealth, he retains a low social status in the village and is scorned by the “quality”; linked to Roy’s low status are his features, described as “Indian.” When other characters discuss Roy’s “pariah-like” social status, they repeatedly compare him to a Native American. The narrator informs us that Roy “was looked down upon as perhaps even lower than [an] Indian” (68). In a key line that bears repeating, Gareth Vaisey refers to Sidney as “the hero of the football team, the diver and swimmer, the pure American stock back to Revolution or before,” and bitterly accuses Sid of “looking down on the renderer’s son like he was some . . . drunk Indian not good enough to spit on your shoes to shine them . . . You don’t know how to love” (162).

Figuring Roy as “Indian,” Purdy is drawing from the tradition of literary gothic Indians, dark and avenging “savages” discussed by Fiedler and critic Alan Velie. One of the originators of the field of Native American literary studies, Velie discusses the “frontier gothic” tradition of Euro-American fiction (literary and popular) and film in his

essay “Indian Gothic,” and demonstrates how Vizenor subverts and reverses the perspective of this trope in his first novel *Bearheart*. These gothic Indians are dark, menacing, and deeply aligned with mysterious forces of nature. Such Satanic characterizations of Natives have their roots in the Puritans’ belief that hostile “savages” were God’s way of punishing them for their failures in bringing to fruition the project of a new nation, a shining “city on a hill” as John Winthrop had it. Roy is perceived as having preternatural powers that are linked with his Indianness. “I feel we are dealing with someone outside of human jurisdiction,” Sidney avers to Gareth (132). “He is more than human and can’t be dealt with like any other man” (133). In light of Purdy’s later novels *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe’s Villa* and the predecessor *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, it is possible to see Roy’s seemingly supernatural powers of domination over his fellows as connected to a special inheritance. Daniel Haws was, according to Purdy, “really an Indian chief” and Amos says that Daniel “is in a class by himself” (32). Decatur was said to be the heir of “full-blooded Ojibwe chiefs.” Moe Swearingen and the boy I will argue is his son, who possess Shawnee heritage, have talents in the psychic and healing arts. Roy Sturtevant, whose name means “astounding king” or “surprising king,” holds others’ lives “in the hollow of his hand” (133). Deep ancestral forces work upon him: “Something was burning in his veins, having its origin from even before birth” (61). Sidney explains to Irene that Roy “*has the pride of some king of a whole world of hemispheres, under the ground and the rivers maybe, but he is king. I see that now*” (117). Purdy gives us a strong hint in a detail that, like the “trivial” detail of the *National Geographic* story, bears great significance. As Sidney speaks of Roy’s hold on him and the futility of running from the renderer, he struggles to find the royal word he is looking

for to describe Roy: “He felt, although he could not say it outright, that the word . . . was *prince*. Not all princes he had read about in old books and legends are beautiful and noble and carry their head high, and his mind went back to his old English teacher who had said once when they were studying etymology: ‘*All the word prince means is first. And chief,*’ the teacher had gone on (she had looked suddenly in turn at both Sidney and Roy, and this was to be the only lesson he had ever remembered from school [ . . . ] ‘*chief, young men, is merely from the Latin meaning head...*’ (134-35). Through the teacher’s gaze, the word “chief” is connected closely with Sidney, the “hero” of both European and Indigenous “original American stock,” and the despised son of the renderer, the Indian that stubbornly refuses to vanish until he is good and ready.

Roy, as a gothic, supernatural force, is an avenging and ultimately self-sacrificing “Indian,” who punishes the “white man” for his rejections and land theft. Recalling the allegorical “ghost world” of the Southern army camp in *Eustace* and Lawrence’s “aboriginal demons” and “ghosts,” Roy is a “specter” from the past, returned to haunt and dominate his rejecter (111). The high pitch of Roy’s passion and revenge also recalls Jacobean revenge tragedy. Roy caused Brian McFee’s death to occur through Sidney’s gun, putting De Lakes in prison for a time. Roy seems to have been behind the accidents that killed Gareth’s father and brother, and put Gareth out of action. Roy’s rage is enflamed by Sidney’s refusal to acknowledge him and their mutual love. Gareth chides Sidney over his rejection: “it was ‘cause he had the stain on him of bein’ a renderer that you never spoke to him all through school, that you held yourself aloof from him which was what drove him crazy in the first place when all the time he loved you” (161). Gareth Vaisey, with his “shock of yellow hair” (34), is figured as an emblematic white

youth from a prominent family and is seen in a home movie riding a symbolic white horse with “spotted gold markings” (43). This golden boy is brutally raped by Roy atop Brian McFee’s grave (126). The harrowing description of Roy’s violent subduing of Gareth prior to the rape even seems to allude to the practice of scalping. Roy forces Gareth to the ground facedown, places both his knees on his back, rabbit-punches him and “slaps the back of his neck until Gareth went into convulsions, then lay quiet, like a small prey the hunter has finished off” (126). Gareth is symbolically dead and Roy’s motions—the knees on the back—resemble those of a scalper; those who practiced scalping, both Indians and European frontiersmen, usually did it to slain enemies. If Purdy here deploys a stock stereotype that could be considered offensive, it might be noted that, first, the allusion is not overt, and second, Purdy is engaging with an American literary gothic tradition that Velie identifies with his revenging Indian character, in what one might call a literary horror novel. If white settlers took his ancestor’s homelands, then Roy in turn comes into possession of the home where the “whitest” characters, Irene and Gareth Vaisey, live. Brian McFee, characterized as an orphaned poor little rich boy, is taken over by the renderer with the help of lots of marijuana and sex (98). As a result of the renderer’s machinations, Brian winds up killed by Sidney.

Likewise Roy’s obsession with Sidney is profound and inexorable. Like Captain Stadger’s indefatigable pursuit of his beloved Indian victim Daniel Haws, Roy’s monomaniacal quest for Sidney comes to resemble both Captain Ahab’s quest for the white whale and Claggart’s hounding of “the Handsome Sailor,” Billy Budd, the creations of a novelist whom Purdy admires greatly. The death of Roy’s mother and

Sidney De Lakes slapping him in the face at the High School graduation exercises become “two shattering events” that “never stopped in time, kept being projected ceaselessly in his brain like a movie that goes on being shown in a theater throughout eternity, giving him no rest or respite or calm, no momentary quiet, even in sleep or when insensible with what he constantly smoked” (72). Just as Ahab is willing to sacrifice his crew to his obsession, Sturtevant is willing to sacrifice his lover Brian McFee, and ultimately himself, to receive an acknowledgement from Sidney De Lakes.

As the plot moves to its gruesome conclusion, radical transformations occur in the characters, most prominently in Sidney De Lakes. The conclusion is terrifying and haunts one’s dreams. Yet the horror operates within recognizably literary tropes and allegorical systems, as Luchetti argued of *Eustace Chisholm* (156). In this most extraordinary novel, Roy and Sidney are figured as tragic lovers. They are tragically destroyed because, although they seem destined to be together, Sidney’s internalized racism and classism has caused him to spurn “the renderer.” The love between Roy and Sid can truly manifest only in the process and aftermath of Roy’s crucifixion, which he commands himself, and the time that they have together alive once Roy is taken down from the barn door is brief. “Why, why did it take you so long then?” Roy ruefully asks from his bed, badly wounded following his ordeal.

During the process of the planning, execution, and aftermath of this terrible deed, Sidney, who had been described as having an “extremely dark complexion” and dark hair, is gradually “rendered” white, climaxing in his hair turning from black to gold sometime during the crucifixion. While Gareth and Sid plot revenge upon Roy, we see Sid’s face “going white”—and after Roy has been crucified and later taken down from

the barn door alive, Sid's hair, once dark, is now, stunningly, seen to be blonde. This ironic transfiguration is appropriate to Purdy's racial allegory: Sidney De Lakes, who, like Daniel Haws, ignores and never mentions his Native heritage, has internalized the dominant culture's racism, classicism, and homophobia. Sid therefore rejects both the love of the lower-status Indian Roy Sturtevant, and the Native part of himself. His ignorance of his Indigenous roots and ties to the land is symbolized by the question he asks Irene Vaisey: "Where is Warrior Creek, ma'am?" (44). During this transfiguring process, the narrator says of Sidney: "So the wheel had come full circle, his past was blotted out along with most of his memory" (152). Like Daniel Haws, Sidney's Native heritage is submerged, now erased. Both within himself, and now between him and the reader, the "white" and the Indian fail to come together in a sustained fashion, symbolic of America's thwarted potential and precipitating calamity.

It is as a white man then, that Sidney crucifies Roy, and although Roy urges him to do it—just as Daniel Haws readily submits to Captain Stadger's punishments—the act takes on similar racial and historical allegorical meanings as those emanating from the "Under Earth's Deepest Stream" section in *Eustace Chisholm*.

In a strategy that Purdy had also used in *Jeremy's Version* (1970), Purdy associates a character's face "going white" out of fear, along with other white symbols, with ethnic whiteness, in this case that of Sidney. As Gareth and Sidney plot a revenge on Roy, who has "so much blood on his hands," Gareth whispers in Sidney's ear that he wants De Lakes to kill the reader: Sidney goes "very white" (130). Thoughts and plots of killing the Indian are associated with whiteness. Later, as they discuss murdering Roy, Gareth demands of Sid, "Why is your face gone so white then?" (138). Sidney's

increasing “whiteness,” his face drained of blood, registers symbolically his refusal of his Indigenous blood. The winter landscape mirrors this increasing whiteness; pure white snow blankets the formerly Indigenous land as Gareth and Sidney plot the death of the renderer, whom, we are told, in contrast to Sid, looks more and more Indian all the time. As they “plan careful” together, Sidney looks out the window “out of which one saw the mountains still resplendently white” (133). As Sidney prepares himself to face the renderer, “even though it was April it kept snowing. The spring flowers were all white with it” (133). When there should be rebirth, during a time of the year associated with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, instead there is whiteness blanketing the former Indian land. It should be clarified that it is not whiteness itself, but the belief in racial superiority and exclusivity associated with it that Purdy critiques.

So here we have two repressed young men, both figured as having Native ancestry, who love each other but are unable to manifest their love in a sustained relationship that imagines a future. They can only allow themselves to love one another when they know the time is very short, following Roy’s barn door crucifixion, when it is clear that Roy is doomed, his remaining hours numbered. Sidney’s change from Native to white is shocking, but is not commented upon by the narrator or characters in the midst of this highly-pitched material that presents extremes of love and death demonstrating the costs of repression and internalized colonialism. From the standpoint of Purdy’s historical allegory it is logical that the crucifier, the long-time tormentor of the Indian, would be white. But there is more to this strange matter. Sidney De Lakes’ ethnic transformation, his transmutation into whiteness, is a prerequisite to he and Roy coming together in their bloody but oddly idyllic terminal love scene after Roy has been taken

down from the “X” of his barn door cross. It is as though Sid and Roy cannot be together except, perversely, as polar opposites, historical enemies. They cannot merge. Two Native men loving each other, especially in public, is unthinkable to them. They cannot abide merging nor can they imagine a future for a union between two crossblood Natives, so Roy must transform Sidney, or aid his transformation, into a white. Their bloody, terminal union of Red and White is a travesty of the ideal American merger that Purdy imagines, indicating national failure.

Although confounding, this situation is illuminated by Gilles Deleuze’s theorization of masochism in his long essay “Coldness and Cruelty,” in *Masochism*. The masochism that occurs here is not a self-conscious sexual “perversion,” as in sadomasochistic gay sex (as Katha Pollitt had insinuated), but something more. Roy’s actions are motivated by masochistic feeling however, in that he craves to be punished for his desire for Sid. While masochism is thought of as being totally passive and a complement of sadism, Deleuze argues that it is actually rather active, and independent of sadism. The masochist shapes and persuades a partner to enter a pact with him, vowing to perform to the masochist’s specifications, to participate in the rites. This partner, as is the case with Sidney, is not a “sadist.”

In the novels of Masoch, “the masochistic hero appears to be educated and fashioned by the authoritarian woman whereas basically it is he who forms her, dresses her for the part and prompts the harsh words she addresses to him” (Deleuze 22). Thus we see that the masochist, far from being a passive correlative of a sadist, has power to shape and control and is the one who ultimately receives just what he or she wants. The

masochist assures this by entering into a contract with his intended partner. “The pact” is the masochist’s “particular form of madness,” Deleuze writes (21).

Likewise, Roy presents the idea of the crucifixion and Brian’s exhumation to Sidney, persuading him to take part in this insane ritual. The masochist is not a passive recipient of violence but “a victim in search of a torturer, and who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes,” Deleuze writes (20). The masochist, far from being passive, molds the sadist to be able to fulfill his desires. Roy therefore “fashions” Sidney, renders him white, because he can only accept the idea of consummated love with Sidney in the form of agonistic opposites. It is Roy who invents and orders his own crucifixion and fashions his crucifier. Sidney arrives at his door, surrendering himself—he says that he must be rid of his tormenter. They determine that they don’t actually want to kill each other, but Roy claims that a “mock-killing” ritual will free Sid from him. Roy has planned out his crucifixion scenario already and proposes it to Sid in one of Purdy’s strangest—and strangely funny—lines: “Supposin’ you were to nail me naked to the barn door all night, say, and then at sunup you brought Brian McFee to see what you had done, owin’ to the fact you claim I killed him through you and so he ought to be present . . .” (147).

Although Sid resists Roy’s macabre plan, he follows Roy’s orders. Although Roy sometimes points a gun at him, this hardly seems a catalyst since Sid had already begged Roy to just kill him and set him free. As Deleuze argues is the case with the masochist’s partner, Sid is “educated and fashioned” into his role. Sidney in fact becomes an enthusiastic, perhaps even zealous participant. “I think your arm needs a couple more nails,” Sid says. With “his mouth open and working furiously,” Sid “pounded the extra

nails in with vehement concentration” (151). Although Roy has power, he uses it to punish himself for his desires, a victim of internalized colonialism and its attendant homophobia. I mentioned earlier that over history, Native Americans, as they were acculturated and started to follow Christianity, in many cases repudiated traditions including same-sex love. This is the case of Sid and Roy, who, having internalized the dominant culture’s values, are unable to love each other as two crossblood Native men.

Instead of killing Roy Sturtevant on Gareth Vaisey’s command, Sid surrenders to the renderer, which Sid has always known he would have to do. This “surrender” means that he must perform the terrible action that ultimately causes Roy’s death anyway, the crucifixion.<sup>64</sup> Roy’s wish to be crucified, obviously linking him with Jesus Christ, signals internalized colonialism, linking him further with Daniel Haws. Both men would rather be tortured and killed than live out their desire for another man in a sustained fashion. Sidney, forced to nail his nemesis-beloved to the barn—and could there possibly be a more fitting emblem of Midwestern gothic horror— is “rendered” white, profoundly transformed. Gareth had warned him, “He’ll *render* you. In the boiling tubs....” (141). Since the occupation of rendering is turning animal fat into soap, changing stain into cleanliness, Purdy constructs an ironic metaphor of ethnic cleansing with Sid “going white” and his hair turning gold. At the scene of the macabre ceremony, underscoring the racial color symbolism, Roy has laid out the nails for Sidney “on some white cloth” (159).

The apex of this transformation, the changed hair color, is revealed following the crucifixion. Sidney removes the nails amidst Roy’s screams and takes his still-breathing,

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<sup>64</sup> Deleuze writes, “Waiting and suspense are essential characteristics of the masochistic experience. Hence the ritual scenes of hanging, crucifixion, and other forms of physical suspension in Masoch’s novels” (70-71).

bloody and “beautiful” body home. Roy has been aided by a draught of a mysterious homebrewed pain-killing “strong medicine,” perhaps further suggesting a figurative link between Roy and indigeneity. “I don’t want no doctor in my house,” Roy tells Sid, foreshadowing Moe Swearingen’s abilities in *Moe’s Villa*. “I’m a doctor. I know more about the human body than Doc Ulric or a whole college of doctors could learn in another thousand years of study” (171). In a “king-sized” room that Sidney chooses for Roy in the latter’s home (although it is not Roy’s bedroom), Roy lovingly runs his hands through Sidney’s hair. But something striking has happened. Sid’s hair, once described as “dark,” befitting someone with an “extremely dark complexion,” and “long,” has now turned into blonde curls. Here Roy gently pulls Sid’s “strands of thick yellow hair,” and fashions his hair this way and that, then strokes his beloved’s head (170). Roy, having internalized the dominant culture’s norms, seems quite pleased, enamored even, with this new whiteness in Sid. Then, as they discuss Roy’s medicine, “the renderer’s hand plunged then into Sidney’s curls. The football star shivered and shook, and the renderer twirled the curls into fine little threads like gold yarn” (171-72). With repeated references late in the novel to a pale face and yellow hair, Sid’s transformation is complete. Tragically, it is only in this extreme difference, by becoming extreme polar opposites, that they can unite, with Sid white and Roy more Indian. In doing so they become stereotypes of opposed false purities. They become stereotypes of violent antagonists and for a while engage in a most violent form of love. They both renounce their crossblood selves and purge their “mixed” quality, betraying themselves and Purdy’s ideal of the merger of Red and White.

This post-crucifixion scene in Roy's house is idyllic, although stained with Roy's blood and gore. This is the loving if transitory and sanguinary repast of the Indian and the "football hero" now rendered white who have become polar opposites doomed by their own embrace of stereotypes of racial purity. Purdy has again subverted the Fiedlerian thesis. The cozy marriage bed of Ishmael and Queequeg now becomes a bower of blood. "We've been brought up to date," remarks the sage-like Doctor Ulric (who is also a character in the tragic short story and short play *Ruthanna Elder*, the story of which Ulric summarizes and compares to the current tragedy which unfolds in *Narrow Rooms*). The unity between the Indian and the yellow-haired man is achieved only for a transitory moment, and while it lasts, Sidney feels that he is with his "'eternal' lover or husband or sweetheart . . . on whom he now poured out his love" (173), his "late embraces" (185). But it is too late, and too late for America, Purdy implies ("Why, why did it take you so long then?"). Part of what prevents the sustained merger of Native and Euro-American is the internalized homophobia that will not allow Roy and Sidney to be together without the knowledge of imminent death. Purdy's title refers to "the prisons men lock themselves into when they cannot shake free of the guilt borne of any measure of happiness which others condemn as sinful" (Martin). But then, if Roy the Indian is ritualistically crucified might not this mean there is a chance for resurrection? If not for him individually, then for Native Americans as peoples and nations?<sup>65</sup>

The conclusions of these two novels are disturbing, enacting the repressed violence of colonialism and westward expansion, "justified" by the rhetoric of American

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<sup>65</sup> One of the three masochistic rites in the work of Masoch that Deleuze identifies is a rite of "regeneration and rebirth" (94).

exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. The implications of Purdy's allegories are seemingly pessimistic for Native Americans and this is a challenge to his work of the future—to engage more closely with contemporary Native social realities and imagine an affirmative future for Native Americans. Purdy's position evolves throughout his work and becomes more complex and gradually more optimistic as the late twentieth century rolls on. The way that Purdy's allegories expose and lay bare the violence and cruelty of American history is at least an acknowledgement and confrontation of Euro-Americans' complicity in a violent colonialist past mystified and justified by self-serving myths.

In his fictionalized memoir *Black Eagle Child: The Facepaint Narratives*, Mesquakie author Ray A. Young Bear's persona Edgar Bearchild writes: "For too long we have been misrepresented / and culturally maligned by an ungrateful country / of Euro-Americans citizens who have all but burned / their own ties to the past" (140). James Purdy at least attempts to make bridges to the past and acknowledges Euro-Americans' vexed position as the heirs of violence, treachery, and land theft. The conclusions of these two novels represent a challenge that Purdy will have to meet in his subsequent works in order to rise above this level onto a more affirmative one. As his career continues, his position becomes less accusatory and victimist, and more affirmative about contemporary Native Americans. His productive response to his own acknowledgment of this position is not to wail and gnash teeth in white guilt, but rather to embrace the notion of the metaphorical mixed-blood who feels an ethical obligation to side with the interests of Native Americans, becoming a "critical ally" of sorts through his evolving allegorical fictional art.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### “THE HEART OF A WARRIOR IS BEATING”:

#### FAMILY INDIAN WARS

Now Cora and Ruth and Vernon and Gretz  
belong to a time when ladies wore vests  
belong to an age only known now to books  
they are the ghosts of America’s beautiful past  
and all you today who are lissome and plump  
soon also will lie down with the slumbering folk  
and no one will remember how pretty you grew.

—James Purdy, untitled, *The Longer I Serve Him the Sweeter He Grows*

In *Jeremy’s Version* (1970) Purdy embeds an allegory of Euro-American aggression and Native American resistance and presence within a Midwestern family saga. This is part of Purdy’s sustained project of confronting troubling and repressed aspects of American history, challenging American myths and critiquing Euro-American colonialism, corruption, and violence. In *Jeremy’s Version* he is again concerned with mixed race, or the crossblood, in that one of the two central families, the Summerlads, is characterized as having Native American ancestry through the maternal line. “So much of his work,” Stephen D. Adams writes, “treats disturbances within family relationships ... as miniatures of national phenomena” (*James* 113). The history of conflicts between

and within families becomes an allegory of the history and character of the United States. Connecting the familial and the national in Purdy, critic Warren French argues against a potential objection that Purdy may be placing white Protestant Americans on a pedestal: “Purdy’s obsessive concern with the failure of clan commitment is motivated . . . less by any sense of the superiority of a particular group than by his conviction that if there is no family solidarity, there can be no larger community . . . If we cannot count on our kin, what can we expect from the impersonal state?” (“James Purdy, Will Moses” 81). The novel’s complex plot turns on a series of battles between clans and family members. Through the repetition of simile, metaphor, and specific historical allusion, these battles become racial and historical allegories of the history of interaction and conflict between Indigenous people and Euro-Americans in what is now the United States, with specific relevance to Purdy’s home state of Ohio and its northwestern region in which he was born and grew up.

With regard to the development of Purdy’s affirmativeness toward Native American claims and communities, within the context of all of Purdy’s fictional allegories, *Jeremy’s Version* marks the beginning of a transition period, offering glimmerings of hope. Purdy arguably slips back into pessimism with his next book, *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972), and later backtracks with *Narrow Rooms*, but in its horror and starkness, in many ways *Rooms* stands very much alone among Purdy’s novels, despite similarities to *Eustace Chisholm*. Within the trajectory of Purdy’s career *Jeremy’s Version* as a whole represents an ambivalent middle ground in which neither pessimism nor optimism for Native Americans prevails. The characters who possess Native ancestry, often figured as Indian, face many challenges and conflicts from within and

without the Indian family. As in *Eustace Chisholm* and *I am Elijah Thrush*, through his representative characters Purdy's allegories stress how Natives have lost land and resources at the hands of Euro-Americans. The novel concludes with the breaking up of a home and the young hero with Native ancestry is sent off to live with his father, who negatively represents whiteness.

The allegorical significance of *Jeremy's Version* was intimated in a broad sense, but not fully or specifically explicated, by certain reviewers and critics. No critics have dealt with the Native aspects of the novel and their bearing on its allegorical meanings. The reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* remarked that one way to read the novel is "as the working of American legends, which have attained mythical weight, and American history . . . into a grand tragi-comedy." Stephen Adams writes in his monograph *James Purdy* that *Jeremy's Version* continues Purdy's "history of the American soul by examining the impingement of a more distant past upon the present" (109).

Any consideration of the "distant past" and "legends" of American history intrinsically involves its aboriginal peoples, although this is not mentioned by the critics. The Summerlads, the characters possessing some Native American ancestry—examples of Purdy's crossbloods—within the context of the allegory of the novel as a whole, suggest that while there is strife and conflict within the "family" of crossbloods, these characters survive in the end, and we suspect that despite their challenges and interfamilial conflicts, they will prevail. The novel does not offer itself up easily to readings that make sense of the text as a whole. Some readers, noting that the novel is the first of a series, felt that it left many questions unanswered about the characters' erotic

and violent interactions. “In some ways, then, this is a complex, powerful, but incomplete novel,” writes Wayne E. Haskin (3864). This critical response indicates the ambivalence of the text and the difficulty and challenge of deriving a holistic reading from the text.

In *On Glory's Course* (1984), another Midwestern novel dealing with similar themes of “blood,” the force of family ties, and desire, Purdy continues his rhetorical link between indigeneity and male same-sex desire that began with *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* and continued in *Jeremy's Version* and *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972). *On Glory's Course* reiterates many of the same themes and concerns of his earlier Midwestern novels,<sup>66</sup> but is more self-consciously comic in its tone, and makes use of exaggeratedly antiquated language and attitudes. With a greater distance in his perspective as time passes, Purdy is able to find humor in the stresses and strains of his growing up in a repressive Midwestern town. Moreover, Purdy explores connections between “fathers” and figurations of the Indian that relate to his obsession with American history and identity. Purdy’s “families and miniature societies are simultaneously the vehicles for an exploration of the national psyche,” Stephen Adams writes of earlier work (*James* 9). These themes would be extended, reaching their fruition in Purdy’s subsequent novel *In the Hollow of His Hand*, which centers on a full-fledged Ojibwe character and his crossblood son, a subject of chapter six.

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<sup>66</sup> *Jeremy's Version*, *The House of the Solitary Maggot* (1974), and *Mourners Below* (1981).

## HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

*Jeremy's Version* (1970) is perhaps Purdy's most autobiographically influenced novel.<sup>67</sup> In this and in several other novels, Purdy dramatizes, mythologizes, and exaggerates aspects of the people and places of his upbringing, and those of his storytelling grandmothers, all in northwestern Ohio. The novel is set in three towns in an unnamed Northern state—Boutflour, Hittisleigh, and Paulding Meadows—seemingly during the late 1920s. We know this is the North because it is mentioned a few times that the state's nickname is "the Yankee State" (54). Both this novel and *On Glory's Course* are set in the aftermath of an economic boom in the region due to discovered gas and oil deposits. This was also the case for Purdy's hometown of Findlay, and his older brother Richard worked for Ohio Oil on Main Street before making his way to New York City to begin his acting career on Broadway and on early television. *Jeremy's Version* is implicitly set in Ohio, which is reinforced by the orthographic similarity of Ohio's nickname, "the Buckeye State," to "the Yankee State," and a reference to Cincinnati as a city in the region. One character even fondly recalls "gathering buckeyes" (274). Writing anonymously in the *TLS* of Purdy's earlier work, critic William Weatherby favorably compares Purdy to Hemingway with regard to Purdy's skilled use of vernacular, "rooted in the flat, frame-house Ohio that he grew up in." Purdy somehow managed to resist "all the brain-washing of modern communication and retained his native rhythms and Ohio vocabulary and conventions of speech and literary manners," Weatherby writes. In Andy Warhol's *Interview*, Purdy told performer Stephen Varble, "my family was real to me. I'm from a small Ohio town. And then everything since then

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<sup>67</sup> This assessment is based upon my own research into Purdy's family history and correspondence. The autobiographical dimensions of this novel have barely been explored, even by Paul Miller, who has published five pieces on Purdy focusing on the biographical aspects of his work.

has been unreal,” thus indicating the importance of his Ohio upbringing to his work (29). Novelist and reviewer Guy Davenport writes, alluding to Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* and other texts, “the Ohio small town is now classic ground” for American literature (BR3).

I want to stress that, while the autobiographical resonances are enriching to a reading of the work, they are by no means necessary to an appreciation of it, nor am I suggesting that they suggest some hidden “truth” of the work, nor serve as a key to unlocking the “secret” of the work. Although Purdy by his own admission models fictional characters on people he has known, as testified by interviews and correspondence, it cannot accurately be said that he works in the genre of *Roman à clef*. Purdy’s vision is much too complex for that, and his fervid imagination is transformative and hyperbolic. In several interviews Purdy referred to himself as an “unconscious” writer because his work just flows from deep wells and he does not analyze nor censor what he is doing while he writes (Lane 72, Lear 60).

Since James Purdy grew up in the northwestern part of Ohio, he gives himself some distance by having the novel’s towns set “*down far south in this ‘Yankee State,’*” as Jeremy Cready establishes right away in his narration (1). Regarding Purdy’s series of Midwestern novels, as long as individuals back in Ohio who were models for characters were thought to be living, Purdy wanted to be discreet, creating such “red herrings” in his more autobiographical work as he would about biographical facts such as his birthplace. Perhaps he did not want “intruders” digging around his old haunts. In later years, however, Purdy would become more liberal with the names of these sources, evidenced by his correspondence in the 1980s with Parker Sams, an editor and journalist for the

Findlay *Courier* newspaper. Regarding his own biography, one red herring that Purdy laid was to say that the nearest town to where he was born was Fremont, almost one hundred miles away from Hicksville, Ohio, in Defiance County (where he was born, according to his birth certificate).<sup>68</sup>

Defiance County and the town of Defiance are named from their origin, Fort Defiance, which served as the base for General “Mad” Anthony Wayne and his troops in his war against the Shawnees, the Ottowas (after whom a nearby town is named), the Ojibwes, and other tribal warriors. Wayne, a Revolutionary War officer, was brought in by George Washington in another attempt to subjugate the Natives, who refused to cede their land to the interlopers. The U.S. Army had previously sustained crippling defeats at the hands of the allied warriors headed by Shawnee leader Blue Jacket. During the early 1790s, Blue Jacket and Little Turtle of the Miami Indians were the major leaders of the Native alliance in the Ohio Country. They fought against the increasing encroachments of white American settlers in western Ohio. The Native forces defeated an army led by General Josiah Harmar in 1790 and another one led by General Arthur St. Clair in 1791. “St. Clair's Defeat” was one of the worst losses ever suffered by the American military at the hands of Native Americans. (“Weyapiersenwah”).

Thus Fort Defiance, ordered to be built in August 1794, was a part of Wayne’s “defiance” against the recent Native military dominance in the region. General Wayne

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<sup>68</sup> Despite this discrepancy, Purdy has repeatedly mentioned (even in conjunction with the contradictory Fremont reference) that his birthplace is near where the St. Joseph River meets the Indiana border: this is the northwest corner of Defiance County, indicating Hicksville, Ohio (Hittisleigh in the novel). James Purdy’s mother Vera Otis was born, raised, and married in Hicksville; his maternal grandparents, and great-grandparents lived there; and his father William was a banker and businessman there as a younger man, where he started a national bank in 1901 (“Purdy, Active”). James Purdy may have wanted to distance himself from the comical name of the town of his birthplace, a small town that was held dear by his mother Vera C. Otis Purdy. Vera regretted moving east to Findlay with her husband William Purdy, which is reflected in their fictional versions in *Jeremy’s Version* and *On Glory’s Course*.

would defeat Blue Jacket's and Little Turtle's confederacy, which included Shawnee, Delaware, Miami, Ojibwe, and Ottawa warriors, at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794, fought near the Maumee River, south of what is now Toledo. And although the Treaty of Greenville (1795) stipulated that whites could not settle in northwest Ohio, the fort remained as a trading post, in "defiance" of treaty. After Fort Defiance was built, Wayne "ordered the destruction of all Native American villages and crops within a fifty-mile radius of the fort" ("Fort Defiance").

Purdy was for the most part reticent about his ties to the cities of Findlay and Bowling Green (where he attended college), and the town of Hicksville, which are rarely mentioned in biographies or interviews, and as noted, he has been elusive or misleading about the specifics of date and place of his birth. Paul W. Miller's entry for Purdy in *The Dictionary of Midwestern Literature* is a strong source for basic biography. The novel's county seat town of Boutflour corresponds to Findlay, the seat of Hancock County, Ohio where Purdy attended elementary school, middle school, and graduated from Findlay High School in 1932 (Sams). The bucolic small town of Hittisleigh, former home of the fictional "Summerlad tribe," corresponds to Hicksville, in Defiance County where James Purdy was born in 1914.<sup>69</sup> Hicksville is where Purdy's maternal grandfather George K. Otis (1844-1908), a Civil War veteran, businessman, and postmaster (*Commemorative* 136-38), owned a showplace home (see Stadler, "House"), and where Otis's daughter Vera Cowhick Otis<sup>70</sup> grew up. Vera was born, raised, married, and had her funeral in that same residence on the corner of Cornelia and Main. Vera and William Purdy had a house nearby in Hicksville, where James spent the first years of his life. Vera's middle name,

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<sup>69</sup> Not 1923, as almost all biographies before Purdy's death stated.

<sup>70</sup> Vera C. Otis would become Vera C. Purdy, and later Vera C. Bauman.

Cowhick, was her mother Minnie Otis's maiden name, and she extended this tradition with her son James Otis Purdy—indicating the importance of the maternal line for James, paralleled in the novel, in which Jethro Fergus begins to use his mother's maiden name (Summerlad) as his last name in the absence of his father. Paulding Meadows, the hometown of the fictional Fergus family, of course suggests the nearby rural town of Paulding, Ohio, but its name also recalls Bowling Green, Ohio, the home town of William Purdy and his parents, Catherine Mason Purdy and Boyd Wallace Purdy. The local newspaper that characters read in both *Jeremy's Version* and *On Glory's Course* is even called *The Courier*, which remains today, as it was in 1930, a Findlay newspaper (*Jeremy's* 330). Also, the courthouse in which the novel's highly-pitched divorce trial occurs closely resembles that of Hancock County, also depicted in *On Glory's Course*, where William and Vera Purdy's divorce proceedings occurred in 1930.

The courthouse on Main Street is not a long walk from the home off Main on 115 East Lima Street, where James lived with his mother and his older and younger brothers, Richard and Robert. Their mother Vera C. Otis Purdy transformed this home into a boardinghouse, of which she was the proprietress, following her separation and divorce from William (evidenced by the 1930 Hancock County census); a similar scenario is found in *Jeremy's Version* and *On Glory's Course*. William Purdy, like the character Wilders Fergus in *Jeremy's Version*, was involved in banking and finance (later, real estate), and lost large sums of money that he had borrowed from others in investments gone bad (Miller *Dictionary* 421-22). The boardinghouse in the novel is a much larger, grander version of the Findlay residence, perhaps incorporating features of James Purdy's

maternal grandfather's grand residence in Hicksville, which appeared on a commercial postcard.<sup>71</sup>

*Jeremy's Version* is dedicated, using only first names, to James's father William Purdy (1877-1964), his aunt Cora Adelia Purdy (1879-1966), and his older brother Richard W. Purdy (1909-1967). Richard Purdy, like Rick Fergus, was an actor, in early television and the theatre in New York City for a time. Purdy made an auspicious debut as Zametoff in the New York production of *Crime and Punishment* with John Geilgud and Lillian Gish during 1947-48. James's big brother was versatile enough of an actor to appear in productions as diverse as a transcontinental *Hamlet* and the touring musical *Can-Can*, working alongside stars such as Walter Matthau, Maurice Evans, David Niven, and Roddy McDowall<sup>72</sup> before his alcoholism ruined his professional career and sent him packing back to Findlay. Boyd William Purdy (who never used his first name<sup>73</sup>) and Cora Purdy, along with being models for siblings Wilders Fergus and Winifred Fergus in *Jeremy's Version*, were the also the models for the elderly siblings Boyd Mason and Alma Mason (the maiden name of William and Cora's mother Catherine was Mason) in Purdy's finely crafted sophomore novel *The Nephew* (1960).<sup>74</sup> These dedicatees are

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<sup>71</sup> This postcard can be ordered today (2009) from the Hicksville Historical Society.

<sup>72</sup> This information was derived from various autographed playbills that had been Richard Purdy's, from the personal collection of his sister-in-law Dorothy Purdy, in Berea, Ohio. Richard also acted in television productions of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and a *Studio One* episode, "The Rabbit," opposite Marie Mouton, the daughter of Marlene Dietrich ("Findlay Actor" and playbill for *Fancy Meeting You Again* at the Royale Theatre, January 1952).

<sup>73</sup> James Purdy's father's name as it appears on his tombstone in Bowling Green is Boyd William Purdy, although he is listed on census data and newspaper articles as William Purdy. He undoubtedly began to use his middle name so as not to be confused with his father, Boyd Wallace Purdy (1833-1913).

<sup>74</sup> That novel is set in the Midwestern college town of Rainbow Center, which was based upon northwest Ohio's Bowling Green (the rainbow's center is green). William Purdy lived with his sister Cora Adelia Purdy, who, like Alma Mason and Winifred Fergus, was an educator in another state and like Alma, ran a small gift shop. Cora, however, actually received a Master's degree from Columbia University (as her nephew Robert Purdy would go on to do) and was an instructor and theorist of Physical Education at the University of Indiana in Bloomington ("Mrs. B.W. Purdy" 2). James Purdy, who lived with his father and aunt while he attended Bowling Green College, was to Cora "the nephew."

among those who have passed away but survive in story and memory, Purdy's "sleepers in moon-crowned valleys"—his series title for what was originally intended to be a trilogy of thematically-linked novels that eventually filled five or six works. These novels, although they did not share characters or, for the most part, place names, were all set in the rural Midwest and were largely inspired by the stories that Purdy's grandmothers told him, along with his own experiences. Between *Jeremy's Version* and *On Glory's Course* were published *The House of the Solitary Maggot* (1974) and *Mourners Below* (1981), two darker works that engage indigeneity in limited ways. Purdy's mother Vera, who had also passed away prior to the novel's completion, was not included in the dedication, having already been one of *Malcolm's* dedicatees.<sup>75</sup>

Comparing the names of the principals with Purdy's own family underscores the biographical resonances of the novel. In the fictional Fergus family (with a name sounding not unlike "Purdy"), the estranged parents are named Elvira and Wilders; Purdy's parents were Vera and William. The novel's three brothers are named Rick, Jethro, and Rory; the Purdy boys were Richard, James, and Robert (James had an older brother who died before James was born). The young "starter," the narrator Jeremy Cready of the novel's present, whose "version" of the past we read, bears many parallels

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<sup>75</sup> Out of James's family only the youngest brother Robert "Bob" Lloyd Purdy (1921-2008), who became a celebrated high school Athletic Director in Berea, Ohio, near Cleveland, was surviving at the time of the novel's completion. Robert did not closely follow his brother's younger literary output. In 2006 the gymnasium at Berea High School was named in honor of Robert Purdy and his photograph is prominently displayed. The recipient of many community honors and awards, Robert Purdy was also the author of a book, *The Successful High School Athletic Program* (1973), which was dedicated to his wife Dorothy, who is the co-author of a collection of Christian poetry, *Fanfare: A Celebration of Belief* (1981). Robert and Dorothy Purdy had two children: David, who has published two books on fatherhood, and Christine, who are both residents of Berea currently (July 2009). Dorothy, David, and Christine were kind to share with me stories and memories of Robert, James, and Richard when I visited Berea in July of 2009. Robert Purdy, who passed away just months prior to James, can be seen as having continued a Purdy family tradition in physical education established by his Aunt Cora Purdy. James and Richard represent a different vein of family influences in their shared passion for literature and drama. Vera Otis Purdy in her youth enjoyed singing and once dreamt of pursuing a vocal career.

to, and is compared to Jethro Fergus, and also has a name resembling “James Purdy.” Just as Jeremy creates a text from the stories of elders, so does his author; Purdy said that his Midwestern novels were largely derived from his great grandmother’s and grandmother’s stories. In the novel *Elvira*’s mother and grandmother are named Melissa and Annette; Vera Purdy’s mother and grandmother were Minnie and Nettie. Recall that Purdy’s great grandmother Nancy Ann “Nettie” Shouf Cowhick (1845-1919) was said to be one-eighth Ojibwe Indian; the character Annette, Jethro Fergus’s grandmother, is also said to have Native American blood in the novel. Vera Purdy’s middle name was Cowhick, her supposedly “part Ojibwe” great-grandmother’s married name, linking her to this putative ancestry. After Vera Purdy’s boys had grown, long after her divorce from William, and during her remarriage to John Bauman and after Bauman’s death, Vera would sign most of her tender letters to her son James, “Vera Cowhick,” suggesting her identification with this maternal family line.

In this series of novels, “Purdy country,” which might be compared to William Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha County, is based upon the rural Northwest Ohio of his youth and the stories his grandmothers told him as a boy, although, as I argue, Purdy’s concerns are by no means limited to regional or autobiographical representations. His allegories are national in scope and deal with race in America broadly. However, his Ohio novels are specific about Native American history in the region and create a contemporary Native presence in places often believed to be a site of Native absence. As has already been suggested, the land now known as the state of Ohio, which was part of the Northwest Territory, in general is saturated with abundant landmarks and historical markers pointing to its Indian history, including famous earthworks built by ancient

peoples including the Hopewells, such as Serpent Mound, Fort Ancient (a National Historical Landmark lying very close to the land my Quaker grandfather Herbert Hadley farmed in Clinton County, and now the site of an excellent Native American museum), and Miamisburg Mound (near where I grew up in Montgomery County). Also, one finds frequent reminders of the more recent bloody “Indian Wars” and battles that occurred there through the early nineteenth century, a decade after Ohio achieved statehood in 1803. It is not well known that Ohio was in fact the site of some of the bloodiest, most awful battles between the U.S. Army and Indigenous tribes such as the Shawnee, the Miami, the Delaware, the Seneca, the Ottawa, and the Ojibwe. The historical memory of a notable presence of Native Americans is fresher in northwest Ohio than it is for other parts of the state because this region was north of the Greeneville Treaty line, south of which had been “opened” by military force for Euro-American settlement in 1795.

Therefore in *Jeremy’s Version*, the town of Hittisleigh is “*not entirely forgetful of Indian battles and skirmishes and the War of 1812, with flowering forests and hills, and valleys favored by yellow moonlight. This was where Wilders Fergus met and won the hand of Elvira*” (19). It is notable that these two characters, whom I will argue to be figured as representative white and crossblood Indian characters respectively, met in a town that was the site of bloody battles resulting from white encroachment upon Native land, and Elvira was (temporarily) “won” like the spoils of war by Wilders. Similarly in the second installment of the *Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys* series, *The House of the Solitary Maggot* (1974), at one point Mr. Skegg speaks loquaciously about “the old times when Indians had still lived about here and on occasion had visited his mother” (86).

In 1817 the Treaty of Maumee Rapids was signed, and tribes including the Ojibwe were forced to relinquish four million acres of land in northwest Ohio. This was revised by the Treaty of St. Mary's the same year, which secured more payment for the tribes, and established that parcels of land set up for the Wyandots and Shawnee were to be owned by those tribes, to be made into reservations. One of these reservations was in Wapakoneta, not far south from Purdy's hometown of Findlay. Ohio Quakers, who, according to historian R. Douglas Hurt, "cultivated good relations with the Indians, particularly the Shawnee, by treating them as equals . . . demonstrated their concern for the Indians by establishing a school at Wapakoneta," teaching lessons in the "three R's" and instruction in agriculture and home economics (365). Unlike other Christian groups the Quakers did not try to convert the Shawnees to Christianity (364).<sup>76</sup> Needless to say the reservations at Wapakoneta didn't last long before whites decided they "needed" those lands too. With the Treaty of Wapakoneta (1831), the remaining Shawnees agreed to give up their land. The Shawnees and Delawares were removed, many of them ending up in Indian Territory, which would also later be envied by white settlers and turned into the state of Oklahoma. Although Wapakoneta, an almost entirely white town, is not known for its Native history so much as being the birthplace of astronaut Neil Armstrong, who helped to "conquer" the new frontier of the moon, the nearby town of Piqua, Ohio includes a Historic Indian Museum at its historical area, which includes the John Johnston house. In northwest Ohio, Johnston was an Indian fighter under General Anthony Wayne, later appointed by President James Madison to be the Indian agent to

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<sup>76</sup> Because of their "odd" way of speaking and dressing, their co-educational schools, their belief that both women and men were able to experience the Inner Light and participate in decision-making, and their "willingness . . . to aid the Indians and runaway slaves," the Quakers were thought to be a "peculiar people" by the other settlers (Hurt 301-02). "On the religious frontier, the Ohio Quakers kept to themselves, created efficient farms and bustling towns, and worshipped in their own quiet way" (Hurt 302).

the reservations established in the same area, a position that lasted over thirty years. Johnston published one of the earliest histories of Ohio Native Americans (“John”).

Prior to focusing on the specific workings of Purdy’s allegories of race and nation in this novel, which engage directly or indirectly all of this history of conflict between whites and Natives in the region that I have discussed, it is necessary to first describe its complex narrative frames and chronology. The opening section, in Faulknerian italics, establishes how the narrator, young Jeremy Cready, a newspaper delivery boy living with his half-sister Della, comes into possession of the story of the Fergus and Summerlad families. He has met “Uncle Matt” Lacey through his paper route, and although they are not related, Jeremy becomes obsessed with Matt’s obsession—these two families. “Uncle Matt Lacey” was once simultaneously in love with the “older woman” Elvira Fergus and her oldest son, his friend Rick Fergus. Matt, who “instead of falling love with a local girl, fell in love with an entire family” (15), decades later makes a regular practice of “channeling” the voices of these people he knew in his youth.

Jeremy Cready is hired as amanuensis, transcribing the voices that his “uncle” performs, dialoging with himself and making these “sleepers,” now departed, return to life in Matt’s uncanny performances. His last name holds both “ready” and “read.” Matt, like James Purdy’s brother Richard, “*had had a career as an actor in New York, that was some years past of course, and had, they said, gone briefly to the top, but drinking and other things related to it had spoiled his success, and he had had to come ‘home’ and now here he was living out the rest of his life in his Grandpa’s house*” (2). Layers of performed speech frame the novel. First are the original actions and lines that occurred in

the 1920s and earlier that Matt experienced himself; then there are the diaries of the middle son, Jethro Fergus, and the stories that Matt heard second-hand. Circa the late 1960s, as an old man Matt turns these sources into a dramatic performance of the past for an audience of one, Jeremy. And although Matt intends to turn Jeremy's transcriptions into a stage performance later at the old opera house, Matt dies before he can realize this ambition. Jeremy uses his notes, along with the related stories he hears from his half-sister Della, who emphasizes a different aspect of the story than Matt as the main source, to create a new synthesis, the text we read—Jeremy's version.

Jeremy Cready closely resembles Jethro Fergus, the middle son of Elvira and Wilders Fergus, the latter a usually absent and shiftless father who has the habit of losing family fortunes in bad financial schemes. Jeremy Cready is “the very spit of Jethro,” Matt declares (5). Like another literary adolescent younger brother, Clinton Williams in James Leo Herlihy's *All Fall Down*<sup>77</sup> (1960), Jethro Fergus keeps “logs” in which are recorded his family's secrets, such as his mother's promiscuity and his brother Rick's bisexuality. Jeremy Cready becomes a fellow recorder like his predecessor Jethro, demonstrating Derrida's iterability. And Jethro and Jeremy both are iterations of different “types” found across Purdy's oeuvre, such as the (usually failed) writer or memoirist, and the boy with an absent or dead father.<sup>78</sup> Jeremy's inscription of Matt's performances is mediated by and facilitated by the fact that he is “an incessant reader of out-of-fashion fiction” (8). These two factors explain why the book is not narrated in a contemporary register but a combination of early twentieth century Midwestern locution

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<sup>77</sup> James Leo Herlihy's brilliant, forgotten novel stands alongside *The Nephew* as another lost classic from 1960. Herlihy also wrote the novels *Midnight Cowboy* and *The Season of the Witch* and co-wrote the Broadway hit *Blue Denim*. Herlihy was also a friend of Tennessee Williams, who admired both men's work.

<sup>78</sup> See Frank Baldanza's “James Purdy's Half-Orphans.”

and archaic-sounding literary language, such as the narrator describing Wilders as “happy as a prince” (134). I will return to the significance of the narrative frame device in the conclusion of this chapter.

Right from the beginning of the novel, reminders of the setting’s Indigenous past and traces in the present appear, their thematic importance announced by their placement on the opening pages. On the sleety December evening on which Jeremy is invited into Matt Lacey’s grand if decaying home for the first time, among the other antiquated furniture, five grandfather clocks, and other items straight out of a Charles Dickens novel, Jeremy spies “statues of wooden Indians” (2)—which had previously been seen in Maureen O’ Dell’s apartment in *Eustace Chisholm*. Before he enters the home he “stomped off the slush from [his] moccasins” (1). The significance of this last detail only becomes clear later. We will see that Jethro is the Fergus son who identifies and is identified most strongly with his Native heritage—as though he somehow ended up with a more potent dollop of Indian blood than his brothers—and Jeremy is in turn linked with this aspect of Jethro through this casual reference to “moccasins.”

The town of Boutflour is the constant subject of criticism from (the older) Matt Lacey, who loathes everything about it. His deep knowledge of history defies the Euro-American myths of wide open spaces, manifest destiny, and white supremacy. As part of his “*general argument against the town,*” Matt points out that Boutflour was founded by “*an insane ex-major from the War of 1812*” (13). Ohio History Central reports, “During the War of 1812, Colonel James Findlay built a road to transport troops across the region and constructed a stockade that was named Fort Findlay in his honor.” This stockade no doubt imprisoned resisting Natives. In the War of 1812, British soldiers in northern Ohio

were allied with Indians, including the Shawnee and their famous leader Tecumseh, against American army troops. Matt's historical acumen includes "*details like Shawnee Indian Massacres*" (19). "British soldiers also were trading guns with the Native Americans, helping the natives to resist the advance westward of white Americans. The United States' victory in the War of 1812 virtually ended the native threat to white Ohioans and allowed these Americans to fully settle Ohio without further opposition" ("War of 1812"). The War of 1812 on the western front was in effect an Indian War. The novel's towns' origins have their foundation in the killing and subjugating of Indigenous people.

Appropriately, this mad ex-major cashes in on his colonial conquest. He became a "*freebooter and began the century and more of pillaging and exploiting of the region's few natural resources; he in turn was followed by other desperados and get-rich quick pillagers of newly discovered gas and oil deposits, and they had been succeeded at last by the O'Toole family, who, three generations ago, had driven out all other contenders and now as billionaire magnates ruled supreme in the town*" (13). Purdy is clearly aligned with Matt's critique and his sympathies are for the Indigenous peoples, who lived in harmony with the land's resources, in contrast with the white usurpers. The critique that Matt presents is meant to apply broadly to the history of American westward expansion and not only Purdy's "own little postage stamp of native soil," to use Faulkner's phrase (255). The reference to the "O'Toole" family seems to be an exaggeration of the history of the Otis family (his mother's line and the source of Purdy's middle name), which Purdy had read about in a heavy tome devoted to the Otises, *A Genealogical and Historical Memoir of the Otis Family in America*, by William Otis. As

mentioned, gas and oil deposits were found near Findlay in the mid 1880s, which led to economic boom times in the late nineteenth century, much subsided by 1930 (“Findlay”).

