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GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE ART THAT WILL NOT DIE:

THE STORY-TELLING OF

GREG SARRIS AND THOMAS KING

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

MARY MARGARET MACKIE

Norman, Oklahoma

2001

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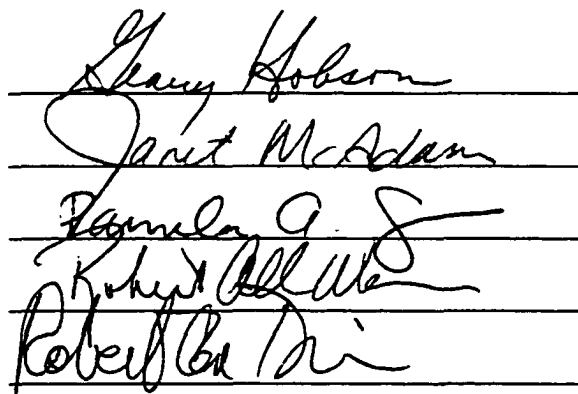
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THE ART THAT WILL NOT DIE:
THE STORY-TELLING OF
GREG SARRIS AND THOMAS KING

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY


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Acknowledgements

Traditionally, the acknowledgment page has been reserved for the poor bastard who has written an entire book or dissertation to list everyone she or he has ever known who ever peripherally aided (or abetted) the entire process—from gathering information to sorting information to bleeding each and every word onto the page to crying over each agonizing revision to the final end which is never truly the end. Some acknowledgement pages are brief, others blather on for a few pages. And let's face it, most people never read an acknowledgement page unless they are aware beforehand that they are referenced therein.

I considered dispensing with this tradition, not wanting to offend by leaving anyone out, but ultimately decided that this was a unique opportunity to say what I wanted after having gone through the process briefly described above. With that in mind, let us commence.

Jeff and Alex, this is especially for you, who grew up over the course of five-plus years without me

on a regular basis. I can never reclaim those years,
and it often makes me wonder if it was all worth it.

This is also for Stirling, without whom it would
have been an awfully dull process. *Te amo.*

In my thoughts, always, are you, *e-du-tsi*, who
unwaveringly supported my worries, concerns, and
always my ideas and writing.

And also *o-gi-na-li-i*. Know that wherever you go,
you remain close to my heart.

Askwa atlokawagan paiamuk. All my relations.

With nothing can one approach a work of art
so little as with critical words: they always come
down to more or less happy misunderstandings.

Rainer Maria Rilke
Letters to a Young Poet

It is our responsibility, as writers and teachers
to make sure that our texts and our classrooms
are not 'safe' spaces from which a reader or student
may return unchanged or unthreatened. While a fictional
territory---a safe, unthreatening space inhabited
by cuddly, colorful Natives---may guarantee million-
dollar advances in New York and glowing student
evaluations, we have to remember the immortal words of
Gerald Vizenor: 'Some upsetting is necessary.'
Literary terrorism is preferable to literary tourism.

Louis Owens
Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place

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Introduction

From the beginning of time, human beings have been telling each other stories. For some of us, the first stories we remember may have been "creation myths"---Bible stories. For others, the stories heard while growing up may be family stories: stories of recent or long ago ancestors and their lives. Still others grow up on "fairy tales," or old children's classics. The telling and retelling of stories of whatever variety is not unusual in any given culture, but the importance and meaning of stories does, indeed, differ to some extent, depending on the culture being studied.

In the following four chapters, I will explore a number of themes related to the storytelling process, and I will be looking especially at how through storytelling a few different things are happening. In particular, after defining exactly what is meant by the term "storytelling," and differentiating the differences between *storytelling* and *story-telling*, I

am interested in exploring how two particular Indian¹ authors--Greg Sarris and Thomas King--define themselves through their storytelling; how their stories situate them in their individual tribes; and how they understand their own self-identity through their individual processes of storytelling.

I believe that an author does, indeed, bring (or should bring) a part of his or her persona to everything that he or she writes, even if it comes under the guise of an academic exercise. That being said, it is my intent to perhaps bring a little bit of "different" to the usual staid dissertation process in that I have interjected (sometimes as epigraphs to the chapters that follow, other times in context in the

¹ Much has been written regarding to the labels imposed upon the indigenous people of the Americas by the Europeans who invaded these continents. Most recently, Michael Yellow Bird [Sahnish and Hidatsa] has written that he interchangeably uses 'First Nations Peoples' and 'Indigenous Peoples' rather than 'Indian,' 'American Indian,' and 'Native American' because they are "colonized identities imposed by Europeans and European Americans" (Yellow Bird 6). "Native Americans" as an academe-imposed term deemed to be politically correct, is slowly being eroded by those of European descent, who, having been born on this continent, insist that they are just as much "native" Americans as the indigenous population. "Indians," of course, is Columbus' misnomer. Joy Harjo, in *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, says that "Native American is a term invented in academe and is the term of the moment. It was invented to replace the term *American Indian*. This is a serious misnomer. In our communities we first name ourselves by tribe, but the general term commonly used is *Indian* in the United States and *native* in Canada. Canadian tribes also use the term *First Nations* with which to address their peoples" (20). However, for the sake of simplicity, and for lack of a more universally agreed-upon term (agreed upon by the tribal peoples,

chapters) some of my own stories, to help make the point of that chapter. Indeed, how can one write about storytelling and self-identity discovery, if the author's own distinctive voice is *in absentia*?

In **Chapter One**, as an introduction to the idea of storytelling, I offer background information, often from writers themselves, concerning what storytelling means to them. I discuss more specifically what I call the "labeling imperative" and the role of academics in criticizing and theorizing about "Native American literature." In accordance with the labeling imperative comes the question of "proper perspective" in terms of both a specific writer's "qualifications" to write about her/his given topic as well as the ultimate reminder that the storytelling being discussed here is fiction and as such should not be viewed as the definitive picture of any culture or peoples. As well, I also address Walter Benjamin in context of his essay "Storyteller" and why I have chosen to use as little Euro-American criticism and theory as possible in the discussion of storytelling in the works of Sarris and King.

that is), I use 'Indian' throughout this work, and apologize ahead of time for anyone who may take offence.

Chapter Two offers a definition of "story-telling," concentrating mainly on its role in Indian cultures, but peripherally discussing other cultures as well. The issues I explore concentrate on the questions: "Why do we tell stories?", "What is the role and responsibility of both the storyteller and her/his audience?", and "What does her story say about the storyteller herself?"

Chapter Three focuses on Pomo/Miwok Greg Sarris, in particular *Watermelon Nights* and *Grand Avenue*, as well as *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* and *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream*. For Sarris, his identity is merged with his tribal identity, and how he illuminates this in his writings is the main focus of this chapter.

Chapter Four takes into consideration another viewpoint in Indian storytelling, that of Cherokee author Thomas King. King is a bit of an anomaly in that while he identifies as being of "Cherokee-Greek-and German" descent, he appears to take a Pan-Indian point of view in writing stories about Indians. He does not explore or write about his Cherokee heritage in as much detail as Sarris does with the Pomo; rather the Indians he writes about are Canadian Blackfoot,

or, more specifically, the Blood tribe of Blackfoot.² This chapter centers on King's three novels: *Medicine River*, *Green Grass Running Water*, and *Truth and Bright Water*.

Chapter Five, in essence, is only a conclusion of this particular angle of introspection on story-telling. By no means is it intended to be the final word, but rather a commencement of sorts, one that I hope will encourage others to continue to explore some of these same issues, with either themselves or in context with other authors, and that perhaps will engender even more thought and discussion of the role of story-tellers in contemporary society. I believe that this importance is once again on the rise. Despite Walter Benjamin's claim that "the art of storytelling is coming to an end" (83), despite the abundance of "sound-bites" and the rise of the so-called "MTV generation," story-telling has a place in American culture, in all cultures---one that is coming into prominence once again for some, one that has always had a place of importance for others---if only to remind ourselves of what once was and what is yet

² Rather than interject a lengthy explanation regarding 'Blackfoot' and 'Blackfeet' and the bands belonging to both

to be. If the story is told, and told well, people will listen.

Canadian and American tribes, I will address this issue in Chapter Four, "It's Okay, We're Indigenous."

Chapter One

In the Beginning Was the Word. . .

"This is the story of how we begin to remember"
Paul Simon, *Under African Skies*

"Remembering is all"
Geary Hobson, *The Remembered Earth*

"To tell one's story is to begin
at the beginning"
Margery Fee and Jane Flick
"Coyote Pedagogy"

Stories and Story-Telling

I have been thinking about storytelling and the storytelling process for a very long time now---almost 39 years---since I myself first set pen to paper I began by trying to think of what story I wanted to write, who my audience was, what the purpose of the story was, how to best tell the story. Of course, I did not think about it in those terms. How could I? I was only four years old, but even at that tender age, I wanted to hear stories, share stories, create stories. . . why? What is it that drives us, as human beings, to bring to voice or to pick up a pen and bring to life through the written word, our stories,

our legends, our histories, our thoughts and fears and treasures?

"I believe," Acoma poet Simon Ortiz writes, "it is to make sure that the voice keeps singing forth so that the earth power will not cease, and that the people remain fully aware of their social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual relationships and responsibilities to all things" (*Earth Power* viii).

Leslie Marmon Silko, a Laguna Pueblo writer and photographer, has said "the best thing, I learned, the best thing you can have in life is to have someone tell you a story; they are physically with you, but in lieu of that. . .I learned at an early age to find comfort in a book" (Coltelli 145). Why is it 'the best thing' to have stories? Ortiz says "by stories do we know ourselves" ("Always the Stories" 58). We grow in knowledge through the sharing of stories, whether oral stories or stories written in books. Gaining knowledge, while often times also being entertained, is of utmost importance. In Ortiz's words, this is because:

knowledge engenders, creates, affirms the very motion of your body and mind and soul. Knowledge is one's awareness among all items of life; to

acquire it ensures that you have a place among the plants, fishes, winds, stars, mountains, all things. This [is] why it [is] important to listen to stories. ("Always the Stories" 59)

In his study of Leslie Marmon Silko's writings, Gregory Salyer recounts Silko's comments in an interview with Kim Barnes in which Silko talks about how she interprets the word *storytelling*:

'When I say *storytelling* I don't just mean sitting down and telling a once-upon-a-time kind of story. I mean a whole way of seeing yourself, the people around you, your life, the place of life in the bigger context, not just in terms of nature and location, but in terms of what has gone on before, what's happened to other people.' For Silko, then, stories are her identity, her biography. (Salyer 1)

According to Gerald Vizenor [Chippewa], "You can't understand the world without telling a story. There isn't any center to the world but a story" (Coltelli 156). And N. Scott Momaday [Kiowa]: "Stories are true to our common experience; they are statements which concern the human condition" (*Man Made of Words* 2).

Greg Sarris [Pomo/Miwok] believes that:

storytelling is a fundamental aspect of culture, and stories are used in a number of ways and for a multitude of purposes. Stories can work as cultural indexes for appropriate or inappropriate behavior. They can work to oppress or to liberate, to confuse or to enlighten. (*Slug Woman* 4)

People tell stories to remember the past. They tell them to share lives. They tell them to learn things. They tell them to share moral issues. They tell them to teach. They tell them to learn more about themselves.