The geography and landmarks of the area chronicle its Indian past. Near Paulding Meadows, home of the Ferguses, a sign recommends: “Visit Shawnee Indian Battlefield” (255). Jeremy counters Matt’s criticisms of Boutflour with references to the “*natural beauty*” of the town, which includes “*Ojibway Creek winding through the little farms and fields filled with their pretty patches of trees, and the Indian cemetery, called Devil’s Spine, owing to its geological formation, where as a small boy I used to pick up arrowheads and other relics*”<sup>79</sup> (14). Purdy’s fictional landscape is filled with reminders of an Indigenous past.<sup>80</sup>

But in Boutflour Indians are not only memories and artifacts, for along Jeremy’s paper route is a living, breathing “*Cree Indian barber with his pierced ears*” (15). His pierced ears suggest traditional practice since traditionally Cree men would wear ornaments in pierced ears. Similarly, in *Mourners Below* (1981), reference is made to “that Indian woman from Catoctin Creek” who offers her services as midwife (243). Linking the Native American with both the present and the past, toward the close of the novel, Matt Lacey tells Jeremy Cready:

*“When I die,” Matt turned and took my hand, as perhaps he had taken Elvira’s,” Listen well, goosebrain Jerry, I’m not being sentimental, there’s no time for it. When I’m gone, get an Indian to help you and go*

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<sup>79</sup> About thirty miles south of Findlay is the Devil’s Backbone, described by the *Ohio Guide*, a book that Purdy kept on his shelf, as “a series of glacial ridges, from four to eight miles long and from one to three miles wide, that rise about 70 feet above the surrounding countryside. Indian relics and skeletons have been unearthed here, and glacial boulders are common” (587). It has been remarked that geological formations that have had special significance to Natives are typically described by Euro-Americans in terms of the satanic, like Devil’s Tower.

<sup>80</sup> An autobiographical aside: My grandfather Herbert Miller Hadley’s farm in Clinton County, Ohio was named “Arrowhead Farm,” since he spotted so many of them eagle-eyed from the seat of his tractor, before descending to collect and save the artifact. His Quaker ancestors repudiated the slave economy of North Carolina to farm the southwestern Ohio lands opened up for white settlement by the Treaty of Greeneville.

*upstairs and haul all that stuff out to the bonfire, yes, including the pictures, and burn every bit and piece and shred, you hear...I don't want the world to stare at what I loved."*

*"Can't I be the custodian?" I heard the words slip out of my mouth.*

*"What, you're that taken?" he dropped my hand. "Queer about people," he mumbled, "and queerer about time." (328)*

This remark oddly connects Indians with both the past and the present. Matt wants to make his own past “vanish” with the help of a Native, but also indicates that in the present there are Natives about who are available for hire. This may indicate Purdy’s struggle to conceptualize Natives in the present day, although he knows of and writes their presence. Finally, at the close of the novel, another Native American resident is noted. Jeremy is politely sent packing by half-sister Della, who has made arrangements for him to live with his Cousin Garth, who is closer to Jeremy’s age than Della, over in Prince’s Crossing.<sup>81</sup> If Jeremy is an iteration of Jethro Fergus, then Garth is an iteration of Garner, a young man who, as we will see, is linked with Jethro in homoerotic scenes. The fact that Matt Lacey, who was in love with Rick Fergus, calls Jeremy “queer” is thus suggestive beyond his peculiar interest in time and the past. Jeremy’s similarity to Jethro Fergus, a queer lad indeed in many senses of the word, and the fact that he looks forward to living with the still-young and virile Cousin Garth, suggests the homosexual connotation of his queerness (368). *“I was relieved of the change,”* Jeremy tells us, *“Anyhow he was a man, at least he wore pants”* (368). As in the beginning frame narrative, another Native American is noted at the end of the novel. One fellow passenger on the bus ride to Garth’s house is *“an old Indian from the county home”*; this is not the most respectful way of referring to this Indigenous elder, but along with the

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<sup>81</sup> Prince’s Crossing is a link to the second novel in the *Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys* series, *The House of the Solitary Maggot*.

Cree barber mentioned at the beginning, this detail reinforces the general presence of Native Americans in the setting.

Purdy's fictional Midwestern Native presence corresponds to real-world Indigenous traces. Although presently Native Americans are not widely visible in Ohio, residents claiming Native American heritage, descendants calling themselves the Shawnee Remnant Band and other names are organizing, making efforts to revitalize and form community. The U.S. government forced the Shawnees to give up their remaining land in Ohio between 1831-33, but, as in other states without reservations, especially in the Southeast, traces and shadows of a Native presence remain.<sup>82</sup>

#### ALLEGORIES OF INDIAN WARS

The novel's plot involves a series of allegorical battles between and within the Fergus and Summerlad families. Over these family wars Purdy lays an allegory of the Indian Wars that alludes to the violent history of the region and the Indigenous ancestry of the Summerlad line. This allegorical level is a part of Purdy's larger "cumulative endeavor to chart the ancestry of the national psyche" (S. Adams, *James* 113), remembering, exposing, and critiquing the brutal history of the settlement of the United States by Euro-Americans. Agonists in *Jeremy's Version* are figured as having white or Indian attributes. With regard to a belief in racial purity, whiteness is figured as lack of blood, corruption, decadence, and failure. With the whitest of these characters, "Purdy gives us the human form of the spiritual void which he suggests has now been

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<sup>82</sup> I do not aim to advocate for these groups uncritically, but they represent phenomena worth investigating further. It should be noted that these groups are controversial and lack federal recognition. The efforts of Ohio organizations claiming tribal heritage are not supported by the tribes residing in Oklahoma whose members are descended from ancestors removed from the Ohio country. The Shawnees of Oklahoma reportedly hold that all the Shawnee left Ohio a long time ago, that there are no bona fide Shawnees remaining east of the Mississippi.

‘nationalised’” (S. Adams 128). The Indian is contrastingly figured in terms of blood, strength, endurance, wildness, and the warrior. In Purdy’s work, Indianness is associated with both male same-sex desire and vigorous masculinity, rather than the historical model of Native homosexuality involving one transgendered partner that was discussed in chapter three. As mentioned before, Purdy’s valorization of warrior masculinity is part of his resistance to the Cold War hegemonic belief, grounded in American psychoanalysis, that men who desire men are narcissistic and effeminate. While Purdy’s emphasis upon masculinity recalls the “effeminophobia” that Jamie Russell diagnoses in William S. Burroughs in his study *Queer Burroughs*, Purdy is not so extreme in his embrace as to suffer from this particular disorder.

While from Matt’s perspective the story centers on “*Elvira, Rick, Jethro, and himself, and their love for one another,*” to Della, “*the whole thing centered around the titanic struggle of two larger-than-life women, Winifred Fergus and Elvira Summerlad*” (23). This war between families occurs because of Winifred's attempts in the past to keep her brother William from marrying Elvira in the first place, and later, ironically, her resistance to Elvira divorcing the man who has lost so much Fergus and Summerlad family money in bad business investments, and who has been absent for so much of the boys’ upbringing, travelling and pursuing elusive leads on making fortunes.

The Summerlad side of the family is associated with Native American traits, due to the belief that Elvira’s grandmother Annette possesses Indigenous heritage. Even before the reader learns anything about Annette’s heritage, Purdy drops hints. As in *Eustace Chisholm* and elsewhere, Purdy puns on the notion of “original stock” and the honor of having pre-Revolutionary ancestors to refer to Native ancestry along with

northern European ancestry. Jeremy's half-sister tells him that Elvira's "*ancestry is grand, going back to before the revolution*" (21). The conflict and lifelong rivalry between Elvira Summerlad Fergus and her sister-in-law Winifred Fergus begins on the day that Winifred pays a visit to the Summerlads, on the eve of Elvira's wedding day, to command Elvira not to marry her brother Wilders. To do so, not only must Winifred face Elvira, but she also faces Elvira's mother and grandmother, who exemplify resistance, solemnity, and spirituality:

"Anything you have to say to Elvira you can say to me also,"  
Melissa Summerlad's voice rose quiet but with incipient belligerence.

During the pause that followed, the sliding gold-colored door behind the strange assembled group opened, and Elvira's grandmother Annette entered. Even Winifred seemed taken down a peg by the appearance of this dark-eyed majestic woman who came forward with the air of a priestess whose ceremony and meditations were disturbed.

The grandmother and the mother stood by Elvira, who breathing heavily had never taken her eyes off Winifred. (20)

This passage evidences the solidarity and bond between the Summerlad women, a communal and matriarchal power privileging the matrilineal, as was the case in many traditional Indigenous peoples of North America. This special bond between these three women was based on biography: the close bond between Vera, her mother Minnie M. Otis, and her grandmother Nettie Cowhick, who was in the family said to have Ojibwe ancestry.<sup>83</sup> The elder, Annette, is connected with spirituality and dignity, qualities often associated with Native Americans, and as a "majestic" woman resembling a "priestess," she is clearly a matriarch. (Some Ojibwe clans are considered to have been traditionally

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<sup>83</sup> These women's bond is actually evidenced by small town news reporting, printed before James Purdy's birth, in *The Bryan Democrat* (later *Times*) of Williams County, Ohio. The paper reports on its local social page in 1910, 1911, 1912 that "Mrs. Nettie Cowhick, Mrs. Minnie Otis, Mrs. Will Purdy [Vera Otis Purdy], and son Richard, of Hicksville," were visitors of "Mrs. L.V. Kenner" of Bryan, the latter being a daughter of Nettie's. William Purdy, who was said to be frequently absent from the family home, is notably missing from all of these quaint reports. James's older brother Richard was then a baby or toddler ("Local," "Personal"). Nettie's father, John Breckenridge Shouf, actually established this newspaper ("Daisy").

matrilineal or even matriarchal) The inclusion of the detail “dark-eyed” and the use of the word “ceremony” bolster the link between Annette, and thus Melissa and Elvira Summerlad, with Native American heritage. Winifred Fergus at one point even refers to the family as “the Summerlad tribe” (52).

Jethro identifies with his mother’s side of the family most strongly. After Elvira and Wilders are alienated, and Wilders is offstage pursuing one job or prospect after another, Elvira begins to be known by her maiden name again—Summerlad. Jethro’s father, upon finding his son’s journal that he has accidentally left behind, is horrified to find that Jethro has signed the book “*Jethro Summerlad*” (179). But this is not surprising since Elvira tells Rick, “I’ve taught the Summerlad boys, as Boutflour calls you, everything you know” (325). This domestic situation is also mirrored in *On Glory’s Course*.

Jethro is identified by others as “Indian,” linked to his heritage, usually because of what is perceived as his wildness. Jethro as warrior, as his aunt will come to understand him, complicates an unequivocal valorization of the warrior figure and warrior masculinity, especially as Jethro edges closer to an action that seems to be a gesture, threat, or even attempt at matricide. Jethro calls for a more complex thinking, a need to scrutinize notions of the warrior more closely. Jethro’s case suggests that the warrior, along with its positive traits, can also connote the risk of self-destruction. This had also been the case with a warrior who paradoxically ignored his Native ancestry, Daniel Haws, whose inability to love caused his self-destruction. (Although non-Native, Captain Stadger was a warrior too, who destroyed himself after destroying Daniel.) Matt Lacey tells “wild Jethro” (323) that he plans to fix up his grandfather’s old property, and

that once he is finished with the job, he expects Jethro to come visit so that the two of them can discuss Jethro's writing.

“Will you come?” Matt looked over at the boy.

“Why should I,” Jeth spoke huskily.

“Why because the old place is wild and deserted, was the scene of battles and massacres and the like. Would appeal I think to an Indian like you.”

Jethro laughed with some appreciation of the “dig” which Matthew now gave back to him with regard to his family, for . . . Jethro's great-grandmother had had, according to Elvira's often repeated statement, Indian ancestry (79).

Matt Lacey's racial remark and Jethro's response is notable because it suggests that in that time and place, having Native American heritage made one vulnerable to teasing or worse. It also is another example of the way that Indianness is perhaps overly associated with “wildness” and bloodshed in the Euro-American imaginary. Using stereotype, Matt jests that “battles” and “massacres” will “appeal to an Indian” (79).

Other Indian features of Jethro manifest. Later, Jethro is seen sneaking a peek at a cache of letters written to his brother Rick from his lovers, male and female. Jethro reflects that Elvira, “for all her possessiveness of Rick had never thought to look” in the hiding place. “Elvira didn't know her own son, Jethro smiled beatifically, no, amend that to her own sons. No, sirree. Jethro laughed then his wild chilling Indian way, and wrote down a paragraph or so in his journal” (128-29). Now exactly what a “wild chilling Indian” laugh sounds like, I am not sure; perhaps Purdy picked this up from the movies as a child during a long-gone era, but I am reminded of Elijah Thrush and how his “wild” Indianness is connected with his ability to exist in another headspace, another cosmology entirely, from those around him, to be discussed in the next chapter. There are hints of this otherworldly quality in the “touched” Jethro Fergus, as there are in Clyde Furness in

“The White Blackbird.” Plus, as will be relevant to a later discussion, Purdy here connects the fierce, wild “Indian” with the act of writing, because Purdy believes that, to quote a title of Ishmael Reed’s derived from Muhammad Ali, *Writin’ is Fightin’*. In *Out with the Stars*, Abner Blossom tells his protégée: “You have to remember, I am above else a soldier and a fighter. For an artist never surrenders, never has in his possession the white flag . . . a writer . . . is the fighting man forever. Battles are his lifeblood and energy. Fight! Struggle! Engage in mortal hand-to-hand combat. And then soar upward!” (147). Feminist readers might object to this as a rather violent, masculinist metaphor, which might encourage Norman Mailer-type macho buffoonery. But Purdy has come to see himself as an embattled figure, fighting with critics, publishers, overzealously politically correct readers, and the eastern U.S. literary establishment.

Later, Jethro’s Aunt Winifred Fergus comes into possession of Jethro’s secret journals, in which he lambastes his mother and what he takes to be her slatternly promiscuity (this is interesting in light of Elvira’s Native heritage, since this is a negative stereotype white men have attached to Native American women, whom they have—offensively—called “squaws”), and details his older brother Rick’s amorous affairs with both young men and women. Winifred is startled but impressed with Jethro’s talent and moxie: “Under his timid and palpitatingly nervous exterior, the heart of a warrior was beating . . . The journals were the work of a very brave boy. How she admired him, envied him also. And with even fiercer resentment she saw that this courage and frenetic frankness must come from the Summerlad side of the house, in whose veins she knew there was Indian blood. This blond boy with the broken neck was a savage” (248).

Here the words accumulate, and Winifred checks off several Indian stereotypes: warrior, brave, fierce, courage, blood, savage. She also acknowledges his Indigenous heritage to herself, while she dismisses it as rumor to his face.

Jethro's "wildness" and alienation are exacerbated by the separation of his parents and the divorce proceedings that Elvira forwards<sup>84</sup>. He is also bothered by the fact that to make a living, his mother has turned their home in Boutflour into a boarding house, giving him a lower-class status than many of his classmates (Purdy's biographical precedent was discussed in the introduction). What goes on in that house, and the very fact that Elvira runs a home that opens its doors to all and sundry, sets tongues a-wagging in this Midwestern town. Jethro sees the roomers as invaders of his homeland, resembling "an invasion of Mongolian warriors, or a plague of locusts," Purdy writes (65). These comparisons are interesting in light of the allegorical role of Jethro as "Indian." These white male interlopers especially are figured as invaders of his sovereign space, enemy "warriors" and a pestilent "plague" that ravages resources, as many Indigenous people saw European settlers.

These male boarders only increase Jethro's acute anxiety about his mother's sexuality. He resents the boarders that become her "beaux" and what he perceives as her promiscuity, even "whoredom" (67). Interestingly, male critics have taken Elvira's so-called "whoredom" at face value, not questioning Jethro's severe slant on things, even using the disturbed Jethro's imprecise language in their reviews: for example, Haskin and the *TLS* reviewer both label her a "whore," Davenport refers to her "whoredom," and Stephen Adams, her "whoring." Not one of these male critics wraps these terms in

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<sup>84</sup> Purdy's play *Brice*, which is also autobiographically influenced, explores similar domestic territory. *Brice* was collected in the very recent (July 2009) publication of Purdy's *Selected Plays*.

quotation marks to indicate they are appropriating Jethro's language. Although Jethro writes in his journal that his mother is running a "disorderly house," or brothel, this does not correspond with reality. Elvira seems rather a still-attractive woman separated from her husband who has sexual needs and enjoys the attentions of her "beaux," who are more than happy to help with these needs. This is a clear sign that more feminist perspectives on Purdy are called for. Jethro records his Oedipal obsession with his mother's sexuality in his journal, which is lost and subsequently found and read by his father and his aunt Winifred, to their horror. Jethro's journal conveys his "overwhelming, unconscious love for his mother, although this was expressed in rage and hatred" (246). Reading Jethro's journal, Winifred is provoked to "a rage against Elvira's sexual being, an envy against her having experienced every satisfaction and fulfillment and fruition" (245). Winifred's morality, which she uses as a justification of her meddling, is undercut by this revealed feeling of "envy" for Elvira. Jethro's obsession might be compared to Jason Compson's maddening concern with his sister's sexuality in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. (Faulkner is clearly an influence upon Purdy's Midwestern novels.) Jethro's concern with his mother's amorous life sets him to writing torrid exposés in his private journals.

It is this family environment—with a mostly absent father who is repudiated by the mother and the looming threat of divorce once his mother begins the legal proceedings and various men courting his mother—that young Jethro tries but fails to cope with. Jethro is also thought to be a bit "touched" by a childhood accident. In a Faulknerian gothic flashback, Jethro fell from a tree, and the back of his head was impaled on the point of a metal fence (44). "The miracle was," the doctor said, "that he

had lived at all” (45). Jethro survived, but as a haunted, “not-right” or wild child (45). Elvira muses that Jethro seems to be making “himself as wild and crazy as possible for his father’s homecoming. He had been . . . hanging around the Starlite Stables, riding the mare without permission, loitering around . . . the Mexican shanty town” (72-73). Jethro is again associated with the Indian and ethnic Other in his illicit horse riding (perhaps comparable to the horse stealing that some Plains warriors would do during war parties or raids), and in his desire to hang out with people of color on the wrong side of the river. Reading *Jeremy’s Version* with the later *On Glory’s Course* (1984), the narrative juxtaposition in the former of Jethro riding the mare and spending time with brown people recalls Ned Cottrell’s relationship with the dusky “horse fancier” Val Daugherty, whom I argue has Native ancestry, in the latter. Later Elvira rues that Jethro has been slumming, “frequencing the shanty town where Mexican beet-workers and migrant Negroes lived” (132). Linked to his figurative Indianness, Jethro seems to have a natural affinity for those “beyond the pale,” people of color, against his family’s protest.

#### WHITE AS A SHEET, RED AS BLOOD

The workings of Purdy’s fictional allegories of race in America are better understood through a close examination of Purdy’s engagement with specific types of colloquial language: idiom and cliché. Purdy’s deployment and engagement with idiom and cliché does not merely serve to create verisimilitude, but also serves the signification of his allegories. In *Jeremy’s Version*, the fact that Jethro is identified and figured as Indian should be contrasted to the “whiteness” of others—even though he has blond hair. Purdy makes use of Midwestern idiom and cliché to imply attributes of racial whiteness

that are subject to his critique. Matt Lacey, for instance, is said by Elvira to have a “peaches and cream complexion” (33). At various times characters are described as going “white as a sheet,” or using variations upon this phrase. The deployment of cliché and idiom is a crucial part of Purdy’s racial construction of whiteness. One of Purdy’s more sensitive readers, English novelist and critic Angus Wilson, has noted that Purdy possesses an “infallible ear for extravagant language and for cliché” (8). While the negative view of clichés (exemplified by Pease) presents them as mindlessly “parroted” or “mouthed,” on the contrary, the cliché, like the proverb, “performs multiple functions” in literature and real life and can be, as Marshall McLuhan proposes, “an active, structuring, probing feature of our awareness” (55). Moreover, the cliché is necessarily altered in some way in each new context it appears. The cliché is thus one of the more visible demonstrations of Jacques Derrida’s concept of iterability, which stresses the inherent alterity produced with each repetition (see *Limited Inc*). All of these aspects of cliché are manifest in Purdy’s literary production. Through this device he associates “white” with a lack of blood and vigor or anemia, fearfulness, a dearth of healthy color.

The “white as a sheet” cliché undergoes intriguing revisions throughout the text, demonstrating Derrida’s iterability, and suggesting a racial connotation. When Della delivers a telegram from old “Uncle” Matt Lacey to Jeremy Cready, she goes “*white as a linen tablecloth*” (10). Della would rather that young Jeremy not be doing such unusual labor as he is for old man Matt, necessitating an odd relationship, but it means much-needed money is being brought in. Moreover, telegrams were only sent in the event of catastrophe or death, “*and nobody had ever been known to send one to a boy*” (10). The “tablecloth” alteration of the more common “white as a sheet” creates a homier cliché

that connotes the comfort of something familiar, the family tablecloth, in the face of something threatening.

Then, when young Matt returns to Boutflour from the Navy and pays his beloved Elvira Fergus a visit, the older woman remarks, “Matt, my dear boy . . . you are white as a linen sheet” (41). The white tablecloth, earlier associated with the chaste domestic life shared by Jeremy and his half-sister Della, now in the new context of the frisson between Matt, who is only a year older than Rick, and the still-sensuous Elvira, becomes the bed sheet, metonym of the *boudoir*. Matt turns white because, and here another cliché registers an epiphany, “the scales fell from his eyes” (40):

Matt felt suddenly that he was lost...He would never...leave Elvira, never leave Boutflour. He had turned down a promising career in the navy for permanent residence in a house, call it “sporting,” “ill-famed,” “disorderly”...and to cap it all, he would never be allowed to do more than chastely kiss and embrace this woman who had summoned him to return for her love, for she reserved her serious favors for her “beaux,” and Matt was to be her fourth son. (40-41)

Thus are juxtaposed the “white” chaste purity and the “sheet” signaling sexual congress. Elvira must keep these favors “chaste” because of the specter of incest appears—Matt, “her fourth son,” is a stand-in for Rick in her desire. These incidents are cumulatively connected with these characters’ white ethnicity.

The theatrical Rick Fergus, while of course presumably sharing the same portion of Native blood, seems to have inherited more of his father’s attributes. At no time is he linked with Indigenous or warrior traits, but is rather seen several times going pale. “He was frighteningly pale and thin as if he had suffered a wasting illness,” we are told (142). When his Aunt Winifred visits Elvira’s home to confront her about the divorce papers Elvira has had drawn up, “Rick, white as bread, stared into vacancy like a blindman”

(161). “White bread” of course has racialized connotations of blandness and dearth of nourishment. Later, Elvira asks him to testify on her behalf during the divorce trial, “against his own father” (212):

“Don’t tell me you’ll refuse,” she cried, and she followed him over to the window and tried to take his hand in hers, but he pushed her away roughly.

“Listen to me, Elvira,” he began, and he turned so deathly white that his whiteness seemed almost phosphorescent. “I won’t refuse you, if you ask me, but don’t ever ask another thing of me then in this world, do you hear?” (212)

But if Rick is theatrical, a would-be cosmopolitan who is trying to free himself from obligations to Elvira and his brothers so that he can make his way to the stages of New York City, still he is symbolically linked with “redness” with his “red parlor,” in which a tall bookcase has at its base “a shimmering construction of red glass,” casting “blood-red patterns upon the even more arresting red of the carpet” (313). Moreover, “*he was most like Annette in the skillfulness of his hands*” (337).

Elvira Summerlad Fergus is also associated with the “Indian,” if not as thoroughly as Jethro, the brown-eyed “majestical” Annette, and Melissa Summerlad. Elvira is in fact the person who has told Jethro repeatedly of the family’s Indian ancestry. Her status as a figurative heiress of matrilineal Indigenous heritage is suggested during the divorce trial scene late in the novel: “Elvira Summerlad—nobody could believe looking at her that she had ever been Mrs. Fergus, or had ever belonged to any man—was dressed in a sumptuous purple dress which must have been made over from one of Annette’s, her grandmother, and which gave her an impossible but convincing air of some crowned head of an obscure kingdom” (294). Annette has already been figured as a “majestical” matriarch, so purple, the color of royalty, is appropriate for the dress her heiress wears.

The “obscure kingdom” could refer to the fading community memory of the Indigenous tribes.

Elvira is also linked with an “Indian blanket,” which Purdy had already deployed as a key signifier in “Why Can’t They Tell You Why?” (1956). During one of Matt Lacey’s visits, Matt throws himself down beside Elvira in the garden “on the soft pink Indian blanket she had spread for herself on the grass” (30). Elvira is linked with the blanket, an important item in the cultural practices of many Native Americans, included in community giveaways and tributes, a potent Indian signifier whose various designs are texts legible to insiders. Finally, when Elvira and her boys await an anticipated visit from Winifred to their home, she proclaims that Winifred is about to meet her match, and “stood there *very warrior-like* . . . a match for anybody” (159, my emphasis). Aunt Winifred, the representative of upright white Christian morality who is associated with the colonizing U.S. Army, naturally “was Elvira’s primal enemy” (154).

Yet at the same time, since Purdy’s characters are complex, Elvira is revealed to be prone to displaying the figurative lack of “blood” and vigor at times that Purdy constructs as whiteness. Although narrated in the context of Elvira’s wedding day, in light of Elvira’s tendency towards whiteness, it is revealing that “in the eyes of Melissa and Annette,” bearers of the Native bloodline, Elvira “had neglected or ignored too many other rituals,” with the connotation of neglecting tradition. (334). In the scene in which Winifred travels to Boutflour to confront Elvira in her home, Elvira turns “so white and her hands and head shook so violently that [Jethro] feared she might fall down dead before his eyes, and he stretched out his hand toward her, all his love and affection

returning in that gesture” (165). As is the case elsewhere, whiteness, a lack of blood and vigor, is linked to death.

In a later scene, Elvira confronts her “bosom friend” Agnes Coles, who seems to have been avoiding Elvira. Agnes Coles’ silence stems from the fact that Wilders Fergus has forced himself on her sexually. Believing that Agnes bears a dark secret regarding Rick instead, Elvira “went white as one of her freshly laundered sheets, after a morning’s sunning” (216). Agnes Cole, emotional, tries to tell her that Wilders has raped her<sup>85</sup>, but Elvira mistakenly infers that her son Rick was the perpetrator. The simile again has the core image of the sheet, associated with the bedroom and thus sexuality and the threat of proxy incest with Agnes as the stand-in this time. But now, the white purity must be intensified—images of cleansing and sun-bleaching, mirror the workings of her mind attempting to scour and purge her incestuous thoughts of sex with Rick suggested by her friend’s story. The idea of Rick having sex with her “bosom friend” and contemporary Agnes is too close to incest, a danger that looms in the novel.

The threat of incest is a deliberate literary cliché that Purdy rehearses (recalling for example Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*). With his deliberate citations of familiar subject matter and themes (used in Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* and Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, for example) Purdy deploys repetition and difference. Davenport perceptively noted that *Jeremy’s Version* “traverses times and places resonantly familiar to us . . . It is a novel which, in a sense has been written many times before... This effect is deliberate and masterfully exploited” (3). Likewise the reviewer for *TLS* noted, “His heroes and heroines... are a package cliché of one area of American

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<sup>85</sup> A very similar incident occurs in Purdy’s play *Brice*. Agnes Coles is surely modeled upon Ada Lee Coe (1884-1943), who was a Findlay music teacher and composer, and a friend of Vera Purdy’s and ran a music studio on South Main Street (“Miss Ada”).

fiction, more usually associated with the South,” yet concedes, “Mr. Purdy makes the cliché work for him” (“Keeping”). Although she would of course possess more Native blood than her “Indian” son Jethro, Elvira’s dominant “whiteness” comes through in her times of stress. Displaying both white and Indian traits, Elvira inspires both love and hate in her Indian son Jethro.

When Winifred arrives at Elvira’s home, what ensues is a shocking allegorical scene that pits “white” against “Indian,” and problematically suggests the “savage” stereotype of Native Americans, if we take Elvira to possess Indian traits. Harsh words are exchanged, and Winifred offers to take the boys into her home to free them from “this harridan who calls herself your mother” (167), upon which Elvira slaps and hits her sister-in-law across the face and mouth, drawing blood, and in the tussle that follows, rips Winifred’s dress clean off her body (167-68). The “savagery” of this attack prompts Winifred, unwisely, to refer to Elvira’s Indigenous background: “your ancestry comes out at last!” she cries (167).

Since Winifred, along with her brother Wilders Fergus, represents white values, embracing the myth of white supremacy, the presence of an Indian ancestor is something to hide rather than celebrate. In fact, Winnifred tells Jethro that “the rumor that your great-grandmother had Indian blood is stuff and nonsense” (170), although we later learn that Winifred “knew there was Indian blood” running through the veins of the Summerlad line (248). She would like to erase the traces of Native heritage from the Fergus family history, whitewashing them. This was something that unfortunately many Euro-American families did, seeing a brown ancestor as a liability in a society that privileges whiteness.

Purdy does not treat the Indian ancestry on the Summerlad side as something isolated and rare, a lone connection with indigeneity. As mentioned, in the novel's landscape and oral history are reminders of the Indian past, and a Cree Indian cuts the hair of townsmen. In the "present" of the novel, Jeremy Cready's much older half-sister Della tells Jeremy a story of the Fergus side of the family as an example of how Jethro's Aunt Winifred Fergus was tough, formidable, and extremely concerned with her brothers and whom they should or should not marry. *"As a matter of fact she broke up the engagement of the oldest and roughest of the boys, Garret Fergus, when he was going with Linnet Varnam, by insulting the poor girl till she nearly dies of heart failure, and Garret ran far out West, lived with Indians, prospected for gold, and finally—I gather—got too wild and rough ever to think of marriage or settling down"* (25). Elvira tells Jethro that his father's brothers, the Ferguses, were all failures "except Uncle Garret who had sense to run out West" and "was adopted finally, they say, by Indians" (158). Interestingly, Elvira, associated with her Indian heritage, approves only of the Fergus brother who lived among Natives. She admires the masculinity of this brother but implies that Wilders is effete. Yet Leslie Fiedler would argue that both brothers' goal was a "flight from the domestic."

Moreover, in Wilders Fergus's Fiedlerian fantasy he would also care to escape powerful and commanding women and "light out" for the West, since, as Jethro recalls, Wilders "sat around on his 'hind end' most of the time dreaming, or reading James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, talked of when he had been a hunter [and] recalled his wanderings in the Southwest and Mexico" among indigenes and mestizos (68-69). In Cooper's series—which James Purdy's own father William enjoyed—a close

relationship between Cooper's Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook is identified by Fiedler in his famous *Love and Death in the American Novel* as another example of the "innocent homosexuality" between a white man and a man of color that Fiedler sees as a theme running through the canon of U.S. fiction. Through these novels Wilders dreams of doing what his brother Garret did out West. Stephen Adams has noted that Wilders is compared to Washington Irving's American legend Rip Van Winkle, whose long slumber was seen by Fiedler in *Return of the Vanishing American* as another flight from the domestic (Adams, *James* 113). Wilders is indeed portrayed as usually absent or lacking the warrior masculinity that Purdy favors.

But rather than being a new American frontiersman type like Cooper's Natty Bumppo, who overtly takes on attributes of the Native American, Jethro's father Wilders Fergus allegorically represents the white usurper in Purdy's racial allegory. The Ferguses "prided themselves on their sturdy Scotch ancestry" (245), and Wilders "could trace his ancestry back to . . . Scotland" (208). Purdy associates the whitest characters—who stress the continuity of bloodline and are thus opposed to his emphasis on the crossblood—with a lack of vigor and blood. As opposed to the rugged warrior, Wilders is mocked by the warrior-like Elvira as overly refined, with his fingernails always "manicured," and his person scented of "lilac toilet water" (265), suggesting his role as an over-civilized effete Euro-American. His former place in the white patriarchal power structure is reinforced by the detail of his "thirty-second degree Masonic pin," (a level achieved by my paternal grandfather, Ohio farmer Guy Estel Snyder, who served for a time as Clinton County Commissioner) indicating high status at the local level (306).

Befitting his role in the allegory, in his absence Wilders is roundly criticized by Elvira for his “crimes,” a word that Jethro recalls his mother using repeatedly. Among the worst of Wilders’ “crimes” is that he caused his wife’s grandmother Annette and the Summerlad women, associated with indigeneity, to lose their “inheritance”: “*there was blood on Wilder’s hands,*” Jethro recalls Elvira saying (68, 69). Through Wilders’ unwise investments financed with money he has recklessly borrowed from others including his in-laws, he manages to “ruin” Annette, her daughter Melissa, and granddaughter Elvira and her sons. “Annette too had been a wealthy woman,” Elvira says to Jethro, “but she lost everything through your father” (70). “He mined my family, Jethro,” is how she puts it (69). Wilders “robbed me of my inheritance,” the oldest son Rick protests (162). “I had the most beautiful home. Do you remember it?” Elvira asks Jethro. With their Indigenous ancestry, these women’s loss of “home” and “inheritance” recapitulates their Native ancestors’ loss of homeland and resources in the Ohio country at the hands of Euro-Americans. Elvira had been “removed” from her familial land and property at Hittisleigh to the less sympathetic, wealth-worshipping town of Boutflour, where she must slave away as the proprietress of a boarding house due to this white man’s desire for more wealth. Elvira and her boys have also lost “all the priceless things Annette, your great grandmother had given us as a wedding gift,” because of him, connecting her crossblood Native American grandmother with victimhood at Wilders’ hands (69). Elvira complains of the hard work she and her mother are forced to perform due to William’s misdeed: she must “drudge for the roomers” and her mother works for Elvira’s “brother over there in the hospital he runs”<sup>86</sup> (70). “We’re ruined, do you hear,

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<sup>86</sup> This has a direct biographical precedent; Minnie Otis as an older woman did work for her son and Vera’s brother, Dr. Lloyd Melville Otis (1888-1964), at his Otis Hospital in Celina, Ohio.

Jethro, and by your father's hands. That's why I say his hands are bloodstained," Vera says (70). The references to "blood on his hands" underscores Purdy's historical and racial allegory alluding to the violence of the settlement of the Northwest Territory that includes what is now Ohio. Wilders has caused these women connected with Indianness, and the Fergus boys, to lose their homes and resources, including treasured family heirlooms. Reiterating this racial symbolism, Purdy has Wilders stop at "Ojibwe Creek" to throw stones in it (189-90).

Similar to Wilders' role as a usurper of Indian inheritances, Jethro's Aunt Winifred Fergus takes on a role as a white military "Indian fighter" in my allegorical reading. Winifred Agatha Fergus is a tough, masculine woman; but if she is "*a warrior inside and out, oh, so fierce, and with too much mettle maybe to be the marrying kind*" (25), as Della puts it, she is not on the whole figured as an Indigenous warrior but rather a white "Indian fighter." Unlike the Native American warrior, in Winifred's case, "for all her 'warrior' qualities her effrontery did not come quite so easily as people claimed" (47-48). Linked with a "clean linen handkerchief" (145), as in the "white as a sheet" trope, Winifred "was not quite the indomitable warrior Elvira pictured" (159). Winifred's "whiteness" as Purdy figures it is best summed up by Wilders' assessment that "Winifred hated . . . nature, sweat, pain, sickness, madness, heavy breathing and tears, sorrow and death—all the things that had to do with blood." As argued, Purdy's Indian is closely linked with a symbolism of blood; therefore, in contrast to Winifred, "the journals of Jethro, although weird and exaggerated at times, underlined everybody's relationship to blood" (233).

Aunt Winifred Fergus is even figured specifically as a military force enabling white settlement and expropriating Indigenous land. Her brother Wilders muses: “*When she appeared, in the parlor or on the sloping greensward of the house, one felt a small army of men equipped with axes were come to chop down forests, clear the land*” (229, my emphasis). Again Winifred is figured in terms of the masculine. To clear this forest for white settlement, the Indians must be “dealt with.” Elvira remembers that Wilders had said of his sister, “Winifred should have been a sergeant in the army . . . She loved nothing better than a ‘fight.’ Indeed her whole daily life was one skirmish after another, one prolonged never-ending war . . . the battle was easily extended to foreign territory. Everything was military strategy . . . Nobody was conducting his affair properly, in Winifred’s eyes, and it was her calling to set things straight” (156). Winifred’s attitude toward “the Summerlad tribe” is a paternalistic one, that of the “Great White father,” or in this case, “mother,” towards her Indian “children,” subjects who will benefit from her guidance.

Aunt Winifred is an example of a recurring Purdian figure, an aggressive older woman who exerts control over others’ lives, engaging in battles for control. This robust figure comes to embody oppressive power, grounded in a stiff and stifling sense of morality, that is exerted against characters who have Native ancestry and are figured as “Indian.” As discussed in the introduction, although this oppressive power is patriarchal in nature, Purdy tends to limn it through his female characters. Because these women consistently represent a negative whiteness in Purdy’s allegory of race in America, we might call such a figure the “Great White Mother.” This figure goes all the way back to Grainger, “the greatwoman” in Purdy’s first longer work of fiction, the novella *63: Dream*

*Palace* (1956). Winifred resembles two women who will be discussed in the next chapter, Millicent De Frayne in *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972), and Olga Petrovna in *Out with the Stars* (1992). Millicent battles for control with Elijah Thrush, who is figured as “Indian,” envious of his autonomy, and forces a marriage upon him. Olga Petrovna clashes with the queer crossblood Ojibwe man Harlan Yost over his supposed immorality and corrupting influence upon her late husband Cyril Vane. Forwarding patriarchal values, these women do not tolerate queerness and represent heteronormative values. “Great White Mothers,” who usually interfere in the lives of adults as opposed to children, might be contrasted with another Purdian woman, the domineering and/or neglecting “bad mother,” such as the mother in “Why Can’t They Tell You Why?” and Vesta Hawley in the novella *Moe’s Villa*, discussed in chapter six. Such women perhaps attempt to fill the role of Purdy’s absent, shiftless fathers, represented by Wilders Fergus in *Jeremy’s Version*, Mr. Coultas of *In the Hollow of His Hand* and Pete Driscoll in *Moe’s Villa*.

With regard to the “Indian,” women such as Winifred, Millicent, and Olga represent forces of subjugation and assimilation toward them. As argued in the introduction, the fact that Purdy constructs oppressive patriarchal power as feminine can be explained as a conscious strategy employed by other contemporary gay writers such as William S. Burroughs. On various scales, the justification for white male aggression against ethnic Others, whether they be African American or Native American, has historically often been built upon their alleged threat to white Christian womanhood,

motherhood, domesticity, and virginity presented by these “savage” Others.<sup>87</sup> To justify American military invasion and expropriation of land, the “defense” of the nation is linked to the defense of women, suggested by the deployment of such terms as “motherland” and “mother country.” The morality of women is at stake in this line of reasoning, so the Natives must be eradicated, subjugated, or removed. Captivity narratives in which women are stolen by “savages” are a cultural manifestation of this strategy. In *Jeremy’s Version*, although Winifred is portrayed as a white military general or the force of a forest-clearing army, she is simultaneously a Christian woman and a virgin, therefore embodying the power and the “justification” for its exercise (229). With this strategy in mind, it is significant that right after Wilders ponders her virginity, he imagines her as “a small army of men” there to “clear the land” (229).

Therefore, on the symbolic and allegorical plane, Winifred believes that if military force and bloodshed are required to make those “heathens” see the light and repudiate their old ways and become like white men—then so be it.

Therefore whenever she appeared, war clouds quickly gathered, and soon cries of the wounded and dying would rise above the flat plains of the Yankee State, and Winifred would appear in general’s uniform on horse, shouting orders, threatening with execution those who disobeyed her . . . Then the battle sounds would die down . . . she would walk off the field with a smile on her face, victory in her bearing. She lived and breathed battle, and was incapable of understanding defeat. (156)

Again the Indian Wars, the Northwest Indian War, circa 1778-1794, and the western front of the War of 1812, along with other battles fought in the area of the Northwest Territory now known as Ohio, are recalled (what they called “Northwest” then, today we call

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<sup>87</sup> Burroughs, who sometimes figured oppressive power as feminine in his fiction, remarked in an interview that the “worship of women that flourished in the Old South, and in frontier days . . . is still basic in American life . . . the whole Southern worship of women and white supremacy is still the policy of America” (122).

“Midwest”). Winifred is imagined as General “Mad” Anthony Wayne, who finally defeated the Indian confederacy led by Blue Jacket (Shawnee) at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794, which led to the forced signing of the Treaty of Greeneville, opening up much of Southern Ohio for Euro-American settlement (“Battle”). In her parlor sits “an ancient wooden Indian” (253). These wooden Indians were a part of the American project of imagining Natives as absent—they were meant to stand in as a reminder of these supposedly “vanished Americans.” As the representative of hegemonic and colonialist white power and morality, “the whole world fears Aunt Winifred,” as Rick Fergus puts it in one of the few un-ironic or un-histrionic statements he makes in the novel (155).

Although Purdy’s figuring of patriarchal power as feminine can be largely explained as part of a strategic critique of the historical justification of the exertion of such power, to further critique Purdy, these masculine women also suggest that Purdy’s gender norms may be rather conventional in some ways. Although his ideas on the fluidity of sexuality caused me to posit in the introduction that Purdy was “doing” Queer Theory in the 1950s, it would seem that, just as Purdy favors masculinity in men (resisting the dominant effeminate model of homosexuality), he also prefers women to be classically feminine. His aggressive “Great White Mothers” are often drawn negatively, although they each have some positive attributes. It might be pointed out that these women are not totally the product of Purdy’s imagination. These “Great White Mothers” are typically based to some degree upon individual women that he knew, such as his Aunt Cora Purdy in Ohio (Winifred), Marian “Miriam” Bomberger Andreas—the ex-wife of financier, literary critic, and Purdy patron Osborn Andreas—in Chicago (Grainger in 63:

*Dream Palace* and Madame Girard in *Malcolm*), and Fania Marinoff in Manhattan (Olga Petrovna).

Earlier it was mentioned that Purdy complicates his valorization of the Native warrior and warrior masculinity. In doing so Purdy suggests that there are better and worse formations of the warrior figure. The bad models of the warrior lean towards self-destruction and hastiness in declaring that “it is a good day to die,” or for others to die. As the mind of Jethro, whom we are to understand is a bit “touched,” begins to take up black thoughts of violence towards his mother Elvira, he moves toward the negative form of the warrior. He pulls an antique pistol out of a display case in the house, loads it, and hides it away. These divergent forms of the warrior, despite Purdy’s general emphasis upon warrior masculinity, explain why Jethro’s erratic behavior in this section of the novel is also figured as “Indian.” For example, the word “ceremony” appears amidst an account of his breakdown:

Going back away from the window to his table, where he had written so many of the pages of his lost journal, he seated himself in slow ceremony, but instead of writing, he took up three dice he kept in a lacquered box, and shook them, demanding that they tell him if he would kill Elvira or not. He sobbed convulsively at times as he thought that he might have to kill someone whom he loved so dearly (329).

Of course, the connotations of the word “ceremony” are not limited to Native American contexts, but Purdy has used it many times in implicit conjunction with indigeneity, that the reader begins to see it as an Indian signifier. Beyond this reference, moreover, at one point during this final section of the novel, Jethro lets out “a war whoop,” prompting his older brother Rick to remark, “Mad as a hornet!” (322).

During a banquet at the fairgrounds put on by Elvira to celebrate her freedom from Wilders, Jethro finally fires the pistol in the general direction of his mother:

“Although Jethro was looking at Elvira, perhaps he never meant to shoot in her direction” (347). Matt Lacey leaps in front of his beloved Elvira and takes the bullet; there is much blood but he survives (347). In one sense, Jethro’s violence can be perceived, within the racial allegory I have delineated, as one Indian trying to kill another in the family—a case of “blood . . . gone berserk” (233). His act is regarded by the narrator(s) as preordained, fatalistic: “Jethro was . . . the one who least wished it to happen, his hand directed less by himself than by a blind and irresistible concatenation of events from before his birth” (346). Purdy read ancient Greek tragedy, and the fatalism of these works resonates with him. While this passage is beautifully written, and can be contextualized in the genre of tragedy, it is still perhaps troubling if this violence is hinted to be linked to Jethro’s modest Indigenous heritage, as part of genetic causal factors originating “before his birth.” This, however, is ambiguous. Simultaneously rendering the scenario more complex is the fact that Jethro is seen, and this is very rare, to go white, “white as those angels who preside over crypts” (348). Death and whiteness are thus linked, and it would seem that Jethro’s Oedipal obsession with his mother’s sexuality, which in part drives his madness and violence, is also figured as “white.”

#### THE “INDIANNESS” OF SAME-SEX DESIRE

Towards the end of the novel, sandwiching the violent incident of Jethro’s firing a gun at his mother, are two idyllic homoerotic scenes that perpetuate Purdy’s rhetorical link between indigeneity and same-sex desire. These involve the young man Garner, a sometime boarder at their house, and Jethro. If we take Jethro to be “Indian,” then these moments can also be linked to Fiedler’s work on trans-ethnic homoeroticism

in American literary canon. Purdy, of course, does not concur with Fiedler's typical Cold War conclusions about his "discovery" of this theme of "innocent homosexuality."

Purdy wishes to emphasize the long history of same-sex relationships in the Americas, that there is something pure and even natural about homosexuality, providing a counter-narrative to the Cold War homophobic discourse of pathology that nettled him and guided ugly reviews of groundbreaking literary achievements.

Garner and Jethro were previously linked through their having sex with the same young woman, Vickie, who works for Jethro's mother and lives in the house. This scene is clearly problematic from a feminist perspective in that it connects the female body with both horror and then suddenly unbridled lust, since Vickie is keen to seduce Jethro, a type that Purdy and Matt Lacey call a "starter" (*Jeremy* 1). Garner, overcome with a desire that has haunted him, presses himself upon Vickie when they are alone in the house. Vickie thought that they would someday marry but is angry about his brutal ill-timing because she is menstruating. As Garner takes Vickie's virginity she slugs his face and bites him. Then, shockingly, afterwards she seduces Jethro and takes *his* virginity: "why should you go off free when I've been taken by the hunters," she demands (283). This scene forms a triangulation of desire in which symbolically the two men have sexual relations via the intermediary of the body of a woman, yet maintaining in their own minds a heterosexual identity. "Because he had plunged into the same bloodstained hole which Garner had first forced his way into, Jethro would feel, he knew, Garner's presence with him in his own body, forever, along with Vickie's embrace. They had partaken of the same queer baptism of blood together, so that he felt Garner almost closer to him than his own brothers," we are told (284). In another blood rite, this time

“queer,” they have sexually bonded through Vickie, have had proxy sex, and again this is clearly problematic because considerations of Vickie are clearly secondary to the bond between these two males, her body a vessel that mystically unites them. Reviewer Julia M. Klein writes, “The rites of passage for a Purdy adolescent are never easy. They entail the twinned savagery of sex and violence, neither executed without blood.”

This scene, like Maureen O’Dell’s abortion scene in *Eustace Chisholm*, renders Purdy vulnerable to charges of misogyny, since it could be argued that a horror of the female body is manifest. This critique has some merit but its conclusions are ultimately off-target. For one thing, Purdy exhibits horror at the male violence and aggression that leads Garner to force himself on Vickie, and, in an earlier incident, for Wilders Fergus to force himself upon his wife’s bosom friend Agnes Coles. In the larger context of Purdy’s work, it becomes clear that such sanguinary scenes of rape or abortion are not designed to denigrate women or women’s bodies in particular. These scenes are more broadly illustrative of Purdy’s longstanding themes of the profound difficulty of locating mutually satisfactory, non-exploitative love, and what he sees as the violence of love and misfired love—what is referred to in the novel as “the butchery of love” (285).

Therefore these scenes are not only about women, but more broadly the perversion of love into rape, brutality, or the consequences of careless love. In *The Not-Right House: Essays on James Purdy*, Bettina Schwarzschild writes, “James Purdy’s work is about love . . . People stumbling, groping towards each other, and failing. Always failing cruelly, tragically, when the very survival of the beloved depends on love” (50). If some misogynistic tendencies are perceived, they are balanced by equal criticism of men’s

aggression and contextualized within a broader exploration of the violence of love, which a few critics have failed to understand.

So this ritual of blood and lust is in the background when Jethro and Garner meet again, before and after the incident that will come to be known as the “fairground disaster,” Jethro’s shooting at Elvira. Their reunion and affectionate activity together is strongly homoerotic, constituting what the reviewer for *TLS* labeled “crypto-homosexuality.” Garner feels “joy” upon seeing him again on the day of the banquet, and as he puts his arm around the boy and inspects him, Garner decides “that for all that might be wrong with Jethro, he had a good figure and carried his ‘broken head’ like a prince, and indeed looked as handsome as many another boy who had never seen a sorrow” (340).<sup>88</sup> Jethro, for his part, with a “look of broad pleasure . . . at being with Garner,” is “too lost in admiration and hero worship of Garner’s vibrant and forceful presence” to hear what the older man is saying (335). The two of them walk and talk together through the amusement park, Garner speaking nostalgically of the old times when he used to live at the boarding house. Garner has had his arm around Jethro’s shoulder, then takes his hand and speaks to Jethro’s sympathetically about Jethro’s and his family’s problems (344). The two take turns giving each other pushes on the playground swings, rendered in lyrical and suggestively homoerotic terms: “the soap salesman gave out one shriek of satisfaction after another as he moved skyward” as though he were nearing orgasm (345). This scene is rendered in idyllic, sylvan terms although the action occurs amidst faded fairgrounds. “They sat then, squatting in the

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<sup>88</sup> This connection between the Indian Jethro and a “prince” is iterated in *Narrow Rooms* (1978), in connection with Roy Sturtevant and Sidney De Lakes. Purdy often connects his favored Native characters with the hint or statement of an especially elevated Indigenous ancestry. This could be taken to be a fault, since Purdy seems fascinated with the idea of Native ancestral “nobility” or “royalty” as opposed to the average tribal person, indicating a Eurocentric or classist bias.

grass, sometimes rolling about in thick clumps of vegetation, laughing” (345). They might like to continue such play, but the force of the superego enforcing cultural proscriptions on homosexuality holds them back: “presently an inexplicable something seemed to come over them, as if each one remembered some nagging gnawing sorrow that would not leave off its molesting hold, even for such innocent sport” (345). In this reading, it is not the desire but the proscription that is perverse and “molesting.”

This all occurs directly before Jethro fires the antique pistol. Directly afterward, Garner serves to remove him from the scene, to eventually take him to his father’s residence. “They moved off immediately into a part of the fairgrounds protected by maple trees, where there was a solitary bench or two, usually a favored site for lovers, and they sat down there, in a seeming easy-going manner, hardly acting like ‘fugitives,’ and in no mind to follow Mathew Lacey’s advice to get going fast and not take time to even look behind them” (349). In this intimate moment, it is as if Jethro’s potentially murderous action had never taken place. This sylvan, isolated spot is a temporary refuge for the neurotic teenager and the young salesman. The two males’ homoerotic bond is linked with indigeneity: “Jethro staring into the heavy green foliage before him thought that *not too long ago when this had been thick forest, one might have spied an Indian passing by* as silent as these moving shadows” (350, my emphasis). Here Purdy emphasizes the relative recent presence of Natives on this land, opposing white notions that the land was virtually empty or unused that have been cited as justification for colonialism. The link between same-sex love and indigeneity is here presented in a pastoral context of what Fiedler called “innocent homosexuality,” but a more explicit version of this link had been earlier established when we learned, through his lost journal

that his father and aunt read, of Jethro's escapades with a gang of wild boys "into which Jethro had been impressed. The boys ran wild around the dam of the river, and one evening Hardin had enacted a gruesome ceremony, in which he had posed as some kind of Indian, masturbating himself and the boys" (258).