Story speaks for you. Story speaks for me. Simply put, story speaks for us. There is no other way to say it. That's a basic and primary and essential concept. Story has its own power, and the language of story is that of power. We exist because of it. We don't exist without that power. As human beings, we, as personal and social cultural entities, are conscious beings because of story, no other reason. (*Ortiz Men on the Moon* iix)

Storytelling is important so that people may know not only who they are, but what role they are meant to enact as a member of a community, a nation, and the human race. Simon Ortiz writes that:

there have always been the songs, the prayers,
the stories. There have always been the voices.
There have always been the people. There have
always been those words which evoked meaning and
the meaning's magical wonder. There has always
been the spirit which inspired the desire for
life to go on. And it has been through the words
of the songs, the prayers, the stories that the
people have found a way to continue, for life to
go on. (*Earth Power* vii)

Telling stories can be a reflection of society,
but it is not so much this as it is a discovery
process. Telling about what interests us is a
reflection on the kind of people we are. Our stories
tell about our morals, our beliefs, our hopes, our
dreams; our wishes and expectations. Telling the
stories, handing them down, is an act of remembering,
whether what is being written is autobiography,
fiction, or history.

But why do we need to tell stories? What kind of stories are the most important to keep alive? What exactly does Leslie Marmon Silko mean when she says in *Ceremony*, that if we "don't have the stories we don't have anything?"

These are some of the questions that I hope to answer in the following work. Some of the questions will not have definitive answers, but rather present an exploration of this idea, start to find the way; perhaps beyond this there will be a definitive answer. And yet, before attempting to get to an answer, before beginning to talk about the importance of stories and story-telling, there are other obstacles, or topics rather, that I feel it is necessary to address, that are all relevant primary questions that could possibly be raised. I feel that it is necessary to address these *somewhere*, as an explanation, perhaps, for questions that could be raised during the course of the chapters that follow, and rather than relegate these topics to the realm of the footnote, I have chosen to address them here: the insatiable academic desire to label; the role of academic intellectuals in criticizing and theorizing about literature; the proper perspective in determining qualifications to

pronounce on certain topics; the negation of the ultimate authority; and the dichotomy of criticism.

The Labeling Imperative

What is this genre called "Native American literature?" In choosing to discuss and examine Greg Sarris and Thomas King's writing as the primary focus to answer some of these questions about storytelling, I have dismissed other writers as potential subjects. With the hundreds of writers who make up the body of what is referred to as "American Literature,"¹ why would I reject (for lack of a better word) the canonical and respected "dead white males," African-American writers, Chicana writers, Asian-American writers and any other so-called "ethnic" or "marginalized" literatures, in favor of two Indian writers? It is not my intention to set up any sort of

¹ "American literature" is in itself self-aggrandizing, colonizing terminology in that it is dismissive of Central America, South America, and Canada, all of which are part of the "Americas." What "American literature" really refers to is "Literature of the United States," literature which up until the middle of the last century dismissed literature by women, blacks, Asians, Indians--- in general, all that was not "Euro-American" male. What is needed, then, is a "borderless literature," one that does not pigeonhole and exclude, one that disregards arbitrary political boundaries. Jace Weaver's comment: "Native people have never recognized the arbitrarily drawn borders that demarcate the modern nation-states of the Americas. Critics such as Forbes, Ruoff, and Geary Hobson (Cherokee/Chickasaw) have argued for a 'borderless' Native literature, hemispheric in scope and regarding the Americas as a single unit for literary study" (xi).

"white versus ethnic" or canonical versus non-traditional-canonical dichotomy. Rather, it is best to look at the literature of America as Craig Womack has defined it in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*:

Tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. We are the canon. Without Native American literature, *there is no American canon.*

(6-7)

If, indeed, Native American literature is *the canon*, it is then the most practical place to start a discussion on story-telling and its importance in all of our lives.

The oral tradition of storytelling is evident in all cultures, from the griots of Africa to the wandering minstrels of England, to "fairy stories" and the myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The long course towards civilization as it is now known saw the evolution of the storyteller, and with the advent of the printing press (whether or not it was Guttenberg or someone else who invented it), oral storytelling in

many cultures fell "victim" to progress, and what was once an integral part of a community's daily actions was usurped. Books, then magazines and newspapers, and finally movies, television, and now the World Wide Web of the Internet all have laid claim to a society's limited attention span. Granted, oral storytelling may indeed still play a major role in some cultures, but it is safe to say that Walter Benjamin, in his essay "Storyteller" was at least partly accurate in his assessment that "the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly" (Benjamin 83).

The operative word here is "partly," in that for "Native American" literature, the oral tradition of storytelling is an integral part. For Simon Ortiz, "there's never been a conscious moment without story" (*Men on the Moon* iix). Before colonization, Indian people "remember[ed] their histories and their ways of life through intricate time-proven processes of storytelling" (Hobson 2). Oral stories are still one way that not only Indians but all people can remember history and ways of life. Native writers draw on their oral traditions for the stories they put to print;

there is a vital, living connection between the oral and the written. For Indian writers, storytelling is not "coming to an end" but is allowing for the continuance of history, tribal ways of life, and for the truth of their lives and those who have gone before them. Janet Witalec speaks of the "dual heritage" of Indian authors, "a heritage composed of Western literary tradition and literary forms on the one hand, and the content and purpose of the oral tradition on the other that is strikingly original and compellingly relevant" (xviii). Storytelling lives, and will continue to do so, in the pages brought forth by Indian writers of the Americas.

So, again, the question: What is this genre called "Native American literature?" Before answering that question there is another that first should be addressed: Why, for academics, is it so intrinsically necessary to attempt to pigeon-hole everything, to categorize everything, to try to fit square pegs into round holes, all the while, in the process, most likely forgetting what it is being talked about in the first place?² There is criticism and theorizing and

² Paula Gunn Allen points out that "in the white world, information is to be saved and analyzed at all costs" ("Special Problems" 58), and I think this comes close to explaining the

critically theorizing and theoretically criticizing and what oftentimes gets lost in the shuffle of academic pretense or what Robert Allen Warrior calls "intellectual gymnastics" ("The Native American Scholar" 49) is the literature itself.

Which is not to say that academic exercises do not have a place in the discussion of all things pertaining to literature. They do. But what often times gets lost in this discourse is that which academics were attempting to discuss in the first place: the literature itself.

How much attention should be paid to critics and theorists? Rainer Maria Rilke, whose quotation on criticism appears as the frontispiece of this dissertation, cautions people to "read as little as possible of aesthetic criticism---such things are either partisan views, petrified and grown senseless in their lifeless induration, or they are clever quibblings in which today one view wins and tomorrow the opposite" (Rilke 29).

Rilke has a valid point, one that appears even more valid when considering that most academics' attempts to theorize and criticize Native American

type of thinking that would also insist on constant labeling and

writings with a Euro-American³ vision lack both background information and the understanding of a culture with which he or she is totally unfamiliar.⁴

The problems inherent in labeling things, especially in this instance, then focuses on the question: "If Native American literature is literature written by Native Americans, then who, exactly are Native Americans?" This in itself bring us to another question that is far from resolved, in academia and in government decisions, at least. An Indian person knows that she or he is an Indian. N. Scott Momaday says that American Indian identity is "an idea which a given man has of himself" (96-97). Yet, discussions about Indian identity have grown much more complex since Momaday wrote those words thirty years ago. Must an Indian be someone born and raised on a reservation?

pigeon-holing.

³ Jace Weaver [Cherokee] an eminent Yale scholar, uses the term "Amer-European" which 'connotes something very different' from 'Euro-American,' which means an American of European descent. Amer-Europeans 'are Europeans who happen to live in America. (Weaver xiii). He contends, 'born of and shaped by a different continent, Amer-Europeans will never truly be of this continent, never truly belong here, no matter how many generations they may dwell here' (xiv). I expect that Weaver has riled a great many white critics with this commentary.

⁴ Carter Revard [Osage] has said that, "In general, my feeling is that Levi-Strauss, Todorov, and most of the other brilliant philosopher/anthropologist/cultural critics from Europe are too far away from the people they are talking about." And on a lighter note, Revard has also noted, "My philosophy about Big Names is, if I can get along without them it saves me a lot of

Would that definition preclude the Indian who is an "urban Indian?" If the person in question has Indian ancestors, but knows nothing of her or his Indian culture, is that enough to warrant claiming that he/she is an Indian? For my purposes in the course of this work, I have chosen not to directly address this issue for a number of reasons.

First of all, and most importantly, I do not believe that this issue is "resolvable." It appears that not even Indians agree on who is "Indian enough" to be considered an "Indian writer." Secondly, it is not the point of this work to determine who is "Indian enough." I have chosen to write about Greg Sarris and Thomas King because they have identified themselves as "Indian" and they have written about Indians---as a result, I do not believe it is my place to say categorically that neither of them is or is not "Indian enough" to come under the rubric of "Indian writers."

Geary Hobson [Cherokee-Quapaw/Chickasaw] points out, in his "Introduction" to *The Remembered Earth*:

To most Native Americans today, it is not merely enough that a person have a justifiable claim to

trouble figuring out why they say such damn fool things in such

Indian blood, but he or she must be at least somewhat socially and culturally definable as a Native American. (9)

There may be those--Native and non-Native--who do not think that Sarris and/or King are "Indian enough," but if we apply the standard as argued by Hobson, at least, then we should be satisfied. Before moving to the third and final point I wish to make in this discussion, I think it is also important to point out yet another comment from Hobson:

Native American writers, then, are those of Native American blood and background who affirm their heritage in their individual ways as do writers of all cultures. Some write of reservation life; others of urban Indians trying to make it in the white man's world. Still others write of war, of work far away from home, of old traditions threatened by the clash with new ways of living, of historical days. (10)

These are the things Sarris and King write about.

Thirdly, and least importantly, I feel as if this latest "Indian problem" has been discussed to death and without resolution. Indeed, it is important in the

peculiar language" (Revard "Re: Korea, Hungary, Basque.")

discussion of literature that the representations of a people, of a culture, be true--to a certain extent. There have been so many misrepresentations of Indian people throughout literature—including film—that it is important that true representation of Indians and Indian cultures is necessary in order to stop perpetuating the constant white myth that Indians have disappeared, were exterminated, or are only long-haired, war-painted Sioux riding horses across the Plains. We can best destroy those false images through appreciation and understanding of contemporary Indian writers and the voice they bring to the rich panoply of the literatures of this country as well as to other countries.