The novel ends in a semi-tragic mode, with Jethro lying down in a flowerbed in a rainstorm, found at last by his father. Yet unlike Daniel Haws in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, a more tragic novel, Jethro survives, as does his mother, although she has been dispossessed. After the incident, Jethro goes to live with his Aunt Winifred Fergus, his father, and Mother Fergus, Jethro's grandmother, in Paulding Meadows. Similarly, James Purdy went to live with his father William and Aunt Cora at the house on 135 Ridge Street, Bowling Green, at some point following his parents' divorce in 1930. This had been the home of his paternal grandparents, and James had already temporarily lived there earlier with his grandmother Catherine Mason Purdy after the divorce. "When my grandmother died, I lived on in her house with my father, who was deeply hurt by my mother divorcing him," Purdy writes in an autobiographical essay ("James" 299). James Purdy was graduated from Findlay High School in 1932 and began his undergraduate studies at Bowling Green College in the Fall of that year. Soon after the start of his studies, Catherine Purdy died in October 1932 and had her funeral in the Ridge Street home, where she had lived with James's grandfather Boyd Wallace Purdy ("Mrs. B.W."), which is fictionalized in *The Nephew*. In *Jeremy's Version* Jethro is forgiven by his mother, who plans a secret meeting with him outside the Paulding Meadows house and on the appointed evening tells him, "all's done, and forgotten, Jeth, as if it had never been" (361). But he is also rejected, because she has had to sell the boarding house and it

goes without saying that there is now no place for Jethro, as he heartbreakingly infers (362). Elvira triumphed with the divorce from Wilders; now, however, perhaps because of legal fees, she claims to have “lost everything” and tells Jethro that “the boarding house is up for sale to pay all my debts . . . I’m penniless” (362). Rick, last seen “in an outlandish mauve jacket and slacks,” like Richard Purdy lights out for New York City “to try to make a name for himself” on the stage (355, 362). Elvira, linked with her matrilineal Indigenous ancestry to some extent, has lost her home although she won the divorce case, in a sense “removed” yet again.

As we have seen, the novel’s plot has involved a series of allegorical battles between Fergus and Summerlad, whites and “Indians.” Winifred has achieved a victory of sorts in having Jethro live at her home in Paulding Meadows, although she was bitterly defeated by the results of the divorce trial, which she was certain her brother Wilders would win. The “Indians” are therefore down but not out at the end of this novel, displaced but not dead. Lindroth writes that although the novel shows the “quiet desperation of small town life” it also shows a “potential for love and hope,” which is typical of Purdy despite the darkness in his work. This is at least an improvement upon what happened to the star-crossed Indians Roy Sturtevant or Daniel Hawes, who died gruesome deaths.

Before concluding this chapter with a discussion of the novel’s frame narrative(s), I want to return to *On Glory’s Course* (1984), the novel whose cast of characters includes Val Daugherty, discussed in chapter two. *On Glory’s Course* is the fourth book in his *Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys* series of Ohio novels, although not labeled or

marketed as such. The novel is set in Fonthill, a Midwestern town very similar to Boutflour.

Just as Purdy linked male same-sex desire and indigeneity with Garner and Jethro in *Jeremy's Version*, he does the same in *On Glory's Course*. The later novel recapitulates many familiar circumstances and aspects of *Jeremy's Version*, but it does not feature an explicitly identified crossblood Native ancestor of the youthful male protagonist, Ned. In the later novel, Jethro and Garner are replaced by Ned Cottrell and the young veteran Keith Gresham, who boards at Ned's home and is regarded by the town as a "war hero." As in the former novel, Elaine Cottrell, Ned's mother, turned the family home into a boarding house due to financial necessity, following her husband's death. Like Matt Lacey, Keith is in love with both the mother and the son. Also as in *Jeremy's Version*, these homoerotic scenes occur late in the novel, carry an idyllic tone, and are associated with indigeneity, and by extension, the same-sex traditions of North American indigenes.

*On Glory's Course* is one of Purdy's funniest and most accessible novels, although it has received scant critical attention and divided book reviewers. The novel is set during 1930 in the gossipy Midwestern town of Fonthill, which, like Boutflour, closely resembles Findlay, Ohio, whose residents also read *The Courier* newspaper, where Adele Bevington had worked and written "brilliantly" as a reporter for many years (312). One passage (26-27) accurately describes a stretch of Findlay's Main Street circa 1930, as Parker Sams pointed out to me, and the Hancock County courthouse. Purdy's command of Midwestern vernacular speech has been remarked upon, but he combines this idiom with his own magical, sometimes archaic-sounding language, creating a

wondrous prose that transcends realism and regional writing. Referring to *On Glory's Course*, and applicable to other novels in his series of Midwestern novels, Purdy remarked: "That speech is Ohio, Ohio country, Ohio town, the spit and blood of all my books" (Sams). *On Glory's Course* also resembles *Jeremy's Version* in that it engages with performativity and the theatrical. As in that novel, characters have past or present aspirations to take the stage and often speak in theatrical language. The central conceit is that the plot is part of an old melodramatic Hollywood movie from the golden years of the silver screen.

*On Glory's Course* follows several stories, but what ties it all together is various characters' links to Adele Bevington, who gave up an illegitimate son—fathered by a prominent older man—as a teenager thirty years ago, and has lived with this "sin" and scandal all her life as she vigilantly searches for the young man that might turn out to be her long-lost son.<sup>89</sup> This novel is also influenced by Purdy's upbringing. Fifteen years of age, Ned Cottrell resembles Jethro Fergus in many ways and his circumstances also reveal the biographical influence. Ned lives with his older brother Alec, who like Rick Fergus has aspirations to a performing arts career in New York (Alec's talent is his singing voice), and his mother Elaine Cottrell, who like Elvira, runs a boardinghouse. In this novel the father is dead rather than just usually absent, although Elaine remarks that he was often gone even when he was alive.

But while *On Glory's Course* bears many similarities to *Jeremy's Version*, it does not emphasize an Indian presence or Native American ancestry in the characters or setting in the overt way that the earlier novel does consistently. Yet, as was argued in

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<sup>89</sup> Incidentally, "Ned Cottrell" is the name of a character in the 1945 Hollywood movie *The Wicked Lady*; in a novel about a woman once regarded as "wicked" that employs a cinematic conceit, this may not be a co-incidence.

chapter two, it subtly implies characters' connections with Native American culture and history. In one instance early in the novel, Ned Cottrell, who is later connected with two substitute fathers figured as "Indian," is observed "putting his bare feet on the Indian throw rug" (20). When his brother Alec accused Ned of "ruining" Adele Bevington, Ned is dismayed. "*I ruin her!*" Ned almost let out a war whoop" (140). This Indian signifier is mentioned in a scene involving the handsome young man Keith Gresham, who is attracted to Jethro, and in his same-sex desire is associated more thoroughly with the "Indian."

The veteran Keith Gresham and his relationship with Ned are figuratively associated with indigeneity. Unlike Garner, Keith's masculinity and virility is compromised by an injury he has sustained from the war. Like Hemingway's Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, Keith has been physically emasculated. This fact is laid bare to the reader in a grotesque scene in which he visits Adele Bevington's home while inebriated. This scene explicitly exposes the veteran's wound, which is only hinted at in Hemingway's novel.<sup>90</sup> This injury complicates his gender status, since he is both a man and not a man, held to one standard. Yet he is figured Indian as a warrior, "a young man who had given everything for his country except his actual life" and like Jethro, due to his being "wild" (263).

Even independent of his growing relationship with Ned, Keith, in his own unstable mind at least, is juxtaposed with "Indians." Keith imagines that "the Indians" follow his name on a list of "charity cases" to be visited by the G.A.R., a group of decrepit Civil War veterans who visit the veteran Keith at his home, the latter already

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<sup>90</sup> In light of Keith's similarity to Jake Barnes and Keith's overt homoeroticism, it is interesting that one gay reader of Hemingway's novel, the Scandinavian critic Axel Nissen, reads Jake Barnes as a queer man rather than a castrated heterosexual man, in part because of Papa's vagueness about Barnes's injury.

drunk on a Sunday morning. The men come bearing a Bible and “banners, and waving a huge Old Glory. It was the last of the Grand Army of the Republic . . . who went around distributing leaflets about God and America,” and visiting veterans and dispensing “advice, and prayers, but never money” (317). Juxtaposed with their God-fearing jingoism, their racial attitudes are satirized when the Captain boasts, “my generation freed the nigger and had to see they was helped out of bondage” (321). Keith, who defies their attempts to “save” him, to render him “civilized,” tells them, “Corn liquor is a treacherous mother. Remember that when you go now to save the Indians. I reckon it’s the Indians who are next on your list. You’ll find them out yonder,” he tells the Captain, pointing toward the river, “out there with the owls and the possums and the lynxes” (324). Here a link by association is established.

Keith Gresham becomes something of a father figure to Ned, but also a paramour. He “eyed Ned with almost hungry curiosity as the boy arrived home late for dinner” from his informal riding lesson with Val Dougherty (262). Ironically, Ned’s mother Elaine jokes to Keith, “My sons will corrupt you, Keith, if you don’t watch out” (262). But Ned has observed “for some time now how much his mother flirted with Keith, and how without the ex-soldier being aware of it, he flirted (or so Ned thought) with Ned” (262). We see Keith offer Ned a cigarette and light it for him “with a very fancy lighter” (263). For his part Ned seems to find him handsome, noticing “what long black lashes Keith had, almost like those of a movie star” (263). With his voice slightly higher than one would expect, perhaps due to his injury, Keith has a slightly androgynous and aesthetic quality despite his masculine physique and status as a heroic warrior.

Keith's flirtations turn to embraces. Ned confides in the "war hero" that Marilyn Dougherty, Val's foster daughter, has miscarried the baby of which he was to be the father. Keith "suddenly drew the boy to him and kissed him coldly on the lips. Ned was too puzzled to resist. He felt it was very peculiar, yet he understood the kiss" (265). Keith rages against mortality and the brutal nature of life. Later Keith goes to the "scarlet woman" Adele Bevington's house, looking for succor, and a disastrous episode that exposes his war injury ensues. The town is scandalized by what happened at Adele's, involving the war hero's naked and emasculated body being discovered draped in Adele's famous fiery diamonds, the gifts that her wealthy and prominent former beau gave to her after she was forced to give up for adoption the child he fathered. Angered, Keith has a violent fit. After this incident, a fiery cross is placed in Keith's yard, linking him in solidarity with the ethnic Other harassed by the Ku Klux Klan, a fellow victim of intolerance (338).

Unlike Garner's and Jethro's "innocent homosexuality," Keith Gresham's attentions to Ned become explicitly homoerotic, but similar to Garner, they are linked with Indian signifiers. Providing some background of Keith's queer sexuality, at one point we are told that "as a boy he could never choose which girl or even young boy, he loved the most (343). Following the debacle at Adele's home, Ned visits Keith at his home, where the veteran has been drinking wine, apparently for a while. Ned has to go to the bathroom, and calls out in the dark, complaining that he can't see, so Keith follows him to turn on the light for him. When the light comes on, Ned has his penis out, and Keith is transfixed by it, remarking upon its size and telling Ned he should be thanking God "morning, noon, and night" for the blessing of such a prodigious member (286).

When Ned protests that he can't void as Keith watches, Keith's rejoinder comes "in an almost savage tone" (287). Then, following this allusion to the "savage" stereotype, after complimenting Ned's equipment again, Keith leaps up "and with a kind of war whoop ran out of the room" (287). Although Purdy is engaging stereotype through a non-Native character, his rhetorical link is clear. Same-sex desire is equated with the Native warrior and rebellion against Euro-American proscriptions. This was also the case with the relationship between Ned and Val Daugherty, the "crypto-Indian" discussed in chapter two. Here too Purdy is by extension alluding to the same-sex traditions held by many North American tribes. Similarly, in the novel *Mourners Below* (1981), there is unspoken desire between young Duane Bledsoe and his handsome tutor Duke La Roche, who, like Keith Gresham, lives alone in a large, crumbling mansion. Their bond is intensified in their mutual love of Duane's absent mother Aileen. Duane suggests that Duke read aloud one of Aileen's letters to Duane. "As he said this, he let his algebra book drop to the Navajo rug at his feet" (107). As with Ned, the physical contact between Duane and the detail of a Native American rug suggests its symbolic importance.

After a search, Ned finds Keith lying in bed and covering his face. Keith suddenly commands Ned to leave, threatening that if he doesn't, he will kill the teenager. He draws out a gun from under his pillow. But as Ned turns to leave, Keith apologizes. "Without warning Keith had kissed Ned, as he had done that past time in the alley" (288). Ned thinks the kiss is a little bit like the kiss his father had given him the last time Ned had seen him alive, suggesting that a father-son dynamic is a part of his and Keith's relationship, even if there is also homosexual desire. "Ned put his hand on his lips where

Keith had touched him,” we are told (288). After Ned has left the house, Keith chases after him for a block and apologizes to Ned. When Ned stretches out a hand to shake, “instead Keith pressed his lips to [Ned’s] hand and then giving out a cry like a wild Indian, lit out toward his ramshackle, dilapidated house” (288). Keith is intentionally trying to sound “like a wild Indian,” rather than this being the narrator’s invented comparison. With another Indian cry Keith “lit out” like Huckleberry Finn for the Indian Territory at the close of his “adventures.” Keith’s queer behavior causes him to be recognized by Adele to be one of those “men who don’t like women, or like women perhaps too well,” (298) men like her doctor Charles Radwell, whom, she discovers, sleeps with his “groom.” Dr. Radwell, like many of Purdy good doctors, resembles the real life Dr. Charles J. Ray of Gilboa, Ohio, who lived for at least three decades with a man over thirty years younger than him named Edwin Scanland (Putnam County, Ohio Census records of 1930, Barton). When Keith and Ned go to see a movie later as if on a date, they both agree that “the best part of the film . . . was the horses and a few stray Indians” (348). The movie is about a man whose land is discovered to hold precious ores. A “powerful mining company” hires “thugs” to try to drive him off his land. The government, aligned with industry, has repeatedly used its hired men, the U.S. Army, to drive landowners, Indians, from their land when resources were discovered and envied. During the final stretch of time that Ned and Keith have together, before Ned leaves for a trip to Canada and Keith’s death, they are treated to “days that cause people to talk about Indian summer” (353).

## CRITIQUE OF RACISM AND CLASSISM

The reference to “Indian summer” reminds one that Fonthill is a typically “white” town, and Purdy satirizes its race and class prejudices by having them articulated by the town’s rampant busybody and gossip, Widow Hughes. With her fussy demands that everyone behave in a “civilized” manner, she recalls the Widow Douglas in Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Her racist belief in aristocracy and “endogamy” moreover is reminiscent of Millicent De Frayne in *I am Elijah Thrush*, discussed in the following chapter . Widow Hughes tells Adele Bevington that despite Adele’s youthful transgressions, “you and I—we are the last of the quality and the aristocrats in this town. Everybody else is dirt compared to our ancestry . . . the truth is the truth. We are the last of the well-bred, you and I. The last of those with antecedents. From now on there will be naught but bilge water and garbage, half breeds and mongrels. They will inherit the earth. We will be a forgotten whisper” (252). Hughes is antithetical to Purdy’s emphasis upon the crossblood against notions privileging purity of race. Her delivery draws a “wry smile” from Adele, who argues that when the aristocrats “as you call us,” did rule, they offered very little; “they offered *me* very little” (253), since she was forced to give up her child. “We are the last of the aristocrats,” Widow Hughes tells Adele. “The river of hoi polloi is waiting for us to step down. Our mansions and fields and farms and rivers will be overrun with their offspring” (256). Her myths of white supremacy and racial purity are rendered comical by her disparagingly hyperbolic language. The satire of Hughes recalls the burlesquing of the aristocratic Reuben Masterson, a scion of one of America’s “front families,” in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*.

Purdy's critique of classism and racism precedes even that powerhouse novel, going back to his classic *The Nephew* (1960). Widow Hughes's racist and classist rhetoric is raised to a hysterical level in Purdy's second novel *The Nephew* by Mrs. Laird, exposing the paranoia and madness of racism, and underscoring the links between white racism, classism, colonialism, and violent aggression. In that novel Aunt Alma Mason visits Faye Laird and her mother, but old Mrs. Laird has a "mental condition" and does not recognize Alma and insultingly denies that the woman standing in front of her could be Alma. Calling poor Alma ugly and self-important, Mrs. Laird sallies, "This woman could be a nigger with that mouth and hair" (97), revealing her racism. She had already downgraded another woman behind her back for being lazy and slovenly, adding, "of course she's not in our class, and you have to overlook a great deal that way" (96). As she turns her attention to her television, a Western plays out, and gunshots, breaking glass, and a horse's whinny are heard. "Kill!" Mrs. Laird shouts, "Shoot to kill or you'll regret it later" (98). The fact that Westerns often depict cowboys fighting Indians, and romanticize the narrative of the "progress" of westward expansion, should be kept in mind. "They've got to be done away with," she roars, and "there's only one way to get them out: Shoot to kill" (83). "More gunfire rocked the TV as Federal troops marched on," Purdy writes (83). "Then as the noise of bullets was dying down, they could hear the old woman cry softly," overcome with patriotism: "Old Glory. Doesn't it make your heart beat faster to see our flag, Faye? Come in here, dear, and salute the flag with me, and get your mind out of the gutter reading those books and papers . . . Come in here with your mother and salute the flag" (83). In this perfect slice of what was called "black humor," Purdy exposes the assumptions of white privilege and racial superiority as

paranoid insanity, and racism and military aggression are implied to be as intrinsically “American” as apple pie.

#### FRAMING A CONCLUSION

Returning to the conclusion of *On Glory's Course*, although Keith Gresham dies while Ned Cottrell is in Canada, Ned and his substitute Indian father Val survive. In chapter two I argued that like Clyde Furness in “The White Blackbird,” Val Daugherty’s energy and strength have not subsided, and he has had his revenge on the white system that has oppressed him and his fellows. On the other hand, since Keith is doomed and had been associated with Native signifiers, one might argue that this registers pessimism about a Native future on Purdy’s part. Keith, however, linked although he is with the Indian with regard to his same-sex desire, does not possess Native American ancestry, so the veteran doesn’t figure into the allegorical scheme as a representative indigene. Although he is never explicitly called a Native, Val is ironically the strongest Indigenous character in the novel, and also the kind of masculine warrior endorsed by Purdy—and he, like Ned, who is implied to have Indigenous ancestry, endures. The novel ends on an affirmative note despite the deaths of Keith and Adele Bevington.<sup>91</sup> Keith manages to write a book about Adele but “as the volume of what he had written increased, his own health declined” (376). Despite Keith’s sad loss, Ned experiences a feeling of triumph since he is able to have Keith’s book published using his own money. In the closing scene, following Alec’s decampment to New York (with an emphasis on *camp*), when

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<sup>91</sup> There is much more to say about Adele Bevington, the true “star” and heroine of the novel, and other aspects of this fine novel, but it falls outside of the scope of this project. In light of the criticisms that have been made of Purdy’s woman characters, however, it is worth pointing out that Adele, the nexus of the novel’s multiple plotlines, is rendered sympathetically if in a self-consciously melodramatic and sometimes comic fashion.

Ned arrives home late to tell Elaine the news, “he was all smiles. His ‘sunshiny’ face reminded Elaine of the ‘good old days’ when he and Keith had all been together” (377). With regard to *On Glory’s Course*, given Val’s autonomous survivance and Ned’s happiness, Purdy’s outlook on the status and future of Native Americans has grown more optimistic since the completion of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) and *Narrow Rooms* (1978). There is hope and a future for Valentine and Ned, and also (to a lesser degree) for Vera, Richard, Jethro, and Rory in *Jeremy’s Version*, and by extension there is hope for Native American survivance. Both novels imply that Native American communities have been fragmented and scattered, but there is a note of hope for their future rebuilding that has expanded greatly between the time of the two novels’ publication, 1970 and 1984. In the world of Purdy’s fiction, the rebuilding of Native communities begins on a small scale, with re-united fathers and sons, in *Moe’s Villa* and *In the Hollow of His Hand*, discussed in chapter six.

We have seen that *Jeremy’s Version* and *On Glory’s Course*—the first and fourth novels in the *Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys* series—although different in tone, have many plot features and conflicts in common. They are set in a similar place and time. One notable difference is absence of the frame narrative device in the latter novel. Why does *Jeremy’s Version* require such an elaborate framing while *On Glory’s Course*, like other novels in the series, does not? One immediate answer is that Purdy was closer in time to the people and places serving as models for characters and settings in the earlier novel—in this view, the frame narrative functions to allow Purdy some distance from his subject, removing it further from his, and his readers’, present. James Purdy’s mother Vera, father William, older brother Richard, and his Aunt Cora all passed away in the

1960s, a dark time for him, and *Jeremy's Version* was published in 1970. But this doesn't really explain the degree of complexity involved with the framing device. Something else is motivating this elaborate device, which seems superfluous to the central narrative in that Jeremy's first person narrative only appears at the beginning, and breaks in intermittently in the dénouement, and does not really "explain" the internal narrative. When comparing *Jeremy's Version* to the next three novels in the series, it becomes clear that *Jeremy's* engages with notions of indigeneity and references to Native history much more frequently and consistently than those three. Indeed, the novel is saturated with such references, indicating that this engagement was intentional and strategic (and raising the question of why this theme has not been considered by the critics). So up until 1986, when *In the Hollow of His Hand* was published, *Jeremy's Version* is the novel in which Purdy most thoroughly engages the Indigenous, building up from the significant precedent of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967). In *Jeremy's*, Purdy was struggling to rise above the negativity and pessimism about the Native that is implied by Daniel's gruesome death in the earlier novel.

In light of this, the frame narrative device can be read as an indication, perhaps even an allegory, of Purdy's struggle to tell the story of Natives in the present and to come to grips with the Native past—to deal with history and to write the Native American into the twentieth century, back into a Midwestern landscape that is often thought to be a site of Native absence. Although the novel includes crossblood Native characters, and references are made to Native history and Native Americans in Jeremy Cready's present (such as the Cree barber with pierced ears who lives in Boutflour), Purdy will not create what we might call a full-fledged Native American character, one

who himself identifies, and is identified or recognized by others, as a Native American, until we meet Decatur in *In the Hollow of His Hand*. This later novel represents the delayed manifestation of an unambiguous Native presence in Purdy's fiction. The optimism continues with the urban crossblood Ojibwe character Harlan Yost, whose future is bright at the close of *Out with the Stars* (1992). *In the Hollow of His Hand*, along with *Moe's Villa*, also represents the manifestation of Purdy's increased optimism about the Native future and advocacy of Native American tribal sovereignty. But Purdy has to work toward this in a long and gradual process that I have traced out in this dissertation, that can be likened to a process of recovery, showing that "history," often a labor of love, is a product of diligence, rather than being something simply handed to us on a plate.

Looking closely at the frame narrative, Matt Lacey resembles the author himself, who also looks back as an older man from the present upon the events of the past in which he participated. Young Jeremy Cready, to whom Matt tells these stories and performs the voices of the characters, of course resembles Purdy too in that he is the writer, the one who compiles Matt's oral performances and his much older half-sister Della's narratives into his own "version" of the clash of the Summerlads and the Ferguses. Similarly, Purdy had compiled his own remembered experiences with the stories that his grandmothers told him of events preceding his birth, rendering these materials into art with powerful invention, embellishment, and exaggeration—what has been called his "magic." It is in Jeremy's first person frame narrative, placed in italics, that the Native history of the setting is established with copious references in the opening section. Jeremy is engaged in a process of recovery work, fascinated by the past and

trying to make sense of its “texts” by creating a new piece of writing, a synthesis, from his sources. In this way Jeremy is like myself as I write this very project, looking back at Purdy’s various texts and recovering the Native American and crossblood aspects and representations that have been neglected. Jeremy and I hope to recover the past and illuminate the presence of the Native where it had been lost. Just as Jeremy seeks to tell the story of obscure lives from the past to show their extraordinary nature and their connection to Indigenous “original stock in America”—thus waking the “sleepers” and making them “come alive” on the page (and perhaps later the stage)—so too do I aim to revive and tell the story of a relatively obscure writer and to explore the trajectory of his work’s fascinating and productive engagement with indigeneity.

The fact that *Jeremy’s Version* is saturated with references to Native Americans reveals that this subject was of prime importance to Purdy, that he was searching for a way to deal with it in his work while working with what he knows. The odd frame narrative device, which in some ways seems superfluous, suggests the degree of Purdy’s intense struggle to find a way to work with Indigenous material and to write Natives into the present. For indeed, many of the references to the Native history of the region, and contemporary references, such as to the Cree barber, are found in the “present” of the frame narrative. Just as the recovery work of Paul with the photographs in “Why Can’t They Tell You Why?” becomes an allegory of Purdy’s entire fictional allegorical project, which seeks to recover the past and tell the story of America in a different way, so too does the frame narrative of *Jeremy’s Version* become an allegory for both Purdy’s and my own efforts at the recovery of history. There is no way that *In the Hollow of His Hand* or *Moe’s Villa* could have been produced without the groundbreaking work

conducted in *Jeremy's Version*. This earlier novel is where Purdy really begins to dig into this material, pondering more deeply the Native past, attempting to write Natives into the present, beginning to think seriously about a Native future. With this novel Purdy opens up a new vein of material that becomes increasingly affirmative about Natives, the culmination of which is *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe's Villa*. In between those works was *Out with the Stars*, which like *Hollow*, included an Ojibwe character with a positive future. Just as *Jeremy's Version* opened up the doors for the envisioning of the Native characters in *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe's Villa*, the 1972 novel *I am Elijah Thrush*, a tentative or preliminary portrait of an urban crossblood "Indian," cleared the path for Purdy to later create more full-fledged Native character to come into focus in *Out with the Stars* (1992), also set in New York City. Conversely, reading the later novel with the earlier renders the Indian in *I am Elijah Thrush* much more legible. These two urban novels will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### NATIVES IN NEW YORK: *I AM ELIJAH THRUSH* AND *OUT WITH THE STARS*

Pigeons & gulls and sparrows & jays,  
starlings and juncos in the winter day.  
The principal birds of the U.S.A.  
Aren't the songsters that delighted you at seven,  
But pigeons & gulls and sparrows & jays.

—James Purdy, untitled, from *Mr. Evening*

In two novels set in New York City, *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972)<sup>92</sup> and *Out with the Stars* (1992), James Purdy explores the racial dynamics, history and character of the United States, reprising and expanding his interest in African American culture and identity.<sup>93</sup> Along with *Garments the Living Wear* (1989), a novel that involves discussions of “the pest,” or the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, these three titles comprise the

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<sup>92</sup> A shorter version was originally published in *Esquire* in 1971.

<sup>93</sup> Among other works, see Purdy's early short story “Eventide” from *Color of Darkness*, several stories from *The Candles of Your Eyes*, and his late story “Easy Street” from *Moe's Villa and Other Stories*, and Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr.'s groundbreaking essay “James Purdy and the Black Mask of Humanity.” Purdy was friends with African American writers including his Brooklyn Heights neighbor Willard Motley and the younger man Henry Van Dyke. According to Purdy's friend Jorma Sjoblom, the two of them dined with James Baldwin a couple of times (interview). As noted earlier, Purdy introduced Motley to Maurice Kenny, who became an assistant and close friend to Motley. Purdy also became friends in the 1960s with the young writer Henry Van Dyke, who was a mutual friend of Carl Van Vechten and dedicated his first novel to him. Just as Purdy would later go on to do in *Out with the Stars*, Van Dyke in *Blood of Strawberries* (1969) based characters upon Van Vechten and his former silent film star wife, Fania Marinoff. Purdy provided a blurb for Van Dyke's debut novel *Ladies of the Rachmaninoff Eyes* (1965): “In the age of the official zombie, Mr. Van Dyke is a rarity, for he has written a charming and incisive, witty and entertaining book. He has loads of talent” (qtd. *Blood of Strawberries* dust jacket). Purdy was quoted in a *New York Times* advertisement for *Ladies*: “Readers whose palates are not tolerant of the hardtack of mournful novels written by college professors will welcome the taste of Mr. Van Dyke's digestible and delicious confection.”

only novels set in the city where Purdy resided for fifty years. With two respective urban crossblood Native major characters, Elijah Thrush and Harlan Yost, Purdy seems to broadly allude to the Urban Indian Relocation Program, begun in 1952, which encouraged Natives to move from reservations into urban centers and lined them up with jobs and temporary housing. Mi'kmaq journalist Maureen Googoo writes, "researchers estimate that 750,000 American Indians move to cities—including New York—between 1950 and 1980, many on their own steam." The results were mixed. These mainstreaming efforts isolated thousands of Natives from their home communities and cultures in an urban Diaspora, creating cultural alienation. This alienation would in part feed the efforts of Indian movement groups like AIM, which was driven by the efforts of urban Indian activists and inspired much reconnection to reservation communities and tribal traditions. Like many Natives who participated in urban relocation, Elijah Thrush and Harlan Yost are also isolated from any sense of Native community; Elijah has only his beloved great-grandson as a fellow "Indian."

In these allegorical novels, Purdy's meditation on the dynamic between Euro-American and Native American broadens and is rendered more complex as he inserts the African American into the equation. In fact, the conventional reading of *I am Elijah Thrush*'s engagement with race has concerned only Black and white, with Red being an excluded third term. This dynamic unfortunately mirrors the majority of twentieth-century discussions about race in America, which exclude not only the Native but all other ethnic minorities.<sup>94</sup> The critics' failure to consider the mixed ancestry of the title

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<sup>94</sup> Beyond his interest in Native American and African American cultures and identities, Purdy demonstrated advocacy for multicultural literature of the Americas, writing of Cuban novelist Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's *Dirty Havana Trilogy*: "Readers wary of the pieties of Borges can welcome this gutsy,

character and his great grandson is perhaps because the overt Indian signifiers are not plentiful. They are important, however, and other quotations and events allude to Native American history and Euro-American settlement of Native land, constituting a racial and national allegory.

Just as historical relations between Euro-Americans and African Americans and between Euro-Americans and Native Americans have been vexed, strained, or stained with bloodshed, so has the relationship between Native Americans and African Americans often been a troubled one historically. Purdy's allegorical Native and Black representative characters at times evoke this historic tension. To cite one historical example, in *Tribal Secrets* Robert Allen Warrior refers to the "strong anti-African-American ideology among many SAI [Society of American Indians] members" in the early twentieth century, an animosity that Warrior claims was "created" by "support from white organizations" for this assimilationist group of Native intellectuals, orators, educators, and other professionals (13). Arthur C. Parker (Seneca) deployed the same racist rhetoric against Blacks that had been used by Euro-Americans against Natives: "the African negro was a savage who was cruel to his own race and superstitious to the extreme" (qtd. in Warrior 13). Prior to that, in the late nineteenth century, African American "Buffalo Soldiers" of the U.S. Army fought Plains Indians and assisted in their removal and the settlement of the West. Later I will discuss the more recent disenrollment of Black Cherokees in Oklahoma. In these two highly performative fictional allegories Purdy explores to some degree these historical interracial tensions.

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courageous Cuban novel which may awaken Spanish fiction to the new millennium" (Gutiérrez, front matter).

Although *I am Elijah Thrush* was published some twenty years earlier, I choose to begin the discussion in this chapter with *Out with the Stars*. This is because while both novels deal with race in terms of white, Black, and Red, the signifiers of indigeneity in *Elijah Thrush* are fewer in number and not as overt as in *Out with the Stars*, and reading the novels together helps to foreground the almost latent Indianness of the earlier text. The role of Elijah Thrush as an allegorical Native American character has not been recognized by critics, and thus we can say that the discussion of race has been limited to “black and white.” *Elijah Thrush* is a novel that is clearly composed in the wake of Black Power and responds to the media interest in African American radicalism. (The implied and problematic notion that African Americans are thus a privileged minority will be discussed later in the chapter.) The novel’s African American narrator, Albert Peggs, remarks early on that he admires “the violence and insurgency of my present-day ‘brothers,’” although he is not about to join them (10). After “tongue-lashing” his white landlord, Peggs remarks, “A few short years ago, he would have stung me with a pejorative, but now owing to my brothers’ victories he could only bite his pale lips and let me go” (30). Red Power, however, is not acknowledged, and for the Indian character, Elijah, things look bleak at the novel’s conclusion. Reading *Elijah Thrush* with *Out with the Stars* allows us to understand more fully and broadly Purdy’s allegory of race, so that the unusual “Black and white” art film that is *I am Elijah Thrush* comes alive in full color. For the later novel *Out with the Stars*, like *In the Hollow of His Hand*, includes an Ojibwe character, Harlan Yost, who, although he is not a major character, plays a crucial part in Purdy’s allegory of race and art. As Don Adams writes, “*Out with the Stars* shines a discerning light backward on the often psychologically difficult and painful

novels that came before, and serves as a fictive explanation and accounting for the whole of Purdy's art" (28). Although Adams in his discussion focuses on art, the gay artist, and fictionality, *Out with the Stars* shines a spotlight on issues of race and ethnicity in Purdy's past work too.

If *Elijah Thrush* does not seem to acknowledge Native American activism and the publicizing of Indian claims and grievances, then perhaps it could be argued that during the twenty plus years that passed between the two novels' publication, 1972 and 1992, Purdy gradually became aware of positive changes in Native American activism and culture from his somewhat removed position in Brooklyn Heights. This awareness would have naturally been increased by the various protests organized by AIM [American Indian Movement] and its predecessors that were widely televised and reported in the *New York Times* at the tail of the 1960s and the 1970s. In their history of the Indian movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee, Robert Allen Warrior and Paul Chaat Smith call the movement "an edgy, unpredictable creature that challenged America power in a way not equaled in this century" (279). The most highly visible protests of radicalized American Indians include the takeover of San Francisco's Alcatraz Island in 1969, the Trail of Broken Treaties (aka Caravan of Broken Treaties) leading up to the messy takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, D.C. in 1972, and the seizure of the town of Wounded Knee in Pine Ridge Reservation, leading to the armed standoff with U.S. Marshals in 1973. To protest the treatment of Native Americans by the film and television industries, and to demonstrate solidarity with AIM, Marlon Brando refused his Oscar award for *The Godfather* in 1973, sending activist and actress Sacheen Littlefeather in Apache dress on his behalf to make a televised statement (Smith

and Warrior 235-36). “By 1972 AIM was quickly becoming a national organization wielding considerable power with the media, white churches, and foundations,” writes Robert Allen Warrior in *Tribal Secrets* (36). Purdy could not have missed these widely covered events, as Maurice Kenny also pointed out to me during a telephone conversation.

This period also saw an explosion of Native American literature attended by growing journalistic and academic interest in this area. The Native American Renaissance is said to have been inaugurated by the 1968 publication of N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, and between 1972 and 1992 landmark Native novels and poetry collections by Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, Simon Ortiz, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, Geary Hobson, Janet Campbell-Hale, Louis Owens, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Maurice Kenny, Joy Harjo, and Louise Erdrich were published. Purdy’s growing awareness of this development affected his allegorical constructions of Native American and crossblood characters. During this time his friendship with Maurice Kenny developed; as mentioned in the introduction, in the same year that Purdy would publish his most “Indian” novel, *In the Hollow of His Hand*, Kenny would co-publish Purdy’s book of poetry *The Brooklyn Branding Parlors*. In the light of these visible manifestations of revitalized Native political activism and culture, it could be argued that *Out with the Stars* is in a sense a revision of *I am Elijah Thrush*, one impacted by the visible development of Native activism and literature in the ensuing years. Given that the original publication of *Thrush* was in 1971 in *Esquire*, Purdy was composing the novel prior to most of the major protest events, so he had not yet absorbed the influence of this movement which led to widespread efforts at cultural revival (Chaat and Warrior 279).

In *Elijah Thrush*, Purdy seems to suggest that African Americans are a favored minority. Albert Peggs writes, “Because I am black everything is forgiven me by whites . . . I am allowed to be as low as possible, and there is always an apology waiting” (10). This problematic suggestion that African Americans are somehow a privileged minority while Native Americans have been mostly neglected or victimized (an issue I return to in the discussion of *Thrush*), is again suggested in *Out with the Stars* (1992). But unlike *I am Elijah Thrush*, in the later novel, what I read as a revision of the earlier one, Purdy reveals a hopeful attitude for the Native American future. Unfortunately, *Stars* is one of the least commented upon and read of Purdy’s novels. This neglect, however, is not due to a lack of merit since it is possibly his strongest novel after *In the Hollow of His Hand*. Besides being clever and funny, the novel is another complex and sometimes disturbing meditation on race, and also possesses allegorical resonances, if not as thoroughly as *I am Elijah Thrush*. It is perhaps fitting that the idea of African Americans receiving special attention from the “mainstream” culture reappears in a novel published in 1992, during a period that did indeed see representations of Black culture appearing prominently in U.S. culture, from current and slightly earlier films such as *Malcolm X*, *Boyz N the Hood*, *Jungle Fever*, *A Rage in Harlem*, *New Jack City*, *Do the Right Thing* and *Colors* or the explosion of hip-hop music and culture to the placement in the academic literary canon of novels such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (rediscovered by Walker in the 1970s) and Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*. In many ways, *Out with the Stars* picks up many of the same issues explored in the novel published twenty years before, and seems to be set during a similar time period, perhaps slightly earlier—hints point to the mid-sixties. The

connection between the two novels is concretized by the appearance of the theatrical Elijah Thrush himself: “Since Cyril Vane loved both men and women indiscriminately, as one old friend put it, his guest list for the blow-out comprised a liberal sprinkling of both sexes, paramount among them was the noted mime Elijah Thrush who called Cyril’s friends, in his own *fin de siècle* phrases, the indeterminate sex” (104).

The plot of *Out with the Stars* involves Euro-American artists (writers, photographers, and musicians) appropriating, referring to, and celebrating African American culture. Christopher Lane remarked that the novel engages “questions about stereotype, fantasy, and prejudice. At various points [Purdy’s] characters struggle over the difficulties of [forming] an ethical relation to love as well as to creativity and composition (in the example of the two operas), to representation and censorship (around Cyril Vane’s photography), and finally, to race (for instance, the two menservants, Harlan Yost and Ezekiel Loomis), which may be the most challenging and troubling dimension of the book” (76). Although Black culture is exalted by white artists, the relationships between the white principal characters and people of color can be troubling. The men of color tend to be in positions of servitude towards them, if additionally they are lovers or friends. This is the case with Harlan Yost, a crossblood Ojibwe Native American man, who takes a major role in the novel especially in its middle portion. In this way Purdy links race and power, revealing and implicitly critiquing whites’ dominant position in the American capitalist system.

The initial plot catalyst is the classic narrative device of a found text. The established opera composer Abner Blossom, an older man based to some degree on the

gay American composer Virgil Thomson,<sup>95</sup> becomes fascinated with a disheveled libretto that a younger composer, his protégée Val Sturgis, finds on the subway and accidentally leaves at Blossom's house. Reviewers have said that Sturgis is based on aspects of composer Ned Rorem and possibly Coleman Dowell or Purdy himself.<sup>96</sup> Sturgis and his handsome singer friend Hugh Medairy came to New York from Kentucky to try their luck in the legitimate music world. The seemingly scandalous libretto is about the writer-turned-photographer Cyril Vane and his ex-silent screen starlet wife, Olga Petrovna, and delves into Vane's aesthetic and erotic interest in African American men. Cyril Vane is known for his photographs of dancers, but even more so, of African Americans. Vane's intense aesthetic interest in African American culture is tied up with his interest in the bodies of young Black men. To avoid embarrassing revelations, Olga battles fiercely to prevent Abner Blossom's opera coming to fruition.

Abner Blossom, whom some had thought retired, makes up his mind to cap his brilliant career in music by composing an opera based on his own version of the libretto. In his second "Negro opera" *The Kinkajou*, which was about a Black preacher in St. Louis, Blossom had offended some African Americans, and created scandal in the press

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<sup>95</sup> Purdy sent Thomson copies of his books and received very appreciative short letters in response. See appendix. Accomplished gay novelist Edmund White writes in his review of *Out with the Stars*, "Abner is clearly the great composer Virgil Thomson, down to his Parisian past, his deafness, his snappishness and his residency in a New York hotel much like the Chelsea."

<sup>96</sup> Purdy was friends with the gay composer Ned Rorem, who wrote incidental music for the stage productions of stories from *Color of Darkness* and Purdy's second novel *The Nephew*. Coleman Dowell was a gay songwriter and fiction writer who was inspired by, and envious of, Purdy's literary talent. Dowell and Purdy were long-time acquaintances and mutual friends of Carl Van Vechten, but they never became close themselves. Edmund White writes, "Val Sturgis blends Ned Rorem's talent with Coleman Dowell's Kentucky background, but Rorem, though Thomson's student, was always far more sophisticated and intelligent than Val (if equally lachrymose as the *Paris Diaries* reveal, when he was still drinking in the 1950s). Dowell, similarly, is both more self-destructive and *sauvage* than Val, and Dowell never studied with Virgil but did write music before becoming a novelist." The gay critic Richard Dyer felt that Sturgis is a blend of Rorem and Purdy himself, "freshly arrived in New York," and the names Sturgis and Purdy do sound somewhat similar. Though White's lengthy discussion of the novel as a *Roman à clef* is illuminating, White himself concludes that knowledge of Purdy's models is by no means a prerequisite for enjoying the novel. "If these keys are tossed aside and *Out with the Stars* is allowed to swing open on its own hinges, there is little to criticize and much to enjoy," he wisely concludes.

because one of the play's characters was a white preacher who was in love with the Black preacher (25).<sup>97</sup> A crowd of African American protesters assemble at his residence to protest, but Abner Blossom eventually sways quite a few of them using charm, quotations from reviews, and his singing voice (30-31). Problematically, Purdy suggests that this is all that it takes to assuage the anger of African Americans, some of whom are said to be "simply angry at life in general" (30), and the author's sympathy seems to be with Abner Blossom. Purdy has stated in interviews that he creates characters based on real people and scenarios, and uses this as an implied defense against such criticisms, that he was simply turning into art something that really happened. Interviewer Christopher Lane confronts Purdy about this issue:

you pre-empt this abyss [of prejudice and pretension blocking real communication between whites and African Americans] on two occasions in *Out with the Stars* by turning around the anger of New York's African American communities and by encouraging their admiration—if not idealization—of Abner Blossom. One of the closing scenes—when he's carried across the Brooklyn Bridge—comes to mind. However, I'm not sure that the issue of African American representations in photography or opera can be solved by appealing to the beauty or history of these communities. For one thing, the question of anger is perhaps too extensive; for another, the question of beauty doesn't get us off the ethical hook . . . wasn't that scene of hero worship slightly idealized? (Lane 77)

Purdy responded that "for a novel to pretend that it's found a solution is a form of madness" and gives a realist defense that many African Americans "actually did idolize Abner Blossom [Virgil Thomson], so I can't judge their worship as fraudulent" (77). Purdy's defense is not entirely satisfactory. The novel sometimes does seem to be marked by what Lane calls "a kind of reverence or awe of race" that seems a bit antiquated and romanticizing, although Purdy's intentions are clearly beneficent for both

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<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Virgil Thomson created controversy by using an all African American cast in his opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, with a libretto by Gertrude Stein.

African Americans and his old composer friends. Purdy refuses to create positive representations of minorities for the sake of political correctness, which brought him criticism from both African Americans and gay readers. Yet at the same time Purdy is celebrated by some African American critics such as Joseph Skerrett, Jr., and gay critics such as Richard Canning, James Morrison, and Christopher Lane.

Afterwards, Abner's African American servant Ezekiel Loomis appears, offering cookies and cider to the assembly. Loomis is a fascinating character. Articulate and apparently educated, it is unclear why he is the servant of the old composer. Purdy writes:

Abner's respect, even awe for his servant dated back to the dark November evening of a few years ago when he had found Ezekiel reading his French version of the *Essais* of Montaigne. In fact he had never recovered from his surprise that Ezekiel not only could read French but read tolerably well in the sixteenth century French of Montaigne.

So he was naturally curious as to what Ezekiel had made of the mysterious libretto. (6)

So on one hand Purdy seems to be commenting on the institutional racism of a society in which a Black man who is highly literate and intellectually curious is working as a servant to a white man. Ezekiel's character militates against stereotype and suggests that African Americans are intellectually underrated and undervalued (Ezekiel recalls Quintus, who is paid to read to Garnet Montrose, a grotesquely injured returned Vietnam veteran, in Purdy's searing 1975 novel *In a Shallow Grave*). But on the other hand, this servant is privileged by Abner, in that his opinions and counsel are solicited and respected by his famous "master." This contributes to Purdy's implication that African Americans are somehow a privileged minority, favored by the mainstream (read white) culture over other ethnic groups, a notion to which I will return.

Similarly, like Abner Blossom, Cyril Vane has used African Americans as the subjects of his art, writing about them and photographing them, creating fame for himself, although this fame has waned by the time of the chronological setting of the novel (circa 1964). Cyril Vane is clearly modeled to some degree upon the writer, photographer, and Harlem Renaissance patron Carl Van Vechten, with whom Purdy became a correspondent beginning in 1956, and a friend soon after he moved to New York, up until Van Vechten's death in 1964. *Out with the Stars* "serves as an affecting pastoral elegy for one of Purdy's early friends and supporters," writes Don Adams (27). Van Vechten was a friend and champion of Langston Hughes, who said that Purdy's "situations and characters linger in the memory long after one has finished reading his stories" (*News*). Purdy sent Van Vechten a copy of his privately-published short story collection, *Don't Call Me by My Right Name* (1956), which began a correspondence leading to a tight friendship between "Carlo" (as he was called by his friends), and Purdy.<sup>98</sup> Van Vechten was quite impressed by Purdy's work and invited the young writer to visit him in New York.

In light of my positioning of Purdy as a "metaphorical crossblood," it is fascinating that both Van Vechten and (most likely) Langston Hughes believed for a while that James Purdy was African American, because of Purdy's convincing use of Black vernacular in the story "Eventide" and even because of the title "Color of Darkness" (Interview with Swaim). This is corroborated by a letter Van Vechten writes to Purdy on 9 November 1956: "I wish you would read *Giovanni's Room* by another

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<sup>98</sup> Purdy would sometimes socialize with Carlo accompanied by his close friend and co-resident at multiple addresses, the chemistry professor and researcher Dr. Jorma J. Sjoblom, who raised the funds to publish privately his novella *63: Dream Palace*.

Negro friend of mine, James Baldwin.”<sup>99</sup> Before meeting James Purdy, Van Vechten had solicited more information and a photograph from him. In a letter of 6 December 1956, the older man wrote: “I don’t mind TOO MUCH your NOT being a Negro. The reasons your Washington friends think you ARE is doubtless because you make frequent references to matters like ‘passing’ but doubtless you do it to tease or terrify.” In an undated 1957 letter, Van Vechten jocosely writes, “Whether you are white or colored doesn’t make too much difference to me, but I am a little prejudiced in favor of COLOR!” And when Purdy arrived at his apartment for the first time, Van Vechten apparently still held out hope that Purdy had at least a little African American “blood,” because when Purdy walked in the door, Carlo looked him up and down and quipped, “I don’t think you have a drop,” as Purdy told radio interviewer Don Swaim in 1987.

Purdy and Van Vechten, who also originally hailed from the Midwest, would have subsequent meetings, and Purdy sat for photographs; their friendship grew after Purdy moved to the city. Van Vechten’s continued support meant a lot to Purdy.<sup>100</sup> Carlo’s biographer Bruce Kellner writes that Van Vechten “worshipped James Purdy’s Malcolm” (299). The character Madame Olga Petrovna is based on Van Vechten’s wife, the Russian-born American silent movie star Fania Marinoff, who was also a great admirer of Purdy’s work and told him so in letters. According to Purdy, “I based Cyril Vane on Carl Van Vechten who really did believe in joy. He was one of the first white men to have more than a superficial relationship with blacks” (Lane 74). Purdy paid

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<sup>99</sup> In his review of *Out with the Stars*, Firdaus Kanga states that James Baldwin admired Purdy’s work. In a note of 9 March 1960, having returned to New York Baldwin wrote Purdy to tell him that he was “back in the zoo and feeling very strange,” that they should get in touch, and that he is “looking forward to seeing” Purdy. As mentioned, Baldwin dined with Purdy and Jorma Sjoblom more than once.

<sup>100</sup> The older man wrote in an undated postcard, “Attending the party awarded Brooks Atkinson, by the stars of the stage last night, I talked at length with Lillian Hellman and she confided in me that her feeling for your work is most enthusiastic. She asked if I thought you would be able to write a play and I averred that you were able to do ANYTHING.”

tribute to Van Vechten after a fashion in a poem published a few years after his death in *An Oyster is a Wealthy Beast*: “A great wide-eyed white-haired Child / innocent of death and pain, / seated at the head of a long pink table / presiding over a perpetual birthday party in his honor” (n.p.). The tone of the poem is interesting because Purdy mildly satirizes Carlo’s *joi de vivre* but at the same time accepts him and grants him a certain child-like “innocence” that is perhaps questionable.

Van Vechten’s “innocence” has been long challenged. Then as now Van Vechten received criticism for exoticizing and exploiting African American culture for his own benefit, for allegedly “corrupting” Black artists, and for titling his novel about Harlem *Nigger Heaven* (which alludes to the nickname of the balconies of segregated movie theatres). But Van Vechten was “a dedicated and serious patron of black arts and letters,” writes African American critic Emily Bernard (xv). Bernard states that the publication of “Nella Larsen’s novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*, the 1927 re-issue of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, as well as many of the significant works of Langston Hughes all came about as the direct result of Van Vechten’s influence” (xxi). In his autobiography *Along this Way*, James Weldon Johnson writes, “The lusty, primitive life in [Claude McKay’s] *Home to Harlem* was based on truth, as were the dissolute modes of life in *Nigger Heaven*; but Mr. Van Vechten was the first well-known American novelist to include in a story a cultured Negro class without making it burlesque or without implying reservations or apologies” (qtd. in Van Vechten, *Inchin’ 79*). Johnson and novelist and essayist George Schuyler (*Black No More*) both praised the novel in reviews upon its release (Van Vechten, *Inchin’ 79*).

Back in 1940 Langston Hughes wrote in his autobiography *The Big Sea*, “Mr. Van Vechten became the goat of the New Negro Renaissance, the he-who-gets-slapped. The critics of the left, like the Negroes of the right, proceeded to light on Mr. Van Vechten, and he was accused of ruining, distorting, polluting, and corrupting every Negro writer from then on” (271). In discussing the negative reaction of many Black critics, Hughes notes that Van Vechten treated his Black characters better than “his own home folks in *The Tattooed Countess*,” a fictional satire of a middle American town and its pretensions, and opines, “I doubt if any of those critics had ever read any book of Mr. Van Vechten’s at all, or knew anything about his style. If they had they could not have written so stupidly about” his Harlem novel, because Van Vechten “writes sympathetically and amusingly and well about a whole rainbow of life above 110<sup>th</sup> Street that had never before been put into the color of words” (271, 272). Detractors of Van Vechten, then and now, might consider what Hughes has to say about him, along with Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters, and countless other African American artists of the day (Hughes 272). For example, Zora Neale Hurston stated, “if Carl Van Vechten were a people instead of a person, I could then say, these are my people,” and Nella Larsen (*Quicksand, Passing*) lauded Carlo hyperbolically as “the best thing that ever happened to the Negro race” (Bernard xxii). Especially given his obscurity today, Van Vechten’s role in supporting and promoting the Harlem Renaissance writers and artists, plus his early critical writing on the Blues, perhaps ought to be acknowledged. To dismiss Van Vechten entirely on the grounds of him being rich, white, and making, as Hughes puts it, an “unfortunate choice” in the title of his best-known novel is reductive if not racist.

Van Vechten should be acknowledged and scrutinized, not ignored, but there is some question whether Purdy's portrait is scrutinizing enough. Christopher Lane remarked to Purdy, accurately, that "Van Vechten's project is the subject of some controversy now. There is one school . . . that would see his project as paternalist and expounding a fantasy of the exotic" (74-75). Purdy replied, "Well maybe it was, but it's better than nothing. [ . . . ] Someone asked [Van Vechten] once if he was pleased with what he'd done for the black people. He said, 'I never did anything for them, they've done everything for me.' I thought that was admirable" (Lane 74). Purdy pointed out that Van Vechten defied the racism of his day by frequently having African Americans as guests at his posh residence and insisting that they arrive via the main elevator, and not the freight elevator, as was the norm of the time (Lane 74). Hughes wrote, "only Carl Van Vechten's parties were *so* Negro that they were reported as a matter of course in the colored society columns, just as though they had occurred in Harlem instead of West 55<sup>th</sup> Street" (251). "He never talks grandiloquently about democracy or Americanism. Nor makes a fetish of those qualities," Hughes wrote. "But he lives them with sincerity—and humor" (255). Van Vechten in the 1950s was a supporter of Civil Rights and the integration of schools and his anti-racism was seconded by Purdy. In a letter of 9 September 1957, Van Vechten wrote to Purdy: "I am very happy about your manifestations against the Governor of Arkansas and hope indeed that he CROKES [sic]."<sup>101</sup> Twenty-five years later, Hughes is still recognizing Van Vechten in a January 1965 address to the American Institute of Arts and Letters, remarking that although Van Vechten placed much sustained "deep interest" and time in African American literary,

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<sup>101</sup> Governor Orval Faubus, excoriated in Charles Mingus' sardonic jazz composition "Fables of Faubus," in 1957 defied the U.S. Supreme Court, and ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent Black students from entering Little Rock High School.

artistic, and political activity, he did not limit his attentions to people of color: “James Purdy is a recent example of Van Vechten discovery and interest from manuscript to final printed page,” Hughes writes (418).

In *Out with the Stars*, Purdy does not so much criticize Cyril Vane for his exoticizing or romanticizing of African Americans, but rather his neglect of another minority, Native Americans. This particular neglect is a part of Cyril Vane’s role as an allegorical white. Through allegory Purdy also critiques the historical disinheriting of Native Americans and how they have not been consistently visible in American culture except as stereotypes. Rather than criticize Vane or Van Vechten for exploiting African American culture, Purdy instead critiques an absence of concern of the white—embodied by the pale and Aryan Cyril Vane—for the American Indian, represented by his manservant Harlan Yost. This message is a part of his allegory of race in the novel, which, while not as pronounced as that of *I am Elijah Thrush*, comes through especially in the relationship between Cyril Vane and Harlan Yost, who comes to strongly identify with his Ojibwe Indian heritage.

The status of Harlan Yost, a “dark complexioned man with a downcast but somehow pleasant expression,” is disconcerting in similar ways to Ezekiel Loomis (15). Both are men of color who are devoted to, and inseparable from, their white “masters.” With Harlan the devotion is most intense, and we come to realize that Harlan is not only Cyril Vane’s servant, but also his sometime lover. Yost’s homosexuality is yet another incidence of Purdy’s rhetorical link between same-sex desire and indigeneity, but again, Harlan is presented as a masculine man, warrior-like in the defense of his older friend and employer, not related to transgender tribal traditions. This relationship also relates to

Fiedler's thesis about trans-ethnic male love in American novels, but as with *Eustace Chisholm*, Purdy subverts Fiedler's thesis. In the novels that Fiedler discusses, as mentioned in chapter three, he argues that the serviceable man of color, Black or Indian, always predeceases the white partner. In this case, however, the Native survives and the white partner perishes.

Olga Petrovna, taking on a role similar to Millicent De Frayne in *I am Elijah Thrush* (as we will see), represents normative and oppressive white Christian values, chastising Yost for his homosexuality using biblical terms, as European missionaries and settlers did to two-spirited indigenes of North America. In the past she "ruined nearly all of Cyril's lovers," Abner Blossom tells Val Sturgis (60). She calls Harlan a "delegate of the spires of Sodom" (115) and likens him and his fellows to "the children of Sodom." She calls Harlan "degenerate, abandoned by God and man," a subject of "the kingdom of forever damned" (122). When Olga finally enters Vane's locked "forbidden chamber" after his death and examines his homoerotic photography, she cries to Harlan: "Pompeii, Sodom, Babylon, and I have been living under the same roof. And you were a party to it, a willing accomplice!" (120). She stares at Harlan "as if he would perhaps explain a thing so beyond nature, a thing which beggared the shame of the ancient cities of the plains" (120). This reference to the "ancient cities of the plains" refers to the five cities of biblical times that included Sodom and Gomorrah. It also likely alludes to book four of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, which deals with homosexuality, whose English title has been translated as "Cities of the Plain." But with this phrase Purdy also seems to allude to Indigenous villages and towns and the same-sex traditions of many Native American tribes, and the Euro-American Christian response to these "shameful"

activities. While this may seem a stretch, this double meaning of “plains” has a precedent in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967), when Eustace recalls lines from Virgil (as translated by Dryden) that underscore Purdy’s historical and racial allegory of America, implicitly referring to white soldiers and settlers as “*Alien of birth, usurper of the plains!*” (252). Olga’s moralistic calumniations recall the labels placed upon Native Americans by early settlers of North America, who labeled them as devilish, immoral, and libidinous due to their gender diversity and same-sex traditions. For example, Victor Trixier, who lived among the Osage tribe in 1839-40, was troubled by their “habits of sodomy” and noted, “these sons of nature are extremely lascivious” (182). As an allegorical white European American, Olga feels that the sodomitical Indian must be vanquished and disinherited. In *Becoming Two-Spirit*, Brian Joseph Gilley writes, “Indeed, ‘sodomy’ and ‘transvestitism’ among Indigenous populations became a central reason to justify the conquest of North America” (13). Harlan tells Val Sturgis, “Then there is the Lioness of course, who’s always been my cross. Olga Petrovna. She kills me with her scorn and contempt” (100). Like Millicent, Olga is seen as predatory and rapacious, a threat to the Indian. Also like Millicent, Olga is connected with the “cross” of Christianity, one in many cases forced upon the shoulders of tribal peoples.

Purdy’s characterization of Yost, while open to criticism, takes into consideration his Ojibwe ancestry. The Ojibwes were often forest-dwelling people who learned how to be stealthy and silent in order to be successful hunters (see Copway). Therefore, after Val Sturgis and Hugh Medairy enter Cyril Vane’s place and meet Vane and Yost, “the young men were hardly aware that Harlan Yost had left the room noiselessly and even more noiselessly had reappeared carrying a heavy large tray on which sat two bottles and

four heavy Spanish glasses” (15). Later Harlan “vanished almost like a wisp of smoke and returned just as quickly” (17). This smoke simile may allude to the sacred smoke produced by the traditional Ojibwe practice of smudging, a purification ritual involving one of four sacred herbs burned in a shell. Along with his Ojibwe stealth he seems to also possess an emotional reticence or wise stoicism, a stereotype that has been affixed to Native Americans. After Cyril Vane convinces Hugh Medairy to undress for a photography shoot, Hugh “stepped out of his clothes with the cool indifference and aplomb of a hardened stripper, careful to hand each article of his clothing to an efficient and poker-faced Harlan Yost” (19). Although Yost desires men, and Hugh Medairy is especially handsome, Harlan’s countenance remains expressionless. This is contrasted with the white Midwesterner Val Sturgis, who gets drunk and “even laughed outright occasionally and once poked Harlan in the ribs” (19). Interestingly and problematically, Yost’s demeanor and actions, while alluding to his Ojibwe heritage, also intersect with stereotypes of the good servant, who is stealthy, unobtrusive, and impassive. This intersection forms part of Purdy’s critique of how socio-economic class in America is typically broken down along racial lines, with people of color relegated to lower-class status, expected to “serve” those above them in the hierarchy.

The link between Native Americans and their “lower” status in the American socio-economic hierarchy is underscored by a symbol deployed in another scene involving Abner Blossom and a European American aristocrat, Count Alexander Ilitch (his last name alludes to Tolstoy). The Count visits Blossom on Olga’s behalf, to attempt to persuade Abner not to continue with his opera about the Vanes. Blossom’s manservant Ezekiel brings out “a footstool with an ornate American Indian design and

placed the Count's rather dainty feet accurately and securely on the stool" (125). Here the Native is associated with something serviceable to the Euro-American, something "beneath the feet" of the elite class. If Purdy's characterizations of Harlan Yost with regard to indigeneity seem problematic or stereotypical, one might counter that Purdy fights the negative and enduring stereotype of the "drunk Indian" with Harlan Yost's sobriety: "Unlike most of his generation he had never taken pills, smoked pot, or even cared much for liquor," (119) and while Cyril, Val, and Hugh drink up, Yost "seemed to only drink a few drops from his glass" (15).

Moreover, Yost is associated with healing in one incident that links him to Native American storytelling. During the same scene as above, in which Vane is photographing the young men, he notices dark circles under Val Sturgis's eyes.

"Move to this seat here now," Cyril addressed Val, "while our good and caring friend Harlan places cornflower water around your overtired and overstimulated eyes."

Harlan Yost administered the cornflower water, and Val blinked wildly and let out a sigh either of relief or unexpected pleasure." (17)

The reference to cornflower water, or "Eau de Bleuet" contained in "a large blue imported bottle," alludes to Native American stories featuring a girl named Blue Cornflower, which seem to derive from the Southwest. The use of the word "administered" in connection with Harlan, a word connoting "to give remedially," and Val's response to same, suggests Native American medicine, or healing powers.

Harlan Yost holds a great deal of loyalty and regard for Cyril Vane. "Harlan believed to the end that Cyril Vane was one of the great photographers and that his art was beyond truth or lies," we are told (99). Harlan's appreciation is meaningful because other characters recognize Harlan's own gift for photography. In turn, Cyril includes

Harlan in his activities and pursuits. When Val and Hugh visit, for instance, Cyril and Harlan wish to hear Hugh sing one of Val's songs while Val plays the piano. When Val says this would give him pleasure, Cyril replies: "Then let Harlan and me hear you," placing Harlan's name before his own (15-16). Then,

after the first number, both Mr. Vane and Harlan Yost clapped appreciatively and Harlan cried, 'Encore.' But it was the second and third numbers which won both the photographer and his assistant over to the performers.

"It reminds me more than a little . . . of the wonderful popular songs of the 1880s. Wouldn't you say, Harlan? Harlan nodded agreement with an emphatic nod" (16).

Harlan is treated as an equal, a full participant in the discussion. Harlan's own photographic talent has earned him respect and he is not regarded as a mere valet, a subaltern. When Hugh and Val leave, Val "kissed both the photographer and Harlan Yost" (20). Cyril feels "so comfortable with Harlan Yost" and later, Vane asks Harlan to get in bed with him, which he does (77).

Despite Purdy's previous hints and allusions to Harlan's Native ancestry, up until the point when Harlan realizes that Vane is deathly ill, he does not refer to, nor does the reader learn of, his Ojibwe heritage. Slightly resembling Daniel Haws in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Harlan has not fully recognized or acknowledged the force of his Native identity; but unlike Daniel, he is aware of this heritage from family oral history and is not sexually repressed. Harlan Yost has not yet fully identified with his ancestry because of his devotion to, and possibly identification with Cyril Vane, who like Van Vechten, is a light-skinned Euro-American. Yet when Vane's health begins to fail, Harlan begins to question his devotion of twenty years of his life to Vane: "I'm approaching the greatest crisis of my own life. I realize now that I have no one, or will

have no one soon,” he tells Val Sturgis (101). While Cyril Vane is clearly obsessed with African Americans, we begin to realize that his concern for the Native American falls short. Harlan complains to Abner Blossom, “I’ve tried to give him gold, and yet I see now all he admires is tinsel if it’s got style. And he’s never cared as deeply for me as I have for him” (101). Indeed, Cyril shows insensitivity to the Native when he tells Harlan, abrasively, “I have always felt you were at heart a puritan like [Olga]” (103). Here, not only is Cyril comparing the Ojibwe man to the character who represents white Western values, Olga, but also he compares Yost to the early usurpers of Indian land in the Eastern United States, the persecutory Puritans. This hurts.

Harlan Yost identifies with other people of color, but it becomes evident that he feels he has been neglected as an “Indian,” passed over in favor of the “privileged” African American. Harlan’s Indigenous heritage tends to lead his tastes away from old European art forms. Like Carl Van Vechten, prior to becoming interested in writing about and photographing African Americans, Cyril Vane was passionate about ballet, and ballet dancers were his previously favored subject. One evening, amidst a days-long party attended by groups of African American artists, writers, dancers, boxers, and singers (including Ethel Waters), which lapses into bacchanalian orgiastic frolic, Harlan confesses to Cyril, “I’ve always hated the ballet, the classical ballet” (107). But when Cyril “began with the blacks, and [was] the first not only to photograph them, but to do so with them wearing not a speck of clothing anywhere [ . . . ] I realized I hated the ballet and the prima ballerina and even the young Hercules that lifted their aging bodies up over their head, such a cruddy cliché in art. How can anybody go on looking at that museum kind of art” (107). When the focus turns to people of color, Harlan realizes his distaste

for European forms of dance, seeing them as antiquated and ossified, favoring Native American and African American forms. Cyril concludes: “So you were happy with me because of my blacks.” Harlan replies, “Because of you seeing them the way you saw them” (107). Prior to the exchange that follows, Harlan intimates “something final was coming,” a crucial moment is about to occur (108). Cyril asks Harlan why *he* is “so crazy about colored people” and Harlan replies, “My great-great-great granddaddy was they say an Indian” (108). Cyril remarks that he knew this even before Harlan told him the first time in the past, and that while it is not evident to most people, to Vane, “your cheekbones give you away” (108). Although he implies expertise in recognizing physical markers of Native ancestry, Cyril, the white aficionado of African Americans and their cultural productions, never expresses interest in Harlan’s Indian heritage—it is never discussed except when Harlan raises the subject. The “cheekbones” quotation draws from the story Purdy told me on the phone, of Purdy’s own experience as a young man in Chicago being “recognized” as having Native ancestry.

After Cyril’s death, it is as if Harlan is released into his identity as a Native American. The morning of Cyril’s funeral, Harlan looks at himself in the mirror while shaving:

for a moment he thought he was looking at a total stranger. His jaw fell, the hand with the straight razor . . . fell to his side. “I recognized myself,” he was later to speak to Val Sturgis. “I saw who I was. My long masquerade as an old man’s underpaid factotum was ended. And who was I looking at. An almost full-blooded Ojibway Indian. Cyril loved niggers, why didn’t he see an Indian was pretty damned far-off geography for him too.”

It took him some time then to get himself together. He had met himself or, in other worn-out expressions which came to his mind, the scales had fallen from his eyes on the road to Damascus, and so forth. (112)

This sense of unmasking, a shedding of the “masquerade,” is suggested by Harlan’s first name, which recalls the word *harlequin*, one of the *zanni*, or comic servant characters from Italian *Commedia dell’Arte*. The harlequin wears either a mask or whiteface. And in a sense Harlan has been in “whiteface” as Cyril Vane’s servant, appreciating Black culture alongside the older man, his Native heritage of little interest, seemingly not remarkable to Vane. Harlan’s use of a slur against African Americans must be addressed. The term indicates bitterness toward Blacks, but we have already noted Yost’s attraction to Black culture. Harlan’s bitterness is derived from feeling that he was underappreciated by Cyril Vane; moreover, the use of the word is an allusion to Carl Van Vechten’s problematic novel title *Nigger Heaven*. It is almost as if invisible quotation marks are placed around this insulting word. Subsequent scenes in fact further demonstrate that Yost does not feel hatred towards African Americans but rather resentment at his departed Vane. At Cyril’s funeral, “the crowned heads of black culture were there barring none,” all of Vane’s beloved jazz and blues singers and instrumentalists, writer, body-builders, dancers, and boxers. Harlan reveals both his feeling of solidarity with other people of color, but at the same time his new feeling of pride and identification with his Ojibwe heritage comes to the fore: “The blacks outdid every one of the few white persons present in their attire, style, composure, grandeur. It made Harlan almost want to tell each one who entered and shook his hand that he was after all not to be overlooked as an Ojibway. He felt as redskinned then as everyone else was black” (113). Here Harlan thinks of his newly-recognized ethnic identity using a controversial term that only an in-group member may use, in the way that some Natives call themselves “Skins.” Therefore, though at first perhaps troubling, the fact that Harlan thinks of himself using

this word suggests his thorough identification as a member rather than his internalization of white racialism. While Harlan is recognized as an intimate of Cyril, and mourners “embraced Harlan as if he were a part of the family,” Harlan does not feel recognized as a fellow person of color (113). Vane’s misrecognition of Yost points toward a larger misrecognition and mis- or under-representation of Native Americans in mainstream U.S. culture.

Yost’s feeling that he was “not to be overlooked as an Ojibway” but underappreciated nonetheless is also related to Purdy’s own ethical self-imagining as a metaphorical crossblood. I have already mentioned the biographical roots of Vane’s “cheekbones give you away” remark, and that Purdy was told that his great-grandmother possessed Ojibwe ancestry. Yost’s feelings of not being appreciated by Vane also seem to correspond to Purdy’s own feelings toward Van Vechten. In his autobiography *A Star Bright Lie* the composer and author Coleman Dowell notes that he met Purdy at mutual friend Van Vechten’s apartment and they became correspondents if not friends.<sup>102</sup> Dowell writes, “In a letter to me after Van Vechten’s death, Purdy says that he does not believe that Carlo loved him. But the letters I have from Carlo about Purdy refute this” (129). Due to Vane/Van Vechten’s more public celebrations of African American culture, Yost as crossblood Ojibwe and Purdy as an imagined crossblood both feel unappreciated and unloved.

As we have seen, Purdy tends to associate the male Native American with the warrior, with qualities of strength and bravery. As Harlan comes to strongly identify with his Ojibwe ancestry, these qualities come to the fore as he battles the heterosexist

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<sup>102</sup> Dowell’s biographer Eugene Hayworth writes, “For unsubstantiated reasons Dowell felt that his favored position in Van Vechten’s circle was being usurped by James Purdy, a writer Van Vechten had also photographed in 1957” (128).

moralist Olga Petrovna and the disparaging highbrow critic Lionel Kremtorte. Like Millicent De Frayne, whom the Indian Elijah Thrush could not vanquish (as we will see), Olga Petrovna is a formidable foe. But it is crucial to note the differences in the respective outcomes of the conflicts between Elijah and Millicent, and between Harlan and Olga. As I will argue, things are not nearly as grim for Harlan Yost as they are for Elijah at the end of their respective novels, although Harlan may have received a raw deal from his deceased employer and sometime lover.

Out of the three scheduled eulogists of Vane, only one shows up: Lionel Kremtorte, who proceeds to deliver “a thinly veiled criticism of Cyril Vane, pointing out the dead man’s many failures to involve himself in the great social needs of the day”; “instead, the speaker averred, Mr. Vane had made pleasure and joy the sole illuminating beacon of his long and self-indulgent life” (114). Given Lionel’s first name and his membership in “some high falutin’ Higher Culture Society” (112), Purdy is perhaps lampooning the famous professor, critic, and “New York intellectual” Lionel Trilling, who taught at Columbia, emphasizing “Higher Culture” in his “Important Books” colloquium and its influence upon literary authors.<sup>103</sup> This is very likely, especially given the scathing remarks about Trilling and his wife Diana Trilling that Purdy made in at least three May 1964 letters written to his old friend Neely Orme, who had expressed admiration of Trilling.<sup>104</sup> Purdy’s objection to Trilling is thorough. Purdy hated Freud and psychoanalysis (although ironically his work lends itself to a psychoanalytic reading with its Oedipal conflicts and family romances), while Freud was a central figure for

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<sup>103</sup> In his biography of Allen Ginsberg, who was a student of Trilling’s, Barry Miles charges that Trilling “was more concerned with a respect for boundaries than with breaking down barriers,” and that Ginsberg eventually saw Trilling and the “literary establishment” that he represented as “ultimately reactionary” (38, 212).

<sup>104</sup> Orme, whom Purdy had known in his freewheeling Chicago days, was in the 1960s a married insurance agent in Arkansas.

Trilling, who wrote a book on the psychologist and published many book reviews in the *New York Times* on Freudian titles. More to the point is Trilling's rejection of Sherwood Anderson's achievement in a *New York Times* review; Anderson was a fellow Ohio writer admired by Purdy, especially for his exploration of same-sex desire in such understated stories as "Hands."<sup>105</sup> Frank Baldanza's typed notes of his 13 September 1970 phone conversation with Purdy read: "He excoriated the most influential establishment critics, naming Lionel Trilling and Alfred Kazin in particular, as very parochial New Yorkers who do not understand native American writing . . . He sees himself as an especially native American writer out of Sherwood Anderson's tradition, and he blames his lack of recognition . . . on the inability of [these critics] to understand and appreciate the native idiom of the rest of the country." (Further examples of Purdy's seemingly punning use of the phrase "native American" to describe his writing were discussed in the introduction.) One also wonders if "Kremtorte" does not allude to English critic Frank Kermode, who was a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, a publication that Purdy loathed.<sup>106</sup> In any event, as Lionel Kremtorte accuses Vane of being in fact "the leading hedonist of his day," he is dispatched by Harlan Yost,

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<sup>105</sup> "I think he was gay. That was one of his troubles. He was great. I think we're dealing with the same kind of landscape and speech: Ohio," Purdy told Richard Canning (19).

<sup>106</sup> Lionel Trilling and *The New York Review of Books* were, respectively, the *de facto* leader, and one of the representative periodicals (along with *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*) of what Richard Kostelanetz calls the "New York literary mob," which, he argues, dominated the U.S. literary scene in the 1960s. "Trilling had become the closest semblance of a chief this disparate tribe had," he writes (51). In *The End of Intelligent Writing: Literary Politics in America*, Kostelanetz delivers a thoroughly sourced critique of this group of "New York intellectuals," arguing both that they never produced a coherent body of critical theory, and that their cliquishness was damaging to American literature, often preventing innovative fiction and criticism from being published. He establishes that the *NYRB* was corrupt in the sixties, heavily promoting the commercial interests of its own editors (Random House and Vintage books) in its choice of reviewed books and reviewers. These choices promoted the careers and sales of this Cold War "mob," who were mostly liberal anti-Communists in their politics. Fiedler, Sontag, and Mailer are also linked with this group. Purdy attacked the "New York literary establishment" in the majority of the interviews he gave in the 1960s and 1970s.

who, “unable to stand such an attack on his idol any longer . . . made what was perhaps the supreme act of his sojourn in Manhattan” (114). He rises dramatically, stating,

“Not one word more, not a syl-la-ble or breath more!”  
And seizing Mr. Kremtorte by the collar, Harlan Yost pulled the speaker away from the podium and forcibly pushed him toward one of the exits to the slow murmurs of approval and a few measured handclappings. (114)

In this moment Harlan becomes a warrior, defending the reputation of his beloved Cyril Vane. Perhaps Purdy has Harlan do to the critic what he himself might have liked to have done repeatedly.

What happens next seems to be Purdy’s celebration, his exculpation of Carl Van Vechten via Cyril Vane, through his imagined representatives of Black culture:

At that moment the most famous black Gospel choir in the nation raised its strong and reverberating lungs. They sang and sang, louder ever louder drowning, extinguishing to oblivion the jarring words of Lionel Kremtorte forever.

Then just as if in one of the black musicals of a bygone age all the mourners rose as one and began clapping and singing in perfect unison. Their voices shook the room to the extent that the great chandeliers, and the building itself vibrated, swayed, even threatened to come down. (115)

It is Harlan’s act of bravery in vanquishing the spoilsport critic that leads to this unity and celebration and act of forgiving. High culture analysis and fussy, inappropriate critiques are drowned out by the lively force of united, soaring Black voices, so beloved of Vane, in a risky scene that engages stereotypical images but works.

Olga Petrovna, like Millicent De Frayne, an embodiment of white elitist values, is a tougher foe to vanquish than Kremtorte. Her voice manages to be heard over the choir, who cease singing as she steps forward to slander Yost, and lower their heads as she addresses herself to them (113). As we’ll see, in *I am Elijah Thrush* Millicent captures the Indian Elijah at the end and his future is bleak. In *Out with the Stars*, Olga presents a

similar threat to the Native. She confronts Harlan: “‘One would think, would one not,’ she began, staring with rapt hatred at Harlan, [ . . . ] that *you*, sir’ (brandishing her braceleted hands at Harlan,) ‘would believe that *you*, standing before us all like Mr. All-Important, were the bereaved widow, and not I’” (113). After more histrionics, before leaving, “she delivered a look of such leveled hate and venom at Harlan that he closed his eyes and bowed low. Then he advanced across the room of mourners and sat down” (114).

But this is a small setback, since Harlan’s courage is bolstered after his vanquishing of Kremtorte. “Harlan Yost now stepped forward determined to banish Olga Petrovna as he had Lionel Kremtorte,” Purdy writes (115). But Olga repels him, accusing him of stealing her husband. “Look at him, ladies and gentlemen. There he stands, he who usurped my place in my broken marriage, who led my beloved spouse to secret infamy and dissolute hidden pleasure!” (115). Olga thus aligns herself with Fiedler, who noted the homoerotic pairings of white men and men of color across the U.S. fictional canon, and concluded this trend indicates a lack of maturity in the American character, a flight from responsibility, women, and the domestic realm. The verbal attack becomes physical as Olga, echoing the violence of Euro-American colonialism, then strikes the Ojibwe man “full in the face, and not content with this blow she spat full in his face” (115). It is not by chance that Harlan’s face in particular is her target, the face that has so recently been fully self-recognized as Ojibwe by Yost.

But while Petrovna is not vanquished, neither is Harlan. With three Black helpers, he leads Olga back to her chambers, “looking more real and self-possessed than he had during his years with Cyril Vane,” despite Petrovna’s abuse (115). This description not

only shows that Harlan has retained his dignity in the face of this assault, but also that his new self-recognition has led to self-actualization. Daniel Haws could never achieve this in his own life, which ends tragically. On the contrary, Harlan's future is promising due to this self-actualization and his recognized artistic talent. Manifested in his defense of Cyril Vane, Harlan's warrior status is confirmed by the fact that two fighters approach him as brothers in battle: "Two famous heavy-weight boxers of the recent past, one white, the other black, now took Harlan's hand in theirs, and offered him heartfelt words of consolation" after the treatment he has received at the hands of Olga Petrovna (116). Here Purdy, who hung antique prints of boxers on his walls, presents a powerful emblem of cross-racial bonding and sympathy. That it is Olga who is the real "savage" and not the "self-possessed" Native is highlighted when Abner Blossom proclaims, in defiance of the wishes of Olga, who urges Blossom to cease work on his opera about her and her husband: "Let Olga Petrovna do her worst. Let her scalp me if she dare" (131).

The stereotypical language of "scalping" that Abner Blossom uses here is meant to characterize the manifestation of oppressive power that is "savage" in its force. As was the implied case with Paul's mother in "Why Can't They Tell You Why?" and Aunt Winifred Fergus in *Jeremy's Version*, this power is often linked with white women characters. Although references to scalping are multiple across Purdy's corpus, they are voiced by, or linked to, the points of view of Euro-American characters that are drawn negatively. This is appropriate in the sense that scalping was perpetrated and encouraged by eighteenth-century white settlers. In *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Vine Deloria writes that the practice of Euro-Americans scalping Natives evidenced their belief "that Indians

were wild animals to be hunted and skinned. Bounties were set and an Indian scalp became more valuable than beaver, otter, marten, and other animal pelts” (14).

With regard to the stereotypical language of “scalping,” Purdy either subverts it by “flipping the script” of its received connotation—pointing to the “savagery of civilization,” as Sioux author Charles Eastman put it in his memoir *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (139)—or places such language in the mouths of disfavored characters. In order to demonstrate Purdy’s latter strategy, let us take a quick look at two novels that are not major subjects of this dissertation. A few examples are found in *The House of the Solitary Maggot* (1974), the next novel published after *Thrush* and the second book in the *Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys* series begun by *Jeremy’s Version* (1970). The “solitary maggot,” Mr. Skegg, is referred to this way, we are told, not only because the people of the village of Prince’s Crossing in their ignorance cannot pronounce *magnate*, but also because somehow it just seems appropriate. His rival and common-law wife is Lady Bythewaite, a woman “whom at first he had refused to marry and who herself, later, had refused to marry him” (65). Bythewaite, who has “raven hair” (48), has been buying up Skegg’s farm properties while he was ill and inattentive, which disturbs him. This event is associated with him dislocating his jaw and Bythewaite’s “brutal pulling of his back tooth” (64). “She had maimed him while he lay helpless, and while she was tearing out his back tooth with the fury of a savage chief, at that very moment, by bold if not underhand means, she was in the process of depriving him of some of the finest farm lands in the nation” (65). This language is used in reference to Skegg’s point of view. Later, Purdy uses quotation marks to indicate that the use of stereotypical language is Skegg’s. The narrator tells us: “the thought of how Lady

Bythewaite had ‘scalped’ him kept coming back” (87). While the Native references are used at various points in *The House of the Solitary Maggot*, it is difficult to derive a sustained reading from them. At various points the reader is asked to focus on the darkness of Lady Bythewaite’s hair. “*How tar-black my hair is*, she kept repeating to herself” (193). Later Skegg wonders that “her hair, her hair was still jet black!” (328). In buying up Skegg’s properties and eventually coming to own much of the village, Nora Bythewaite (whom, it is implied, has Indigenous ancestry), like Roy Sturtevant in *Narrow Rooms*, has exacted a sort of Indian revenge upon her sort-of husband Mr. Skegg, re-appropriating the land that was once taken from her ancestors. Purdy dedicates the novel to “my Grandmother, Minnie Mae,” whom, according to the family story James was told, would have been 1/16 Ojibwe. While *The House of the Solitary Maggot* is particularly dark and opaque even by Purdy’s standards, the references to raven hair and savage chiefs indicate the significance of Native American aspects.

Purdy also implicitly critiques stereotypical language in *Mourners Below* (1981), by placing it in the mouth of Duane Bledsoe’s father Eugene, who is emotionally distant and bitter toward women. An older woman, the tempting Estelle Dumont, becomes pregnant with Duane’s child. Eugene learns from Dr. Cressy (another version of the good Dr. Charles J. Ray from Gilboa, Ohio) that Estelle refuses to deliver the baby in a hospital. Eugene replies, “What does she have in mind, to drop the baby like an Indian squaw somewhere?” (242). Dr. Cressy, not dignifying this with a spoken response, only grunts in reply to this offensive racist and sexist remark. Purdy then cleverly turns things around on the speaker of Indian stereotypes by soon showing Eugene as talking “in a savage tone of voice” (244). Purdy’s good doctors are often characterized as respecting

and interested in learning from nature and from Indigenous medicine. It transpires that Estelle is demanding that Dr. Cressy (and no other) is to deliver her baby, although he is retired. She threatens to have “that Indian woman from Catoctin Creek”<sup>107</sup> deliver the baby if Cressy refuses. Cressy, following the pattern of Purdian doctors respecting Indigenous practice, tells Eugene: “And that Indian woman she threatened me with, Eugene, she’d be in a lot safer hands with such a midwife than with some of these recent medical graduates” (244). This type of sympathetic doctor will reappear in the novella *Moe’s Villa*, discussed in the following chapter.

Returning to *Out with the Stars*, Abner’s “scalping” reference indicates that Olga Petrovna continues to represent the Euro-American “usurper,” prone to the “savagery” that has been imputed to Native Americans in order to justify their removal, subjugation, and assimilation. As we will see, just as Millicent kidnaps Elijah, effectively “removing” him from his “reservation” of Arcturus Garden, Olga tells the Ojibwe, “I want you out of this house today, and I never want to see your face again as long as I live” (120), and “you need not stay. I told you I never want to see your face again. Never” (121). This space had been Yost’s home for twenty years.

The cruelest cut to Harlan comes later, however, an important allegorical gesture in this novel. After two decades of faithful service to his beloved Cyril Vane, Harlan is disinherited. Abner Blossom reports, “the saddest news of the week is that dear Harlan Yost . . . was not remembered in Cyril Vane’s will except for an old camera and some darkroom equipment which Olga was going to throw out in any case. The rumor of

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<sup>107</sup> Catoctin Creek is also a creek in Frederick County, Maryland, sharing its name with a nearby mountain and mountain range in the Appalachians; tradition claims that the name *Catoctin* is derived from the name of an Indian tribe that lived there, the Kittoctons. Several tribes once fished and hunted at the foot of the mountain. Purdy may also be referring to the similar-sounding Coshocton, a town in Ohio which was once the primary village of the Lenape (Delaware) tribe.

course has it that Olga Petrovna and her lawyers changed the will on the grounds Cyril was *non compos mentis* at the time he had his will drawn up” (169). Thus is it left unclear whether Cyril truly forgot him, or if Olga was responsible for disinheriting of the Ojibwe man. In either event Purdy slyly alludes to how indigenes were disinherited by Euro-Americans. If it is true that Cyril Vane forgot Harlan in his will, then this would confirm Harlan’s feeling that his gifts and his uniqueness were not sufficiently appreciated by Vane. That Olga intervened is more likely, given her moralistic hatred and past abuse of Harlan. Olga being responsible is appropriate to Purdy’s allegory too, because Olga’s intervention is deliberate, and her character represents the aggressive side of Euro-American colonialism. While the allegorical parallel between Natives having their tribal homelands and resources taken by violent or underhanded means and Harlan being left out of Vane’s will may be abstract, the rhetorical effect is legible and simple: the Native is screwed out of his inheritance by the Euro-American.

Yet, while both Elijah and Harlan as “Indians” have abuses visited upon them by these female characters representing Euro-American colonial and imperial rapacity, Purdy’s attitude toward the position of the Native American has changed in twenty years. As we’ll see, although Elijah Thrush is “ruined” by Millicent De Frayne at the close of the earlier novel, Purdy supplies ample hope for Harlan and thus for a Native future. He has come to know himself and recognize his ethnicity, which has given him strength and courage, and he has retained his dignity in the face of the obloquy and degradation of Olga Petrovna. But more importantly, he will continue the work of his former “master,” making it his own; moreover, it is suggested that he may well do it better than his former idol. In this way Harlan resembles, as we will see, the African American narrator Albert

Peggs in *I am Elijah Thrush*. Harlan tells Abner Blossom that Cyril Vane said, “if anything should happen to me, Harlan, keep this in mind. After me in the art of photography there is only you. And although we were in a public place, he kissed me full on the mouth,” giving Harlan his blessing, unashamed to show his love and high respect for the crossblood (118). Abner says he is not surprised that Vane said that: “Cyril had many sterling qualities. One of the most sterling was his ability to praise where praise was deserved, and needed. Treasure that statement, Harlan” (118). Val Sturgis adds his “own eulogium”: “It is even possible you may outstrip the Master in a special way of your own” (118). Val speaks these words with conviction to the crossblood, who allows himself tears. In the larger context of Purdy’s fictional allegories of race, the notion of the Native “servant” potentially rising above the Euro-American “Master” is hugely significant in light of the pessimistic conclusions of *Eustace Chisholm* and *Narrow Rooms*. Harlan’s artistic talent, recognized by Vane and Blossom, is important too because Purdy is himself acknowledging, if belatedly, the emergence of the Native American artist. In Harlan’s rejection of European high art forms such as ballet, it is insinuated that Harlan is carving out his own aesthetic, one inflected by his embrace of his Ojibwe ancestry.

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Emphasizing the importance of Harlan and the allegory of race in *Out with the Stars* opens up doors of perception allowing us to recognize the importance of the Native American in its spiritual predecessor, Purdy’s fantastic *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972). This

short novel is especially rich, imaginative, and ornate. Looking back from the 1990s, reviewer Irving Malin, a long-time appreciator of Purdy, called *Elijah Thrush* one of his “masterpieces,” along with *Malcolm* and *The Nephew*, in his review of *Out with the Stars* (208). In one of his many letters to Purdy, British expatriate writer Gerald Brennan called *Elijah Thrush* “a very strange book, unlike any other, a curious mixture of the imaginative, the touching, and the fanciful, with . . . a general satirical background.” Set in New York City, this shorter novel is one of Purdy’s most surreal works, and in its opulence and camp aesthetics bear the influence of English novelist Ronald Firbank, about whom Purdy wrote a Master’s thesis at the University of Chicago<sup>108</sup> (Luchetti 1). One can sense that this is the same author that wrote what may be his most-read and celebrated text, *Malcolm* (1959), but now possessing expanded imagination, verbal resources, humor, sensuality, and social and cultural engagement. A *New Yorker* reviewer writes, “Mr. Purdy astonishes us with the vividness and fluency that he imparts to an extremely fanciful story” (114).

*I am Elijah Thrush* is one of Purdy’s most complex and intriguing racial and national allegories. Detecting the novel’s allegorical resonance, the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer calls it “an American parable.” To Don Adams, *Thrush* is “one of Purdy’s most overtly allegorical novels,” but he does not explore the novel’s national and racial allegorical meanings (8). It is also a fascinating study of language (including cliché and idiom) and its constitution of, and relationship with, identity. While this novel, like many other Purdy novels, was often called an allegory, commentators are usually hard-pressed to present a sustained allegorical reading. A friend of Purdy’s, the

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<sup>108</sup> Purdy’s thesis is titled “Ronald Firbank and the End of the Decadent Tradition.” According to Luchetti, there are no known extant copies. Carl Van Vechten helped Firbank to get published in America.

expatriate novelist Paul Bowles, wrote in a letter of 1 June 1972: “Each new book you write is an event. Elijah Thrush has caused a good deal of argument and discussion here. Maurice Grosser was persuaded it was an allegory, but he couldn’t decide about whom or what.” Another friend of Bowles shared his Christian allegory, which as described by Bowles is most unsatisfactory.<sup>109</sup> Bowles himself didn’t feel the need to try, and emphasized the novel’s uncanny richness: “Myself I am content to enjoy it as I did Malcolm, without assigning ultimate meanings to the characters. I’ve read it three times; one thing which has struck me is that each time, I had the impression that I was reading it for the first time . . . And that I find strange. I shall have to continue and see what happens on a fourth attempt.” The novel coheres most strongly as an allegory when we think of it in terms of race and nation.

The principal characters of the novel are three: Millicent De Frayne, Elijah Thrush, and Albert Peggs. Later Thrush’s great-grandson, a mute boy known only as Bird of Heaven, will take on a catalyzing role. With its ornithological conceit suggesting a theme of predation, like other Purdy novels, *Thrush* is a historical, racial, and national allegory of the United States. Millicent De Frayne represents the (elite, moneyed) white, Elijah Thrush the (crossblood) Native American, and our narrator Albert Peggs the African American (with roots in the South). “Albert Peggs’s adventures epitomize in a surreal way the predicament of the black race,” Paul Binding writes (6). While the racial meanings of the novel have been discussed to some extent, by Tony Tanner, Stephen

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<sup>109</sup> Purdy told interviewer Richard Canning a related story that he also told to me via telephone. In 1977, when Purdy was a visiting writer in residence at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma, he was invited to Tulsa’s evangelistic Oral Roberts University. Purdy thought they had the wrong writer. “I said, ‘excuse me, have you read my books?’ They were indignant and said yes. I thought it must be a mistake. I went, and the first book I saw them reading was *I am Elijah Thrush*. They think those books are like Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* or Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*: religious allegory. That’s what they saw me doing.” *Thrush* was their favorite. “As I laughed, they stuffed three hundred dollars in my pocket. I thought, Religion must pay ‘round here” (18).

Adams, and Joseph Skerrett, Jr., these have been limited to the interplay of white and Black identity formations. Elijah Thrush's tie to indigeneity has not been truly explored, but rather only briefly noted or nodded at. The author of the introduction to the *Gay Modern Classics* re-issue paperback edition, critic Paul Binding, parenthetically remarks, "Purdy is much occupied by the Amerindians as keepers of the mysteries of America" in the midst of his reference to the Bird of Heaven, but Binding fails to mention the boy's great grandfather Elijah in this context, who is equally characterized in Indian terms (4).

The major conflict in the novel revolves around Millicent's long drawn-out desire to possess the resistant Elijah in matrimony. "When shall we be married?" she asks. "When hell freezes its oldest star boarders," is the queer thespian's reply (33). The marriage that Millicent seeks would exert white and heterosexual control over the independent Thrush and his domain, the Arcturus Theatre. This mirrors the heteronormative control that Olga sought to exert over Cyril Vane against his gay relationships and aesthetics. Millicent is envious of Elijah's autonomous world and wants to possess it and him. A related conflict involves her desire to thwart Thrush's love of the beautiful boy, his grandson the Bird of Heaven. "This is our bone of contention," she tells Peggs. "I don't want him to love the boy" (11). In both of her desires, she exerts a moralizing, normalizing energy that militates against what is queer.

With this aim in mind she hires Albert Peggs as a memoirist but also, and more importantly, to spy on Thrush. The idea of a powerful Euro-American paying an African American man to tread on what is figured as the sovereign property of an "Indian," to infiltrate his world and surveille him in preparation for his eventual overthrow (in this case, kidnapping and marriage), carries historical allegorical reverberations. The general

scenario recalls the “Buffalo Soldiers” of the late nineteenth century, regiments of African American cavalymen and infantrymen who were led by white officers into the territory of the Plains Indians to surveille, intimidate, and war upon them, to clear the way for white settlement. In both scenarios, white power pays Black men to subjugate the Native: hegemonic power pits one subaltern against another. Regarding Peggs’s being tasked to compose Thrush’s memoir, as in Purdy’s earlier novels *The Nephew*, *Cabot Wright Begins*, and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, we find another writer tasked with the impossible: making sense of a person in writing, only to find that the self is largely created in writing. At least according to De Frayne, Peggs becomes another failed writer, a consistent trope in Purdy.

The opening paragraph of *I am Elijah Thrush* is a dandy: “Millicent De Frayne, who was young in 1913, the sole possessor of an immense oil fortune, languished of an incurable ailment, her willful, hopeless love for Elijah Thrush, ‘the mime, poet, painter of art nouveau,’ who, after ruining the lives of countless men and women, was himself finally in love, ‘incorrectly if not indecently,’ with his great-grandson” (9). Millicent and Thrush are inferred to be rather old, since the novel is set circa 1970, but this strange pair has ways of appearing younger than their years, which I’ll explore later. Don Adams explains that such elevated, unusual language alerts the reader that she has entered into a figurative, allegorical realm: “the extravagance and ambivalence of this opening sentence . . . serves as a clue to the novice reader that he is entering a realm that is other than the ordinary, although it may seem to be familiar, as in a dream” (8).

Millicent has pined for Thrush since 1913, and into senescence Thrush continues to stage regular performances of his drama and pantomime, just as did another birdman,

Paul Swan (1883-1972), a model for the character who shares many traits in common with Thrush beyond a biblical first name and an avian last name. Purdy's friend, composer Ned Rorem, wrote in his diary entry of 29 October 1971: "James Purdy for supper, and recitation by him of forthcoming novel based on Paul Swann [sic]" (374).<sup>110</sup> Born in 1883 and raised in Illinois and Nebraska, Swan was famed in the early twentieth century as dancer, actor, sculptor, and portrait painter, and died the year *I am Elijah Thrush* was published as a book. He was also an admirer of James Purdy's work, and Purdy got to see Swan perform in Swan's later years.<sup>111</sup> "I went to a very odd and even spooky place last Sunday. The studio of Paul Swan in Carnegie Hall," Purdy wrote to John Cowper Powys on 1 November 1957:

Paul Swan, it is whispered, is really a man of 80, although he appears to be quite young. Only very old people were in the audience of this small concert hall . . . A gong sounded and there was the strong odor of incense. The lights were extinguished and when they came on a nearly naked man came dancing over the small stage . . . At the end of the program Paul Swan, dressed in an Oriental cap and wearing many jewels, gave a long speech on individualism and the Greeks. He said he was a Greek and civilization be damned as it was today.

Letters of 29 and 31 October 1957 from Swan to Purdy offer lavish praise of his short stories, and between 1957 and 1962 Swan sent Purdy and his roommate Jorma Sjoblom several free tickets to his performances. A worshipper of ancient Greek culture and gods, Swan was known for his regular dance and dramatic performances that continued to occur longer than they perhaps ought to have—but from another angle of thinking it is magical and wonderful that they continued. "Under all Paul Swan's strange and often

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<sup>110</sup> Of Purdy, Rorem memorably continued, "Ever since Chicago, circa 1938 when his roommate corrupted me at my request after seeing Zorina in *Goldwyn Follies* we've gone to different schools together" (374).

<sup>111</sup> In Fall 1957 Sandy Campbell wrote to Purdy: "I am glad you liked going to see Mr. Swan . . . He called me to see if I knew your telephone number. He had spent the day, apparently in ecstasy, reading your books, and he wanted to tell you how much he liked them."

outlandish behavior I felt there was a genuine man,” Purdy continued in his letter of 1 November 1957 to John Cowper Powys. “And if he is 80 his dancing is remarkable for its vigor if nothing else.” Coleman Dowell is less charitable; in his memoir he fondly recalls evenings spent with Carl Van Vechten “refraining from laughter at Paul Swan’s dance recitals where dancer and audience practice an extreme form of masochism” (116). Purdy draws from his experiences with Swan throughout the novel. Thrush tells Peggs, “You have come from destiny. You were meant to know me. I was meant to know you. Thousands of years ago we knew one another, you and I” (17). Correspondingly, on 31 October 1957 Swan wrote to Purdy: “With you I seem to have found an identical vibration,” and elsewhere makes intimations of the cosmic link between them. Along with the elderly women who continued to follow his career over the decades, Swan also became the object of interest in the 1960s of a younger group of camp stylists and connoisseurs of the bizarre. He eventually attracted the attention of Andy Warhol, who made two films in the mid-1960s starring the inimitable Swan, *Paul Swan* and *Camp*.<sup>112</sup>

*I am Elijah Thrush* constitutes a triangular allegory of race in America. The title suggests that we begin with the Indian characterization of its bizarre and theatrical star. Like Daniel Haws in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Elijah Thrush can be understood to possess Native American heritage with roots in Illinois, but does not explicitly refer to his heritage himself, although it is strongly suggested. Unlike Daniel Haws, others do not

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<sup>112</sup> My main source of biographical information is *The Most Beautiful Man in the World: Paul Swan, from Wilde to Warhol*, by Janis and Richard Londraville. This descriptor was used to refer to both Swan and Thrush, but the Londravilles never mention Purdy’s novel nor is it included in their bibliography. A current (February 2009) Google search of the title of the novel plus Swan’s name yields nothing. I was first made aware of Paul Swan as a model for Elijah by John Uecker, who was an actor, acting coach, and theatre producer. Uecker was a friend, assistant, and later amanuensis to both Tennessee Williams and James Purdy. He provided crucial editorial assistance to Purdy for *Gertrude of Stony Island, Moe’s Villa and Other Stories*, and *In the Night of Time and Four Other Plays*, and edited his new *Selected Plays* (2009).

refer to his Native heritage in dialogue. Instead it is suggested through Albert's descriptions and various allusions and hints. It should be made clear that Elijah's Native heritage is by no means obvious, and many critics have missed the importance of his crossblood identity in Purdy's literary performance of race and power in America, limiting their discussion to the interplay of Black and white (Skerrett, Bolling, Tanner, Adams). Like Paul Swan, Elijah Thrush grew up in rural Illinois, but later his family, like Thrush's, moved West. Swan's family moved to Nebraska: Purdy has Thrush remark, "Albert, you smell like a nocturnal moth I once crushed against my chest many years gone past, in Nebraska," a remark that is odd and striking in its specificity; as argued throughout this project, Purdy's details are rarely insignificant (10). If Thrush represents the "Indian," as he is described, then these references suggest that Thrush may possess Midwestern or Plains Indian heritage, but a specific tribal affiliation or ancestry is not established. On a superficial level, superannuated Thrush's exaggerated, colorful stage makeup might recall war paint, and his long hair, once all dark, also suggests Native American practice. His nearly-nude dancing during his stage performances also suggests the appearance of male warriors, whose relative lack of clothing shocked Europeans (71). As we will see, the proverbial "beads and feathers" become important Indian signifiers in the novel.

The narrator Albert Peggs's descriptions of Thrush and his great-grandson provide the most explicit evidence of his Indigenous heritage. This is odd, because the African American hired memoirist understands Thrush to be "white," like Millicent De Frayne. Peggs tells us, "Although white men had offered me their lust before, nobody white had ever offered me illusion, together with dream courtesy, attention, and the entire

backdrop of playacting which was now poured out upon me” (19). If Thrush’s skin is not particularly dusky, other features and actions betray his Native roots, particularly his eyes and hair, as we will see.

Elijah’s enflamed response to the appearance of a feather of a Golden Eagle is a strong clue to his Indigenous knowledge, and is difficult to explain without considering Thrush as “Indian.” For a strange reason that will be discussed later, due to Albert Peggs’ mysterious “habit” which the reader at first takes to be a drug addiction, specifically heroin, Peggs is discovered on more than one occasion to have a brown feather affixed to his attractive, swarthy person. The feather is, the reader learns later, the brown feather of a Golden Eagle, indigenous to North America and elsewhere. The feathers of the Golden Eagle and the Bald Eagle are sacred to many North American tribal peoples. Accordingly, since these eagles are a federally protected species, access to the eagle feather is currently barred by U.S. federal law, except to Native Americans. In the opening chapter of *Black Elk Speaks*, “The Offering of the Pipe,” the Lakota medicine man tells of the sacred symbolism of the eagle feather (1-5). Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday writes in his first novel *House Made of Dawn*: “Great golden eagles nest among the highest outcrops of rock on the mountain peaks. They are sacred . . . the eagle soars in man’s imagination; there is divine malice in the wild eyes, an unmerciful intent. The eagle ranges far and wide over the land, farther than any other creature, and all things there are related simply by having existence in the perfect vision of a bird” (57). In the poem “Close Encounters” from *An Eagle Nation*, Osage poet Carter Revard tells the story of the Osage people coming “down from the stars” to the earth. “When we came down, our messengers / encountered beings / who let us take their bodies / with which we live

into the peaceful days” (25). The “Golden Eagle” is one of these beings. “As eagles, we came down, / and on the red oak tops / we rested, shaking loose with our weight / great showers of acorns, seeds / for new oaks, and our daily bread” (25).