This, then, brings us back to the original question from the beginning of this sub-section: "What is this genre called 'Native American literature'?" The simple answer is that it is literature (poetry, stories, novels, plays, screenplays) written by Indians. To that one would add, "and about Indian subjects" (Velie 3). The argument has been made that the vastly popular novels of Martin Cruz Smith would not be considered "Native American literature" even

though Smith is Senecu del Sur/Yaqui⁵ because the subject matter of his novels does not deal with "things Indian."⁶

Yet Robert Warrior [Osage] in *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* argues otherwise, faulting contemporary criticism for not addressing "the science fiction writing of Russell Bates [Kiowa], the mystery writing of Martin Cruz Smith... the political humor of Will Rogers [Cherokee], and a host of other Indian writers whose work does not fit into standard definitions of Indian writing" (xx). Warrior believes that there needs to be "fundamental reworking of scholarly understandings of American Indian literature" (xx).

LaVonne Brown Ruoff, in the introduction to *American Indian Literatures*, uses the term 'literature' to refer to both oral and written works:

Although the origins of the term literature have led some to apply it only to what has been

⁵ Martin Cruz Smith is identified as such by Robert Warrior in *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*. However, it should be noted that the Senecu del Sur is a tribe that has not existed for more than 300 years, which would make it difficult for Smith to "culturally identify" with that tribe.

⁶ In Ruoff's *American Indian Literatures*, she notes that Peter G. Beidler (in *The American Indian in Short Fiction*) addresses Smith's treatment of Indians in the essay "Indians in Martin Cruz

written, such a strict interpretation ignores the oral basis of our literary heritage, Indian and non-Indian. A more useful definition is the one suggested by William Bright in *American Indian Linguistics and Literature*: "that body of discourses or texts which, within any society, is considered worth of dissemination, transmission, and preservation in essentially constant form."
(80)

Concisely, then, "Native American literature" is literature, both from the oral tradition and the written, that is produced by Native Americans.⁷ There is little doubt that the discussion regarding what is "Native American literature" and who is a "Native American" is far from over. However, Warrior makes sense when he notes that "both American Indian and Native Americanist discourses continue to be preoccupied with parochial questions of identity and

Smith's *Nightwing*." But works of fiction can include Indian characters without actually being about Indians.

⁷ Calling the issue of identity a complex one, Ruoff turned to the Bylaws of the National Indian Education Association for a definition: "For purposes of the NIE Constitution the term American Indian shall mean any person who: (1) is a member of a tribe, band, or other organized group of Indians, including those tribes, bands, or groups terminated since 1940 and those recognized now or in the future by the state in which they reside, or who is a descendent, in the first or second degree, of any such member, or (2) is considered by the Secretary of the Interior to be an Indian for any purpose, (3) is an Eskimo or

authenticity" and insists that such questions should not "obscure more pressing concerns" (xix).

The Proper Perspective

However, I believe that we must also keep in mind that what we are talking about is literature, and more particularly, fiction. Was there, for instance, a person who acted like Shakespeare's Shylock? There may have been. Are all Jews like Shylock? Hardly. Should we condemn Shakespeare for his negative view and portrayal of this singular Jewish person based on this one play? Not at all. Should we take that picture to heart and come to believe that all Jews are like Shylock? Again, with any amount of common sense, we cannot do that. Rather, we should be aware that Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock can help us to understand an attitude towards Jews during the time in which Shakespeare wrote. It is difficult to believe, and impossible to argue, that Shakespeare deliberately set out to disparage every single Jewish person---this is only one portrayal, one man's view (and there is reason to believe that Shakespeare never even personally knew any Jews. Of course, if all the

literature being produced during this time deliberately maligned and drew incorrect pictures and conclusions about Jews, then the argument that Shakespeare, and other writers from this period, as well as the culture that bred them, were racist would indeed be plausible. What must be remembered is that this drawing must be taken in context and not seen as Shakespeare speaking for all Englishmen drawing a definitive portrait of all Jews.

Greg Sarris, in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Literature*, points out that "one party may write a story, but one party's story is no more the whole story than a cup of water is the river" (40). And "what an Indian knows from his or her tribe may not apply to other tribes. In terms of their histories, cultures, and languages Indian people are different, sometimes radically different, from tribe to tribe" (91). The point here is that no one, no matter from what culture, can be assigned (or arbitrarily take on the role her/himself) as the speaker for an entire culture. No one can speak for all Indians. No one can speak for all Latinos. It is inappropriate to assume that such a condition can

by his community." (Membership, art. 3).

be true---and highly self-aggrandizing as well. No one person can speak for an entire ethnic or minority (or even majority) group.⁸ This is a topic that I will address again in Chapter 2.

This is especially true with Indians. "Indians" is a generic term. What most of Euro-America sees as "Indians" is really a rich variety of cultures and people, not just Sioux or Cherokee, but a myriad of others: over 500 still-living cultures in the area called America alone.⁹ Jace Weaver makes the point that "despite a growing pan-Indian discourse, a native person's primary self-identification remains that of his or her own tribe" (xiii). Is there, then, an "Indian spokesperson?" No more than there is an "Abenaki spokesperson," a "Wampanoag spokesperson," or a "Kiowa spokesperson."

When people tell stories, either by writing them down or by transmitting them orally, an important

⁸ I remember, during my Junior Year Abroad program, being "briefed" by the director before leaving the country for a year in Canterbury, England. The director went to great pains to drill into those of us who were going that we were "representing the United States of America." And I recall thinking at that time, "What does that mean? Who does that mean I have to be?" If what he meant was "be on your best behavior," that was certainly something to taken into consideration. But "representing" an entire country? Even then, the thought appalled me, as something grotesque and never-to-be-accomplished.

thing to remember is that this is their individual story: that is, it is the story they wish to tell, from either their imagination, or based on yet another story they heard or read; or both. Writers, especially beginning writers, are encouraged to 'write what you know,' and unless a great deal of research is involved, as in historical fiction, or background information necessary to the "reality" of the story, most writers do, indeed, draw from their own storehouse of knowledge when they present a work to the reading public. Where controversy arises is either when the writer is writing about something so far adrift from his own cultural milieu that the resulting story sounds contrived, sexist, racist, or completely unbelievable (which is not the case in the genre of science fiction); or when the author is attacked for not presenting what others consider to be a "true" representational picture of the culture, people, or times he or she is writing about.