Thrush is attuned to the sacred power of the Golden Eagle feather. Albert reports, “As [Thrush] fanned me now so close, from the inner recesses of my clothing a large brown feather arose, like something alive, so that he caught it easily with his hand. He put down his fan. ‘Where on the face of the earth did this feather come from?’ he cried in a voice of superstitious awe” (20). Not knowing that Albert is the victim of a “habit” involving a Golden Eagle, Thrush seems to accuse Peggs of somehow tapping into the Indigenous medicine of the eagle feather, underscored by his so-called “superstitious awe.” The description of the feather as “like something alive” alludes to the tribal view of the sacred feather as something possessing consciousness and deserving reverence. Traditionally, in the context of tribal ceremonial dances (including those of the Osages), the eagle feather must not be allowed to detach from a dancer’s regalia or fall to the ground (in the old days, this would fetch you a whipping from the Whip Man). As Elijah scrutinizes Peggs, the latter is “shaken with a fit of trembling” (20). Albert narrates, “He kept staring at me with his wild, Indian-like pupils. ‘What is the meaning of this feather?’ he demanded. ‘Have you brought it here and if so for what purpose . . . You know what I am talking about, don’t you?’” (20, ellipsis in original). Albert can only lamely reply, “In Alabama the unusual is the usual” (20). (The link between a feather and Native American medicine and was previously established in my discussion of the short story “The White Blackbird,” in chapter two). Peggs doesn’t understand why Elijah is making such a fuss over a feather. Forgiving Albert again for “it is impossible to be

angry with anyone as fetching as you,” Thrush complains that he has *already* forgiven Peggs repeatedly, although they have known each other very briefly, and again remarks upon the feather: “as I am fanning you like your slave, the feather of a bird of prey falls out from your rich mahogany chest!” (21).

The intense way in which Elijah Thrush reacts to discovering this feather (which is echoed by Dr. Noddy in “The White Blackbird”) and the terms, connected with indigeneity, in which the incident is narrated (such as “Indian-like,” and “Eagle feather”), suggest not only that Elijah Thrush has Native American heritage, but that he has inherited a certain knowledge and capacity for what Western civilization might inaccurately label “shamanism” or “magic,” or what a tribal person might call *medicine*. Millicent calls it witchery. The heiress warns Albert not to “be too intimate with the Mime”: “I’ve sent people before who’ve fallen in love with him. He is first-water mesmerism, no question about it, and in Old Salem would have been burned at the stake. He is a wizard” (13-14). The reference to late seventeenth-century Salem does not merely to connect him with “witchery” but also with indigeneity. The puritans believed Native Americans to worship the devil. A woman called Tituba or “Tituba Indian” was one of the first three people accused of witchcraft because of her link to sorcery (Breslaw xix).<sup>113</sup> Martha Corey, one of the accused Puritan women, was believed to have had a “mulatto” child with an Indian. Like Dr. Noddy’s “hypnotism,” Thrush’s “mesmerism”—his Indigenous medicine—is linked with the feather, which, while not out of place in a novel filled with avian tropes, at the same time is clearly a Native signifier.

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<sup>113</sup> Although there has been much debate about Tituba’s ethnic background, some believing her to be Black Caribbean, all the contemporary records describe her as “Indian” and it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that her “Indian” ethnicity was challenged. She may have been an Arawak Indian from the West Indies.

During Albert's first visit to Elijah Thrush's Arcturus Gardens, he manages to charm the old thespian, who caresses the Black man and fans him with a palm leaf. For Albert's part, "here I thought my madness begins, I thought him beautiful" (19). It is implied that Thrush's medicine includes "love medicine," in this case manifesting as the power to make the beholder perceive him as much younger than his years. In "reality," perhaps, with his ubiquitous stage makeup, affectations, and decrepitude, Thrush is bizarre and even grotesque in appearance. Later Millicent will complain to Peggs that his biography of Thrush is out of touch with reality: "You have fallen under his spell, as all do, you see him as a beautiful young man" (81). Thrush's ability to cast "spells" is associated with indigeneity and the feather.

If Thrush has in turn fallen "under the spell" of Albert's Black beauty, we see that Albert is strongly and viscerally affected by something in Thrush's speech, a "spell" which turns out to be triggered by the word "bird." While late in the novel we will come to understand how Albert's "habit" is connected with a bird's beak and not a needle, Thrush seems to have intuited the potency of this word to Peggs (linked to the centrality of Albert's "habit") and uses it to cast a spell on him to render him supine or frothing at the mouth. "Despite the humor of his queer phraseology, at his last words I became very agitated again, a kind of foam came from my lips, as I twisted about in the chair under his fierce scrutiny, and I had then to allow Bellamy and him to lead me into one of the other rooms, where they removed my clothing, and began applying copious amounts of witch hazel" (21). The detail of "witch hazel" further suggests supernatural power. When Thrush then mentions "the Bird of Heaven," Albert cries, "I wish you wouldn't use that term." He is overcome by "a kind of raving anger" and "more froth poured" from his lips

as from a rabid hound. “I can’t have you use those references,” Albert tells Thrush, but Thrush torments him by uttering the word two more times, causing the African American man to writhe in pain (22).

In Speech-Act theory, performative utterances “do things with words,” or perform actions in words. According to J.L. Austin and John Searle, performative success is only possible within felicitous conditions and contexts. Within certain accepted institutional contexts, authorized speakers are understood to perform actions, changing “reality” with their illocutionary utterances. The “action” performed is usually intangible. That is, there is a change in the listener’s mind in how she defines things or understands things, when something is felicitously decreed, christened, or officially pronounced. When the minister says “I now pronounce you man and wife,” there is no physical change in reality. Elijah Thrush, however, not only performs that conventional kind of Speech Act, but he has also been authorized, perhaps in his boyhood, to “do things with words” in the context of Native medicine. In *The Social Art*, Ronald K. S. Macauley links illocutionary utterances with the casting of spells. He states that we have all heard of stories in which words were uttered, and something wonderful or terrible happens, or of spells being cast that have a “binding effect” on another person (101). “We mostly think of such things as absent from our own use of language, but this is not so,” Macauley writes, emphasizing the “magical element of language” (101, 102). Elijah Thrush uses words to create physical effects. He casts “spells”; he is a medicine man. In Native American traditions, certain words, such as secret names or ceremonial chants, are said to hold power or alter physical reality. “Language, spoken in the appropriate ritual context, will actually cause a change in the physical universe,” writes Muskogee Creek novelist and theorist Craig S.

Womack (16-17). If the context is felicitous, these can be considered transcendental speech-acts. When Thrush says the word “Bird” in front of Albert Peggs, and Peggs is hit by a seizure and foams at the mouth, this is such a transcendental speech act, and an emblem of the force of Elijah and Millicent’s speech upon Peggs. Their speech acts upon him, putting language in his mouth, but also controls him physically. Albert is to a considerable extent seduced and spellbound by these two. But as I will show later, he retains much of his own language and identity, and ultimately makes the language of these two his own.

If Thrush is taken to be Native American, then his Arcturus Garden is his sovereign land, his reservation. While he is occasionally bothered by the government (in the form of police raids, usually connected with Millicent’s power), Thrush is left alone to continue his painting, teaching, and performances as he sees fit. Within the walls of the Gardens, Thrush is outside of Western time, immune to the vicissitudes of fashion and taste, within a spiral-shaped “Indian time,” if you will, rather than linear Western time. Thrush engages art and dance of the past and communes with ancient spirits while never seeming to age. While Millicent De Frayne claims to finance the theatre with her inherited oil money, Thrush repeatedly dismisses this claim as nonsense. If the Arcturus Gardens is the Indian’s reservation, then the money that the white “agent” claims to be giving to the Indian is actually already the property of the Indian, from whose (forcibly) purchased lands Millicent’s inherited oil wealth presumably derives. Historically, when Natives on reservations were threatened with cutoffs of rations or other items by white Indian agents in response to practices deemed inappropriate or harmful, the agents had no right to withhold from the Indians what was already theirs. In most cases the money for

such rations was supplied by the money paid to the tribe by the U.S. government in compensation for the land they purchased (see John Joseph Mathews' *Wah'Kon-Tah* for example), making a deal the tribe could not refuse. This is problematic in so many ways, but the very notion of the exchange of land for money does not make sense from the perspective of many tribes' traditional philosophy, because formerly, most tribes did not believe that land was a "possession" that could be bought or sold. When Millicent circumvents Elijah's plan to sail away (for a time—he plans to return) with Bird of Heaven, having him kidnapped and led onto another boat and forcing a marriage upon him, within Purdy's allegory this can be seen as the forced removal of the Indian from his sovereign land. "She has expropriated all that was fine in me," Elijah later laments (103). She had earlier stated to Albert that "our only task, of course, remains to grind Elijah Thrush to powder" (82). Moreover, the marriage is a travesty of the ideal merger of Red and white that Purdy proposes as prerequisite to achieving a truly American character. Peggs is instructed to take on Elijah's roles and to keep the theatre going, and he does not expect to see Thrush again (117, 120).

Further suggesting Elijah Thrush's allegorical role as crossblood Indian is the Native appearance of Thrush's great-grandson, a mute boy known only as Bird of Heaven. Bird of Heaven is a mute and communicates by making "kissing sounds" that resembles "the calls of mating birds" (26).<sup>114</sup> This boy takes on a role akin to the doted-

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<sup>114</sup> Purdy's fictional Bird of Heaven was modeled on a real boy. Janis and Richard Londraville note, During this period (1961-65), Swan developed an odd relationship with a nearly deaf eleven-year-old boy from the Albany area. The boy's grandmother brought him to see Swan once, and after the performance Swan spent extra time with him, gesturing, making clucking noises, and pointing out items around the studio. The boy responded. Several other visits were arranged, and by the time the boy returned home they were able to communicate. Somehow Swan had figured out certain sounds . . . that the boy could understand. They made up their own code and were able to "speak" on the phone. Swan was sympathetic because of his own, age-related hearing loss (224). The "Indian" identity of the boy, and his relationship with the elder thespian, however, was Purdy's own creation.

upon Changeling child in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, feuded over by Oberon and Titania. Like many of Purdy's innocent young "starters," such as Malcolm and Jeremy Cready, the boy seems to have been orphaned<sup>115</sup> and before he is adopted by Millicent De Frayne, he is housed at "THE ALIMENTARY FOUNDATION / A HOME FOR THE UNWANTED" (25). While spying upon Thrush making a visit to the outside window of the foundation, since he is forbidden to visit the boy, Peggs watches as a barred window scrapes open, revealing "a young boy with flowing raven locks, haunting wild Indian eyes, and a mouth of brilliant vermilion: a striking family resemblance in the boy's every feature to Elijah Thrush" (26). At a later performance at Arcturus Gardens, after De Frayne has adopted the boy, he is brought in by Millicent wearing "an Indian suit, and long black curls" (66).

If Elijah Thrush and Bird of Heaven are "Indians," then Millicent Charbonneau De Frayne represents moneyed, Eurocentric U.S. white culture and identity, and is figuratively associated with whiteness repeatedly. Embracing the pretensions and prejudices of old world aristocracy, she also embodies the American myth of white supremacy. Her language is thus a mixture of sophisticated phraseology and Middle American cliché, many cleverly altered in Millicent's iterations. In the middle of the narrative, Millicent sends Elijah a cryptic telegram: "CONSOLE YOURSELF. ALL OWL EGGS ARE WHITE. / MILLICENT" (69). To many Native Americans, the owl is an ill omen, often a harbinger of death, so from Thrush's perspective this might be construed as more of a threat than a consolation. Thrush is perplexed by the missive, and

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<sup>115</sup> See Baldanza, "James Purdy's Half Orphans."

asks Peggs if he can make anything of it. “Had she sent it to you, I would take it to be an example of her superiority, her being a firm believer in endogamy. Mark my words, all her interest in you is mere infatuation with the exotic,” Elijah tells Albert (69). If the owl is a symbol of wisdom (derived from the mythological Owl of Minerva), wisdom’s origins are claimed by De Frayne to be white. In this reading Millicent tells Thrush to console himself because although he may be under her thumb, the Indian is in good white hands. This is the philosophy of white paternalism, issuing forth from the would-be “Great White Father” (here figured as feminine—as argued in chapter four, Millicent is a female Purdian type I label the “Great White Mother”). In calling the heiress a “firm believer in endogamy,” Thrush accuses her of a belief in the supremacy of the white race. Against the notion of the crossblood that Purdy advocates, Millicent valorizes racial “purity” and the continuity of “elevated” bloodline. “It’s one’s hereditary stock that’s the ticket, and you know it better than I,” Millicent tells her doctor. “Your absurd praise of democracy and charity has led you astray professionally again and again,” she scolds, evincing her elitist and aristocratic attitude (76). Upon meeting Peggs, she remarked, “I have never worked with a person of your complexion . . . Frankly you are not what I would have selected, had I the power of selection. But I am desperate” (11). Peggs tells us that she “was forthright in expressing her surprise that I did not ‘smell.’ I think she was disappointed” (10). The Indian warns the African American again: “engrave on your heart the terrible knowledge that she believes only in endogamy. Her love for you is specious” (70). “After all, he must have cannibal blood, don’t you suppose?” Millicent had asked Thrush, of Peggs (34).

Just as Euro-Americans sought to possess Indigenous land, resources, and bodies, Millicent's paramount desire is to possess Elijah Thrush body and soul, removing him from his sovereign land. Right off the bat we learn that her inherited fortune is derived from oil, no doubt drilled from appropriated or expropriated Indigenous land (Millicent is again connected with the masculine in that oil fortunes are usually connected with male heirs). In light of Purdy's interest in Native Americans as a crucial part of American identity and history, it is notable that De Frayne's middle name, Charbonneau, which is not mentioned until halfway through the book, is the same as the last name of the trapper, explorer, and translator who purchased two captive Shoshone Indian women from another tribe and made them his wives—one of them was named Sacagawea. Toussaint Charbonneau (1767-1843) and Sacagawea would of course join the Lewis and Clark expedition and become a part of American mythology. It is appropriate that De Frayne is linked with him, in light of the fact that she ultimately kidnaps and forces a marriage upon Elijah Thrush, our "Indian." Charbonneau, whom Meriwether Lewis called "a man of no particular merit," is not remembered as a hero (L. Morris 14). History tells us that a Saultier Indian woman in fact once stabbed him with a canoe awl while he was in the act of raping her daughter. This middle name is carefully selected to further convey Millicent's rapacity and acquisitiveness.

With all of these allegorical and historical resonances, it is also tempting to read De Frayne's statements in the light of the history of contact and interaction between whites and Natives. "I've carried the cross of caring for him, and have only been rejected for my pains," Millicent rues of the Indian (14). This alliterative line, which changes the more breezy cliché of "carrying a torch" for someone into a religious metaphor, evokes

the white missions and attempts to acculturate the Indian and turn him into a model Christian. To “carry the cross” is to shoulder a heavy burden, so her diction also suggests the colonialist notion of the “white man’s burden.” Moreover, Millicent also promotes the idea of the Indian as a cannibalistic “savage”: “once [Elijah] told me he could eat my kidneys roasted on an andiron, and so on,” Millicent tells Peggs (14).

While Millicent is seen to be rapacious and racist, she is not the only allegorical character who evinces negative racial feelings towards the Black man. Purdy’s racial and national allegory is more complex than that. In general, Thrush and Peggs take a liking to each other, and Thrush is clearly enamored with Peggs’s physique. Albert Peggs sees a connection between himself and Thrush that can be read as incipient feelings of solidarity between two U.S. minorities, two men of color. Peggs narrates, “His banishment on moral grounds from association with his great-grandson made me begin to half-agree with the Mime, that we were connected in a ‘mystical real way,’ and the bare outlines of our life were not too dissimilar” (28). Albert sees how they are both subject to oppressive power.

But historically, there has been dissension and conflict between African Americans and Native Americans. On the one hand, there has been much intermixing of the groups, since escaped slaves and freedmen were accepted into Southeastern tribes. On the other hand, Native Americans, especially those of the so-called “Five Civilized Tribes,” held African slaves through the 1860s, encouraged by white practice. For example, nineteenth-century Cherokees in the Southeast U.S., making efforts to assimilate so that they might be left in peace in their communities, followed their white neighbors’ agricultural practices, which meant using Black slave labor. This, however,

didn't prevent Andrew Jackson from (illegally) removing them anyway. In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Purdy alludes to the way that Euro-Americans have pitted ethnic minorities against one another, specifically the way that Natives have been encouraged to think of African Americans as inferior. In a letter to Eustace from the Army training camp in Mississippi, Daniel Haws complains of how Captain Stadger forever "hounds" him: "*Other day [he] stopped me after I by accident drunk out of a Lister bag that was in the colored section of the camp. 'Daniel, you like to drink after niggers?' he inquired. Answer my question. A real American Indian like you want to drink out of a nigger's Lister bag?' I had to apologize for half an hour, salute my hand off*" (181). In *Elijah Thrush*, Peggs tells us early on that he fears he will become Thrush's "captive," evoking both slavery and Indian captivity narratives (19). "You belong to me," Elijah tells Peggs, evoking such a relation of ownership (36). Historically, there have been and are Black Creek Indians and Black Cherokees, to give just two examples.<sup>116</sup> It is sometimes assumed that there must be a natural bond between different ethnic groups that have been exploited and oppressed by the dominant group, but such a bond is more difficult to form when subaltern groups are pitted against one another by the dominant one, as the Buffalo Soldiers and Native appropriation of slavery testify. As an exploratory figure toward the non-Native critical ally, Purdy is not afraid to deal with history that is troubling, and this applies not only to the relations between Euro-Americans and African Americans, but also to that between Native Americans and African Americans. As I argued in the introduction, a good ally is not a sycophant but

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<sup>116</sup> The continued dissension between the two groups is typified by the recent disenrollment of Black Cherokees (Freedmen) by the Cherokee Nation in the 1980s. The Cherokee Nation Supreme Court overruled this in 2006, allowing Black Cherokees back into the Nation, but Chief Chad Smith called an emergency election in 2007 which overruled the Cherokee Supreme Court's ruling.

rather presents an honest assessment in a spirit of helpfulness. An ally might point out that it is just as problematic for Native Americans to attempt to retrospectively justify slavery as it is for whites: a placard displayed in the Five Civilized Tribes Museum in Muskogee, Oklahoma (April 2009) states that it was “necessary” for Cherokees to own slaves in Indian Territory.

Purdy highlights this troubled interracial dynamic allegorically in one scene particularly. During one of Elijah’s performances, Albert watches as the strings of beads he wears swing about wildly as he dances. Although these are not identified as Native American beadwork, in *Elijah Thrush* “beads” function as an Indian signifier. Thrush is associated with beads from the start because the first time we see him, “the bead curtains had parted” to reveal Thrush to Peggs (16). The beads are all that Elijah wears aside from a hat and a “cache-sexe,” evoking the semi-nude appearance of the warrior (71). Reminding us of his Native roots, Albert is able to intimate beneath Elijah’s aged tendons and muscles the spirit of what titillated and inspired Parisian audiences some fifty or sixty years prior: “his frontier vigor and naiveté,” which again suggests Native Americans, sometimes perceived by “frontier” settlers as “innocents” (72). But interrupting his “reverie,” a note lands in Albert’s lap which cruelly informs Albert that “THE MIME CALLS YOU TARBOX THE SUPERB BEHIND YOUR BACK” (72). Enraged, Albert steps onto the stage “where one of his long strings of beads struck me full in the face with such force that it drew blood” (72). On one hand, this moment symbolizes the force of racist language, literalizing the “blow” that these words make upon Peggs. But also, the whip hand of the slaveholder and the beads of the Native American are conflated in this symbolic incident, part of Purdy’s racial and national allegory. ““You would be in the

fields cutting cotton this minute had I not rescued you!' [Thrush] shrieked, forgetting that it was I who had applied to Millicent De Frayne for employment, and that it was she who had introduced me to him," Albert tells us (102). In these instances Purdy suggests how the Native has internalized white racism against Blacks. Such scenes dramatize the complex history of interaction between Natives and Blacks.

In the radical performativity of this novel, Purdy dramatizes the way that language shapes us, speaks us. Matthew Stadler writes, "In *Elijah Thrush*, Purdy took his early habit of quotation, of the theatrical performance of real speech, to another level. In effect, [the novel's] whole world is rendered as a quotation, an assemblage of borrowed parts and faked reproductions, within which the principals act out the drama" (10). This is conveyed in the way that Albert Peggs is shaped and interpellated by his patrons' language. Right from the beginning, Peggs begins to acquire the language of the man whose life he is meant to chronicle. "'I have come' I began, falling now as I was later into his own language, 'I have come only to know you, Mr. Thrush.' 'Elijah,' he corrected" (17). This exchange, besides registering the first step towards Peggs' identity being overshadowed by Thrush and Frayne, is also an iteration—a repetition with a difference—of the title *I am Elijah Thrush*. Soon, Peggs says, "I seemed to require the company" of the aged feuding pair. Gradually, repeating a cliché Purdy uses in his previous novel, Peggs reports: "I was falling not merely under the spell of Elijah Thrush, I was deeply in love with him" (30), which is another iteration of the title: "I am (becoming) Elijah Thrush." The falling under a spell/falling in love cliché is iterated later as "I had fallen hopelessly under the spell of Millicent and Elijah . . . it could only be described, improbable as it was, as the passion of love" (78). And Millicent tells him,

“You have fallen under his spell, as all do,” alluding to Thrush’s love medicine (81). The cliché takes on a literal connotation too, given Thrush’s unusual powers, as we have seen (it is insinuated that Albert, spellbound, perceives the couple as much younger and more vibrant than they really are). Later, Albert comments, “I felt most unlike myself, although I had been getting less like myself since that July interview with Millicent” (45). Albert has the sense that he is speaking another’s words, that he is losing his identity. The allegorical resonances can be felt too when we consider the historical past of Albert’s ancestors, as a dark-skinned Black man from rural Alabama. His ancestors were brought over from Africa and their tribal language became useless as they were taught to speak English by necessity, taking on the Other’s language. At the height of his alienation, Albert cannot even remember his own name (112). But as his language will reveal, he comes back to himself.

This has to do with Purdy’s larger point about the social and constitutive force of pre-existing discourse, the way that language speaks us and draws us into its force. One of Purdy’s stronger readers, the English critic Tony Tanner, writes: “perhaps most importantly the novel is about language” (67). We have noted how Peggs takes on the expressions of Millicent and Elijah, who “often employed the identical favorite phrases, words, idioms” (23), and we may add, “clichés.” When Peggs says, “I have come into an inheritance,” this statement can be extended to refer to the way that each of us has come into a preexisting social and cultural heritage, a linguistic “inheritance” that we absorb, are interpellated by, but which we also critically engage. Applicable to many of Purdy’s works, with elegance Tanner writes of *Elijah Thrush*:

To be born is to be inserted into a particular discourse, which to a large extent will determine the values, modes of perception, formulations of

reality, by which and in which we live. And quite as often as feeling that they are in the wrong house, Purdy's central figures feel that they are in the wrong language . . . To the extent that Albert accepts being absorbed into this surrogate family [of Thrush, Frayne, and Bird of Heaven], he has to accept that language, so that the narrator and the narrated come to share and sustain a curious and many-layered discourse. (68)

Peggs's voice may seem to be overshadowed by the Mime. He tells us, "More than anything else, more than the danger, the money, the humiliation, the hate of this great house where I was the paid memoirist, it was the language which was now becoming mine that made me go out of my head" (92). But as we will see, Peggs retains selfhood and is not taken over entirely, suggesting Purdy's hope for the future of African American communities. The Native American future is another question. Although Thrush's discourse to some degree is being perpetuated by Peggs, Thrush himself is "removed" by Millicent, and Peggs takes over Thrush's roles and theatre.

As the young Black man's consciousness seemingly becomes the host of Millicent and Elijah Thrush's parasitic language, he is ultimately "given instructions" that he is to take over Thrush's name and roles. Thrush is last seen on a ship about to be forcibly married to Millicent, who has tricked him into this voyage. She impels him into a parody of the performative utterance of the marriage vows, Austin's classic example of the speech-act. Brazenly declaring that "in this holy hour when Elijah and I are to be made one flesh, I will act as my own priest," Millicent's words ironically recall Austin's concept of "felicity" and felicitous speech-acts: "Darling beloved, this is the moment of my highest felicity—come forward all, this is my wedding day . . . With this ring I thee wed" (112, 113). She then retrieves an enormous gold ring, and stumbles over to where Elijah sits with head bowed.

“With my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.”

Having spoken these words, she seized his hand, as one would take hold of an umbrella that gives signs of flying through the worst of an east wind gale, while he let out cries of pain and astonished rage. (114)

After this travesty, Peggs, handed a certified check for twenty thousand dollars, is instructed to take over Thrush’s roles, manage his theatre, and assume his whole identity. Albert’s closing lines are delivered onstage to an audience at the Gardens: “Ladies and gentlemen,” I began, as the piano playing let up for a bit, “I . . . I . . . I ,” and choked back a sob, “I am . . . Elijah Thrush” (120).

In spite of this declaration, however, many factors suggest that Peggs is not simply the peg on which Thrush hangs his identity. The iteration is uttered by a new subject, a new “speaking body,” and with ellipses interjected. This gap between the “I” of Albert and that of Elijah Thrush is significant. Shoshana Felman’s model of the “scandalous speaking body,” emphasizing the physicality and vulnerability of speech, argues that even if Peggs thinks he has been taken over by Elijah, there is always excess or the possibility of misfire which opens new meanings and interpretations. She writes: “if the theory of the performance of the speaking body—of speech acts proper—lies in the realm of the performative, the theory of the scandal of this performance falls in the domain of psychoanalysis. The scandal consists in the fact that the act cannot know what it is doing, that the act (of language) subverts both consciousness and knowledge (of language)” (67). Although Peggs may feel that he has been taken over by Elijah Thrush’s identity, his iteration of Thrush’s “lines” and identity say more than he means or knows. Peggs, as an African American performer, puts his own signature upon the “character” of Elijah Thrush. Whether he knows it or not, he is making something new, and something

Black, out of “Elijah Thrush.” As Millicent had told him: “You are incapable . . . of being anything but you, wonderful, only *you*” (82).

While Peggs assumes Thrush’s identity with a sob, Derrida’s theory of iterability alongside Felman allows hope for him. Peggs, in performing “Thrush,” will recite his lines, his voice. Yet “every sign,” Derrida writes, “can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable” (*Limited* 12). While Tanner speaks of the “enslavement” of Peggs, and he, Douglass Bolling, and Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., privilege essentialist notions of “authenticity” and thus see Peggs as deficient, the total victim of white parasitism, I rather stress Peggs’s difference from Thrush, a difference produced by the alterity of iterability and “the scandal of the speaking body.” This difference is important, for the early critics ignored Elijah as Native American, and also assumed that Peggs was entirely colonized and swallowed up by Elijah Thrush, whom they see as simply “white.” In the conventional view, the Black man loses his identity due to his imbibing of the language of Millicent DeFrayne and Elijah Thrush. In my reading, Peggs by no means loses his identity; in fact, the African American is seen to triumph in his taking over of the roles of the owner of Arcturus Gardens. It is the Native American, ignored by past critics, who has truly lost himself in the end, “cut to mincemeat” by the aristocratic white who has kidnapped and forced a marriage upon him. Twenty years later, Purdy rewrites this scenario in favor of a Native American perspective. This time around, instead of an African American it is a Native American, Harlan Yost, who takes over the artist’s “role” from his former “Master,” Cyril Vane.

Both Felman and Judith Butler (in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*) emphasize the embodiedness, the physicality of speech. In iterating “I am Elijah Thrush,” Peggs speaks from a different vantage point, from a different “speaking body.” This difference is registered comically when Peggs, directly prior to his debut performance as Thrush, “thought of slipping on [Thrush’s] cache-sexe, but—not to belittle him, after what he has suffered—it didn’t fit” (120). Albert Peggs is not really a slave, and although he may cry as he iterates, may believe he has been swallowed up, as Felman argues, the speaking body always says more than it intends, more than it realizes. Peggs’s speech, his performances, will do more than simply recite the words and identity of the superannuated Elijah Thrush. Iterability enables one to make the other’s words our “own” in a sense, that in speaking familiar words in a new context, we can modify, embellish, and subvert them, placing a new tone, spin, or signature upon them.<sup>117</sup> As Abner Blossom says to Harlan Yost in *Out with the Stars*, “it is even possible” that Albert “may outstrip the Master in a special way” of his own.

Thus, I find hope when Albert earlier uses the pantomime he has learned from Thrush to escape a room full of menacing police officers: “I caught them off their guard when I began bowing as low to them as ever black, darky, or white had bowed under their detention—for hadn’t I observed the Mime’s repertory of pantomime and *made it my own* as if I had been his best pupil?” (92, my emphasis). Iterating and performing racial stereotypes, Peggs satirizes the deference he is expected to show to these white guardians of the dominant power structure. If Albert Peggs has “become” Elijah Thrush

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<sup>117</sup> This is what Judith Butler similarly argues in *Excitable Speech* when she explains how hate speech says more than it intends, making itself vulnerable to expropriation and détournement, to use the term of the French Situationists.

to some extent, it is not as an automaton. Learning the techniques of pantomime and making them “one’s own” is not the same as abject mimesis or mindless repetition. Bakhtin writes in “Discourse in the Novel”: “prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, in other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own” (1215). To Bakhtin, the best pupil develops and makes “one’s own” the work of the “master” or the mentor—just as clichés do not simply parrot something said before but become something different in each new context.

Because my perspective has been influenced by Foucault’s post-humanism, I cannot go as far as Bakhtin in his uncritical positing of the capacity for the personalization of language, yet at the same time I don’t feel that a person can be utterly subjugated by another’s language—one still retains agency. Thus, at the close of *Jeremy’s Version*, when Della quotes Matt Lacey as falling in love with a whole family, she notes that she is also quoting Jeremy too, “*for these words was repeated often enough by you to make them your own*” (366). Jeremy has “followed right along in [Matt’s] footsteps” but there is alterity in his repetition; the words have become his “own.” Likewise, we can hear Elijah in Peggs’ voice as he punningly tells Millicent’s servant, “I am a peg too low to care what might become of me now, Norah” (92). But even acknowledging these absorbed voices of the Other, the voice of Albert Peggs of Alabama, even if he is feeling “low,” is heard loud and clear as he asks the Bird of Heaven, “Are you ready to run over the roof with me to freedom, as you done promised me at our last tryst” (93), or when he uses terms like “lit out” (96) or “went off lickety-

split” (97) and perhaps best of all, when he commands Norah: “Put some motorpower in that fat white ass of yours” (92-93). Such dialogic utterances allow us still to glimpse Albert Peggs behind the mask that utters at the close, “I am... Elijah Thrush” (120). “We wear the mask,” another Ohio writer once famously put it, African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (17-18).

But while Albert Peggs survives his appropriation of Elijah’s mantle, his performance sure to inspire applause from the gathered audience, prospects are bleak for our Indian Elijah Thrush. Bringing to mind treaty violations and land grabs, Elijah states near the end of the novel, “She has expropriated all that was fine in me, dear boy . . . Look at me! Do I not look a ruin. I am not at my best” (103). This utterance perhaps suggests Purdy’s view of the Native American at midcentury. Millicent has waylaid Elijah and the Bird of Heaven, forced a marriage upon the Indian, and the young scion is sick. With Bird’s and Elijah’s faces looking pale, it is evident that Millicent has controlled and “bleached” these “Indians,” rendering them white. The envious and rapacious colonizer has taken what is most cherished by the Indian, the Bird of Heaven, who speaks only through atavistic, sylvan bird sounds. Described as “wild,” the Bird, who makes sounds like “the calls of mating birds” could be seen as the Native American’s connection to nature, the link in his traditional cosmology to the other species of the earth that Black Elk spoke of. The boy could also be seen as the Indian’s future, which is thrown into doubt. Over a megaphone Elijah informs Peggs, now on a tugboat heading for shore, “The Bird of Heaven . . . is just wilting away, and won’t last the voyage, but I’ve nursed him all I can, and stood by him, and should he die, we’ll have to consign his remains to the waves, although it will kill me of course” (118).

Albert is sent ashore to fill the bill onstage for Elijah, claiming his mantle. Over the waves Elijah's voice, amplified by a megaphone, can be heard. Crying out "in a paroxysm of grief and rage," Elijah laments: "I am ruined, irreparably, for all time, the little that's left of me to be ruined. Oh, I will go under the waves, I fear! She's cut me to mincemeat! [ . . . ] She's annulling the marriage" (118). After forcing him into the bedroom, we are told, she belittles his penis and semen. "Albert, I will never recover from this slight. She has asked for the wedding ring back" (118). In a parallel to Euro-American relations with Natives, having controlled Elijah, she now rejects and injures the "Indian." Her love is the devouring and "ravens love" (*Eustace* 253) that appears regularly in Purdy's fiction. Her conquering and repudiation of the Indian is also expressed through two songs performed by a band on the ship as Albert is being escorted away. The first is "Red Wing." Red suggests both the "Red man," the Indian, (as do the feathers of the "Wing") and the blood of a bird, Thrush, being rendered flightless, cut "to mincemeat." The ship's name is also suggestive: "Queen Dick, formerly the Plucked Pigeon." Thrush, the Indian/bird, has been "plucked," his powerful feathers stolen. "Queen Dick" suggests *Moby Dick* and the Pequod (named for the Pequot tribe, who were thought to be "vanished"): while Captain Ahab never caught Moby Dick and died along with his multicultural crew, Millicent has finally succeeded in possessing and controlling her long-time "inscrutable" obsession, only to reject him. She can also be seen as "Queen Dick" in the sense that she, as a "Great White Mother" type, has appropriated the "Dick," patriarchal, phallic power in the Lacanian sense. The name can also be seen as a mockery of Thrush, the powerless "queen" whose "dick" has been berated: he is symbolically castrated, shredded. The next song that is heard after "Red

Wing” is “American Patrol,” evoking U.S. militarism and imperialism. Things look grim for Thrush and Bird. “This wedding cruise may last years,” Albert laments (118). Albert cries as he is hurried to Arcturus Gardens: “I mourned Elijah, whom I knew I would never see again” (120). The Indian is vanishing.

Thrush is not the only “bird” that Millicent De Frayne cuts “to mincemeat.” The Golden Eagle, *Aquila Chysaëtos*, beloved and nourished by Albert Peggs, is also her victim. From Thrush’s perspective as “Indian,” the killing of the sacred Golden Eagle is a further insult to him and a sacrilege. But the eagle takes on different signification within the novel. The Golden Eagle is the bird that has been Albert’s “habit” alluded to throughout the novel but not explained, if such a thing can be explained, until late in the narrative. The novel, with its ornithological conceit, is about predation, often racial predation in the sense of Euro-American colonization and cultural imperialism. Albert’s “habit” is to allow the Golden Eagle literally to bleed him, to be nourished from his blood directly. If the Bald Eagle is construed as a noble symbol of America, then the Golden Eagle is this symbol gilded, like the ones perched at the top of a flagpole bearing the stars and stripes, come to life. From the Western perspective, the Golden Eagle represents a corrupt, avaricious, predatorial America. The economic sense of America “bleeding” the Black worker is reinforced by the detail of place where this occurs: the “chambers” that Peggs rents are located “in the Wall Street area of Manhattan Island”—no doubt an allusion to Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener* (29). The Golden Eagle, as a symbol of America’s rapacious greed and exploitation, is appropriately linked with Millicent (who is known to siphon the semen of paid young men who line up outside her door as a part

of her rejuvenation program). The heiress's nose is described as "immense" and "aquiline," the latter adjective literally meaning "like an eagle." As Peggs looks at it, "for the first time I realized what it resembled. I became almost immediately ill" (32). This truer symbol of America bleeds Albert, feeding from his strength, suggesting the way that white America has exploited the bodies and labor of African Americans through slavery, institutional inequality, and racism. The eagle is an example of the difficulty of Purdy's symbolism and allegories; as Don Adams has pointed out, they are powerful and daunting in their multiplicity, perhaps a product of Purdy's "unconscious" creation. To Thrush, the eagle is sacred and its feathers powerful; but the eagle simultaneously functions as a symbol of a capitalist America that oppresses and exploits its minorities.

In Purdy's complex allegory, the Eagle is not the only one to bleed the Black man. Aristocratic, moneyed elites, politically on the Right, are not the only subjects of Purdy's critique. Writing in the late sixties and early seventies, Purdy witnessed the birth of Black Power, the rise of the Black Panthers, and the ensuing white "Radical Chic," as labeled and mocked by Tom Wolfe in his essay of that name, first published in February 1971. Black rage was in demand, selling books, periodicals, and films. The cultural demand for this rage issued not only from like-minded African Americans but more often from guilt-stricken whites who wanted to be excoriated by righteous anger, to be "punished" (without actually having to sacrifice their privilege). Thrush's possessive pianist, the young white man Eugene Bellamy, tells Peggs that he is "in demand everywhere. It is your period" (60). Purdy therefore suggests that Blacks are a privileged minority (as opposed to Native Americans). Purdy witnessed African Americans becoming a minority *cause célèbre* among both rich white liberals and

willfully poor hippies, aided by precedents such as Carl Van Vechten and Mezz Mezzrow, the jazz musician, “Johnny Appleseed of weed,” and Black culture aficionado who wrote the memoir *Really the Blues*. Beat Generation writers such as Jack Kerouac romanticized Blacks and Mexicans in *On the Road* and *Mexico City Blues*, and Norman Mailer’s famous polemic “The White Negro” fetishized Black masculinity and male sexuality, positing them as resources for the white existential hipster. These white authors romanticize and stereotype characteristics of Black culture and identity, with a special interest in Black masculinity. Although Purdy usually engages stereotype critically or ironically, he may occasionally be guilty of romanticizing African American and Native American masculinity. On the other hand, in *I am Elijah Thrush* Purdy has created an African American major character and narrator who is “queer” in many ways, including his sexuality, his “habit,” his aestheticism, his exhibitionism, and his speech and narrative voice, placing him at odds with many norms of Black masculinity. At the time Purdy was composing *Thrush*, publishers (with few decision-making African Americans on the payroll) were profiting hand over fist from a flood of books on Black radicalism and the Black Panthers (Kostelanetz 116-17). As long as these Black militants remained unfocused in their political critique, verbally attacking “whites” indiscriminately, they didn’t present a threat to the power structure. In fact, they were selling a lot of books and newspapers for them. Looking back on his period of Black nationalism from his later perspective as a Third World Marxist during a 1984 radio interview, Amiri Baraka remarked that “during that period of the movement,” as long as it remained “a bourgeois nationalist, reactionary nationalist kind of trend—a ‘hate whitey’ kind of thing” which claimed that “the enemy is ‘all whites’ without making a

class analysis and showing that there's only a handful of super-billionaire vampires that actually control the society, the ruling class,” then “they didn't really have any problem with that” (Baraka 249). As an angry Black nationalist in the late sixties and early seventies, Baraka found his writings in high demand for publication. As a Third World Marxist presenting a more sophisticated and nuanced critique, and thus more threatening to the capitalist oligarchies in power, he struggled to publish.

Therefore, acknowledging contemporary reality, Purdy has Albert write, “I admire the violence and insurgency of my present-day ‘brothers’ (a word I grin at nonetheless), but I can only live and be what I am, a desperate man, but a comfortable one” (10). For Purdy, it is not only the elite that “feed” on Blacks, but also their white liberal champions, emblemized by the vampirism of Ted Maufritz, a minor character from Albert Peggs’ past who does not appear on stage. For Purdy, “blood” is figuratively linked with bloodline and masculinity. Maufritz is in awe both of Albert’s Blackness—he is the “scion” of a “noble race”—and his masculinity, and seeks to siphon his power or essence, just as Millicent siphons the youthfulness of her paid young men. Purdy’s “liberal-radicals” are implied to be the scions of the elite, their identities predicated, at least initially, on rebelling against their parents while shielded by inherited wealth and white privilege. Thus Ted Maufritz is both a “retired liberal-radical” and a “white gentleman of a wealthy banking family” (29). Peggs would allow the apparent vampire Maufritz, resembling his Golden Eagle, to open one of his “best veins and drink a considerable amount of my blood in the hope, he said, and only in the hope of being ‘worthy’ of the noble race I was scion of. ‘Remember me when yours will be the power and glory of this world,’ he would cry intoxicated by my physical prowess” (29). It is

implied that white liberals are “nourished” on the “blood” of African Americans in the sense that the latter’s plight gives them a cause, something to believe in, to romanticize, champion, even something to prostrate oneself before. Moreover, the position of cultural privilege enjoyed by such whites is built on a history of exploitation—America’s culture and institutions were the beneficiaries of the free or cheap labor of African Americans, their blood, sweat and tears. While Purdy was a wide-ranging and acerbic critic of his contemporary America, and was opposed to the Vietnam War, in this instance he was not averse to criticize the then-trendy “liberal-radical.”

Related to Maufritz’s simultaneous worshipping and draining of Peggs, the ending of *Thrush* as I interpret it, and some of Albert’s statements, as mentioned, suggest that the author tends to see African Americans almost as a privileged minority, who are circa 1970, as they were in the Jazz Age 1920s, “in vogue,” to allude to Langston Hughes’s chapter in *The Big Sea* that recollects the Harlem Renaissance years. James Purdy wrote to his Chicago friend, the surrealist painter and jazz aficionado Gertrude Abercrombie, that he had mailed a copy of *I am Elijah Thrush* to tenor saxophonist and jazz composer Sonny Rollins, who had sent him a letter. If he liked the book, then they would meet, Purdy wrote; perhaps Abercrombie, who knew Rollins along with most of the other be-bop greats, was attempting to get them together. Purdy complained to Abercrombie that he never heard back from Rollins. While this is speculation on my part, it is possible that Rollins may have been alienated by the fact that Albert Peggs writes: “perhaps, if I were lighter—Elijah Thrush on my first visit to the Arcturus Gardens, his studio, said bluntly: ‘You are the color of ripe eggplant!’—I might pass” (10). Also, he remarks: “Because I am black everything is forgiven me by whites, and so

again this may be the reason I have been entrusted with a story a white writer, straining for nobility, for current coin, would not dare to pick up. I am allowed to be as low as possible, and there is always an apology waiting. Except from Millicent De Frayne” (10). Purdy seems to be generalizing on the sentiment of white liberals whom he sees as romanticizing and sentimentalizing African Americans, and it would not be surprising if this rubbed some Black readers the wrong way, Rollins perhaps among them.

Another reason Purdy may have wanted Rollins to read the novel is that a legendary musician whom Rollins knew and who was also a part of Gertrude Abercrombie’s circle—bebop alto saxophonist and jazz legend Charlie Parker (1920-1955)—may have been an influence upon Purdy’s characterization of Albert Peggs in certain ways. Even this odd and vague allusion is rendered slightly more legible reading *Elijah* with the later *Out with the Stars*. In his generally very positive review of the novel, Dyer takes exception to the looseness of Purdy’s plotting: “a *young saxophonist* is introduced so he can make *Parker* House rolls that Abner Blossom can admire because they don’t taste store-bought, and then he disappears” (my emphasis). This character almost seems to exist so that Purdy can allude to Charlie Parker. One of Abercrombie’s paintings, *Design for Death* (1946) was given a parenthetical subtitle, “Charlie Parker’s Favorite Painting” (Weininger and Smith n.p.). The connection between Parker and Peggs is suggested almost subliminally by Purdy. First of all, Parker’s nickname was “Bird,” (shortened from “Yardbird”), which ties into the whole avian trope of the novel, and the word *bird*, recall, triggers Elijah’s Native medicine “spell,” which renders Peggs abject. “Bird” also wrote a bebop standard, “Ornithology.” Next, when Millicent meets Albert for the first time, and he tells her his last name, she asks, “P as in *porker*?” which

seems strange and arbitrary (although perhaps joking on the similarity between *Peggs* and *pigs*), but does resemble “Parker.” Moreover, as Peggs narrates and refers to the “habit” that drains his resources, his language may cause the reader to infer that Peggs is a heroin addict, as Charlie Parker infamously was. Albert’s “habit” turns out to be a Bird, the Golden Eagle, but he is free of this habit by the end of the novel. Parker, on the other hand, would die partly as a result of his drug habit. The motivation behind these allusions is foggy. Perhaps Purdy is commenting upon the changes that had occurred since the racist and conformist 1950s: while Parker was destroyed by his times and his own demons, Peggs, during a time that Purdy judges as relatively favorable to Blacks, finds a way to survive and prevail as an artist.

Ultimately, even though Millicent is associated with the Eagle, she kills it and serves it up to her guests at the farcical wedding banquet aboard the “Queen Dick, formerly the Plucked Pigeon,” then stuffs and displays it, to the horror of Elijah and Albert, who each has his own reasons for reverence of the eagle. All of the major characters were linked with the eagle in one way or another. Albert had his “habit.” Elijah’s fate has mirrored that of the sacred eagle’s, since he is cut “to mincemeat.” Millicent was linked by her predatory nature and her aquiline nose. Her action therefore is a form of cannibalism and sacrilege. This action suggests that the elite powers in America, now linked with the rise of multinational conglomerates, have become so corrupt that only gaining more immediate wealth and power is of interest, with no real concern for preserving national integrity or strength, since multinationals are beholden to no single nation. America, led by corrupt and greedy elites, is feasting on itself. The only real beneficiary is Albert Peggs, even though he is saddened and horrified by the

loss of the Golden Eagle. He is now freed of his habit, has been handed a hefty check, and is in control of a theatre and running performances in New York.

To recap, reading *Out with the Stars* alongside *I am Elijah Thrush* allows the Native aspects of the earlier novel to become more legible and their importance in Purdy's racial and national allegory to be understood. From the earlier to the later novel, we might say that "Indian" changes from adjectives to nouns. While Elijah is described and figured in Indian terms and attributes, and his response to the Golden Eagle feather "gives him away" like a prominent pair of cheekbones, we never hear him refer to his own indigeneity. Alternatively, Harlan Yost, positioned between Cyril Vane and Olga Petrovna as Albert is positioned between Elijah and Millicent, recognizes himself and emerges as a self-actualized crossblood Ojibwe artist. The former is considered doomed, while the latter offers a bright hope for a Native future. My reading of *I am Elijah Thrush* opposes those that have preceded it on the issue of Albert Peggs' identity. Rather than seeing Peggs as the total victim of white parasitism, taken over by the language and habits of Thrush and De Frayne, in my allegorical reading, the African American, retaining selfhood through making this language his own, has displaced the Native American, and the Native American, cut "to mincemeat," has been removed and his resources expropriated.

This pessimistic view of the Native American's status circa 1970, although presented as a critique of Euro-American imperialism, is problematic. On the literary scene, Purdy seems not to have been aware of positive signs such as the impact of Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* or N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and

Momaday's receipt of the Pulitzer Prize. On the other hand, most of the highly visible activism of the American Indian Movement would arrive *after* Purdy had composed *I am Elijah Thrush*. This negative view and outlook is eventually exchanged for a much more affirmative one in what I regard as Purdy's revision of *Thrush*, 1992's *Out with the Stars*. This later novel, although profitably discussed alongside its precedent, should also be considered alongside a relatively later set of works that surround it, including *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986), "The White Blackbird" (1990), and *Moe's Villa* (2000, 2004 US). These works present a more affirmative outlook for Native Americans, endorse and depict the rebuilding of Native communities (starting with fathers and sons), and evince Purdy's advocacy of tribal sovereignty. Purdy's most "Native" works, the culmination of Purdy's developing engagement across his entire career, are *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe's Villa*, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX

### INDIAN FATHERS, SONS, AND LOVERS:

#### *IN THE HOLLOW OF HIS HAND AND MOE'S VILLA*

Two close people sail off in a canoe.

Love will do, love will do.

—James Purdy, from untitled, *The Running Sun*

Purdy's later works *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986) and the novella *Moe's Villa* (2000, 2004 U.S.) represent a strong development in the evolution of his implicit attitude toward the state of Native American claims and communities. Looking at these two fictions together in light of all of the novels discussed so far, it is possible to see these two works as representing Purdy's strongest feeling of optimism for Native communities, and especially in the later novella, an advocacy of tribal sovereignty. In both works Purdy endorses Native survivance and is, or at least attempts to be, sympathetic with Native perspectives. Purdy is also highly aware of Native American history in the Midwest and alludes to this, especially in *Moe's Villa* with regard to the Shawnee people who lived in what is now the state of Ohio. In the earlier novel featuring Anishinaabe characters Purdy engages with traditional Ojibwe stories in a fashion that could be called "tribally-specific" in a sense. This development is in line with my positioning of Purdy as a metaphorical crossblood and an exploratory figure towards the non-Native critical ally. These works—especially considered after the feeling of optimism for the crossblood Ojibwe character Harlan Yost in *Out with the Stars* (1993), published in

between—represent the furthest point of development in Purdy’s oeuvre with regard to his engagement with the Indigenous. The most overt endorsement of Native claims comes in *Moe’s Villa*, but is also developed in a more sustained fashion in the earlier novel *In the Hollow of His Hand*.

These two novels join *Mourners Below* (1981) and *On Glory’s Course* (1984) as the concluding installments of Purdy’s Midwestern series, *Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys*. This series title was used officially for the first two novels, *Jeremy’s Version* and *The House of the Solitary Maggot*, but was dropped afterwards because publishers felt a series name might deter readers who felt they had to read all of the previous books to understand the current novel. In Purdy’s series this is actually not a concern, because each novel has almost entirely different character and place names, and they are only related in their Midwestern settings and the fact that they are largely derived from stories that Purdy’s maternal grandmother and great-grandmother told him, along with his own experiences growing up in northwestern Ohio. Purdy’s treasuring and retelling of stories told by elders recalls the oral tradition of Native American storytelling, especially because these women were believed to have Indian ancestry. “I had listened as a child to these women’s endless recollections of small towns, and villages, and sinister cities. When death had silenced the narrators, very gradually I began to recall, as if prompted by the dead, these stories from beyond my own remembrance,” Purdy writes in an autobiographical statement (“James” 303). He specifically noted that the *Sleepers* series includes *Mourners Below* and the then-imminent *On Glory’s Course*. In a letter of 3 December 1971, when only *Jeremy’s Version* had been completed, Purdy wrote to Professor Frank Baldanza that the series “may turn out to be as many as five or six

volumes.” He was correct in his prognostication: with *In the Hollow of His Hand* the fifth volume, and the novella *Moe’s Villa* considered as the final volume, we have six books in the series.

These two works of fiction share a special concern with the father and patrimony, and both employ, explicitly in the earlier work and implicitly in the latter, a secret Native American father who has been suppressed by the son’s white family. Reviewing *In the Hollow of His Hand*, John Espy’s astute summation is applicable to *Moe’s Villa* too: Purdy blends “surface realism, hilarious burlesque, and flashes of divine magic to explore two of his obsessive themes: the blood forces of generations and the mutual needs of a father and a son.” Purdy suggests through his national and racial allegorizing that Native Americans comprise a crucial yet repressed or misrepresented part of American identity, and that Native Americans ought to be regarded as the true fathers of America, fathers who have been unfairly rejected. In these two works, two crossblood sons choose between white and Indian parents. But for Purdy, who explores and endorses the crossblood, things are rarely as simple as “white” and “Indian.” The “white” mothers in these works possess a modest Native ancestry, and the Native fathers are of mixed blood, although Decatur in *Hollow* is quite dark-complexioned.

Purdy suggests in both works that the biological fathers’ Native patrimony is a *Red gift* to the family, and his tone seems to privilege unequivocally the claims of the Indian fathers, which seem profound, even preternatural. Broadly speaking, Purdy is arguing that Native Americans are foundational to, and intrinsically a part of, American culture and ethnic identity, as opposed to being historical relics and a barrier to Manifest Destiny that necessitated removal to fulfill the logic of American exceptionalism.

“Within the narrative of American exceptionalism there is no role for tribal sovereignty or native separatism,” Deborah Madsen writes (43). Against such American myths as exceptionalism and its offshoot Manifest Destiny, in these two works Purdy endorses Native American tribal sovereignty in various subtle but important ways. *Moe’s Villa* is also particularly significant in that it presents a positively-limned character, Dr. Cooke, who seems to embody the ideal that Purdy has implicitly called for—a blending of Indigenous and European traits that would constitute a new American. His earlier novels such as *Eustace Chisholm* and *Narrow Rooms* had shown the dire consequences of the failure of America to merge the Euro-American and Native American. In this later work, Purdy is able to imagine with Dr. Cooke what this merging might look like, or at least a prototype of this merger.

A concomitant concern, in noting Purdy’s privileging of male characters and his theme of inheritance and patrimony, is the author’s attitude towards women, which is an issue in earlier works as well. His literary explorations of Native American themes center on his vivid male characters. Also, Purdy’s women, especially the mothers as they are perceived by Purdy’s young protagonist sons, are often licentious, still sensual, and overly controlling yet neglectful. Young sons, characters such as Jethro Fergus (*Jeremy’s Version*), Ned Cotrell (*On Glory’s Course*), Chad Coultas (*In the Hollow of His Hand*), and Rory Hawley (*Moe’s Villa*), are each very concerned with his mother’s sexuality and her lack of exclusivity with her love. This is taken to an extreme in *Moe’s Villa* (which employs a fairy-tale hyperbole at times). Rory in his sleep recites a litany of five names, “Vesta Hawley’s roster of lovers” (252). Dr. Cooke tells a dying patient of his, “Rory saw she was not his mother, but a Circe” (195). Frau Storeholder tells her mistress Vesta,

“Love will not permit or allow for it to be shared. And you, poor child, have shared love with so many, so countless many...in your case multitudes” (232). In both works the son leaves the mother’s house to live with his crossblood Native American biological father. In the former novel the Native man’s patrimony is made overt, and in the latter established through an accumulation of hints, but in both cases the texts privilege the claim of the Indian father over the mother. In both cases the mother is said to possess a modest portion of Native blood, but this does not affect the text’s sanctioning of the Native paternal claim on the son. The relinquishment or acquiescing of the mother in the face of the overwhelming force of the Indigenous father’s claim is most pronounced in the earlier novel. As will be seen, in the later work, *Moe’s Villa*, Purdy makes a movement toward conciliation with a feminist point of view. Also in Purdy’s defense, in both works he sensitively explores women’s familial relationships and friendships in these novels and is sympathetic to women’s challenges and limitations in a patriarchal society.<sup>118</sup>

Purdy’s picaresque, surreal, American Gothic novel *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986), unlike his much-treated early novels such as *Malcolm* or *The Nephew*, has not been touched by Anglophone academic scholarship. This in spite of the fact that it is “one of his most perfectly achieved novels,” according to Firdaus Kanga, a gay and disabled London author who grew up in Mumbai. The novel was generally positively reviewed, with some dissenters weighing in, but apparently did not sell well, being the only Purdy novel that was never issued as a paperback. The novel is therefore obscure even to many who know Purdy’s work fairly well, which is unfortunate given the novel’s

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<sup>118</sup> As earlier noted, Purdy has claimed that women comprise a large part of his cult readership and three of his pieces have been published in either *Cosmopolitan* or *Mademoiselle* magazine.

explosion of creativity and humor, along with its rich engagement with Indigenous themes. Author Hilary Masters writes that the novel reaffirms Purdy's "reputation as an authentic original, a 'permanent truant,' to use his own description of a character, in the American school of contemporary literature." In his review of the novel, English gay critic Richard Dyer, pointing towards the symbolic and allegorical resonances of this novel but not elucidating them, writes that the novel "is a fable or parable that displays all of James Purdy's remarkable gifts."<sup>119</sup> Recognizing this dimension and critically pointing to the challenging multiplicity of Purdy's allegoresis, Loxley Nichols complains that the novel, although beginning "in a tide of rhapsodic splendor . . . later becomes stymied in an allegorical bog." Reviewer Sharan Gibson imagined the novel as "co-authored by Mark Twain and Angela Carter, then rewritten as a screenplay by William Faulkner." Dyer reckoned that *Hollow* is "as picaresque in its form as it is in its content. It begins in one genre and ends in another—as if Ivy Compton-Burnett decided halfway through one of her books to go rafting with Mark Twain." Reviewer Lee Smith, a Southern female novelist, makes the point that the novel is actually "antipicaresque" because Chad, "instead of setting out on a traditional quest to find his own father, is kidnapped repeatedly by potential fathers eager to adopt *him*," although the novel in its second half follows the tradition of the picaresque.<sup>120</sup> Vince Aletti writes that the novel's "14-year-old hero, Chad Coultas, is a Main Street Malcolm cut loose from family ties and

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<sup>119</sup> Dyer, the author of several books on film and gay studies, lists some of these gifts: "his awesome ear for the way people talk; his uncanny understanding of what they mean to say, and cannot, because they don't know what he does; his gift for seeing the grotesque in the ordinary, the ordinary in the grotesque; his sense of sin; his appealing American humor, wherein redemption lies."

<sup>120</sup> Purdy, who taught Spanish at Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin for nearly ten years, and studied in Spain, is a great admirer of Cervantes, especially his *Rinconete and Cortadillo*, of the Spanish picaresque tradition (Bradford 98).

set adrift in an American fantasyland as outlandishly marvelous as Kafka's Oklahoma" (18).

This novel, which Nichols called "an initiation story [exploring] the relationship between fathers and sons and the search for self," opens in a small Midwestern town, probably in northwestern Ohio, in the 1920s, in the general area of what, circa 1800, was the far southernmost stretch of small Ojibwe settlements. Although the landscape includes "a small mountain," which is out of place in Northwestern Ohio, it is established that "Yellow Brook's near the Blanchard River" (128). The Blanchard River runs through Findlay, Ohio, where James Purdy attended elementary, junior high, and high school (Parker Sams *Courier*). The name *Yellow Brook* is likely a nod to the village of Yellow Springs, Ohio, the home of Antioch College, a progressive small liberal arts college not far from Dayton, which does have cliffs that are similar to those described in the novel. English professors at Antioch have taught Purdy's novels including the also neglected predecessor *On Glory's Course*, and have corresponded with the author (Ohio State archive). Moreover the college publishes the *Antioch Review*, which has been highly supportive of Purdy's career over the years, publishing many of his short stories. The population of Yellow Springs more closely resembles that of Purdy's "town of 5,000" than Findlay (1).

Given Purdy's intense interest in American history and his references to regional historical landmarks and events, with "Yellow Brook" Purdy also alludes to a tragedy that occurred at Yellow Creek in 1774, which is located near the present town of Steubenville, Ohio. *The Ohio Guide*, which Purdy kept on his bookshelf, tells us "On the south bank of this creek is the site of the Logan cabin, which was for several years the

home of Logan [Tachnehdorus], the Mingo chief. In 1774 Logan's sister and a number of his Mingo friends were murdered by a group of Americans led by Colonel Greathouse; this act caused Logan to take up arms against the white men" (436). What this (sometimes inaccurate) book does not mention is the cold and calculated manner in which these Mingos were murdered with prior intent. The book *The Ohio Frontier* (1996) includes Henry Jolly's account of the slaughter, which occurred when he was sixteen years old. Five Mingo men and one woman with an infant crossed the river to visit "Greathouse's party":

The whites gave them rum, which three of them drank, and in a short time they became very drunk. The other two men and the woman refused to drink. The sober Indians were challenged to shoot at a mark, to which they agreed; and as soon as they emptied their guns, the whites shot them down. The woman attempted to escape by flight, but was also shot down; she lived long enough, however, to beg mercy for her babe, telling them that it was a kin to themselves. The whites had a man in the cabin, prepared with a tomahawk for the purpose of killing the three drunken Indians, which was immediately done. (38)

He concludes:

Could any rational person believe for a moment that the Indians came to Yellow Creek with hostile intentions, or that they had any suspicion of similar intentions on the part of the whites, against them? [ . . . ] Every person who is at all acquainted with Indians knows better, and it was the belief of the inhabitants who were capable of reasoning on the subject that all the depredations committed on the frontier by Logan and his party, in 1774, were as a retaliation for the murder of Logan's friends at Yellow Creek. (39-40)

Soon afterward Chief Logan's sister, brother, and father were killed by a party led by Colonel Michael Cresap. Chief Logan vowed to kill ten whites for every one of his friends and relations who were killed, leading to his alliance with the Shawnee Chief Cornstalk in what became known as "Lord Dunsmore's War." After a peace treaty was signed, Chief Logan made his famous speech which was recorded by Thomas Jefferson

in his Memorandum book in 1774. The speech begins, “I appeal to any white man to say if he ever entered Logan’s cabin hungry and he gave him not meat; if he ever came cold and naked and he ever clothed him not. During the course of the last long and bloody war, Logan remained idle in his cabin, and advocate for peace. Nay, such was my affection for the whites, that my countrymen hooted as they passed by and said, ‘Logan is the friend of white men.’” He then recounts the massacre and his revenge: “I have fully glutted my vengeance.” He closes, “Who is there to mourn for Logan? Not one” (40). Purdy’s town name serves several purposes, but the most important one is its reminder of white treachery and bloodshed that led to the establishment of white settlements.

The novel’s plot hinges on the reappearance of the dark-skinned Ojibwe man Decatur (“He don’t have no other name”), who one day fourteen years earlier engaged in a clandestine tryst with a laudanum-hazed Mrs. Eva Coultas (16). The result is the adolescent Chad Coultas, who in spite of his “thick black hair” (27), “dark features,” and the fact that he has one blue eye and one black (23), has always been treated as the progeny of Lewis Coultas, a white man. Like many other Native men who ironically at the time weren’t even granted U.S. citizenship, Decatur enlisted to fight in World War I. Returning from the Great War as a hero, dusky Decatur, the “town Indian,” begins slowly but surely to claim his offspring. Ultimately Chad will choose his Ojibwe heritage over his mother’s blood, leaving the Coultas family behind to join Decatur.

In writing of the Anishinaabeg and implicitly condoning Chad’s decision, along with acknowledging his debt as a storyteller to his supposedly crossblood Ojibwe grandmothers on his mother’s side, James Purdy reaffirms this part of his imagined Native ancestry, keeping it alive in his own way. Euro-American writers have regularly

made problematic choices in their characterization of Native Americans in fiction, or in appropriating Indian identity or spirituality, as critiqued by Indigenous theorists such as Gerald Vizenor and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn. Supporting my contention that Purdy is of interest to Native Studies, Cherokee scholar and critic Dustin Gray stated that Purdy renders “Indian characters sympathetically and in complex ways. These characters are not monosyllabic speakers, backwards, or apolitical. His landscape acknowledges Indigenous presence, both historical and contemporary.”<sup>121</sup> Even if James Purdy’s imagined Ojibwe ancestry were proven, this would by no means render him immune to criticism. The novel no doubt to a limited extent includes aspects of fantasy, projection, and exoticization. Yet Purdy told one interviewer in 1987 that his plot was based on a story his grandmother told him as a child<sup>122</sup> (Swain). The interviewer did not follow up, however, and the subject was changed. Such indifference is unfortunately typical of Purdy’s critics, because not only does Purdy in his own idiosyncratic way opt to keep this imagined heritage alive, but he also implicitly advocates Native American survivance and resistance.

Purdy told me more on the telephone about his family’s claimed connection to an Ojibwe ancestry, or what I call his imagined heritage, including a story that is re-inscribed in the novel. This story suggests the ways in which American identity generally is complex and internecine and often incorporates Native American ancestry,

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<sup>121</sup> Having read *In the Hollow of His Hand* at my recommendation, Gray, at the James Purdy Society panel at the American Literature Association conference in May 2008, presented a Native American literary nationalist reading of the novel. His talk responded to the feedback that was elicited by my earlier presentation on *In the Hollow of His Hand* that Gray had witnessed at the Native American Studies/Indigenous Studies conference in Athens, Georgia in April 2008. For the James Purdy Society I had previously discussed the Native American aspects of *Eustace Chisholm* in 2007 at the American Literature Association conference.

<sup>122</sup> In multiple interviews Purdy has mentioned his mother and maternal grandmother appearing to him in dreams, telling him he had to tell a story in a particular way.

one that was often hidden historically. During two telephone conversations, Purdy told me that during his great grandmother Nancy Ann “Nettie” Cowhick’s funeral, a Native American woman in traditional Indian garments was an unexpected visitor; this occurred when he was about five years of age. Family members were scandalized, and an attempt was made to usher her out, but the Native woman refused to leave and announced that “Nettie is one of us,” Purdy told me via telephone. Having Native American heritage in the early twentieth century was not always seen as something to be proud of, but rather something to conceal, subject to social disgrace. Purdy’s friend, Mohawk poet Maurice Kenny, writes in “Introduction: A Memoir”: “My father was born in 1900, not a time in America, let alone in northern New York state, to shout, ‘Hey, I’m an Indian’” (52). When I repeated Purdy’s story to Kenny over the phone, he commented that it was “very possible” that this was a true story. Kenny’s father told him not to reveal to people that he had Native ancestry. Purdy told me that his father William did not believe that there was really Native blood on his wife’s side of the family. Photographs of Nettie Cowhick, however, certainly do not rule out the possibility that she did have Native ancestry; she appears to have a somewhat duskier complexion than others around her.

The story Purdy told me is the basis of a fictionalized, altered version told near the beginning of *In the Hollow of His Hand*, indicating its importance. For one thing it reveals to the reader that Native American heritage is already a part of Chad’s mother’s family, and that Chad would have had some Native blood even had the Ojibwe man Decatur not been his father. This both suggests Purdy’s emphasis on the widespread presence in the U.S. of Indigenous roots and mixed blood, and helps to explain why there had not been more suspicion about Chad’s dark features before. Bess Byall, Chad’s

teacher, recalls “the disgrace at Chad Coultas’s maternal great grandma’s funeral” (12). Even the cause of Chad’s great grandmother’s death is associated with the family’s Indian heritage and interest in their past presence. “The old woman, who was over ninety, had died while opening a box of choice arrowheads she had taken down from the attic” (12). The arrowheads also emphasize that the land of the novel’s setting had been Native land for centuries, not virgin land just waiting for white settlement.

While the elaborate funeral was in progress in her home, a fearful looking and very old Indian man, clothed in a blanket and wearing a kind of headdress of deep red feathers, had tried to gain admittance to the ceremony. He was turned away by an usher, but pushing past him, the terrible old man went directly up to Eva Coultas . . . and said to her in a loud voice that the old woman lying in her coffin had Indian blood, and he could not therefore be denied admission. Lewis Coultas, seeing his wife being harangued by the Indian, lost his temper, and struck the man, whereupon the Indian drew a knife. Brandishing it, he said, ‘Your punishment will come—is already in preparation—both of you’ (13).

Wearing the emblematic Indian blanket, his man is Decatur’s grandfather, the significance of whom will be discussed. This memory introduces a dramatic Indian curse on the family (an example of what Alan Velie calls “Indian Gothic” in his essay of the same name) and foreshadows the predicament in which Lewis and Eva Coultas will find themselves when Chad’s paternity becomes clear. Chad’s grandmother Pauline, daughter of the deceased, remembers “her mother’s funeral and the appearance there of an old Indian man who had insulted everybody at the ceremony. He had shrieked out at her, ‘Your own mother is one of us,’ it seemed to her he had said, ‘and you are likewise. Look at your face in a still pool of water and see if I am not right’” (85). Decatur’s grandfather is like a specter of the past, an Indian who was supposed to have “vanished,” but has returned to haunt the family, a foreshadowing. The hostility of Lewis and the fact that an usher tries to turn the Indian away suggests how the white family and white-

majority town wishes to excise its Indian past and heritage. In considering the similarities between this scene and the story that Purdy told me, likewise note the similarity between the name Eva Coultas, and Vera Otis, James's mother's maiden name.

Decatur is an example of a modernist type of Native protagonist, an iteration of the returned veterans and alienated heroes of canonical Native American novels. Called the "Town Indian," Decatur seems to go it alone for the most part, a Native without a community, separated from other Ojibwes, except for his grandfather, who lives "in the hills" outside of town in an apparently traditional manner. In Purdy's fictional setting, "there was an Indian reservation not far from Yellow Brook, although it was very small, hardly more than a compound of very old men and a few 'squaws'" (56). The offensive and derogatory term is placed in quotation marks to indicate that this is the racist and sexist language of Chad's father Mr. Lewis Coultas, a character who is mostly negatively drawn. Traditional culture has dwindled, yet it is significant that Purdy creates a reservation in his fictional landscape, something that hasn't existed in Ohio since the 1830s. This suggests the vestigial and contemporary presence of Ohioans with Native ancestry, opposed to the assumption that Natives are long "vanished" from the state. Decatur laughs when he tells Lewis Coultas that his grandfather doesn't think his hair is long enough: "He says I should come back with him to the . . . hills. But I ain't never been to the hills, as a matter of fact. My grandpa is like a total stranger to me," he avers (56). Although Decatur's black hair is already much longer than the white male norm, he usually keeps it hidden beneath one of the expensive hats he is seen wearing (14).

Decatur is restless, looking for a home to replace the homelands that were stolen from his people. He moves from house to house, not able to find a suitable resting place.

Decatur is seen to possess a great deal of money, owning various homes and cars, and the narrator attributes this to his “mustering out pay” from the war. Due to the mysteriousness of his activities, and given the time period, perhaps his money is derived through bootlegging or other illegal activities, but the source of his wealth is never adequately explained.

Decatur, with his mustering out pay, had been buying up property, old houses deserted by very old people who had died without heirs. He would stay in one of the houses he had purchased for a few days, then tired of it, he would move on to another house he had recently taken possession of. He also bought several used but luxury cars. But in the end, no matter how many houses or cars he had, he always went up the small mountain near Yellow Brook and disappeared—into a teepee he joked. But others said it was a house containing twenty-five rooms which he had built by hand, beginning with the foundation, and only recently the massive roof. He himself called it a teepee. (14)

This indicates that he has no home, no place where he feels that he belongs; the fact that he is struggling to “build” a new one for himself (and his son) carries symbolic significance. He is not satisfied with the many “houses” built by Euro-Americans that are available to him; he must build “by hand” his own “house.” The fact that he calls it a “teepee” suggests that he is building something Indigenous, the beginning perhaps of a Native community that he wants to establish with his son Chad, but it also shows his distance from Ojibwe traditional life, because the typical Ojibwe dwelling was a wiigiwam.

Decatur has difficulty forging this “home,” his identity, and resists strict traditionalism. In a moment of despair, Decatur declares repeatedly in the face of evidence pointing otherwise, “I am not an Indian.” Decatur resembles many previous Purdy male characters who cannot accept themselves. Kermit, the “little person” from *Malcolm*, comically refuses to accept that he is any different from anyone else, although

his small stature makes this obvious to everyone else. In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, other characters remark upon Daniel Haws' dark features and hair, but he will not acknowledge or investigate his Native heritage. Bess Lytle reports to her brother Todd that Decatur's grandfather had come to her house, where Decatur was staying, and tried to force his grandson to come live with him "in the hills" until the old man expires: "Decatur kept saying again and again *I am not an Indian. I won't go back and live in the hills*" (51). Her brother Todd responds, "Well, maybe he don't think he is . . . But he'll have to do a lot of convincing to the rest of the world" (51). Like Daniel Haws, Decatur looks like an Indian; unlike Daniel he is familiar with his Native ancestry. Yet he has trouble accepting himself as an "Indian," just as did Daniel, and, as we will see, Moses Swearingen in *Moe's Villa*. Purdy implies that much of the problem is the limited range of what "Indian" can mean in Decatur's time. In the novel, set in the 1920s, the available options seem to be either try to assimilate and live in town experiencing marginalization, or live traditionally in the hills. Since Decatur, despite his dark skin, is actually a crossblood, he is forging a third space, building his own house that is neither in town or in the hills, but on the mountain. Moe, on the other hand, has Shawnee heritage but does not "look Indian." In the case of both Kermit and Daniel Haws, their refusal to accept their stature or ethnicity is rhetorically linked with their refusal to accept their queer desire for other men. Although Decatur is linked with homoeroticism, his problem has more to do with his limited definition of what it means to be Native American. Decatur elaborates, "I can't go live in the hills whatever my face says to other people. I can only be me now from this time forward," he tells his old teacher Bess Lytle (50). Despite his individualism, however, he is not sure who he is, but he knows that the fact that he has

fathered a son is tremendously important. Decatur's problem seems to be that he can only conceptualize Indian identity as being traditional and separate from modernity. Driving an automobile and living in town among whites makes Decatur feel that he is "not an Indian." Yet when Bess suggests that he leave in light of the revelation of Chad's paternity, Decatur embraces his heritage as he defiantly states, "I have been away . . . Now I'm back. I belong here more than any of you do. This is where I grew up. This is where my people used to be—all over this territory, the dry land and the water too" (32).

Decatur's struggle with his identity mirrors the struggle of the reader to try to understand more about Decatur's family history, race, and sexuality. Much mystery surrounds this character. His identity struggles seem to be commensurate with the mixed blood protagonists created by several Native American authors. These characters negotiate the white and Indian worlds, and in older texts have been constructed as tragic, fulfilling the "torn between two worlds" trope. Yet the reader receives contradictory information about Decatur's ethnicity. The narrator tells us on the first page that "He was a full-blooded Ojibwa Indian" (11). This seems to be what is assumed by the townspeople. We are also told that "his skin appeared to get darker every year" (11). Chad's older sister Melissa, who is the natural daughter of Lewis and Eva Coultas, remarks to her mother, "he is almost as black as a Negro, isn't he?" (24), and Detective Harkey quips that he is "black as a mulberry" (126). Chad believed Decatur to be "100 percent Ojibwa" (153). Yet the schoolteacher Bess, who has known Decatur since he was a boy and has recently had conversations with Decatur, tells her brother Todd, "he has white blood too." Todd gives her "a look of sour disappointment, almost contempt," which seems to betray his horror of miscegenation. He remarks after a long silence, "I

wonder then, where the white blood is kept hidden in his case. If he was any darker my God he would be black as a November night” (39). Eva later reflects, “Her mother had accepted her sin, Chad’s being the son of a man of mixed blood, and finally the boy’s being taken away by that father—she accepted it all with perfect equanimity” (75). Decatur’s grandfather, in front of Chad and Decatur, calumniates Decatur as “a half-breed cur” (83). Later, he declaims to Chad that the boy has only one father, “the full-blooded descendant of full-blooded Ojibwa chiefs,” but when he says that, he is “deep in his cups” (132, 133). Based on the sober statements of those who have known him the longest, Bess and his grandfather, the reader might justifiably conclude that Decatur is a crossblood who looks like, and is taken to be, a full-blood. Purdy again complicates binaristic understandings of racial formations and emphasizes the notion of mixed blood or the crossblood—even the dark skinned Decatur is known to have Euro-American ancestry, although it hardly shows.

Decatur’s white blood is painful to Decatur’s grandfather. Purdy’s emphasis on the crossblood and the mixing of Euro-American and Indigenous traits is stressed through its opposite ideology, that of racial purity, being placed in the mouth of this negatively drawn character. Decatur’s grandfather is an intriguing character in that he is very different from the literary cliché of the honored traditional Native elder. Instead of being a source of tribal wisdom, calm, revered, and stoic, Decatur’s grandfather is angry, mean, cruel, and usually drunk. In fact, in a novel that alludes to Mark Twain’s works, one might even see this man as a throwback to Twain’s egregious characterizations of Native Americans, most famously “Injun Joe” from *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The difference is that Purdy’s “bad Indian” is not presented as intrinsically evil because of his race, as

Twain implies of Joe. This grandfather, given his age, would have heard from his parents the stories about relatives gunned down by the U.S. Army, and Indian land coerced from their hands. Decatur's grandfather also recalls Huckleberry Finn's Pap in his drunkenness and cruelty. For instance, Decatur reports that his grandfather used to trap him "in the cellar tied with chicken wire" (84). Like Huck, he would sneak out while the old man was away, then return before him and put himself back in the wire as though nothing had happened. After Decatur has moved in with Bess temporarily, she hears noises from his room, and finds the grandfather choking Decatur, who does not resist (50). She tells Eva later that "the old man had the most loathsome face of any human being I have set eyes upon" (51) and later compares him to the malignant legendary figure, the Erlking.

Depending on your point of view, this character could be seen either a subversive reversal of the more recent literary cliché of the wise traditional grandparent, or a malignant throwback to literary representations of Indians as evil, such as Injun Joe or Faulkner's Chief Doom. But it is crucial that he is seen as representing an attitude embracing purity of blood and disfavoring the idea of mixed blood. As has been argued, Purdy embraces and promotes the crossblood, opposing the grandfather's rhetoric. When he figures out that Decatur is Chad's father, the grandfather says, "I didn't think you could ever have fathered a dog, Decatur" (83). When Decatur asks him to apologize, the old man asks him why he didn't die in the trenches of the Great War "like a real man." "Did you hide during the battles?" he spits. "You are a half-breed cur, a disgrace to your own race and the white man's" (83). Then he calls Decatur "a name which Chad had

never heard before, but whose sound alone sickened the boy” (83).<sup>123</sup> As Decatur goes to strike the old man a second time, Chad seizes Decatur’s fist. The grandfather states, “let him hit me again if he wants to . . . Half-breeds ain’t men” (83). This scene reveals that racism and obsession with blood purity are not the sole province of whites. Significantly, these racial ideas are put in the mouth of disfavored characters. We learn that the old man had told Decatur that Decatur’s mother died after giving birth to him, but Decatur receives a letter while he is in Europe in the war from his aunt, saying that his mother had just died in Canada. The knowledge that his mother had been alive all those years he believed her dead devastates him (38). Given Decatur’s grandfather’s hatred of miscegenation, it stands to reason that Decatur’s mother was white, and the grandfather’s anger at his Ojibwe son having a child with a white woman made him disown his son and lie to his grandson (Decatur) about his mother being dead. Decatur cannot find full acceptance among the only family he has. His parents are both dead and he lacks guidance.

Decatur’s grandfather shows that Purdy is capable of figuring a Native American character quite negatively, rather than in uniformly valorizing terms. As Purdy’s exposure of Elijah Thrush’s racist remarks and his allusions to Native American slaveholders shows, he does not view Native Americans uncritically or monolithically. But overall Purdy’s sympathy is with American Indian perspectives. Part of Purdy’s project therefore is exposing and critiquing white racism towards Native Americans. In one scene, Chad’s teacher Bess Lyle, who had taught Decatur fourteen years previously,

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<sup>123</sup> This word, which drives Decatur to violence, is probably “motherfucker.” Interestingly, Purdy was the first author ever to print that word in a piece of literary fiction, at the close of *63: Dream Palace*, which caused a stir, and was censored by his British publisher. In the context of the 1980s, when it seemed that many battles of free expression had been won, Purdy finds that the word has more impact when merely hinted at rather than spelled out.

tells her brother Todd about how Decatur showed up in her classroom unannounced and sat down in a vacant seat. Later he reappears and asks to know where Chad sits.

“‘Decatur,’ her brother Todd repeated the name as Bess told him the day’s events. And he would shake his head like a very old man. In fact almost everybody in Yellow Brook pronounced the name the way that Todd did tonight. The way people say *cyclone* or *syphilis* or *murder*. Nothing could be done about Decatur. He was the town Indian.

They expected bad things from him, but not too bad” (13). When we learn of the small Indian reservation near the town, the narrator tells us that Lewis Coultas “always put on the gas when he drove past it” (56) and that “he had nearly forgotten about” its very existence. He doesn’t want to know or think about these contemporary Native Americans who refuse to vanish. Middle American racism is exposed when rumors circulate that

Decatur is Chad’s father. Boys at Chad’s school taunt him with the “filthy words”

“Redskin” and “Indian!” and “they beat him until he lay in a mangled heap on the gravel” (41). When their teacher Bess Lytle demands to know why they did this, one boy replies,

“Because . . . we should not have an Indian boy in our school” (41), recalling a scene in

Sara Winnemucca’s autobiography *Life among the Paiutes* when the author suffers a rejection from her white classmates at a California school to which she has traveled. Her

grandfather’s dying wish was to have his two girl grandchildren enroll in this school (67).

But after arriving and enrolling, “we were there only a little while, say three weeks, when complaints were made to the sisters by wealthy parents about Indians being in school

with their children” (70). When Decatur goes to a store to buy shoes and socks for Chad,

in a plan to see for himself whether or not Chad has inherited his webbed feet, he is

regarded with “open misgiving” and “treated with suspicion by a chalk-faced elderly

man,” the salesman, who does not seem inclined to wait on a Native American (59). In these moments Purdy exposes the prejudice and discrimination that Native Americans experienced in the twentieth century, and seems sympathetic to Native perspectives.

Purdy’s racial allegory of whiteness and Indianness, which critiques American myths, operates in this novel in a manner similar to *Jeremy’s Version*. In both novels the boy has inherited Indian blood from a distant relative on the mother’s side. Despite Chad’s Ojibwe patrimony, his mother and grandmothers are already associated with indigeneity. Decatur’s grandfather claimed that Chad’s great grandmother had Indian blood. Pauline has also told Eva that the family has Indian blood (73). Lewis tells Eva, “I have listened to Pauline for years as she spoke of your family secret, that far back in your ancestry you have Indian blood...But what I saw on that boy’s face was nothing distant, or far away, or long ago” (104). This scenario is similar to that of Jethro, Elvira, Melissa, and Annette, who are shown to have Indian heritage in *Jeremy’s Version*. Pauline also exhibits a Native American perspective when she tells Eva, regarding the revelation of Chad’s parentage, “You are very unfortunate . . . and yet you are blessed . . . because Lewis Coultas could have never given you a son who has inspired such love. You are loved twice, once for yourself, and once for your boy” (74). After Decatur drives off with Chad and doesn’t seem to be coming back, Pauline “did not believe that Decatur had actually kidnapped Chad” (75). Rather she uses the word “outing” instead, which, along with showing Pauline’s sympathy for the Ojibwe man, also suggests that Chad has been “outed” as an Indian. The Indian has come out of the closet (or the cupboard, to allude to a children’s book).

Likewise, even more than the father Wilders Fergus in *Jeremy's Version*, there is no question that Lewis Coultas, Chad's putative father, is meant to allegorically figure the white American male. The narrator even tells us that the strapping Lewis "was practically a stereotype of the rugged white American male" and is thus "the antipodes, in every way, of Decatur" (44). As we have seen, Purdy figures the Indian as strong, fierce, enduring, wild, and robust. On the other hand, whiteness is figured as degenerate, weak, and bloodless. Reviewer Austin MacCurtain sensed the allegory of race at work when he remarked somewhat critically: "One suspects that the primitivist exaltation of the Indian, at the expense of the effete and degenerate whites, is a comment on what has happened to American society."<sup>124</sup> But as has been shown, the treatment of the Indian is not totalizing, since Decatur's grandfather is treated negatively, and Decatur is mildly criticized by Chad for striking the old man in anger. While Lewis does possess a handsome, athletic body, he is no warrior. We learn that, to his shame, Lewis "had been found physically unfit for military service" and his repeated attempts to enlist only result in repeated rejections. Something is clearly deficient despite every appearance of Lewis being a red-blooded American male. Decatur, on the other hand, is a warrior, a decorated war hero. And while Eva Coultas finds Decatur attractive, and eventually recalls her sole tryst with the young Indian fondly (54-55), hungering to be with him again and yearning "to touch his dark forbidden lips"<sup>125</sup> (54), she is repelled by Lewis Coultas. "Lewis was

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<sup>124</sup> Hilary Masters writes that Chad is "propelled into an odyssey of trials and initiations that serve as stage sets for the author's contempt for American family life, racial attitudes and jurisprudence."

<sup>125</sup> Eva's attraction to Decatur and her recollection of their tryst recalls Angela St. John's attraction to Abel and the description of their love scene in Momaday's classic novel *House Made of Dawn*. Although Decatur is only a teenager when he makes love to Eva, both he and Abel are brought near to their respective white lovers because they are hired to perform work around the house. The love scenes occur in each woman's upstairs bedroom. Angela invites Abel upstairs, and Decatur appears at Eva's door. Though in Purdy's novel Decatur initiates the scene, once Eva sees him, Purdy writes, "At her command she watched him close the door and wait obediently, his head slightly bent over" (54). In both cases the women

too handsome . . . like some statue in a world-famous museum. His physical perfection froze any passion she felt for him at the very moment their union was to be consummated. In his arms . . . she was as cold as the brook in mid-December,” Purdy writes (77). His marble-white perfection deflates passion. Eva’s continued desire for and bond with Decatur is reinforced by a gypsy fortune teller woman who tells her, “*Your real husband is a swarthy-complexioned man*” (76). As Lady Tuttle pined in Purdy’s short play *Wedding Finger*, “only in the arms of an Indian” can she find satisfaction.

Like Wilders Fergus in *Jeremy’s Version*, Lewis Coultas has caused the women of Eva’s side of the family, possessing Indian heritage, to lose their ancestral inheritance, their “homelands.” This evokes the historical white treachery used to pull land from Indian hands. As in the earlier novel, the father has been borrowing a great deal of money from his wife’s mother. Lewis, an “incurable speculator with other people’s money,” causes Pauline to lose “her ancestral home” and other possessions, leaving her “wiped out as if by a tidal wave” (44). “Pauline’s financial collapse brought her for a while almost to beggary,” we learn (44). If Pauline and her family are figured as Native American in this allegory, then her impecuniousness reflects the status of Natives in the early twentieth century, who were struggling with the aftermath of dispossession and acculturation, and had reached a historical low point. Likewise, while Decatur, visibly Indian, has money, as we have seen, he struggles with his identity, and “had been defeated and deprived of all he needed to have and hold . . . he felt he was forbidden to breathe even the air which all those who had surrounded him since his birth inspired into their lungs . . . white people’s air” (61). This last phrase may allude to Native American

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consent to the Native man’s ardor, and are profoundly altered by the experience. It is fairly safe to say that Purdy had read *House Made of Dawn* (1968) prior to composing *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986).

author D'Arcy McNickle's modernist novel *The Surrounded*, which was set around the same time. Lewis, in his allegorical role embodying Manifest Destiny philosophy, subscribes to the "Vanishing Indian" philosophy, so the Natives' continued presence in Yellow Brook disturbs him. They haven't vanished as promised, serving as a reminder of a legacy of brutality, white colonialism. As noted, Lewis tries to forget the presence of the small Indian reservation on the edge of town, and "puts on the gas" when he has to drive past it. He also always refers to Decatur as "the Indian boy," denying him his masculinity (55). This recalls how white racists, especially pre-Civil Rights, would refer to African American men as "boy." When Lewis confronts Eva about Chad's paternity, she answers that he has no right to ask (104-05). "I will tell you nothing, Lewis Coultas, for you are not the support and mainstay of this house. All that I have, and the crumbling walls of this mansion itself, are gifts from my family, whom you have ruined catastrophically. You have no moral right to ask me where the wind blows!" (105). Eva, the descendent of Native blood, here makes a show of rebellion and resistance against the white interloper. Since the house and land are from her family, they are connected to her Ojibwe heritage: "this house belongs to me and my mother," she rebelliously states to Lewis Coultas. Reinforcing the sense of Lewis as a white settler/colonist, she roars, "go back to your western vagabonding" (105). This last phrase connects him to notions of western expansion and Indian fighting in the Wild West.

Beyond the way that he causes these "Indian" women to lose their land, their inheritance, Lewis also matches Purdy's figuration of whiteness through his rampant adultery. While obviously Eva committed adultery once, she had her husband's flagrant cheating in the back of her mind when she committed it. Eva refers to "the countless

women, adventuresses, harlots who make up your retinue” (105), and even Melissa had referred to Lewis’s “ladies” (26). Similarly, another white male character, Bess’s brother Todd, is known to drunkenly “cavort” with “loose women” whenever Bess goes out of town. After Decatur “kidnaps” Chad and is apprehended by the law, Lewis decides to do his own “kidnapping” of the boy, to make a fresh start and bond with him. He takes Chad on a train to Chicago, where the boy is introduced to two lascivious women, Minnie and Cora.<sup>126</sup> When Chad wakes up in the middle of the night in his hotel room to find his father naked with these two, Chad is disgusted. “Having seen Lewis Coultas as he *really was*, Chad at once felt a great burden being lifted from him, for Lewis Coultas, he now saw, could of course never be his father” (125). (Later, Chad’s virginity will be taken from him by two deaf sisters who resemble Minnie and Cora). Lewis’s profligate wenching is a part of his “whiteness” for it shows his dissolution and further underscores his lack of responsibility. In the end it transpires that Minnie and Cora are jewel thieves and Lewis has skipped the country to Australia to avoid incarceration. Lewis’s aiding and abetting of jewel thieves confirms his low character and connection to the stealing of Indian land. As a result, Chad flees the scene and heads north, eventually traversing the Canadian border and continuing into Ontario, Ojibwe country. “Escaping, Chad embarks on a series of colorful adventures, meeting charlatans and scalawags,” Dyer writes. “Huck and Jim met no one more outlandish, or familiar, than Chad’s new acquaintances.”

Purdy’s allegories, in their critique of American exceptionalism, ally themselves with the objectives of Native American studies. A primary tenet of Native literary

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<sup>126</sup> The reason why Purdy gives these women of questionable repute the names of his Aunt (Cora) and his maternal grandmother (Minnie) is a bit of a mystery. It seems to be an inside joke with himself, since his Aunt Cora Purdy, the model for Bess Lytle in this novel, was a stern instructor of austere temperament. Cora was also the model for Bess Byall, the teacher in *Moe’s Villa*, Aunt Winifred Fergus in *Jeremy’s Version*, and Alma Mason in *The Nephew*. Minnie M. Otis is the model for Pauline in this novel, and for Melissa Summerlad in *Jeremy’s Version*.

nationalism is the importance of tribal contexts and specificity. Despite the fact that Purdy does not identify as a Native American, I want to consider the relevance of this approach to *In the Hollow of His Hand*, Purdy's work most thoroughly representing Native Americans of his imagined tribal heritage. Intermittently in the novel, Purdy alludes to Ojibwe stories and traditions. Early in the novel, Decatur "courts" young Chad, showing up daily at Chad's school to offer him rides in his many automobiles. Chad's teacher Bess Lytle is alarmed by Decatur's routine appearances and chauffeuring of Chad. During class one day, Chad drops an object that is retrieved by his teacher. Bess Lytle is disturbed by the sight of a jar of hair oil or salve that he hands her, labeled Bear Grease, a gift from Decatur. "No civilized person wears bear grease on his hair," she scolds. "No one!" (16). In this instance, Decatur's gift connects him with the Ojibwe culture hero and trickster Naanabozho, who kills a bear and gives the grease to the animals in one tale. "Here is a puddle of bear grease. Do whatever you want to do with it. You can swim in it or drink it or take as much as you want of it" (Coleman et al, 82). In her autobiography, the Colville Indian author Mourning Dove (Christine Quintasket) recounts a childhood bad stomach ache from eating too much sugar; her mother gives her "bear grease to eat" to ease her discomfort (7). She also notes, "my hair always seemed to be in a tangle, although I know Mother combed it frequently and oiled it with bear grease so my tresses would grow long and silky" (32). Despite her ostensible disgust, Bess Lytle applies a dab of the oil to her hair after Chad is out of sight, foreshadowing how she will fall in love with Decatur.

This link to Naanabozho is one of the first intimations we get that Decatur may have special powers or medicine. As signs accumulate, we are encouraged to think of

him as the heir of chiefs, and thus Chad as well, and eventually Decatur's grandfather claims as much, that Decatur is the "descendant of full-blooded Ojibwe chiefs" (132). Such high ancestry had been foreshadowed by Eva Coultas's sarcastic remarks as she likens Chad to a "young prince" royally riding "in state" with the Ojibwe man in his automobile. Chad tells Eva that he supposed that Lewis Coultas "sent him" to Chad's school "to see I get home alright" (22). Eva denies that Lewis even knows Decatur. "Your dad knows no such person. Have you looked at this person who escorts you home as if you were some young prince? What on earth do you think you're doing riding about with him in state! Chad, listen to me now, I forbid you to see this man" (22). Roy Sturtevant had also been linked with the "prince" in *Narrow Rooms*.

Along with Naanabozho, Decatur is also associated with the totemic animal Duck, and his name even sounds a bit similar. Like Naanabozho, Duck offers gifts to the Ojibwe people, and the black duck, according to Basil Johnston, is a totemic symbol of depth (53) and a sacred clan animal. The clan's members have been fire keepers, politicians, and messengers. In a comical and scatological fashion, in one story Duck, who like other totemic animals is referred to as Naanabozho's younger brother, gives him, and thus the Anishinaabeg, Manoomin (wild rice), considered a sacred gift by the Ojibwe (Radin 14). Like Duck and Naanabozho, Decatur offers gifts. Purdy suggests that Chad's Ojibwe heritage is a metaphorical gift from Decatur, and his time, attention, and the auto rides he gives Chad are gifts as well, rarely received from his putative father Lewis. To Eva, the Indian gives a child who is loved more than if he had been Lewis Coultas's. Appropriate to Decatur's link to the duck clan, Decatur serves as a messenger to Chad, awakening him to his Ojibwe heritage.

The most striking connection to Duck is that oddly, Decatur's feet are webbed "like that of a duck" (59). This revelation is "the ocular proof," as Othello put it, that Chad is his son, since the boy also shares this unusual trait. After he learns the truth, Chad's resistance to the idea of his father being an Indian is manifested in his slicing his webs, but they grow back along with his regard and, eventually, love for his Indian father. Further linking Decatur to Duck, in her memories of the day on which Decatur came to her room, Eva Coultas recalls: "there he stood before her mother-naked, like some large winged bird which had flown out of the trees" (55). Similarly, in *Momaday's House Made of Dawn*, when Angela is in the midst of coitus with Abel, she thinks of "the badger at the water, and the great bear" (64). Eva later reflects that "*his hair did not smell of shampoo but of wild birds' plumage*" (78). Chad is also associated with Duck; besides his webbed feet, "already there were traces of down, the coming of a beard across his upper lip" (92). Purdy links Chad's emerging manhood with his emerging awareness of his Native patrimony, recalling Purdy's connection between the Native and warrior masculinity. Chad's growth into incipient manhood is linked to his initiation via Decatur but also through his solo expedition through "Indian country," into an acknowledgment and relation to his Ojibweness and membership in the Duck clan.

These allusions are not arbitrary, but rather represent Purdy's embrace of his imagined heritage and his engagement with Ojibwe narrative tradition. Like Naanabozho and Duck, Decatur offers a gift to the town and the Coultas family in his person and his progeny, a gift that is not welcomed for the most part. In contrast, Chad's putative father, Lewis Coultas, is constantly travelling, and lost most of the family's money in bad business speculations. Eva makes it clear that no one misses him when he is gone. A

philanderer who was deemed unfit for military service, he has been a sad excuse of a father for Chad. A gypsy fortuneteller tells Eva that her “*real husband*” is a dark-complexioned younger man who “*will cause you . . . grief, but he will also give you the only joy you have ever known*” (76). After Decatur had been arrested for “kidnapping” Chad the first time, Chad testifies to the sheriff: “I had never been claimed before by anybody, never had a father before . . . I knew that even if I came back to Yellow Brook, I would only be coming back to it now as a stranger because I had become his son” (100). When Chad leaves Yellow Brook with Decatur a second time at the conclusion, Purdy implicitly condones Chad’s decision.

Chad’s identification with his Indigenous ancestry is suggested to be in part due to Decatur’s influence and as an accidental result of a solo journey catalyzed by his rejection of what he perceives as his father’s sexual immorality. But as has been mentioned, the novel is concerned with “blood ties” and the pull of these ancestral ties. To put it in less mystical terms, one might suggest that there might be aspects of Ojibwe character or personality that may run deep and not be diminished much by differences in environment or geography. D’Arcy McNickle cites a 1925 study in his influential text *Native American Tribalism* that supports such a theory of continuity of Ojibweness, “a correlation between basic personality structure and cultural persistence” (8). Professor A. Irving Hallowell and his students compared a traditional group of northern Ojibwes in western Ontario, whose economy closely resembled what it was upon contact, with a group in southern Wisconsin considered more highly assimilated that lived, worked, and studied alongside their white neighbors.<sup>127</sup> Although Hallowell expected to find very

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127 McNickle elaborates: “The purpose of the study was to determine, if possible, what agreement or conformity existed between observable acculturated behavior and the covert, inner life of the people. The

different “personalities,” he had to conclude that there is “a persistent core of psychological characteristics sufficient to identify an Ojibwa personality constellation, aboriginal in origin, that is clearly discernible through all levels of acculturation yet studied. For this reason all the Ojibwa referred to are still Indians in a psychological sense, whatever clothes they wear, whatever their occupation, whether they speak English or not, and regardless of race mixture” (qtd. in McNickle 9-10). McNickle comments, “Indians remain Indians not by refusing to accept change or to adapt to a changing environment, but by selecting out of available sources those alternatives that do not impose a substitute identity” (9). In his “Creek book,” the critical study *Red on Red*, Womack’s fictional character Rabbit, in one of the Poseyan interlude letters from Jim Chibbo to Hotgun, says: “Red stays Red, most ever time, even throwed in with white. Especially around white. It stands out more” (24).

Another of Purdy’s concerns, linked with “blood-ties,” is to critique the law’s favoritism toward whites and the white man’s paternal claims, and its discrimination against indigenes. “Maybe the law won’t believe an Indian,” Chad tells Decatur (87). When Bess Lytle expresses to her brother Todd that Decatur has a claim on the boy, that their travel together should not be considered “kidnapping,” Todd scoffs at the idea that the law would recognize the claim of a Native American man: “that is what the law will call it . . . Abduction, taking a minor away without anyone’s say-so” (69-70). After all, it was only in 1924 that all Native Americans were granted U.S. citizenship; during the setting of the novel Decatur may not have been regarded as a legal citizen of the nation in

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general outlines of post-contact Chippewa culture were reconstructed from the accounts of explorers, traders, missionaries, and others who had close association with the Indians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The descriptive material was supplemented by field observers and projective tests administered to adults and children” (9). McNickle admits that such views stressing “the persistence of Indian culture and personality have not gone unchallenged” (12).

whose army he fought against “the Hun” in World War I. Native American warriors’ participation in the Great War was in fact a large justification for the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act (a.k.a. the Snyder Act). As Chad is initiated into Indianness along his journey, he begins to think of and describe Lewis Coultas as his “legal dad” and he refers to Decatur as “my flesh and blood dad” (184) and “my *Indian* dad” (185) to Viola Franey. After he tells her his story of what happened in Chicago, she concludes, “your legal father is a crook” (185). Earlier, after the first “kidnapping” of Chad, Lewis takes Chad to the sheriff at the county courthouse. Chad, in a kind of daze, states bluntly that Decatur is his father, but the sheriff refuses to believe what he is hearing. He considers Chad’s testimony to be perjury and “a kind of blasphemy, certainly shameless prevarication and bold-faced deceit unknown to him in all his forty years as an upholder of public decency and order” (100). To claim Indigenous patrimony in this Midwestern small town is considered blasphemous, beyond the pale. The sheriff is only interested in hearing what will help him prosecute the Indian and protect the “rights” of the white father. But Decatur rejects the laws that protect white men’s interests, instead following what he sees as natural law. “So you see,” he tells Bess, “I can no more go away, Miss Lytle, than the moon can all upon a sudden rise in the west. He is my son. I am his father, and like the moon I must follow a law that will govern the very breath I draw” (38-39). This material, and the fact that the ending of the novel endorses Decatur’s claim upon Chad, can be read as an endorsement of legislation aiding Native Americans, for example the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978.<sup>128</sup> Purdy shows the necessity for such legislation given the disadvantage of Native Americans in maintaining family coherence.

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<sup>128</sup> I owe this particular insight to Dustin Gray.

In essence the ICWA seeks to keep American Indian children in American Indian families.

Purdy's novel also endorses tribal sovereignty by interrogating the very idea that Native Americans are under the jurisdiction of the federal government with regard to imposed colonial borders. After Decatur has crossed a state line with the minor Chad, he states that he cannot understand the white man's "cause and effect" and therefore cannot recognize the authority of legal boundaries. Decatur asks, "what, now, crossing one white line and then crossing still another, makes a man more liable to punishment than he was before he crossed them?" (86). Decatur's questioning of colonial borders—"white lines," as he aptly puts it—implies the absurdity of the federal law and how it misrecognizes his actions and claim: "This is what I have done to you in the eyes of the law. Crossing state lines with a minor. Abducting" (86). To a society that often refuses to recognize the rights and claims of Native Americans, especially back in the 1920s, this is exactly how his action is perceived. Todd Lytle's skepticism was therefore not unfounded.<sup>129</sup> This challenge to the arbitrary imposition of such borders as state lines upon what was Indian land harkens to the struggles that groups such as the Akwesasne Nation of the Mohawk have undergone to assert their autonomy as an sovereign tribal nation on the U.S.-Canada border with members on both sides; they are currently (May 2009) protesting against the arming of Canadian customs officers. Correspondingly, when Chad, travelling alone, passes a sign reading "YOU ARE NOW LEAVING THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA" he pauses and reflects on whether he ought not to turn back. However, "he decided to go forward, for in his own troubled mind he felt he

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<sup>129</sup> Dustin Gray stated in his presentation that "if Purdy is read within Native American Studies, then critics can show how colonial borders and jurisdictional spaces place limits on Indigenous families and how Decatur's crossing through them is an exercise of sovereignty."

had left the United States a good many days before” (179). As Chad is further initiated into Ojibwe identity during his journey deeper into “Indian country,” he has “left the United States” in the sense that as he approaches an acceptance of himself as Ojibwe; symbolically he joins a sovereign tribal nation and leaves U.S. law behind, which refuses to recognize Decatur’s paternity. In the later part of the novel, as Dickensian Detective Wilbur Harkey and his retinue pursue Chad north deep into Michigan, he declares that they are now within “Indian country” (205). “We have actually left civilization as we know it behind us,” Harkey remarks. Purdy takes liberties with the historical truth, emphasizing and exaggerating the Native American presence in the region as Chad travels further north into Ojibwe homelands, going wherever his horse takes him. In “Indian country” Chad meets Viola Raney, who has “very black hair,” gives him moccasins, and knows his frightening great-grandfather (180). Later, Viola tells Chad, when he asks if two men are Indians, “My dear young man, I am the only white person there is for two hundred miles around. Keep that in mind. So of course Black Lynx is an Indian, and for mercy’s sake, don’t please ask around from now on if *somebody is one or not*. And don’t use the word *redskin* as I heard you while you were eating your venison stew say to somebody. You have a long way to go, and an awful lot to learn, so keep your mouth buttoned tight for the most part” (222). Viola, along with Decatur, his great grandfather, and Shelldrake, all contribute to Chad’s education and initiation into Indianness and manhood.