A brief digression: An excellent example of this is Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, an epic novel of one woman's life during and after the Civil

⁹ On the internet, the URL <http://www.healing-arts.org/tribes.htm> not only lists all federally recognized tribes, but also provides links from tribes that have official websites.

War. Mitchell wrote the story of her self-centered heroine, Scarlett O'Hara, and presents it, not as a first personal narrative, but rather as one told through Scarlett's point of view. The complaint against Mitchell's racist stereotyping of happy, contented "darkies" working diligently and loyally for their white masters was brought against her when the book was initially published, and most especially when the book was being filmed. Indeed, with the advent of the 60th anniversary of the release of the *Gone With the Wind* movie in 1998, the charge was indeed raised again, this time drawing the attention of the mainstream press. Mitchell's version of black people in this book is racist and it appears that Mitchell wanted to present a picture of Southern perfection prior to the destruction of that civilization in the Civil War. From endless slave narratives, we know that *Gone With the Wind* is not representative of the reality of that time, that it does not show how abhorrent slavery really was (and still is).

First of all, most of Mitchell's knowledge of the Civil War and its aftermath came from stories she was both told and which she overheard as a child during visiting afternoons when relicts of those Civil War

times gathered and relived the various war campaigns. Mitchell chose to tell her story about Scarlett, and how Scarlett would have seen her life—for the most part sheltered and pampered and totally unaware of how her slaves (who were later servants) lived or felt about their situation. She would see them as happy and content because she could not imagine it any other way. The story in *Gone with the Wind* is not Mammy's story; nor is it Prissy's; nor Pork's; nor is it Big Sam's, although they come near to playing major roles. They are all seen through Scarlett's perception of them. Had Mitchell chosen to write about the state of slavery in the South at that particular time in American history, it would have been an entirely different story, and it would have run the risk of sounding contrived because that side of the story was not the side Mitchell would have known. Mitchell was Scarlett, she wasn't Mammy.

The other point important to remember in this digression of sorts is that Mitchell was not presenting herself as writing as representative of "all things Southern," nor was she writing something that was to be taken as totally representative of "how things were" for members of all the races she was

talking about during the course of the book. Mitchell, one must always keep in mind, was writing fiction.

To re-quote Sarris: "one party's story is no more the whole story than a cup of water is the river" (40).

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn [Dakotah] echoes these sentiments, writing that:

the idea that poets can speak for others, the idea that we can speak for the dispossessed, the weak, the voiceless, is indeed one of the great burdens of contemporary American Indian poets today, for it is widely believed that we 'speak for our tribes.' The frank truth is that I don't know very many poets who say, 'I speak for my people.' It is not only unwise; it is probably impossible, and it is very surely arrogant, for *We Are Self-Appointed* and the self-appointedness of what we do indicates that the responsibility is ours and ours alone. (58)

The difference between Euro-American writing, the tradition of which Mitchell is a part, and Native American writing, is best exemplified in a comment of poet/musician Joy Harjo [Creek] made in an interview with Bill Moyers:

Especially because I'm a person from a tribe in the United States of America, I feel charged with a responsibility to remember. I suppose *any* poet in *any* tribal situation feels that charge to address the truth which always includes not just the present but the past and the future as well.

(Moyers 163)

This is what Sarris is doing in his novels *Watermelon Nights* and *Grand Avenue*. The question remains: "Whose truth?" Each writer can only address her or his own truth, from her perspective, from her memories and the memories handed down to her. Which, however one may dislike Mitchell's presentation of the African-American slaves, is what Mitchell has done: told her story from her Euro-American perspective--- she told what she knew, which was, unfortunately, only one very racist side of the whole story.

For too long, the indigenous population's "side of the story" has been ignored, glossed over, or simply mis-represented by those in power, in control of the publishing world: the Euro-American colonizers. There is truth in the belief that history is written, albeit subjectively, by the victors, which should cause us, as readers, to question much of history that

is presented to us as 'fact.' Question the historian and question his motives.¹⁰ Rather than taking for granted what the historian claims as actual fact, one needs to listen to the people and understand that there is, perhaps, no such thing as total objectivity, as everyone brings his or her bias into every situation. "We sort out what we hear, unconsciously and consciously, and this sorting has to do with our cultural and personal histories and the situation of our hearing" (40) Sarris writes in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*.

The bottom line, then, is when dealing with stories, there is more than simply words on a printed page. There is the subconscious bias that the writer brings to bear in telling her/his story as well as the background and culture that the audience brings to each reading. There is different histories and different interpretations each time a person sits down to write the stories and each time the stories are read.

¹⁰ Ralph Salisbury addresses this problem, taking the stance that true history can be found in contemporary literature. His quote: "'Much of the United States history is falsified because the professional historians' careers are best advanced by their taking an optimistic view. The truest contemporary history is in contemporary literature,' the noted American historian Lawrence C. Goodwyn said in a lecture I attended in Germany, and he agreed

"Always the Stories"

Who tells stories? What do we mean when we talk about storytelling? Both oral and written, of course, constitute stories. Our first stories are oral, as is evidenced by the story at the start of the second chapter. We may hear "fairy tales" as children, moralistic stories such as Aesop's fables that we encounter in school, and what have been referred to as "old wives' tales"--those wonderful stories heard from grandmothers, great aunts, and other female relatives. Children tell stories all the time, reinventing themselves to suit the moment, to help them to understand who they are. They role play based on what they have learned. It is an exploration. We, too, explore ourselves when we take pen to paper and create.