Along with Decatur, Purdy includes two other Ojibwe voices of resistance within his narrative. One of these comes in the device of a found text (harkening back to Cervantes and his picaresque tradition). In the final third of the novel, during the

sequence in which Chad has fled his second “kidnapper” Lewis Coultas, Chad’s horse leads the young rider north into Michigan toward Canada and deeper into Ojibwe country. Encountering a scarecrow in a field, Chad takes its clothes, including a symbolic mantle and diadem. Later, after his horse crosses the border and takes him to the home of Viola Franey, it is revealed that the pocket of the coat he took is full of gold coins.<sup>130</sup> The accompanying note to the finder reads:

My three boys died in the electric chair, but before they departed this life, they left me a fortune in gold. Yet this fortune has brought [no] solace from . . . grief from their unjust executions. I do not want the State to have their fortune, for I brought my three boys up not to respect or obey the State, and what they done in the way of a few robberies was only getting back what the Banks and the Government was robbing the People of in the first place. I want this here fortune . . . to go to the young man . . . chief white Cloud told me one day would go down this road and claim it. Let him put this fortune to better use . . . And may God return this land to the Red Man, for the white Man ain’t worth the powder to blow him up with. Signed, Sussanah K.” (182)

Viola Raney tells Chad that she knew Sussanah K.’s mother, and “they were Ojibwas” (182). White Cloud (Wabanquot) was indeed a notable Ojibwe chief, at White Earth, Minnesota, in the late nineteenth century. Sussanah K. and her sons as Ojibwes also refuse to accept the authority of the federal and state governments. Sussanah’s righteous anger and defiance of the federal government presages the spirit of rebellious Ojibwe activists fifty years later, who were for the most part the founders and leaders of AIM,

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<sup>130</sup> The scarecrow deepens one’s suspicion that Purdy is making allusions to *The Wizard of Oz* movie, another fairly picaresque story. The man with a wagon full of waxwork figures in Chicago, Elmo Lejeune, who takes Chad for a ride, had already recalled the fortune-telling man, Professor Marvel, that Dorothy encounters in Kansas preceding the tornado strike. Chad’s travels north will later become a search for chiefs said to hold special powers, such as Silver Fox, which parallels the search for the Wizard of Oz. Zonked on his mother’s laudanum, Chad often travels wherever the horse takes him, as simple as following a yellow brick road. Dorothy learns that there is no real Wizard of Oz, but rather just a man behind a curtain; a queer Ojibwe outlaw, Shelldrake (who may be a chief himself, he intimates), tells Chad, “in this life, there are no guides. There are no chiefs waiting to tell us something” (225). Both texts convey the moral that one must look within to find one’s power and strength. These references are part of Purdy’s strategy of tapping into iconic American myths and narratives in this picaresque novel, such as Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

including Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt (Smith and Warrior 128-32). I have noted that Purdy figures oppressive power as white and feminine; here the spirit of rebellion and Native autonomy is summed up in a Native woman's words, rather than those of the male warrior. Another resisting Ojibwe is the minor character Shelldrake, to whom I will return shortly.

Beyond the tribal-specific references, Purdy advances other ideas that show his knowledge of problems and issues confronted by Native studies. One of these is the problem of non-Native appropriation of Native culture in the form of "playing Indian," which Philip Deloria has explored in his book of that title. After Chad is returned to Yellow Brook following his first "kidnapping" by Decatur, Lewis Coultas then takes the adolescent to Chicago to make a fresh start. But after Chad is disgusted by stumbling upon his father *in flagrante delicto* with two young women of questionable repute, he "lights out for the territory," in this case north into the "Indian country" of Michigan and Canada. Chad encounters what at first seems to be a party of raucous Plains Indians, who, inebriated, are jumping their horses through flaming hoops (197). Chad joins in their antics: "you've got just five minutes to get your ass through every one of those hoops, or by the Great Spirit, you'll be scalped to your brains" (197).<sup>131</sup> As if going through a fiery initiation, Chad rides through the hoops twice with "a kind of dreamy fearless precision" (197). But then when the "Indians" call it a night, they bathe themselves and "Chad observed with a growing terror that the redskinned savages were all turning into white men with very fair skin, and without their wigs, had hair like corn silk, and sky-blue eyes" (198). When the men learn that Chad's brown skin won't wash

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<sup>131</sup> The previous chapter discussed how stereotypical language, exemplified by references to scalping, is voiced by negatively-drawn characters, and is not an accepted part of Purdy's own discourse.

off and his hair is real, they become enraged. “he’s a damned redskin himself! A dirty dyed-in-the-wool Indian, boys!” These men are likely members of the Improved Order of Red Men or some such fraternal organization, which, while appropriating rituals and customs indiscriminately from various Indigenous tribes, at the same time barred any non-whites from membership (Warrior 13). This order was active in Ohio in the 1920s and still exists today. In a scene reminiscent of the rustic brutality found in Jerzy Kosinski’s novel *The Painted Bird* (1965), the men punch, kick, and strike Chad with burning branches, and spit liquor on him for good measure. This scene dramatizes the irony of white appropriation of Indian signifiers. In a display of what Philip Deloria has called “playing Indian,” these men act out their fantasies, becoming Baudrillardian simulacra of “Indians,” in the sense that the Ojibwe writer Gerald Vizenor uses in his work. These men’s settler ancestors, following bloody battles with U.S. troops, imposed the removal of Ojibwes and other Indigenous peoples, from Ohio with the Treaty of Greenville (1795), the Treaty of Maumee Rapids (a.k.a. the Treaty of Fort Meigs, 1817), and others. Now the descendants play Indian, seeking to empower their masculinity and gesture towards the hoarding and ritualistic transferral of “esoteric knowledge” figured as aboriginal. Both secretive fraternal men’s organizations such as the Improved Order of Red Men and aren’t-Indians-neat hobbyist groups appropriated Native culture in demeaning ways throughout the twentieth century. As Purdy shows, as they borrow disrespectfully from tribal culture, they have no scruples about harming real Indian people. The fact that the men are riding horses through flaming hoops suggests that they are complicit in destroying “the sacred hoop” or medicine wheel, a sacred healing symbol used by most North American tribes including the Ojibwe, referred to by Black Elk and

Paula Gunn Allen. In the Ojibwe interpretation, the four cardinal directions are associated with four sacred colors and four sacred plants, among other meanings (Decatur is a user of one of the sacred herbs, tobacco). The concept of the sacred hoop “is one of singular unity that is dynamic and encompassing” (Allen 56). Often the white appropriation of Native garb and ritual were contemporaneous with efforts to grab Indian land, as Philip Deloria demonstrates. We can compare such “tributes” with contemporary offensive mascots, chest-thumping men’s movement activities, and product names that appropriate “Indianness” while speciously claiming to honor them, without benefiting real Native people.

An aspect of *In the Hollow of His Hand* that confronts Native literary studies is its inclusion of Indigenous male same-sex desire. During modern times, until recently the discussion of this topic in Native American culture has largely been taboo. With Christianization and acculturation came proscriptions on homosexuality that militated against traditions accommodating same-sex desire extant in the majority of North American tribes. Euro-American constructions of Indian identity also discourage such discussion. In his chapter from *Red on Red* focusing on the closeted gay Cherokee playwright Lynn Riggs, Womack writes, “the queer Indian . . . defies the stereotypes . . . a queer Indian presence fundamentally challenges the American mythos about Indians” (280). Decatur and Chad are desired by both men and women, and Decatur’s pursuit of Chad in the early part of the narrative has queer aspects. This caused one critic, in one of the rare negative reviews of this novel, to complain that “there are no chaste kisses in James Purdy’s latest novel . . . kin are cast in a creepily incestuous light” (Rosenheim). Purdy, a gay writer, lingers over evocations of Decatur’s naked body several times,

conveying Eva Coultas's memories of her tryst with Decatur. Along with Eva, the teacher Bess Lytle, who shelters Decatur in her house for a time, is thunderstruck by the accidental sight of his nude body. It also makes an impact on Chad: “what haunted him was the remembrance of the very dark, bare and glistening body of the Indian in all his exposed nakedness” (90). Perhaps not since Richard Amory’s sixties gay frontier novel *Song of the Loon* has the male native body been so eroticized. Granted, such evocations risk falling into a fetishization of the “exotic” other’s body. Yet these characters can also be understood to challenge the norms of much canonical Native fiction, which arguably leans more towards the homophobic than the homoerotic (examples of this can be found in canonical novels by Momaday, Vizenor, and Silko). Even Decatur’s patient pursuit of his son, which one critic refers to as a “courting” and “bizarre elopement” (Rosenheim) carries romantic undertones that suggest Freud’s family romance and the strong tie between fathers and sons.

The most obvious queer Native character is Shelldrake, an Ojibwe fugitive from the law whom Chad meets on his solo journey. “I ain’t a bad man, just an unlucky one,” he tells Chad (227). Chad’s northern journey represents a reverse “conversion narrative,” that is, a conversion from Christian to Ojibwe identity, and constitutes a vision quest of sorts. Unlike the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ojibwe Christian Peter Jones, who felt called to convert to Christianity during his travels, Chad is converted to Ojibweness, and Shelldrake is the final initiator. Shelldrake’s name evokes the male Duck, or drake, while the first syllable suggests the protection he temporarily affords vulnerable Chad, and may allude to Turtle’s shell, central to Ojibwe cosmology, or the megis shell, central to Ojibwe cultural practice. Shelldrake finds Chad asleep on the road, zonked on his

mother's "elixir" (laudanum), his wagon smashed and his horse expired. Shelldrake informs Chad that the law is on his trail, something they have in common. How Shelldrake knows this, however, is a mystery. Shelldrake is moonstruck by Chad and tells him he wishes he had a son just like him. More than paternal feelings are suggested by Purdy's prose: "Then Shelldrake gave Chad a look the boy did not quite understand. The expression in those deep-set ebony . . . eyes seemed to be that of a deep hurt or outrage. All at once he drew the boy's head toward his lips, and kissed him slowly on both his eyes" (225). Shelldrake wears a "feather of many shades" behind his right ear, perhaps evoking the rainbow that has been embraced as a symbol by contemporary lesbians and gays, including "two-spirit people" (226). He and Chad flee in Shelldrake's auto, now pursued and fired on by the police. Holing up in a deserted house, Shelldrake embraces the boy tightly and kisses his one blue eye twice before returning to his gun fighting. Chad has one blue eye and one black, symbolizing his white and Native ancestry. As gunshots thunder, Shelldrake returns to Chad inside the house. In a harrowing scene strongly suggesting a blood rite, Shelldrake holds the boy tightly as he bleeds to death, riddled with bullets.

Shelldrake had told the boy that "in this life, there are no guides. There are no chiefs waiting to tell us something" (225). Chad was previously told by Viola Raney that he was to see a chief named Silver Fox, but an Indian he meets along the road tells him the chief died a "year or so ago." He meets Wilma Trowt, a non-Native woman towering 6'4" even without her favored high heels, who operates the WILMA TROWT HOME FOR RUNAWAY AND INCORRIGIBLE BOYS, boys whom Chad learns are all dark-skinned Natives. She declares "there is no Chief Silver Fox . . . I don't think any

respectable Indian would call himself that in the first place” (219). But she is inattentive and dismissive of the Indian way of life and so is not a reliable source. But ironically, Shelldrake had hinted that he himself is a chief, and as they hold each other, Chad reflects that “the hands were too strong . . . even for an Indian man, the hands must be, Chad saw, the hands of some spirit, some true Chief; and the blood that then came from him was like a hailstorm from above . . . Chad was floating, smothered, drowned in Shelldrake’s blood. ‘I will hold you forever,’ Shelldrake told him . . . His lips, curtains of blood, or fire, closed over Chad’s face and sought his lips . . .” (229). This uncanny, eroticized blood ritual, Chad’s baptism in “flowing streams of crimson, scarlet, all the shades and hues of spilled Indian blood,” (230) is the climax of a “final awakening” (224) as Chad later thinks of it, his initiation into a full embrace of his Ojibwe identity. Indeed, a few pages later, it is noted that his blue eye has turned black following Shelldrake’s kiss during this blood ritual. In this gruesome scene Purdy also evokes the historical horror of Ojibwe bloodshed over a hundred years earlier from the guns of U.S. Federal troops. The concatenation of Shelldrake’s violent resistance, his avowed lineage as a chief, and his homoeroticism, is potent and subversive, challenging “the American mythos about Indians” (Womack *Red* 280). This queer Native character, although appearing only briefly, is powerful and crucial to Chad’s trajectory, and is notable in the literature by, or about Native Americans. Craig Womack has asserted that it is time for Native studies to come to terms with the combination of “Indian” and “gay,” that those in the field need to “challenge the nature of what we have inherited in the discipline” (303) and that includes the silence on native same-sex desire and homophobic characterizations.

At the novel's close, when Decatur is seen leaving with Chad, this represents the beginning of a rebuilding of Ojibwe community. Although it is only a father and son, it is a start, and for all we know they could be heading back up north into Ojibwe country. Therefore this ending differs from the tragic or bleak endings of *Eustace Chisholm*, *I am Elijah Thrush*, and *Narrow Rooms*. Chad's "afflictions end happily. The novel concludes on a note of triumph," Hilary Masters notes. Novelist Lee Smith writes that the novel "is in some ways a departure for him. Not quite so dark, finally the book's ending offers a resolution; not quite so violent, this novel's plot lacks the gratuitous bloodletting sometimes seen in the earlier novels. And the absence of a writer-character (a Purdy trademark) makes this book more real, less self-consciously a fiction." The endings of both *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe's Villa* especially, are decidedly optimistic for the future of their Native characters, who have formed mini-communities of fathers and sons.

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The novella *Moe's Villa*, published in *Moe's Villa & Other Stories* (2000 UK, 2004 US), also explores the theme of the secret Indian father, in a much more understated and subtle fashion. Central to the plot and symbolism in the novel are the red "jewels" given to Rory Hawley by his now-deceased putative father. The answer to the question of whether they are bona fide rubies, among many other hints, leads the careful reader to a conclusion that the real "red gift" is not the "rubies" but rather Moe's paternal gift of Indigenous blood to Rory Hawley. The reviewer Donna Seaman, referring to the

collection, writes that Purdy “displays his considerable gifts both for straight-ahead storytelling and subversive approaches to dismantling boundaries related to class, race, and gender as well as the flimsy divide between perceived reality and magic.” This collection, Purdy’s most recent and last work of fiction, was not reviewed widely, but those reviews it did garner were positive. “The stories amply justify Purdy’s reputation as a cult hero who’s slowly (and belatedly) stepping into the light of day,” stated *Kirkus Reviews*. The major newspaper reviewers for whatever reason mostly ignored the book (perhaps because it was not issued as a hardcover), and sadly, the collection had difficulty finding an American publisher. Gore Vidal, however, addressed *Moe’s Villa and Other Stories* in his laudatory and lengthy 2005 *New York Times* essay review.

Rory’s name has its roots in the old Irish for “red king,” suggesting that Rory may even be the descendant of a Shawnee leader, which will be explored later. Rory is also the name of the youngest brother in *Jeremy’s Version*, who does not figure into the plot much. In this later story Rory is an only child, and it is almost as if the “Rory” who was inconsequential in *Jeremy’s* now gets to be the star of his own tale. The name is a signal that the novella will return to material explored in that novel and *In the Hollow of His Hand*. As in *Jeremy’s Version*, the mother of the boy has turned the family home into a boarding house, and the father is absent, in this case deceased, although he had been often absent in the past. As Jethro eventually does in *Jeremy’s Version*, Rory assumes his mother’s maiden name over his father’s birth name, and although the townspeople believe that “Peter Driscoll was Rory’s father,” no one was certain that Driscoll “was actually Vesta Hawley’s legal husband. At least there was no record of their having been to the altar” (236). The authority and legitimacy of the white father is held in question.

In *Moe's Villa* James Purdy becomes downright celebratory of Native Americans, with an ending whose "fairy-tale" qualities are not out of place in a collection that engages with and subverts the genre of the fairy tale. Reviewer Jeff Zelasky, calling these stories "often fantastical," noted that two stories in particular "feel like fairy tales, but look at 'happily ever after' from oblique angles." The novella brilliantly investigates American identity and suggests the complexity of identity in light of a person's heterogeneous genetic, ethnic, and familial heritage. In his preface to a re-issue of Purdy's 1978 novel *Narrow Rooms*, Paul Binding writes, "no man acts alone, for always he himself has been, or is being worked upon by others, is the heir to complicated and contradictory emotions and traditions" (v). The title character and "Shawnee Indian," Moses Swearingen, for example, has an ancestor who was a Revolutionary War General and Indian fighter (highlighting the fact that the western front of the Revolutionary War was an Indian War). He met his doom at the hands of Indians. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the Shawnees, living in what is now Ohio, battled the U.S. Army in defense of their homelands, and as earlier mentioned, scored some remarkable early triumphs over colonial troops before ultimately being subdued. In this territory, "During the American Revolution, the Shawnees fought alongside the British against the Americans. The Shawnees believed that England would prevent the colonists from encroaching further upon the natives' land. After the war the Indians continued to fight the Americans" ("Shawnee"). Like *In the Hollow of His Hand*, *Moe's Villa* also shows an expanded awareness of contemporary Native American issues, such as Indian gaming, and implicitly endorses tribal sovereignty via the townspeople's acceptance of Moe and his Villa, a saloon with a gambling parlor. The novel seems to take place during a time

when gambling was illegal and prohibition reigned, but due to the fact that Moe runs a gambling parlor, Purdy is alluding to the issue of contemporary “Indian casinos” as a sovereignty issue. In the text’s and the townspeople’s ultimate advocacy and support of Moses Swearingen, the novella thus endorses Native American autonomy.

The novella takes place in an economically depressed Midwestern small town circa 1930, “in the era when there were still brawny men who delivered ice from the quarry to residents . . . for there was no refrigeration as we know it now in Gilboa” (191). As in his other Midwestern novels, the setting of *Moe’s Villa* resembles the northwestern Ohio rural, small-town and medium-sized town landscapes that shaped James Purdy.<sup>132</sup> It is interesting that the town is named Gilboa, because Gilboa is a hamlet west of Findlay, Ohio, where Purdy grew up. One of the major characters is Dr. Cooke, who courts Vesta Hawley before, during, and after his marriage to “the heiress Mamie Resch,” whom, it is implied, he married for money (200). In letters James Purdy wrote in the mid-1980s responding to Findlay *Courier* journalist Parker Sams, he stated that “the doctors in many of my stories are based on a wonderful real doctor who practiced in Gilboa, Ohio. He is dead. He lived long enough to read my novels *Malcolm* and *The Nephew*. He had always told my mother I would be a writer. When he read *Malcolm* he saw his prophesy come true.”<sup>133</sup> Speaking of his then-new novel *On Glory’s Course*, treated in chapters two and four, Purdy wrote Sams: “the doctor was Charles Ray . . . I

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<sup>132</sup> Interestingly, the name “Moe’s Villa” had appeared in Purdy’s fiction before. The Midwestern novel *Mourners Below* (1981), a dark counterpart to *On Glory’s Course* (1984), opens on a father and son together in an ice cream and candy shop bearing this name. According to information provided to me by researcher Parker Sams of Findlay, Ohio, in the late 1920s there was a confectionary on Findlay’s Main Street named “The Villa,” run by a man named George Moe. If novels such as *Jeremy’s Version*, *On Glory’s Course*, and *Moe’s Villa* draw from James Purdy’s experiences living with his mother and brothers in the Findlay home that Vera Purdy ran as a boardinghouse, then *Mourners Below* reflects the time in which he lived with his father William Purdy.

<sup>133</sup> Letter from Purdy to Sams, 9 August 1984.

often wonder what became of all Dr. Ray's wonderful library in Gilboa, Ohio. He had a splendid collection of books, mostly what people called 'belle lettres'" (9 February 1985). Dr. C. J. Ray was an important intellectual mentor and friend to James and his mother Vera, who commonly referred to him in her frequent letters to her son, telling James about how proud Dr. Ray was of his accomplishments in the literary world. Ray lived with "his companion, Ed Scanland" (Barton 1) a man over thirty years his junior, for decades. Rory's mother's name, Vesta Hawley, like Elvira Fergus in *Jeremy's Version* and Eva in *Hollow*, bears some resemblance to that of Purdy's mother, Vera Purdy.

This novella, like much of Purdy's fiction, is full of subtle signs, beginning with the title itself. The enigmatic quality of much of Purdy's fiction only increases in the later years, as evidenced by the earlier discussion of "The White Blackbird." The title for starters even puns on its genre: compare *Moe's villa* and *novella*. Purdy's titles are often deceptively simple but can point to insights into the work. Although the novella at first seems to center upon the relationship between Dr. Cooke and the widow Vesta Hawley, the title suggests that Moe and his Villa are actually central to this tale. Given the focus of the title, it is not surprising that Purdy put much thought into Moses Swearingen's name and what he embodies as a character, which I now consider.

First of all, the name *Moses* instantly connotes "prophet." As the name of a man identified as Shawnee, the name Moses, the Old Testament prophet, in turn suggests one of the most famous and controversial Shawnee leaders and figures of resistance, the messianic medicine man known as "The Prophet," or "The Shawnee Prophet," Tenskwatawa, the brother of Tecumseh. Tecumseh and his brother formed broad-ranging

Indian alliances, travelling widely. In his essay “The Clash of Cultures,” D’Arcy McNickle writes: “Tecumseh’s planning was on a scale never before attempted by an Indian leader. He travelled from the Canadian border to Florida, from Missouri into New York State. Everywhere he urged tribes to hold together, to keep to old ways, above all to retain their lands. ‘Sell a country!’ he exclaimed. ‘Why not sell the air, the clouds and the great sea as well?’” (326). Although the Prophet lost his following after telling his warriors, prior to their defeat in the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811, that his medicine would protect them from soldiers’ bullets, during his prime he possessed great influence. Future Ohio politician and U.S. president William Henry Harrison was then leading U.S. troops against Indians in the Northwest Territory, and “Tippecanoe” became his nickname. Running for president, his boosters exploited the Indians’ defeat with the song and slogan “Tippecanoe and Tyler too.” In popular legend, The Prophet (or in other versions, Tecumseh) placed a curse on Harrison which caused him, and every subsequent president elected in a year ending in zero, to die in office (Harrison famously died in thirty days). This “curse” was only broken, it is said, with Ronald Reagan, despite *Catcher in the Rye* fan John Hinckley’s best efforts. The Prophet, following a religious vision, urged the Shawnee and other confederated tribes including the Senecas, Ottowas, and Ojibwes, to reject all of the new objects, tools, and practices introduced by the white man and to return to traditional ways. In Ojibwe communities to the north, there was a burst of enthusiasm for the Shawnee Prophet circa 1808, and local Ojibwe prophets spread the word (Vecsey 193). Before moving his followers’ settlement, Prophetstown, to Tippecanoe in what is now Indiana, they had established a village at Greenville, in western Ohio. The significance of this nominal reference to the famous Shawnee

medicine man becomes clear when it is seen that Moe and Rory have what westerners call “supernatural” gifts of healing and psychic power.

Thinking further about *Moses* as the name of a Native American, in light of the history of Native American literature, the name Moses is also highly resonant due to the increasingly better-known 1772 speech that Samson Occom, an educated eighteenth-century Mohegan orator, delivered prior to the execution of Moses Paul, a Wampanoag Indian who had been found guilty of killing a white man named Moses Cook. Reading this speech with Purdy’s novella, in which Moses and Cooke are rivals for Vesta, this pairing of white and Indian Moseses, two sides of the coin, one of them named Cook, is fascinating, suggesting Moses Swearingen’s mixed-blood identity. Also, there is a sense in which Moses and Dr. Cooke’s histories and fates seem bound up together. In Purdy’s novella the “Shawnee Indian” Moses is whispered to have made late-night visits to Vesta Hawley, while the “town wiseacre” quips that Dr. Cooke “came as her suitor of more than twenty years” (189). There is an implied rivalry between the “white” man and the “Indian.” As has been pointed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the relationship between the rivals in such a triangle can have homoerotic connotations. Dr. Cooke “relished, although he would be the last to admit it, that he got a great deal out of tending someone as unlike any of his other patients as Moses Swearingen” (248). Reading these texts together, this proliferation of men named Moses and Cooke/Cook intersects eerily with Purdy’s complex and fascinating racial constructions of Americans emphasizing mixed race. Dr. Cooke and Moses are bound up together in mysterious ways, and although characterized as white, as we’ll see, Cooke is said to resemble a Shawnee Indian even more than Moses does.

These constructions highlight the complexity and contradictions of the American character that fascinate Purdy so intensely. Purdy's characterization of Moe also explores the issue of "looking Indian" that figures into perceptions and self-presentations of crossblood tribal people that identify as Native American or First Nations. For example, the narrator, who seems to be a composite voice of the villagers of Gilboa, calls Moe "a Shawnee Indian." Yet "Moses Swearingen did not look like an Indian. For one thing he had hair almost the color of Vesta Hawley's, except it was if anything more abundant and of a finer texture. His eyes changed, it was observed, like the tides. In the morning his eyes were almost robin's egg blue, but as the day progressed his orbs became darker, and as he sat overlooking the card players in the evening his eyes were of a fearful black" (192). In *In the Hollow of His Hand*, Chad's eye turns from blue to black as he comes to identify with his Ojibwe heritage; in a similar injection of magical thinking, Moe's changing eyes seem to express the different aspects of his mixed racial heritage. Significantly, it is when he supervises the operations of his modest "Indian casino" that his eyes appear the darkest. Purdy also teases the social sciences and white "Indian experts" when the narrator tells us, "A young man who dabbled in anthropology and who visited Moe's Villa from time to time said that, despite Moses' fair hair, his pronounced high cheekbones are the telltale proof he had Shawnee blood" (192). We never hear Moe himself say anything about his Shawnee heritage.

In the character Dr. Cooke, Purdy seems to have finally created a character who closely resembles his ideal of a blending of positive Indigenous and European traits, who would be the new kind of American that D. H. Lawrence had called for in *Studies in Classic American Literature*. In the larger context of Purdy's work, whether or not he has

any Native American ancestry, Dr. Cooke represents a blending of ideal attributes of white and red, a product of attention, study, and respect of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. This is reflected not only in his appearance but also in his high regard for Moe's capacities for healing despite the crossblood Shawnee man's lack of a formal medical degree (to be discussed). If Moe does not "look like an Indian," Dr. Sherman Cooke resembles a hunky, bare-chested Native on the cover of a historical romance genre novel, or "bodice-ripper," as did "the Iceman" Val in *On Glory's Course*—which, while admittedly stereotypical, conforms to Purdy's stress upon warrior masculinity. Purdy's self-conscious homoeroticism comes out in these moments. Cooke does not resemble the typical family physician of a Norman Rockwell painting but rather "had the chest of an athlete, almost a Samson, and even at an advanced age he gave the impression of a blacksmith or the wielder of a sledgehammer" (192). But contributing most to his Indian look, Cooke possesses an "untamable shock of very black hair, which appeared never to have been cut or indeed combed. And, until at a late age, it was all but untouched by gray . . . In short, Dr. Cooke . . . resembled a Shawnee Indian more than Moses Swearingen. And townsfolk often jeered that the scars on the doctor's countenance were inherited from tomahawk wounds" (193). Dr. Cooke combines positive qualities of masculinity, strength, and ruggedness with intelligence, literacy, intuition, and powerful healing gifts.

Dr. Cooke's craggy face and general appearance suggest a benevolent white frontiersman who has appropriated aspects of Indigenous practice living amidst Natives. Dr. Cooke as a character therefore seems to allude to Natty Bumppo from Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* and can be seen as a revision and improvement upon Cooper's

hero. Purdy's father William was an avid reader of Cooper's tales, and James once gave him a fine edition of Cooper. When interviewer Bradford Morrow asked Purdy which authors influenced him, Purdy listed Unamuno, Hemingway, Whitman, Melville, Sherwood Anderson, "and even James Fenimore Cooper. I knew it was a world which I belonged to" (97). Leslie Fiedler has famously argued the homoeroticism underlying the friendship of Natty Bumppo and his Delaware (Lenape) Indian friend Chingachgook in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. The irony of Dr. Cooke's Indian-like appearance highlights the limitations of an overemphasis on the criteria of "looking Indian" in considering Native identity or authenticity. Purdy's doctor seems to be a kind of revision of Natty Bumppo, but instead of a frontiersman, he is a healer who respects and learned from Native traditional practice.

Moses Swearingen's last name, which alludes to an apocryphal story about the Shawnee chief Blue Jacket, is even richer in significance than his first, and further suggests the complexity of American identity. Along with *Tecumseh!*, staged in the former Indian town of Chillicothe, Ohio, another yearly Ohio Indian outdoor drama was *Blue Jacket*, staged east of Xenia, Ohio.<sup>134</sup> Blue Jacket, or Weyapiersenwah, you will recall, was a Shawnee chief and warrior who led a coalition of tribes against the U.S. Army as it fought to clear yet more land for white settlement in Ohio. In the early 1790s, Blue Jacket and Little Turtle (Miami) represented the greatest leaders of the Natives in the Ohio Country. The united Native forces defeated the army commanded by General Josiah Harmar in 1790 and that led by Arthur St. Clair in 1791. "St. Clair's Defeat" is regarded as one of the worst losses ever suffered by the U.S. military at the hands of

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<sup>134</sup>I attended at least once in my childhood. The flaming arrows and galloping horses were the kind of theatre I appreciated as a boy.

Natives (“Weyapiersenwah”). Although the outdoor play has been placed on hiatus and the story is reportedly going to be changed, the performance was based on a play that propagated a legend popular in Ohio and nearby states: namely, that the Shawnee Chief and warrior Blue Jacket, or Weyapiersenwah, was actually a white man named Marmaduke Van Swearingen (with the “Van” often omitted). According to this legend, Swearingen was captured by the Shawnees during the Revolutionary War period.

This theory, although built on shaky ground, was apparently regarded as factual by many. In an item on the town of Bellefontaine, Ohio, located about fifty miles south of Findlay, the *Ohio Guide* (1940) states: “A Shawnee village called Blue Jacket’s Town stood on the site prior to its occupancy by white men. Blue Jacket was a white man named Marmaduke Swearingen who was captured by the Shawnee when he was 17 and brought to Ohio from Pennsylvania” (588). This legend was further disseminated by southwest Ohio novelist and historian Alan W. Eckert’s historical fiction; Eckert wrote the play *Tecumseh* as well, adapted from one of his novels. The legend of Swearingen has now been discredited with historical and genetic research.<sup>135</sup> First of all, there is no evidence that anyone ever referred to Blue Jacket as anything other than a bona fide Shawnee until *seventy years* after his death. Also, he married a white woman, and his children were referred to as mixed-race, not white. Moreover, it has been argued that the historical dates fail to mesh. (Dubiously, there are some who cling to the myth and state that the case is not yet closed, that it is still possible that Weyapiersenwah was white). So while Moses’ last name connects him to Blue Jacket, a famous Shawnee leader who fought for tribal autonomy and against white encroachment upon Indigenous lands, the name also connects him, due to the popular but erroneous legend, with the idea of an

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<sup>135</sup> For a genetic study debunking the myth, see Rowland et. al.

Indian who has white attributes, which is appropriate. In my reading, due to the legend, Moe's last name suggests that he, a man with significant Shawnee heritage, has been whitewashed, alienated from his tribal heritage. Specious legends such as the one that was propagated by the outdoor drama I saw as a child are a whitewashing of history, effectually a disinheriting of Weyapiersenwah's Shawnee descendants. Racist sentiment seems to motivate such mythologizing, as if white blood were a prerequisite for true greatness. It is clear that Purdy's purpose is not to suggest that Moe is actually only a white man; rather, Purdy is showing how Moe's Shawnee heritage has been covered up and repressed by a white majority culture, and internalized by Moe himself. Knowing Purdy's predilection for puns, the name Swearingen also suggests "swear Injun" (acknowledging that this is an offensive term) and "swearing in," a reference to Moe and Rory's mutual initiation into Shawneeness. Arguably, through the irresistible force of what I take to be his inherited Shawnee medicine power, Rory initiates Moses into his Indianness in a sort of return of the repressed.

Just as the refuted legend claimed that Marmaduke Swearingen was raised by the Shawnees as a Shawnee, so is Rory Hawley taken in to the home of the Shawnee crossblood Moe Swearingen. To many readers it may not be evident at first that Rory has any Shawnee blood, making it seem that Rory is actually the one who resembles the legend of Marmaduke Swearingen, not Moses Swearingen. Rory is characterized as neglected by his mother: "Vesta Hawley never bothered to send her son to school . . . it was believed . . . Rory had almost never attended classes from his earliest years. His mother pretended to believe he was at school when she must have known better" (190-91). Rory thus resembles Paul, the psychologically abused boy in "Why Can't They Tell

You Why?" (1956), who stayed home from school to study the photographs of his deceased Native father. Rory and Paul both reject the assimilating force of American public schools; lacking a Native father figure, Paul is an autodidact, while Rory becomes the pupil of the crossblood Shawnee Moe. Moe becomes interested in Rory "when he saw how neglected he was by his mother" (191). In both *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe's Villa*, the boy's teacher, in both cases named Bess, in alarm informs the mother about the boy spending time with an Indian man. In both cases there is a perceived "absence of maternal responsibility" since both mothers feel there is nothing to be done (*Moe's* 196). Instead of going to school, Rory spends his hours at "Moses Swearingen's mansion, called the Villa," where he receives a very different, more Native kind of education (191). Although the Villa serves "admirable evening repasts," it is "more famous for its gambling salons behind the restaurant proper and the number of young men who waited on him hand and foot" (191).

Here the connection between indigeneity and male same-sex desire is suggested for the first time, continuing Purdy's rhetorical link between the two. Prior to the moment when Moses takes Chad into his car, he had already noticed the "strange behavior" of this "neglected child of a ruined marriage" (222). There is a homoerotic aspect in Moe's attentions to Rory that recalls Decatur's attentions to Chad Coultas. Indeed, like Fenton in Purdy's early novella *63: Dream Palace*, Rory is picked up in a public space: "One cold winter day Moses spied young Rory wandering aimlessly about the town square. He wore no overcoat or gloves and was blowing his hands to keep them warm," Purdy writes. "It did not take many words for Moses to invite him to his Villa, as his property was frequently, although sarcastically, called," Purdy writes (222). Later,

after touching “the down on the boy’s cheeks,” Moe feels “fearful awe” and “turbulence” toward Rory (227). This disturbance can be doubly explained by both Moe’s attraction and his gradually dawning realization that Rory is his son. A homosexual double entendre, perhaps unintended by the narrator but not of course by the author, can be found when the narrator states, regarding Swearingen’s card playing and gambling, that he “had initiated many young men into the practice” (224). Late in the novel, the narrator tells us that “young servers dressed in gold-trimmed uniforms demonstrated . . . that Rory was not the only handsome young man present” (266). His guests are “treated to the outpouring of a young men’s chorus” (267). Clearly Moe prefers to surround himself with appetizing young men.

Despite such homoeroticism, it is hinted that Moe was involved with Rory’s mother Vesta Hawley, similar to the interlude that occurred between Decatur and Mrs. Coultas in *In the Hollow of His Hand*. In this novella, however, we are only privy to the information that is known by the villagers of Gilboa. “It was whispered that Moses Swearingen himself far back had often paid Vesta Hawley short mysterious calls. It was said he always left the premises with lowered brow and sagging shoulders,” we are told (193). His reputed posture on leaving the house suggests both shame and the aftermath of the release of sexual energy. Later, a certain past intimacy is implied when Moses remarks to Vesta, “You’ve always been very high-strung, Vesta” (257). The fact that Moe’s visits are said to have occurred “far back” opens up the possibility that Moe could be Rory’s father. But unlike the case of *In the Hollow of His Hand*, this is only insinuated. Until the last section of the novella, others do not suggest or speculate that Rory may be Moe’s; this is left for the reader to surmise from Rory’s abilities. The only

exception, which comes near the end of the novella, giving the readers a hint, is when the Russian gem expert declares that he had no idea Moe had a son, and such a handsome one at that (264). Moe is quick to correct the Russian. Yet even this big clue is mitigated by the fact that Alexei Oblonsky suffers from an eye disease, and “employed different spectacles to view the boy” (264). The principal of schools, Eli Jacqua, remarks that Rory “has gone from truant to deserter, and from deserter to a kind of, shall we say, turncoat to his own ancestry and upbringing. He is a resident, along with many other young men who are out of work, at Moe’s Villa. Indeed he lives there” (208). The fact that Rory chooses to live with an Indian makes him a traitor to his white “ancestry.” The use of the word “turncoat” is interesting given that the Shawnee fought for the British in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

After taking him in, Moe teaches the boy how “to read, write and cipher, and finally how to play cards” (191). Moe’s Villa can then be seen as a school or academy to the young men that he takes under his wing. As mentioned, Rory as Indian entirely rejects the acculturating force of public school, and receives his education instead from the crossblood “Shawnee Indian.” Rory’s teacher Bess Byall (whose name resembles Chad Coultas’s teacher, Bess Lytle), asks Vesta, “Do you realize that Rory has not attended school since the first two days of the term . . . He is either at the picture show, or when the picture show is not running, he spends the day and even most of the night at Moe’s Villa” (196). Suggestive of Moe’s failure to investigate his Shawnee heritage, Moses is seen cutting the hair of the Wild Boy Rory. Although the boy possesses “yellow tresses,” his hair is Indian-long, and due to Moe finding briars and marigold petals in his tangled locks, Rory is associated with wildness and nature.

Rory becomes a special pupil to Moe, for Moe comes to believe that the boy has a potential for talent in the “psychic arts,” a keen interest of Moe’s that Purdy links to his Shawnee heritage. In the young men that Moe takes under his wing, “he was always looking in them also for some hint that they might have psychic ability” (222). Before Moe dropped out of medical school, he independently studied psychic phenomena, “devouring every book he could lay his hands on” (222). This “field,” the narrator tells us, is Moe’s “real interest outside of cards, gambling, and strong drink” (221-22). Moe’s interest in psychic phenomena seems tied into his Shawnee heritage, but this is not something that he acknowledges. Moses “felt that he himself had some talent in the field, but he was afraid to go further into this science. It seemed to threaten something very deep in his nature” (222). In a certain way resembling Daniel Haws in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967), something in Moses balks at the idea of pursuing this line of thought any further. It is as though he, as an acculturated crossblood, is unconsciously denying his tribal and familial inheritance, his gifts in “medicine,” manifesting in this instance as psychic ability, just as Daniel refused to acknowledge or investigate his Native heritage. In both cases it is others who declare Daniel and Moses to be an “Indian.” In Moe’s case, we are never party to his thoughts about or identification with his Shawnee heritage. What the reader receives is filtered through the composite narrative voice of the town (resembling Faulkner’s narrative voice in his famous story “A Rose for Emily”). It might be more accurate to say that Moses is afraid to pursue this ability any further because “it seemed to threaten” *to stir up* “something very deep in his nature” (222). Moses embodies conflicting genetic propensities; beneath his cool exterior battles rage within. In the world of Purdy’s fiction, there is no denying one’s self, and

one's genetic and familial history shape this self. On a sidebar, Purdy believes himself to have some psychic ability, which he may or may not connect to his imagined Ojibwe heritage. I have discussed this topic with Purdy's long-time assistant and friend John Uecker, and together we wondered about this connection. "I have something I'm embarrassed to tell you," Purdy told Richard Canning. "I don't work on it, but they say I'm psychic. This young man who helps me—my director, off-Broadway, John Uecker—will ask me what I get about a person. I just tell him whatever comes into my mouth and it turns out to be true" (23).

Rory seems to have inherited psychic and healing powers that are linked with his Indigenous blood. As mentioned, Moe himself had studied Western medicine and independently studied psychic phenomena. Purdy puns upon the term "medicine," invoking its Native American connotations, as he stresses Moses Swearingen's gift for healing. "It was said that he sometimes practiced medicine without a license," we are told. "Even Dr. Cooke often remarked Moses knew more about the profession than many a licensed M.D." (221). As mentioned, Dr. Cooke's deep respect of Moe's talents in "medicine" contributes to Purdy's implied positioning of him as a New American, a blend of Native American and Euro-American attributes. It is not a lack of talent, but rather Moses' deep-seated Shawnee characteristics, that kept him from receiving his degree, in my reading. "Moses had studied to be a medical doctor," we are told, "but having to work with cadavers had caused him to have such a horror of the profession, he had left school a few months before graduation" (221). Rather than seeing Moses as squeamish, we might see him instead as traditionally Shawnee, observing the many cultural taboos that restricted the handling of corpses. Such a traditional view may well

regard the dissection of cadavers as sacrilegious. With his gifts for “medicine” considered along with his propensity and talent for psychic phenomena, it may be inferred that Moses is indeed the descendant of Shawnee medicine men like “the Shawnee Prophet.” If Rory bears these gifts, this implies in turn that the boy has inherited powers in healing and second sight from Moses.

Rory reveals his uncanny inherited talents the very first night that Moses takes the boy into the Villa. When Moses picks him up, Rory is figured as wild and neglected, like an orphaned Indian boy. Rory, thought to be white, ironically, is the wild and dirty “savage,” and not the “Shawnee Indian.” Rory’s neglect and truancy have put him in ill health, and even after entering Moe’s home and being given a sweater, he still has a “fit of shivering” and “his lips were almost blue” (223). It is during Rory’s “dangerous condition,” after Moses wipes a “thin stream of blood” from Rory’s face, that Moses first intimates the boy’s psychic ability.

Sensing the boy might be conscious, he asked, “Do you know where you are, Rory?”

The boy’s eyelids fluttered, his mouth twitched and then said, “General Yoxtheimer’s.”

Moses was unable to restrain a gasp, for General Yoxtheimer was one of his remote ancestors who had fought the Revolutionary War and in several Indian uprisings. And it was furthermore in the General’s house where they were now present.

“And who was General Yoxtheimer? Moses whispered.

The boy thrashed about now frantically, and then shaking his head, managed: “Died . . . the Indians.”

“You mean they killed the General?” Moses was barely able to inquire.

No one, Moses reflected, could have known General Yoxtheimer had been killed in an Indian massacre. Even he had only lately learned this fact from a very old history of the Revolutionary period he had found in a library in Chicago. (223-24).

This scene is so rich, it merits a long excerpting. It illustrates the complexity and torsions of American identity. Moses Swearingen's familial history includes both a U.S. Army General, and Shawnee warriors who fought for their land against white encroachment. Through Moses Swearingen's name referring to the Shawnee resistance leaders Blue Jacket and The Prophet, as they were known to whites, Purdy suggests that Moses is descended from a line of Shawnee leaders and medicine men. This genetic inner conflict highlights the complexity and violence of American history and of white westward expansion into the "Northwest Territory" that included Ohio. The scene also of course reveals Rory's gifts of second sight. Moses asks him, "Who let you in on the fact I am a gambler"; after "four or five minutes" of silence Rory replies, "You broke your mother's heart betting away your inheritance" (225). This "inheritance" refers to money, but could also suggest Moe's neglect of his Shawnee heritage.

Some will argue that for a white writer to attribute mystical "psychic abilities" to Indians is a form of New Age romanticizing, an obsession with Indian "magic." Yet supernatural perception has been associated with many distinguished Native Americans, whether they be called medicine men or holy men, sachems or chiefs. In his preface to the 1961 edition of *Black Elk Speaks*, John G. Neihardt describes his first meeting with Black Elk in 1930. Later, after meeting the medicine man, his interpreter and his son remarked that Black Elk seemed to have foreknowledge that Neihardt was coming, in spite of the fact that he had not been alerted to their approach. Neihardt writes, "when I had known the great old man for some years I was quite prepared to believe that he did know, for he certainly had supernormal powers" (xxv). As mentioned in the discussion

of “The White Blackbird,” Charles Eastman (Sioux) referred to medicine men’s powers of “hypnotism.”

If Moses is ambivalent, repressing his inquiry into his own psychic talents that are associated with his Shawnee heritage and patrimony, Rory seems to be the return of the repressed. Moses manages to convince himself, despite the fact that he has just heard Rory recite some esoteric and personal information about Moses, that “maybe he did not have someone who had second sight on his hands, but someone at any rate who was different from anyone he had ever known before” (225). Yet one could even infer that Rory, amidst his visionary state, speaks in the Shawnee language, which he could not have learned. Purdy writes, “Rory started up as if coming out of a deep slumber. Rising from the bed, he shouted something unintelligible or words in a foreign language” (225). This outburst seems to provoke a response from Moses that is deep and mysterious: “Moses groaned and wondered what he was up against with such a boy” (225). Perhaps something deep in Moe’s blood causes him to recognize the cadence of the Shawnee words that Rory may be intoning in his visionary state. Moses does not want to admit to himself Rory’s psychic and healing gifts because to do so would be to confront what he perhaps unconsciously suspects, that he is Rory’s father. In making this chain of reasoning, Moses must confront his Shawnee heritage, something he doesn’t seem inclined to do. In Rory’s presence, “For the first time in his life Moses Swearingen felt, if not outright uneasiness, a kind of fearful awe of another person. This was the turbulence he experienced in the boy’s presence” (227). This repeats the tone of Decatur’s unsettled feelings towards Chad Coultas.

Rory's name means "red king," but he is characterized as neglected and vulnerable, as we have seen. This neglect takes on significance in Purdy's allegory, suggesting the status of Native Americans in the early twentieth century. His long hair underscores his connection to a Native heritage. Purdy writes:

The condition of the boy showed every kind of neglect. His clothing was much too large for him, as were his shoes. And although a handsome fellow, everything about him indicated inveterate neglect. His teeth looked like they needed attention for they were almost black in places. His hair...was long unaccustomed to tonsorial care, if indeed he had ever set foot in a barber shop. His fingernails were broken and some blackened. From wearing the wrong sized shoes his toenails were discolored and broken. And under his paper-thin shirt...one could count every one of his ribs. (225-26)

Many Native American tribes in the early decades of the twentieth century were at a historical low point, having been put through a grueling process of forced acculturation, and then further alienated from their tribal traditions of communal land ownership by the Dawes Act of 1887, which parceled traditionally communally-held land into individually owned plots. The federal government was basically trying to turn tribally-minded Indians into white capitalist farmers, and this often had disastrous results. If the early twentieth century was an especially grim time for Natives, then Rory, in his desuetude, isolation, and alienation from tradition, can be taken to allegorically represent the historical status of Native Americans at this juncture.

But now the boy and the man whom Purdy suggests is his father can teach each other something about their Shawnee heritage, with Rory serving as catalyst. Rory will not be a passive student at Moe's "academy" but will rather have something to teach this man who, like Daniel Haws, has trouble confronting the force of his Native American ancestors. Moses "had taken the boy into his mansion because he saw how needful, even

desperate, the young man was. But instead of having ushered in a child in desperate trouble and need, he found he had taken in a kind of being who appeared barely of this world. And instead of Moses being the master, he was often to have the sinking feeling the boy held the real sway at the Villa,” Purdy writes (227). Rory becomes a teacher, a school master in a sense, to his father. Moe feels an attraction to the boy, but senses a profound and troubling connection to the boy that he has not consciously recognized as familial yet. Examining the boy, Moe had even mused to himself that there was a question about whether Vesta is really the boy’s mother, given her neglect of the child. This Cinderella-like neglect (recall Rory’s long blond locks) is consistent with the fairy-tale sensibility of many of the works contained in Purdy’s late collection *Moe’s Villa & Other Stories*, including a story about a talking cat (“Kitty Blue”) and a dragon who lives to terrify little girls (“A Little More Variety, Please”). Also recalling *In the Hollow of His Hand*, Rory’s connection to a Shawnee heritage goes further than Moses being his father, since the older folks in town say that Rory’s grandmother too is a crossblood Shawnee woman. Rory’s grandmother had foretold how Moe’s and Rory’s fates are bound up, which was mysterious to Moe at the time. Thinking back, Moses recalled that when Rory was only about three or four years of age, Moses had seen him riding with his grandmother in a horse-drawn buggy. Rory’s maternal grandmother would always stop upon seeing Moses to pass the time of day, as though she saw Moe as a special person. “The grandmother did not look like anyone remotely related to Rory or his mother. She was so dark-complexioned the townspeople often wondered if she did not have African blood. But older residents claimed she was, like Moses, part Shawnee,” we are told (228). “One cold December afternoon long ago” Rory’s grandmother came to the door of

Moe's Villa, knocking portentously. Settling down by the fireplace, she tells Moses that she has "had a presentiment," a vision sending the message that "*You are to look after Rory when I'm gone*" (229). Remarking that her daughter Vesta Hawley "isn't capable of caring even for a song sparrow," she says that on the day that she joins the choir invisible, "which may be any day or the next day or never, you are to consider Rory your own flesh and blood" (229). This shows a bond between two Shawnee people formed in a place from which Shawnees were supposedly "removed" back in the 1830s or earlier. Perhaps Rory's grandmother has some suspicion that Moe may be the father of her grandson. At the very least it shows a profound bond of trust and solidarity between two Shawnee people surrounded by a predominantly white culture.

Rory, the red king, is also shown to possess powers of Indigenous touch healing along with his psychic ability, which I take to be a manifestation of his special inheritance. In the lengthy scene that illustrates this, Purdy's racial allegory reverberates. It will take some time to explain this scenario, before returning to Rory's powerful healing medicine. Rory represents the Native American future in this allegory, the repressed Shawnee rising within the "white" youth. Rory also enacts Purdy's wish to undo historical hurts, to reverse historical trauma.

To explain this whole scenario, we must back up and analyze, first, the allegorical significance of Peter Driscoll, Rory's putative father, who is deceased in the present of the novel, and second, explicate the related symbolic plot device of the "rubies," Driscoll's long-neglected gift to his assumed son Rory. As will be demonstrated, Driscoll, a greedy, reckless white man, allegorically represents, as a historical white settler, a threat to Shawnee survivance. *Moe's Villa*, as a fairy tale of sorts, exaggerates

three Purdian figures: the absent, often financially reckless father; the (to the son) overly-sexualized mother who fails to offer enough exclusive love to the son; and the wild, neglected boy bereft of masculine guidance, an example of what Frank Baldanza called “Purdy’s half orphans.” Peter Driscoll is loathed by Vesta: “I hated Pete Driscoll so much . . . He ruined both of our lives, after all” (237). Therefore Rory and her mother choose to use her maiden name, Hawley, just as Elvira and Jethro Fergus in *Jeremy’s Version* come to use Elvira’s maiden name, Summerlad. This choice throws into question his authority or even authenticity as Rory’s father.

The strange manner in which Moses responds to the mention of Driscoll and the presence of the rubies reinforces Driscoll’s allegorical role. It has already been suggested that Moe was Vesta’s lover. Therefore Moses and Peter Driscoll were rivals for Vesta.<sup>136</sup> We also learn that Moe had been shot when he was younger by a “bully who attacked him” (211). When the box first arrived containing the “rubies,”—which Vesta originally thought were marbles upon peeking in at them—she was angry with Pete Driscoll, so she stashed them in the attic, not even telling Rory about them. Re-discovered accidentally after Moe had sent a note to Vesta requesting that she send a winter coat to the Villa for Rory, the rubies are brought down from the attic where Vesta had stashed them away a decade prior. When Vesta’s helper Frau Storeholder brings them over to Moe’s Villa, Moe behaves in a most peculiar fashion. It is as though the presence of this gift from Peter Driscoll, and the words of his letter to Rory, are painful to Moses to regard. It would seem that there is a special reason for this even beyond the fact that Moses has become a new, albeit alternative father figure to the boy. “Moses’ features moved

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<sup>136</sup> It is tempting to read “Vesta” as “West” with Moses the Indian, Dr. Cooke the white Indian-loving frontiersman, and Peter Driscoll, the unethical white settler or soldier, all in contention for her.

uncomfortably at the mention of Peter Driscoll . . . He was sweating profusely,” we are told (241). “Having gazed at the jewels for as long as the sight of such a spectacle could be endured, Moses Swearingen rose unsteadily and began pacing around the room in an agitated manner” (242). Vesta’s assistant Frau Storeholder “looked after him concernedly. She felt puzzled, even sorry for him somehow. It was obvious the sight of what is called rubies was highly disturbing to him” (242-43).

The “gems” and the question of their authenticity come to take on much symbolic weight. They come to symbolize for one the question of Rory’s paternity. Peter Driscoll, the absent, now deceased putative father of Rory, has been out of the picture and Rory has been living with Moe, but now these gems from Driscoll return to haunt his relationship with the boy. Purdy writes, “[Moses] looked over at the gift again as if it were the cause of everything that faced or would face him” (244). Moses, wanting to claim the boy, is disturbed by this “Dad’s gift” from Driscoll (246). It is as though, if the rubies are real, this valuable gift will vindicate Driscoll’s love for Rory and provide proof of the legitimacy of his paternity. Additionally, Moses is disturbed by this sudden intrusion of the specter of Driscoll and his fascinating if deferred gift, I infer, because it is Peter Driscoll who shot Moses, likely surprising him with Vesta.

“He is dead, I take it,” Moses inquired, his eyes still closed.

“Peter Driscoll? Oh, a long time ago, Moses. Years and years.”

Moses nodded and a queer enigmatic smile broke over his mouth.

“I cannot say, Frau Storeholder, that I am happy to have such a possession as you have brought to me today. But I believe since Rory is the one who is entitled to be the owner, it belongs here as long as he remains with me. Which I hope will be forever!”

He almost shouted these last words, and Frau Storeholder drew in her breath. (244)

A few hours after Moses is visibly shaken and disturbed by the sight of the gems, upon which his gaze fixes repeatedly (244, 245), he “was suddenly taken ill and retired to his bedroom without having spoken to Rory about the ‘rubies’ . . . Moses Swearingen’s illness was this: he had been in some kind of gunfight years ago when he was a fairly young man. The bullet of his assailant still lodged in his chest or, as Dr. Cooke said, near his breastbone” (245). The placement of the wound suggests the heart. Purdy’s juxtaposition of the rubies, talk of Pete Driscoll, and Moe’s perturbation followed by his illness, further supports the inference that it was Driscoll who shot Moses.

Peter Driscoll as the shooter of Moses follows the logic of Purdy’s allegory as established in his previous Midwestern and urban novels. Peter Driscoll is a version of earlier fathers such as Wilders Fergus in *Jeremy’s Version* and Lewis Coultas in *In the Hollow of His Hand*. “Rory, your Dad never loved us. He deserted us,” Vesta Hawley tells her son late in the novella (259). Peter Driscoll also has the same racial allegorical significance as those men, connecting whiteness with absence and irresponsibility. In this instance he is a figure in a historical allegory, evoking the blazing guns of the U.S. Army in their war upon Shawnees in the Northwest Territory. It only makes sense that Driscoll would have been the one that shot Moses, the “Shawnee Indian.” “Today, as if somehow the sight of the rubies had brought it on, Moses experienced the most fearful pain in his chest he could remember,” we are told (245). But of course in this story filled with hints and subtle, enigmatic meanings, we are never told this outright.

The allegorical narrative is a product of Purdy’s wish to reverse historical trauma and acknowledge the violence that ensued from the white settlement of Ohio and all across the Americas. Within this “fairy-tale” he enacts such healing figuratively. This

finally returns us to Rory's laying of hands upon (the man I take to be) his father, Moses, who as we have seen possesses talents in the healing arts himself, as Dr. Cooke remarked. Touch healing was a method practiced by many tribes. The Paiute author Sara Winnemucca Hopkins wrote, "Our medicine man cures the sick by the laying on of hands . . . We believe that our doctors can communicate with holy spirits" (15). After Moe's chest pains force him to take to bed, Rory comes to him. When Rory, who speaks "now no longer like the boy Moses had brought home but like a young man," touches the place where the bullet is lodged near Moses' heart, Moe's pain is alleviated (246). Moses, who as we've seen is reluctant to accept the truth of Rory's medicine, reasons that this is merely the effect of "Doc Cooke's dope" (247). But when Rory touches the place a second and third time, pain again leaves Moe's chest. Suggesting his Shawnee heritage, Rory goes into a trance or vision state, "into one of what people called his absentminded 'starts.' He said no more and indeed acted as if he had forgotten where he was" (247). Doctor Cooke, who intimates Rory's healing gifts, asks Rory to stay by Moe's side to help him through the night, and leaves a surgical instrument for Rory that could help him work the bullet out of Moe's body. In the middle of the night, Moses lets out "a war whoop...loud enough to wake the dead," which further connects his injury to his Indianness, underscoring the racial allegory. Without the aid of the instrument, inexplicably Rory removes the bullet from Moe's chest. Purdy's account of this incident bears homoerotic undertones.

Twisting and turning, even frothing at the mouth, Moses tried to turn this way and that, but Rory took hold of him and pushed him down firmly so that he could keep his eye on the bullet hole. Then as Moses cried out as if a torch had been set afire on his bare flesh, he felt those strong pitiless young hands moving as if to touch his beating heart, and he heard an echoing cry come from [Rory]. Moses stared openmouthed at

the boy who was holding the bullet now in his hand and brandishing it at Moses (252).

Afterwards Rory wants to keep the bullet, which has been so close to Moe's heart. Rory, as the heir of Shawnee medicine power, acts to heal Moe's wound, removing the bullet fired into him by the avaricious white false father, Peter Driscoll. Again, some might point to this as romanticizing malarkey, white nonsense about Indian "magic." But early observers of the Shawnee medicine men reported differently. John Heckewelder was a missionary of the Moravian Church during the 1770s and 1780s in the Ohio Country. "I firmly believe," Heckewelder wrote, "that there is no wound, unless it is absolutely mortal, or beyond the skill of our own (white) practitioners which an Indian surgeon (I mean the best of them) will not succeed in healing" (qtd. in "Medicine"). Heckewelder gave as an example a Shawnee man who had suffered a nearly fatal gunshot wound in his chest. The Shawnee medicine man completely healed the man's terrible wound. With Rory's extraordinary removal of the bullet, and his healing of Moe's old gunshot wound, Purdy may well be alluding to this very story.

The question of the authenticity of the gems, as mentioned, takes on great portent in that it equates to the question of the authenticity of Peter Driscoll as Rory's father. Therefore there is much speculation about their authenticity, and if they are indeed genuine, how Peter Driscoll could have possibly acquired them. Finally a Russian émigré, Alexei Oblonsky, a supposed jewelry expert living in Canada whom Moe knows, is called in to investigate. (Oblonsky's name seems patched together from two characters from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.) Moe's tie to this odd man further suggests Moe's involvement in activities on the edge of the law, like his gambling parlor. "He owes me many favors," Moe says, "I helped him with all the paperwork when he became a

Canadian citizen, and then there were other favors I won't go into" (260). After much fanfare and scrutiny, Oblonsky declares the gems to be "candy! I repeat, *candy!*" (272). Even in Purdy's account of how he solved the ending of the tale, the notion of parentage and family is invoked: "With the story 'Moe's Villa,' I didn't know how to end it," he told Richard Canning. "But I dreamed it, where my mother told me, 'The jewels are candy.' I said, 'How ridiculous! That's unbelievable.' Well, it isn't believable. But you fall under the spell of the story and believe it"<sup>137</sup> (Canning 19).

Driscoll's red "gift of the father" is spurious, and therefore, so is Peter Driscoll's patrimony. The "real" Red gift is the Shawnee patrimony of Moses Swearingen, Purdy suggests. This novella, included in a set of stories many of which engage with the fairy tale genre, is Purdy's opportunity to express not only his critique of the myth of Manifest Destiny and the Vanishing American, emphasizing the presence of Shawnees in the Midwest, but also his endorsement, advocacy, and even celebration of contemporary Native American culture, rights, sovereignty, and survivance. Before tracing back to the celebratory conclusion, I want to circle back in order to point out a few instances in which Purdy implies his pro-Native stance.

Living an unconventional lifestyle in the margins, and offering forbidden gambling and spirits at his Villa, Moses is a controversial figure in the town, and Purdy shows how he receives opposition from moralists in the small town, which is conflated with their anti-Indian racism. Principal Eli Jacqua calls the Villa "a gambling hell!" and, denied in his attempt to see Vesta, asks Frau Storeholder, "How, may I ask, could hell be worse than the Villa," when she remarks that there are worse places Rory could be (208).

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<sup>137</sup> In multiple interviews Purdy has mentioned that he dreamt of his mother and maternal grandmother, whose voices guide his stories. Since the maternal family line was said to possess Ojibwe ancestry, this is particularly interesting given the important status of dreams of elders in many tribal traditions.

Yet crucially, implying Purdy's advocacy of tribal sovereignty, the "Shawnee Indian" also receives respect and is given autonomy by prominent citizens. "Moses Swearingen belonged to one of the most respected families in Gilboa. His ancestors went back before the Revolution," the narrator tells us (221). Here, as in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, there is a subversive double meaning of ancestors going "back before the Revolution." This "original stock in America" slyly refers to both early (northern) European and Indigenous ancestors. Purdy re-inscribes the rhetoric of "know-nothing" nativism and the Daughters of the American Revolution by subverting the valorization of the "purity" of blood, in order to privilege and celebrate Indigenous ancestry. At an "emergency meeting of the school board," (209) Principal Jacqua delivers a harangue against Rory's truancy and Moe's profligacy: "our young truant Rory is permanently quartered in a rather notorious domicile already referred to as Moe's Villa!" (210). Yet superannuated Superintendent Shingles, who is nearly deaf, bridles at Jacqua's attack, and defends the Shawnee proprietor: "But see here, I have known Moses Swearingen since he was a boy! He is actually a young man of remarkable resources, a former war hero, we must remember, and now the owner of a property . . . which rivals Vesta Hawley's own mansion, but is, if I am correctly informed, worth great deal more in value! [ . . . ] So I believe if I may say so, gentlemen and Miss Byall, that Rory Hawley could be in a much worse place than the name Moe's Villa might imply" (210-11). Rather than disparaging Moses for the queer implications of all of the young men he employs at his Villa, Mr. Shingles lauds him for hiring "many young men who have been, through no fault of their own, unemployed!" (211). Superintendent Shingles is aware that "card playing" and gambling goes on at Moe's Villa too, but his attitude is that the State should not interfere

with what goes on there: in effect, Shingles is recognizing Moe's Shawnee sovereignty and his right to mentor Rory, even though Rory is extravagantly truant. Frau Storeholder, rebutting Principal Jacqua when he attempted to see Vesta, echoes his sentiment. She too has known Swearingen "from the time he was a boy" and insists that "Rory will be provided for," if she knows Moses at all (208). Shingles makes his position clear, saying in effect that he regards Moe's Villa as sovereign land. As a representative of the State, the superintendent of schools, nonagenarian Shingles takes up a gavel and declares, astonishing everyone with his sudden vivacity, "Let me say at this time, my dear friends and colleagues, that in my opinion we have no jurisdiction over the lives of the person we have been discussing. [ . . . ] What . . . Mr. Swearingen does in his [home does] not concern us . . . who are we . . . to interfere" (212). The superintendent's attitude contrasts sharply with that of the principal and the sheriff from *In the Hollow of His Hand*. Before this, Purdy's Natives had only met abuse, torment, persecution, and prosecution from the State and its allegorical representatives. Now Purdy's tone is more optimistic as a non-Native character with authority argues for recognizing tribal sovereignty.

The conclusion of the novella continues the "fairy-tale" feeling of the narrative, and is indeed a "fairy-tale ending" that reveals Purdy's endorsement of tribal sovereignty. This is not to say that Purdy regards such sovereignty as a pipe dream, but rather that his conclusion, like much of his work, deploys rhetorical hyperbole and is not aiming for strict verisimilitude. In his imaginative work Native Americans, via Moe, receive the recognition and respect that is deserved and has so long been denied. The story of the false rubies "spread not so much like wildfire through the entire village of Gilboa, but more like the effect of a huge meteorite which, falling, had struck all the palatial

mansions of the town” (272). The story even catches the attention of the national media “and reporters made an attempt to interview Vesta Hawley, her son Rory, and Moe Swearingen” (273). At the conclusion, “Even Moe Swearingen himself was . . . pardoned for his many past deviations from the norm” (272). His “queerness” and his encouraging of drinking and gambling are forgiven. Purdy writes:

Although there was no reason for the brass band to play or the torchlights to parade about the town, somehow each evening for quite a while this was exactly what occurred. Young men carrying banners which were illuminated by the torches assembled in front of Moe’s Villa and Vesta Hawley’s mansion. On these banners one could make out messages such as:

WE LOVE YOU VESTA  
COME WHAT WILL

And before Moe Swearingen’s Villa another fluttering banner could be deciphered, to wit:

*MOE, WE HONOR AND COMMEND  
YOU AND YOR VILLA [sic]*

If before Gilboa had some fame for the renowned splendor of some of its mansions, from this time forward the village became equally famous for the episode of the false rubies. (273)

The phrasing of the banner honoring Moe seems particularly significant. The banner shows that the town not only has respect and honor for “the Shawnee Indian,” but also his Villa. The Villa, as I have argued, symbolically represents sovereign Shawnee land. To honor and commend Moe and his Villa means that this space will be regarded as autonomous, and the law will leave him alone.

We might also compare this conclusion with that of *In the Hollow of His Hand* to show how Purdy has granted more consideration to women than in the past. At the close of the earlier novel, Chad Coultas leaves with Decatur, and no one tries to stop him.

Chad's mother Eva melodramatically comes to regard Decatur's love for his boy as something "immoderate" and overpowering, like some inexorable force of nature. Eva gives a speech in which she admits that she has no claim on the boy and that she always knew he would be ultimately claimed by Indians (253). This is clearly a problem, because the mother's love is seen as unimportant and diminished when compared to the Ojibwe man's love for his son. Part of this, of course, is explained by Purdy's racial allegory in which white is seen as degenerate, lacking "blood," vigor and strength, and Indian is seen as robust and fierce. Defending his right to take Chad, Decatur declares, "I can do what my blood tells me" (35). But both mothers are described as possessing some Native blood, so they cannot be seen simply as "white." Eva's total acquiescence and Chad's total rejection of his Euro-American ancestry does not leave a space for the alliance between Red and white. When Chad's one blue eye turns black, this is overly totalizing in the sense that although he is a crossblood, he seems to have become 100% Native. The claim of the mother is seen by both Decatur, and eventually Eva Coultas, to be weak, and Eva gives up her claim to Chad in the end. This is implicitly endorsed by Purdy's authorial voice.

In *Moe's Villa*, however, Purdy seems to strike a more fair balance, and acknowledges the legitimacy of the mother's claim and her love, even though Vesta Hawley has neglected her boy. This provides some sort of redemption. Even though Rory chooses to stay with Moses, which pleases the older man, unlike Chad Coultas, he begins to rebuild his relationship with his mother. Rory begins "visiting his mother almost every evening for the duration of an hour or so. It is thought she obtained his pardon for never having given him on their arrival the box of candies from his scapegrace

father, Peter Driscoll” (274). Moe also gives his blessing to this reconciliation, and pays off “all Vesta’s debts so that she was the sole mistress at last of her mansion” (274). In this way Purdy recuperates the disrespect that some could perceive him showing toward women in *Jeremy’s Version* and *In the Hollow of His Hand*. Vesta is also reunited with Dr. Cooke, who had courted her for decades. He becomes a “star boarder” at her mansion, so we have a happy ending all around.

In both *In the Hollow of His Hand* and *Moe’s Villa*, Indigenous fathers are reunited with their secret sons, which can be seen as the beginning of the formation of, or movement toward, a larger Native community. At the close of the earlier work, we do not know where Decatur and Chad are headed, and it is possible they are heading north again, to join other Ojibwes in Indian Country. The re-uniting of these fathers and sons represents a movement toward healing of Native families and communities. These novels represent the apex of Purdy’s development with regard to Native American claims and communities, and represent a serious engagement with Native history, perspectives, and stories.

## CONCLUSION: THE EVOLUTION TOWARD ALLIANCE

First published in 1956, Purdy's early short story "Why Can't They Tell You Why?" offered a glimmer of possibility that the adolescent boy Paul could save his beloved photographs of his father. In my reading, Paul's assiduous study of these photos represents recovery work of a repressed Native ancestry via his father's family line. But Purdy's earlier novels often do not offer even this much hope for the rebuilding of Native identity, community, and tradition. Purdy's racial and historical allegories of America constructed in his earlier novels, including *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) and *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972), tend to end badly for the characters figured as Native American. Not only is Daniel Haws tortured, castrated, and murdered, his potential son, his hope for the future and "proof of his manhood" (81), was aborted in a backstreet procedure by his former lover, Maureen O'Dell, implying a barren future for Natives. The reader is forced to watch this horrifying scene through young Amos's eyes. In *I am Elijah Thrush* the white heiress Millicent De Frayne causes the Indian Elijah Thrush to board the wrong boat in his attempt to elude her with his beautiful and beloved Indian great-grandson, Bird of Heaven. Millicent forces him into a travesty of a marriage and its consummation, and berates his manhood, causing Elijah to declare that "she has cut me to mincemeat," symbolically castrated him and "ruined, irreparably" his future (117). "She has expropriated all that was fine in me," the Indian laments (103). His African American memoirist, Albert Peggs, does not expect to see him again, and is instructed to take over Elijah's stage roles and identity, which is authorized by Elijah himself. In *Narrow Rooms* (1978), Sidney De Lakes turns white and the Indian Roy Sturtevant is

shot to death, but he was going to die anyway as a result of blood loss from the bizarre barn-door crucifixion that he commanded, able to unite only briefly with his beloved and hated Sidney.

It can thus be inferred that although Purdy's earlier racial allegories expose and critique white colonialism and violence against indigenes, they also suggest a pessimistic view of the state of contemporary Native Americans. Purdy's obsessive interest in American origins and identity led him to the conclusion that the fate of Native Americans and America are bound up tightly. To be truly American, as Lawrence argued, is to be at least partly Indigenous, aboriginal. Purdy's implied pessimism about the status and future of both is deep and only starts to abate in the 1980s. In a symbolically charged scene from one of Purdy's finest, most painstakingly wrought creations, *The Nephew* (1960), Purdy's assessment of his contemporary United States of America is clear. "After an icy Spring, Decoration Day arrived damp and chill," Purdy writes. Purdy's people are "ghosts of America's . . . past," to quote from the untitled poem serving as an epigraph for chapter four, using antiquated terms such as "Decoration Day" for Memorial Day. But then, as William Faulkner famously writes in *Requiem for a Nun*, "the past is never dead. It isn't even past" (80). On Decoration Day,

Just at daybreak, in attempting to bring the flag down from the attic, Boyd slipped on one of the narrow upstairs steps, and in trying to break his fall tore the flag rather badly. Alma said that the important thing was he had not hurt himself, and she was certain she could mend Old Glory and have it up before mid-morning. But the tear was not so easily repaired, she saw, once she began working over it. Other long-hidden snags and rents in the material suddenly asserted themselves, as if in conspiracy with the first rent in the fabric, and soon Alma saw that what she held was a tissue of rotted cloth, impossible to mend. (196)

Purdy suggests as much about America in this patently allegorical passage, that it is rotten, corrupted, and irreparable. Purdy leaves a similar feeling with the reader at the close of such allegorical fictions as *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967), *I am Elijah Thrush* (1972), and *Narrow Rooms* (1978), along with the satirical novel *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964).

As argued throughout this dissertation, however, Purdy's view evolves, first presenting a struggling, challenged Native survivance typified by the conclusions of *Jeremy's Version* (1970) and later rendered slightly more optimistic in *On Glory's Course* (1984) and "The White Blackbird" (1990). Purdy then became gradually more affirmative, emphasizing Native American presence, survivance, and finally, tribal sovereignty, especially in the later works of fiction *In the Hollow of His Hand* (1986), *Out with the Stars* (1992), and *Moe's Villa* (2000, 2004). Purdy's view was no doubt influenced by the development and increasing visibility of Native American literature and activism from the late sixties through the present. This knowledge was in part gained through his reading of the work of his friend, Mohawk poet Maurice Kenny (who was co-editor for *Contact/II*, which published a good deal of Purdy's unique poetry), and also through the media visibility of Native American political activism led by AIM and other groups. Purdy was inspired to imagine a more optimistic future for Native Americans, and began imagining nascent communities through the re-uniting of Native fathers and sons. The positive development in this area evidenced by Purdy's work in the later period moves him closer to the status of non-Native critical ally. Purdy's hope for Native American sovereignty and community evinced in these later works suggests in turn that there is some hope for America as a whole after all.

Purdy's novels and stories have too often been defined as highly subjective and socially disengaged. But as I hope to have shown, Purdy consistently and increasingly engages issues of race and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality across his career. His works are by no means removed from the culture and the nation in which he lived, but rather critique and intervene in that world. Don Adams writes that "the lesson of Purdy's allegorical pastorals, and of his allegorical fiction in general, is that, while we cannot change our nature, we can change our world" (28). Too many critics have stressed the darkness and despair of Purdy's work at the expense of other, more productive aspects of his work, especially following the 1960s. Purdy's confrontation of the grimmer side of existence does not constitute an argument for apathy nor does it represent a disengagement from social, cultural and political contexts. Purdy's humor, playful use of language, his persistence in developing his art, and most of all, his compassionate social and cultural critique, are affirmative traits that permit hope for change. This sense of hope is conveyed early in his career, in a letter of 1 November 1957 to John Cowper Powys in which Purdy simply states: "I don't believe man has to suffer as much as he does." The simple point that Adams makes—Purdy's allegorical fictions argue that we can change our world—is crucial in that it foregrounds Purdy's engagement with the social and the political and conveys Purdy's transformative power. The vast majority of critics have missed this message in Purdy's work, and Purdy's reputation and readership has suffered as a result of their failure to espouse his broader relevance. This is a shame, especially since Purdy used to be taught fairly regularly in contemporary American literature and other undergraduate literature courses. The irony is that his work became

even stronger and more socially and culturally relevant *after* the most intense period of critical attention (1957-1965) ended.

As I have shown, some important and sustained facets of such engagement is his imagining of a Native American presence, his unflinching exposure of troubling chapters of American history, and his advocacy of Native American tribal sovereignty and survivance. An understanding of Purdy's engagement with indigeneity, along with his also largely-ignored engagements with other aspects of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, should point to a revival of his works. Purdy ought to be of at least some interest to anyone closely examining post-war American fiction in general, but as the theory and praxis of Weaver and Cox testifies, non-Native literary authors' representations of Native characters and their engagement with Native history and storytelling should also be of interest to Native Studies and American Indian literary nationalism. Purdy's impressive canon is a treasure trove and the later works have barely begun to be explored. Especially now that four of Purdy's *Selected Plays* (2009) will be available to U.S. readers, Purdy's drama is a further area of exploration with regard to social and cultural contexts.<sup>138</sup> For example, the short play *Wedding Finger*, from which I quoted, is a complex and surreal racial allegory of America that I did not have the space to adequately explicate in this project.<sup>139</sup>

My project traces James Purdy's development toward becoming a non-Native critical ally, aided by his self-positioning as a metaphorical crossblood. Positioning Purdy as an exploratory figure toward the critical ally suggests possibilities for other non-

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<sup>138</sup> Purdy's plays have also been collected in the Dutch collection *In the Night of Time and Four Other Plays* (1992). Two short plays, both highly admired by Tennessee Williams, appeared in *Children Is All* (1962). The literary journal *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* published many of Purdy's one-act plays. See Jay L. Ladd's bibliography of Purdy.

<sup>139</sup> This short play, first published in 1972, incorporates Purdy's *Esquire* story "Q & A" and intersects in odd and surprising ways with *I am Elijah Thrush*.

Native authors as well. My study of Purdy also seeks to encourage further scholarship in non-Native authors who write about Native Americans and crossbloods, both the well-known and the non-canonical but worthy authors who have engaged with indigeneity. Many of these works and authors have not been approached from a perspective sympathetic to Native Studies (or have hardly been approached at all). My approach to Purdy might exemplify a new way of reading these authors. Such an approach does not only aim to criticize their representations or figurations, to expose how they have “gotten it wrong” or been complicit with systems of oppression and cultural erasure—this would form an important part of any critique of these writers—but beyond that, such work also examines non-Native authors’ attempts, and in some cases, successes, to be sympathetic to Native American claims and to advocate Native perspectives, approaching or perhaps even becoming, in some cases, non-Native critical allies. Such an approach would include considerations of the benefits and drawbacks of such authors’ sympathy or identification with Native perspectives, considering possible aspects of exoticism, romanticism, fetishism, or exploitation that might hinder such attempts at alliance. My readings are sympathetic to, and often coterminous with, Red readings and are grounded upon a basic foundation of knowledge in Native American literature, theory and criticism. This approach is interested in expanding discourse on Euro-American authors who create representations of Native Americans and engage with Native history and culture. It is important that readings do not simply “go after” an author for his or her sins of representation in a given work, but rather open up the wider range of complexities and ambiguities in a work, an author, a body of work. Each work should be granted its singularity, as Derrida recommends.

This area should look into both canonical and “vanishing” fiction writers of merit who write of Native Americans and crossbloods, and Native history and culture, regardless of the author’s ethnic background. James Cox’s usually excellent study *Muting White Noise* leaves something to be desired when, out of all the Euro-American authors who have ever written of Native Americans, he cites only Ken Kesey and Oliver La Farge as “exceptions,” examples of non-Native writers who have not reinforced negative stereotypes or promoted, intentionally or not, the logic of the “vanishing Indian,” only capable of imagining Native absence (247). The fact that Cox does not ever mention Thomas Berger’s well-known *Little Big Man*, a novel highly praised by Vine Deloria, Jr. as providing “a good idea of Indian life” in *Custer Died for Your Sins* (23), and made into a popular film starring Dustin Hoffman, suggests that there are many overlooked works by Euro-American writers out there that do not fit so neatly into a binary of “good” and “bad” representations, penned respectively by Native or white authors. The novel *Stay Away Joe*, by Dan Cushman (1952), later made into an Elvis Presley movie (1969), is a novel that seems chock-full of stereotypes, portraying many of its Montana Indians as short-sighted, beer-guzzling, wanton hedonists. The Montana Indian novelist and poet James Welch (Blackfeet/Gros Ventre) detested the novel and vetoed an excerpt of the text that was to be included in *The Last Best Place*, an anthology of Montana writing (“Dan”). Vine Deloria, Jr., on the other hand, in a book written before the advent of what has been called the Native American Literary Renaissance, called it “the favorite of Indian people” and said that it “gives a humorous but accurate idea of the problems caused by the intersection of two ways of life” (23). Along with *Little Big Man* and *When the Legends Die* by Hal Borland, these three books (all written

by Euro-American authors), according to Vine Deloria “give a good idea of the intangible sense of reality that pervades the Indian people . . . Anyone who can read, appreciate, and understand the spiritual forces brought out in these books will have a good idea of what Indians are all about. Other books may be nice, accurate, and historical but they are not really about Indians” (23). The extreme disagreement between Deloria and Welch, two important and influential Native American writers and thinkers, underscores the complexities and ambiguities that must be confronted in thinking about such non-Native works.

Countless representations created by canonical and lesser-known U.S. post-war writers might be productively addressed from this perspective. James Leo Herlihy is one 1960s writer who springs to mind. I have mentioned Herlihy’s negative representation of a gender-bending mixedblood Native American man in *Midnight Cowboy*, but a Native American character in *All Fall Down* (1960) is also quite interesting and complex, if seedy. In *All Fall Down*, the ne’er-do-well older brother, named Berry-Berry, in California becomes “particularly friendly” with a Native American panderer and marijuana dealer named Silas Rents His Ox, who teaches him how to smoke and how to pimp and feels “a real fondness for his apprentice” (180). With this Indian-white male relationship we again enter Fiedler country. Herlihy notes an “intimate comradeship” between Silas and Berry-Berry that is suggestive (180).

References to “Indian” philosophy, people, and cultural practice pepper Thomas Pynchon’s historical novel *Mason & Dixon* (1997). “Tom” Pynchon’s very early short story “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna” (1959), published in a Cornell literary magazine, includes a mostly silent Ojibwe character, Irving Loon, at a party in Washington D.C.

who is suffering from “Windigo psychosis.” Loon is dating a non-Native woman who, unaware of his dangerous madness, perceives in him a “brooding James Dean quality” and “a divine melancholia” (8). In a form of cultural imperialism, this woman, Considine, during her travels for the State Department tends to pick up exotic “male specimens” wherever she goes, brings them back home with her, then drops them after a few weeks (9). Loon is described as “an incongruous note in the whole scene: a swarthy person in torn khakis and an old corduroy coat who stood in one corner like some memento mori, withdrawn and melancholy.” The descriptions of Ojibwes included in the narrative problematically paint them as primitive, by and large susceptible to murderous and cannibalistic madness. “This group lives forever at the brink of starvation,” a professor had lectured to the narrator’s anthropology class (8). The reader infers that Loon shoots multiple party guests at the end (it is therefore not surprising that “Morality and Mercy in Vienna” was the only published short story that was left out of Pynchon’s collection of early material, *Slow Learner*).

Other acclaimed or interesting works of post-war U.S. or Canadian fiction authored by non-Natives engaging indigeneity and/or Indian stereotypes include Jack Ludwig’s *Confusions* (1963), Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* (1966), Richard Amory’s gay historical fantasy *Song of the Loon* (1966), Donald Barthelme’s short story “The Indian Uprising,” William Gaddis’s *JR* (1975), and Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1999). This area of inquiry can no doubt unearth many more works of literary merit that have suffered critical neglect. Many unknown or understudied Euro-American works of literature are waiting to be analyzed from a more complex perspective. This perspective acknowledges the good while criticizing the bad and does not overly adhere to any single

critical discourse, instead advocating a “crossblood” approach that blends critical methods while emphasizing Native theory and criticism and forging and developing alliances with Native Studies. Such works, as I hope to have shown with Purdy, potentially have much to offer to both Native Studies and American Studies. This is a relatively unexplored area, derived from a “mixed” critical perspective that aims for alliance.

In examining both Native American and non-Native authors in their singularity, it is important to attend to the developing and changing attitudes of a given author, as I have done with Purdy. An author cannot be summed up by one or two works. With Purdy I hope to have shown that Native Americans were an abiding interest in the scope of his fiction, at different levels of visibility, but sustained throughout his entire corpus. His attitude, although always critical of Euro-American abuses, develops gradually over the years, and attention must be paid to several of his works to understand this. Very few studies have considered Purdy in the context of his entire career, or even the majority of it. It would be a mistake to attempt to categorize James Purdy’s attitude towards Native American communities and claims after reading only one or even a few of his works. A serious writer needs serious readers. As the speaker asks in the Purdy poem that serves as an epigraph to chapter three, “And you’ll come won’t you now?” James Purdy’s work, in many ways the product of an outsider to the U.S. literary and cultural establishment, will continue to emerge from neglect. The return of this “vanishing” American author is becoming increasingly visible.

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APPENDIX:  
AN ENVOI FOR JAMES PURDY

Due to James Purdy's relative obscurity among both the general reading public and much of academia, it seems fitting, especially in light of his recent passing, to selectively cite some of the abundant praise he has received since the mid-1950s from preeminent writers, critics, and artists, in order to give unfamiliar readers a deeper sense of how his prodigious and singular work was received, especially early in his career. This appendix is meant to be a send-off, a tribute to the late author. Purdy passed away on the morning of Friday, March 13, 2009, at the age of 94 while I completed this project, one week prior to the day on which I was scheduled to meet him in person.

Purdy was praised by some of the most perceptive and seminal literary and cultural critics of his times: Brooks Atkinson, George Steiner, Susan Sontag, Ihab Hassan, and Donald Pease. The famous drama critic Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* was impressed by Purdy's first collection of stories, and "delighted" by *The Nephew*. Atkinson told Purdy in a letter of 23 September 1960: "I can't tell you how much I admire it . . . for it is thoroughly original, always under control and as far as I can see, owes nothing to what anyone else is writing today." In 1964 another New York critic, the edgy and innovative Susan Sontag, author of *Against Interpretation*, stated: "Anything Purdy writes is a literary event of importance," and that he is "indisputably one of the half dozen or so living American writers most worth taking seriously." Although Purdy's name has undeservedly slipped off the radar of many critics and professors at present, Sontag in 1964 alluded to "the deservedly high place he now holds

in contemporary letters” and revealingly notes that “everyone who cares about literature has expected, and will continue to expect, a great deal” from Purdy.

Philosopher of language and critic George Steiner wrote: “James Purdy is a writer of remarkable talent . . . His books take one by the throat and shake one’s bones loose” (*On Glory’s Course* hardcover dustjacket). He concluded a review of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* for the *London Sunday Times*: “Such is the honesty and sensual immediacy of Purdy’s work, which is his power to make nerve and bone speak, that our imagination emerges somehow dignified, for here is the sharpness, integrity, life-giving energy of Purdy’s art and of the American language at its best” (qtd. in Purdy, “James” 303). The “New Americanist” critic and editor Donald Pease published two significant pieces on Purdy and was the keynote speaker at a 2003 conference on “Assessing James Purdy.” To Pease, Purdy performs “magic with technique” (*Fifties* 147). Other notable literary and cultural critics of the 1960s through the 1980s who engaged and praised Purdy include Irving Malin, Tony Tanner, Theodore Solotaroff, Benjamin De Mott, Warren French, Charles Newman, and R. W. B. Lewis.

Along with the most important critics of his day, many of the era’s most significant novelists, poets, and playwrights have also sung James Purdy’s praises. Some of Purdy’s champions, although they could also be called “gay writers,” are among America’s finest twentieth century authors. Purdy became a heavy-duty correspondent and friend in the early sixties with Carl Van Vechten, the queer (and married) novelist, cultural critic, photographer, and patron of the Harlem Renaissance. Van Vechten, who had assumed that Purdy was African American based on his use of vernacular, called Purdy’s work “brilliant” and “subtly revealing” (“News”). “No one since Henry James

has contributed as much to the short story as James Purdy,” Van Vechten wrote. Van Vechten’s friendship and belief in Purdy’s talents meant a great deal to Purdy, who modeled the character Cyril Vane in *Out with the Stars* after “Carlo.” A close friend of Van Vechten’s and recipient of his largess, iconic Harlem Renaissance poet and prose artist Langston Hughes also admired *Color of Darkness* and agreed to contribute a blurb.

Another canonical figure, Tennessee Williams, an admirer and a friend of Purdy’s, praised Purdy’s dialogue and characterization, and urged Purdy to write drama (“James” 303). Williams “had fallen in love with the fiction of James Purdy after reading *63: Dream Palace*,” Peter Theroux writes. Williams, one of the finest, most sensitive playwrights of the twentieth century, called Purdy “a genius” (“Selected”). On 16 December 1956 Williams wrote Purdy a letter thanking him for sending two books. He said he was reading both but admitted, “I am a very slow reader.” Williams found these works “fresh” and “original” and concluded, “I would very much like to meet you and discuss your book with you.” This meeting did not work out until later, sometime after Purdy moved from Allentown to New York City.<sup>140</sup> According to John Uecker, an amanuensis, assistant, and friend to both Purdy and Williams, and a producer of Purdy’s dramatic work with The Running Sun Theatre Company, Williams participated in a performance of a Purdy short play with friends, an informal reading of *Cracks* from *Children is All* (Interviews).<sup>141</sup> Indeed, Purdy told an interviewer that he, Williams, and “a very close friend of mine who’s an actor” (Uecker) used to “go out together, have supper, and he read one of my plays aloud to us in New York. Tennessee Williams read

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<sup>140</sup> “Tell me something about him, what’s he like? . . . I would love to meet him,” Williams wrote to a friend in early 1957 (qtd. in Theroux).

<sup>141</sup> Uecker also said that Williams carried around a copy of Purdy’s collection *Children is All* in his manuscript case for four years, the only item that was not one of his own works.

the part of the mother. He loved my dialogue” (62). Tennessee provided a blurb for James: “Purdy may shock and offend some partisans of the well-trodden paths in fiction but he will surely enchant the reader who values a new experience in our very new times” (qtd. in Theroux). When Uecker found Tennessee Williams’ body in his New York hotel room on the morning of his death in February 1983, there was a photocopied manuscript of Purdy’s short story “Some of These Days” on the bed, writes Williams biographer Lyle Leverich (2). It is clear that Williams’ potent short story “Desire and the Black Masseur” (from *One Arm*), with its exploration of a guilty masochism that mushrooms into a craving for annihilation, informs the gruesome Stadger-Haws scenes in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*.

The estimable Gore Vidal was another prominent champion of Purdy’s work. “In the 1970s and 1980s Vidal corresponded with Paul Bowles about Purdy, who has the distinction of having shocked both writers—quite a feat,” Theroux remarks (116). In his recent memoir *Point to Point Navigation*, Gore Vidal notes that several Purdy novels sit atop his desk: “I’ve been writing about him, and wondering why so unique a writer has been so ignored” (35). Vidal, praising *Narrow Rooms* (1978), called Purdy “an authentic American genius.” Vidal declared in a 2005 piece for the *New York Times* that Purdy should not be ghettoized as a “gay writer” but rather should “be placed alongside William Faulkner.” Truman Capote, in his famous *Playboy* interview, placed Purdy on a list of “excellent writers” (Inge 158).

The powerful and haunting composer and expatriate novelist Paul Bowles was another friend who publically supported Purdy (and another visionary and sometimes terrifying author whose work today ought to be better known). In his memoir *Without*

*Stopping*, Bowles tells of being in New York in 1958 to work with an opera production, and running into Carl Van Vechten in the street. During lunch the next day, Carlo asked Bowles, who usually could be found in Tangier, if there was anyone he wanted to meet while he was in the city. Bowles had just read *Color of Darkness* in Lisbon (which had been sent to him by New Directions publisher James Laughlin) and was impressed; he uttered Purdy's name. "Come Wednesday at seven," responded Van Vechten immediately, a magician. Of the meeting Purdy later remarked, "I was at the beginning of my own career as a writer, and was a bit nervous at meeting so mysterious and legendary a figure as Mr. Bowles. My apprehension was put at an end when I met him. He seemed like a quiet, very dignified and kind man, perhaps like a doctor of medicine" (Pulsifer 92). Bowles in turn found Purdy to be "a reticent and unassuming man whom I instantly liked. Carl took photographs all during the evening" (*Without* 340). Of Purdy's second full-length novel *The Nephew*, Bowles wrote in a letter of 7 September 1960: "I read it as soon as it came, and was completely delighted with it . . . in this novel you have done something quite new. [Ivy] Compton-Burnett has done it for the English, but nobody has done it for the Americans until this book. [ . . . ] it comes out wholly fresh,—a new thing. I loved MALCOLM, but it was a tour de force and therefore unique. This has nothing of the tour de force about it, and is therefore more brilliant."

As a music critic, Paul Bowles for a time worked under composer Virgil Thomson (the model for the character Abner Blossom in *Out with the Stars*) at the New York *Herald Tribune*. Thomson served as a mentor and sometimes father figure of sorts to a younger generation of queer composers which included Bowles and Ned Rorem. On 1 March 1960 Thomson wrote Purdy saying, "Your *Malcolm* has made me infinitely happy

. . . I find myself remembering it all the time.” In a postcard of 19 July 1970 Thomson wrote, “I stayed up all night with Jeremy [*Jeremy’s Version*]. It is very real and grand, and a thriller. And now I am practically a relative of everybody in it.” Composer Ned Rorem was another friend of Purdy’s and wrote in his diary that Purdy’s novels “give the lie to the until recently chic suggestion that criticism has supplanted fiction” (239). Rorem composed incidental music for at least two theatre productions of Purdy fictions, *Color of Darkness* and *The Nephew*.

Edward Albee, considered along with Williams one of the most incisive postwar American playwrights, liked Purdy’s *Malcolm* so much that he adapted it to the stage (although it was decidedly not a critical or commercial success). Albee calls Purdy a special talent, explaining four aspects of Purdy’s work that most appeal to him, that make him “most grateful” for Purdy’s work: “its wit, its eroticism, its quirky, pungent prose, and its compassion.” He compares Purdy to “Joyce, Stein, Proust, Beckett, Nabokov, Borges” in that he, “like most of the important twentieth-century writers,” is “deeply, sadly, funny” (viii). Thornton Wilder wrote Purdy to thank him for sending him a book, remarking that “all the stories are filled with remarkable insights.” Mathew Stadler, a gay contemporary novelist and the author of two pieces on Purdy, admires Purdy “above all other living writers” (“House” 93), and said that “I could not think without these books now” (“Theater” 12). Postmodern and experimental gay novelist Dennis Cooper is a fan and has blogged about Purdy; Scott Heim is another admirer. An early gay novelist advocate of Purdy in England was stylist Angus Wilson, and the eccentrically gay author and raconteur Quentin Crisp also praised his work in an essay. English playwright Noël

Coward praised his early stories in a 1957 letter to Purdy and later wrote to say he would be willing to recommend Purdy for a Guggenheim grant (Purdy was made a fellow in 1958).

The very different gay filmmakers Derek Jarman and John Waters both admired Purdy's work immensely. Jarman vowed to film *Narrow Rooms*, talking about it until his death from AIDS, and Waters, who has corresponded with Purdy, collects and recommends his books. In a January 1986 postcard to Purdy, Waters noted, "I gave 'Shallow Grave' to a few people for XMAS and I think I've turned them into Purdy addicts." "In my circle of friends, *everybody* reads him," Waters remarked (Theroux).<sup>142</sup>

Purdy's male admirers were not limited to gay men but included those as adamantly heterosexual as Norman Mailer, who for a time was a neighbor of Purdy's in Brooklyn Heights. In 1956 Mailer made efforts to help Purdy get published, according to a letter from Purdy to his agent Toni Strassman. Mailer's support re-emerged in the 1984, when, as current president of the writers' organization P.E.N., Mailer suggested that Purdy be invited to join the likes of N. Scott Momaday in P.E.N. (Hollander). Terry Southern praised Purdy's "intense fidelity to his own particular perception of things . . . it is . . . upon this kind of alliance that any strength of American writing depends." Other male novelists who have praised Purdy's work in letters to him or book reviews include Robert Penn Warren (who anthologized Purdy in *Understanding Fiction* and called *The Nephew* "a glittering tour de force, but also a great deal more, with sharp stabs of reality throughout, a strong and impressive book"), Gerald Brennan (a long-time correspondent

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<sup>142</sup> In his book *Crackpot: the Obsessions of John Waters*, the filmmaker describes how he endlessly re-arranges his favorite books, sometimes kissing them. "'Good morning James Purdy,' I chirp," Waters writes (59).

with Purdy), Irishman Joyce Cary, James T. Farrell, Herbert Gold, Guy Davenport, New Zealander Noel Virtue (who corresponded with Purdy), and Jonathan Lethem.

Purdy's fiction-writing admirers have not been limited to men, and many women have publically praised him, which can be used to build a counterargument to those (mostly heterosexual male) critics who have accused Purdy of misogyny. Katherine Anne Porter wrote that Purdy has "style as fluid and natural as a man thinking to himself in the dark, yet controlled, coherent, with an innate sense of form, and great powers of concentration" ("News"). Dorothy Parker is known for her comically snarky reviews and quips, but she called Purdy "a striking new American talent, sharp and sure and powerful" (20). She placed *Malcolm* among the "major miracles of ink and paper" and dramatically concluded: "I have no claim, the Lord knows, to be counted among the special nor have I the voice to shout hosannas or the eyes to see into the future. I do not know how James Purdy will be rated, come the next century. I know only that I believe he is a writer of the highest rank in originality, insight and power, and if, in the Two Thousands, there is a grain of consciousness left among my dust, I will still believe it." ("James" 302). Parker's friend Lillian Hellman, who was an admirer of Purdy's fiction, convinced Purdy to write plays and supported his efforts to do so. In a letter of 25 September 1959 Hellman tells Purdy that she proposed him for the Academy of Arts and Letters, seconded by Parker and Glenway Wescott. Joan Didion offered praise to *The Nephew* (1960) in her review. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins of 17 January 1958, Flannery O'Connor said she saw "some wonderful things" in Purdy's early stories (*Habit* 264), and later thought *The Nephew* "very fine" (*Collected* 1136). Two more women authors who have lauded Purdy are Hope Hale Davis and his friend Paula Fox.

The woman who had the greatest effect in championing Purdy has not been addressed. If Vidal compares Purdy favorably with Faulkner, the English poet and critic Dame Edith Sitwell asserted in a 1956 letter to poet Alberto de Lacerdo that Purdy “is a *much* greater writer than Faulkner. I can’t think of any living prose writer of short stories and short novels who can come anywhere near him. He is really *wonderful*” (*Selected* 210).<sup>143</sup> Although Sitwell’s name is not well known today (although exalted by gay alternative rock stars such as Morrissey and R.E.M.’s Michael Stipe), she was, along with her two brothers, at midcentury regarded rather highly as a poet and literary tastemaker. The aristocratic Sitwell was a major early champion of Purdy’s, helping him to get published in England even before he was picked up by a proper publisher in the States. Two of Purdy’s friends, passionate about his work and seeing the rejections stack up, insisted on having his stories privately published, and Purdy would mail these out to writers and others whom he thought would be sympathetic to his voice (The Yale Beinecke collection holds many responses from well-known literary figures).<sup>144</sup> With Edith Sitwell, photographs of whom sat on Purdy’s mantel in his bedsit apartment in Brooklyn Heights, Purdy struck gold. After reading these two volumes, Sitwell wrote in a second letter to Purdy of 26 November 1956 expressing her “profound admiration”:

“You are truly a writer of genius” (212). In this letter Sitwell called *63: Dream Palace* “a

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<sup>143</sup> And Sitwell was no disparager of Faulkner—she found his *Requiem for a Nun* “deeply moving,” as she wrote to Purdy in December 1957 (220).

<sup>144</sup> An agricultural heir, businessman, financier, independent scholar and author of monographs on Conrad and James, Osborn Andreas—who became a model for at least two of Purdy’s characters: Girard Girard in *Malcolm* and Reuben Masterson in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*—had *Don’t Call Me By My Right Name* privately published in 1956, a collection of short stories adorned with Purdy’s impressionistic line drawings. A chemistry professor and scientific researcher, and a long-time close friend with whom Purdy lived for extended periods in Appleton, Wisconsin, Allentown, Pennsylvania, and New York City, Dr. Jorma J. Sjoblom borrowed money to have the novella *63: Dream Palace* published that same year. The novella and stories (plus two more) would be collected as *Color of Darkness* (1957) by New Directions in America.

masterpiece from every point of view . . . I am quite overcome. What anguish, what heart-breaking truth! And what utter simplicity. The knife is turned in one's heart . . . there isn't a single false note, and not a sentence, or a word too much, not a sentence or a word too little" (210). In a 1962 review of *Children is All* Sitwell proclaimed it "undoubted that James Purdy will come to be recognized as one of the greatest living writers of fiction in our language," having already stated in a letter that in the future Purdy "will be known as one of the greatest writers produced in America during the last hundred years" (*Letters* 240). "Your friendship, and your work, are very important and precious to me," she wrote to Purdy on 27 April 1957.

The British publication of *63: Dream Palace* in turn led to critical praise by Welsh novelist John Cowper Powys and English gay novelist Angus Wilson, both of whom became correspondents with Purdy. In an evaluation that Purdy would subsequently "cherish" and regard as insightful, Powys wrote that Purdy "is the best kind of original genius of his day. His insight into the diabolic cruelties and horrors that lurk . . . under our conventional skin is as startling as his insight into the angelic tenderness and protectiveness that also exist in the same hiding-place. Few . . . recognize either of these things. But Purdy reveals them" ("James"). Irish modernist giant Samuel Beckett wrote a letter to Purdy from Paris, dated 2 August 1958, thanking him for *Color of Darkness*, which Beckett calls "very fine."

Along with Edith Sitwell and Langston Hughes, several poets joined the choir of praise, especially between 1958 and 1963. Purdy has published several short books of poetry, including one titled after the poem I have used in chapter epigraphs, *The Running Sun*, collected in the Dutch *Collected Poems*. Canonical modernist poets William Carlos

Williams and Marianne Moore also had kind words. W.C. Williams, imagist poet and author of the seminal American Studies text *In the American Grain*, said that Purdy “has such a way of biting into the bare core of our lives . . . The Great Russians, Gorky among the rest, could not have done better” (“News”). So profoundly had Purdy captured the essence of the American small town that Williams remarked that Rainbow Center, the setting of *The Nephew*—“where I grew up and practiced medicine for 42 years—is proud of you. You have squeezed us in a ball, tenderly, heart and soul, and laid us bare with complete understanding . . . I was much affected by a fine piece of writing” (“News”). Marianne Moore called him “a master of the American vernacular” (qtd. in DeStephano 51). In a letter to Purdy of 3 December 1956, Elizabeth Bishop thought his early stories were “very good” and “touching” and wrote, “Please believe I’ll be on the lookout for more of your work.” The gay poet James Merrill thought *The Nephew* “very strange and beautiful” and wrote Purdy: “When I reached the end I felt I had a prism in my hands.” Another admirer was Kenneth Rexroth, who in 1956 wrote to Purdy of his privately-published debut: “it is one of the best 1<sup>st</sup> books of short stories I have ever read. I am amazed that could not get a ‘regular’ publisher.” Along with Rexroth, Robert Creeley and James Leo Herlihy (author of *Midnight Cowboy* and *All Fall Down*) are other admirers associated with Black Mountain College. In the spring of 1962 Herlihy wrote his close friend Anaïs Nin from Key West, asking if she had read James Purdy’s novella *63: Dream Palace*, which he had just read in the paperback edition of *Color of Darkness*. “Brilliant, beautiful, terrifying,” Herlihy writes. “He does a splendid, illuminated realism that comes out surrealistic” (Nin 296).

Many of these accolades came early in his career, and many of his champions died before they could witness the extended development of his career, but in any event the advocacy or criticism of Sitwell, Van Vechten, Vidal, Schwarzschild, Tanner, Baldanza, and the British critic Stephen D. Adams, was especially strong. More recently (2005), as mentioned in the introduction, Jonathan Franzen sang his praises and nominated him for an award. The award, given to Purdy for *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, was for a great American novel that had been overlooked or was due for a revival. Franzen read the novel because a mutual friend, author Paula Fox, had strongly recommended it to him (Italie). Readers have often come to Purdy through the strong recommendation of friends or, less commonly, through his association with other literary figures, rather than through publisher hype or literary politicking. Those that have read Purdy in depth tend to become lifelong admirers, although with his disregard for respectability and political correctness, Purdy will eventually ruffle just about any reader's feathers. It is sad to think that there will never be another James Purdy novel. But what a staggering body of work he gave us, over half of which has barely been touched by academic criticism.

Goodbye and fare thee well James Purdy.