To Believe

*I believe
 . . . in the once upon a time
 and long ago and far away;
 I believe
 . . . that the words spoken clearly are
 the ones with the most light;
 I believe
 . . . that I do not speak for you,
 but that I speak with you;
 I believe
 . . . that somewhere there is common*

with me that Faulkner and many native American literary writers are good examples of what he was talking about" (34).

ground, not more borders;
I believe
. . . that the oldest story
is the newest story;
I believe
. . . in there here and now and
the there and then;
I believe
. . . in the circle, outside which
no one stands.

Songs tell stories as well. Songs and poetry,
 both of which follow the oral tradition. There has
 long been the myth that peoples deeply steeped in oral
 tradition have no literature. Of course that bring us
 to the question, "what constitutes literature," a
 question that has been covered in depth by many
 others. If literature is something that tells us a
 story and makes us think, that would not necessarily
 preclude oral tradition. If literature can instruct,
 can remind us of the past, can connect us to our
 families and ancestors and their lives, can entertain,
 then we get that, too, from oral storytelling, from
 songs, from poetry. That, too, is all part of this
 strange ineffable creature that we call literature.
 What I see both Sarris and King doing is continuing
 the oral tradition, on paper, in the "enemy's

language"¹¹ telling the stories, keeping them alive and bringing them to terms with contemporary culture and society today.

Purpose and Direction

What I hope to accomplish in the work that follows is to show how, in their own particular ways, Sarris and King have continued a dialogue begun by other contemporary Indian writers---such as N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko---in which it is realized how important storytelling is, not only to Indians, but globally. Paying close attention to the story-telling techniques and the role of story-telling for two Indian writers can perhaps lay the groundwork for a more active discussion of storytelling (oral and written) as it affects all cultures. Far from changing the world, I would hope that we might better learn to observe and interact with each other just a little bit differently. A small step, then, would be to look at Sarris and King's writing, discussing how and why they

¹¹ The term "enemy's language" come from the anthology *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*, edited by Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird. The "enemy's language" is the language of the colonizers, through which native lands were stolen, children taken away, and peoples betrayed and brought to the brink of destruction. Harjo and Bird hope "that in 'reinventing' the English language we will turn the process of

tell their stories, what the stories say about them as individuals and as part of a specific culture, and begin a better understanding of ourselves as a disparate, global community. What Sarris says he is doing in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* is trying "to show that all of us can and should talk to one another, that each group can inform and be informed by the other" (7). Each culture will always be Outsiders looking in to another culture, but there can be, and are, basic human similarities, and with that basis established, perhaps the "informing" can truly take place.

While a number of Indian writers will be discussed throughout the course of this work, I am focussing on Greg Sarris and Thomas King, who exemplify in many ways the beauty, creativity, and reason for storytelling in their works. Their *raison d'être* is not simply to write something down and make money from it. Throughout all their works, both authors exemplify all five points of storytelling that I will discuss in the next chapter. And their identity is not concentrated on *themselves* alone, as it is with many, if not most, Euro-American writers. They are

colonization around, and that our literature will be viewed and

individuals, but their identity is based on who they are as Indians, as part of their Indian communities. An Indian's sense of "identity" is different from a Euro-American's sense. William Bevis discusses this difference:

These books [*House Made of Dawn*, *Winter in the Blood*, *Ceremony*, *The Death of Jim Loney*, *The Surrounded*, and *Wind From an Enemy Sky*] suggest that 'identity' for a Native American, is not a matter of finding 'one's self,' but of finding a 'self' that is transpersonal and includes a society, a past, and a place. To be separated from that transpersonal time and space is to lose identity. These novels are important, not only because they depict Indian individuals coming home while white individuals leave but also because they suggest---various and subtly and by degrees---a tribal rather than an individual definition of 'being'. (19)

Carter Revard [Osage] concurs with this in his discussion on Geronimo and his identity:

. . .the notion of identity, of how the individual is related to world, people, self,

read as a process of decolonization" (25).

differs from what we see in 'Euro-american' autobiography. In 'Western Civilization,' an *identity* is something shaped between birth and death, largely by tiny molecules called genes, somewhat also by what the child's nervous system undergoes between birth and the first few years thereafter---and with every year past the first one, events become less and less important in shaping that identity. That is not how Geronimo sees his identity . . . He knew who he was and where he came from, and he was sure that removal of the Apaches from their *homeland* meant, for him and for all of them, the loss not just of a 'way of life' or a 'home' but a change in, perhaps a loss of, their *beings*---or, as we might say, their *identities*. In his [Geronimo's] story, the notions of cosmos, country, self, and home are inseparable. (128)

Who Speaks This Time?

Is there an inherent difference between Native American and Euro-American literary criticism? I believe so, especially from an academic, or critical (or theoretical) point of view. That is, when

approaching the writing critically, when going beyond a mere read, when surpassing the generic comments of "I liked that," or "I'll never read anything by that writer again," there are differences. Arnold Krupat theorizes that "what chiefly marks the Americanist critic off from the Native Americanist critic today is the relation of each to that thing called theory. Although there are, to be sure, some notable exceptions, Indianists have kept their distance from theory rather more than Americanists" (*Voice in the Margin* 5). This should not be taken to mean that those discussing Indian literature have completely distanced (or severed) themselves from theory and criticism. As early as 1978, Charles R. Larson produced *American Indian Fiction*, in 1982 Alan Velie published *Four American Indian Literary Masters*, and in 1983, Kenneth Lincoln's *Native American Renaissance*.¹² Within the last ten years, numerous critical books (and to a lesser extent, theoretical books) have been published, with Indian writing as their center.¹³ More recent

¹² None of whom are Indians. To this list I might be tempted to add two books by Andrew Wiget, both published in 1985: *Critical essays on Native American Literature* and *Native American Literature*. Again, not an Indian.

¹³ Published in 1990, *American Indian Literature: An Introduction, Bibliographic Review, and Selected Bibliography* by A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff offers an extensive bibliographic listing of a wide variety of works by and about Indian writers. Obviously, in ten

additions to the field include *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature* by Dee Horne, and *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformations of Native American Fiction* by Catherine Rainwater. Horne presents a theory which she refers to as "subversive mimicry" and attempts to show how Indian authors "can dance along the precipice of colonial mimicry by creating narrative strategies that subversively mimic aspects of the colonial relationship in order to contest it and propose alternative paradigms" (Horne xvi). Rainwater's semiotic interpretation of a number of Indian writer's fiction argues that "no matter what our cultural background, our 'texts,' 'our own systems,' and the 'connections' we make are the products of universally human, sign-wielding behavior" (Rainwater x)---to which Sarris might well respond, "non-Indians often ask what this or that symbolizes, as if signs and semiotic systems were transcultural" (*Slug Woman* 43).

While offering different insights into the works of Indian authors, and while also acknowledging their own limitations as non-Indians, there is still a bit

years there have been significant additions to Ruoff's compilation.

of perceived colonialism by way of appropriation attached to both author's works.

There is a difference in the way scholars should approach the study of the literatures of Indians as opposed to the study of Euro-American literature, despite protestations to the contrary and attempts at securing the universal outlook upon literature. By no means am I suggesting that this is a "good versus bad" evaluation of either literature, but rather a question of two (or more) different cultures that may or may not speak the same (enemy's) language, not completely grasping the inherent cultural differences. Each literature has its basis in different traditions and as such should be looked at differently.

According to Robert Conley [Cherokee], speaking in regards to his own writing,

these stories do not grow out of European literary traditions so much as they do out of those of the Cherokee. Behind these stories are gathered a whole set of cultural referents, a different way of interpreting events, a different notion of time, a different concept of language, and, of course, a different view of the purpose and art of storytelling. In short, a non-

Cherokee, especially a non-Indian, reader. . . .
 should be prepared to deal with an unfamiliar
 world view. (Conley xii).

Throughout this work I try to depend upon as few
 "Euro-American" theorists and critics as possible. I
 may have done myself and my study a disservice by
 doing so, but I believe otherwise. Taking this genre,
 "Native American literature" and dissecting it using
 the "usual suspects" in the criticism and theory game
 is the disservice. Yes, it is possible to do so, but
 is it the right thing to do? There are critics who
 believe that not only is it not the right thing to do
 but that it is detrimental to Indian scholarship and
 cultural understanding, and only perpetuates the
 colonizers' continual appropriation of all things
 Indian.

Craig Womack [Creek-Cherokee] writes in the
 introduction to *Red on Red: Native American Literary
 Separatism*:

My greatest wish is that tribes, and tribal
 members, will have an increasingly important role
 in evaluating tribal literatures. It goes without
 saying that I cannot speak for Creek people or
 anyone else; however, I do have the

responsibility as a Creek-Cherokee critic to try to include Creek perspectives in my approaches to Native literature, especially given the wealth of Creek wisdom on the subject. This book arises out of the conviction that Native literature, and the criticism that surrounds it, needs to see more attention devoted to tribally specific concerns.

(1)

Looking at things from a Native perspective rather than a Euro-American perspective, Womack convincingly argues that there *is* such a thing as a Native perspective, which has to do with allowing Native people to speak for themselves (4). Anna Lee Walters sees the literary treatment of Indians by non-Indian writers as a way of "maintaining the status quo of mainstream society" (75) and elaborates:

Scholars or authorities from academia, from outside tribal societies, do not necessarily know tribal people best. There is an inherent right of tribal people to interpret events and time in their worlds according to their own aesthetics and values, as a component of American history, even when this interpretation is different from that of mainstream history. (86)

Womack suggests that criticism (and by extension, theory) of Native writers should "emphasize unique Native worldviews and political realities, searches for differences as often as similarities, and attempts to find Native literature's place in Indian country, rather than native literature's place in the canon" (11).¹⁴

Womack again makes the valid point that: we have too easily accepted an inheritance handed down to us largely by English departments experienced in dealing with American and British canons (but not necessarily the Native one) when we have our own canon, a large body of written and oral work authored and spoken by Indian people, both primary literatures and commentaries on those literatures in written and oral forms, which have existed for centuries and must surely

¹⁴ Womack also insists that "Native literature, and Native literary criticism, written by Native authors, is part of sovereignty: Indian people exercising the right to present images of themselves and to discuss those images. Tribes recognizing their own extant literatures, writing new ones, and asserting the right to explicate them constitute a move towards nationhood. While this literary aspect of sovereignty is not the same thing as the political status of Native nations, the two are, nonetheless, interdependent. A key component of nationhood is a people's idea of themselves, their imaginings of who they are. The ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty alive in the citizens of a nation and gives sovereignty a meaning that is defined within the tribe rather than by external sources" (14).

provide models for interpretation and principles of literary aesthetics. (75-76)

He also suggests "rejection of the approach to teaching Native literature as simply some kind of 'minority extension' of the American canon" (86).

Robert Warrior writes that "appeals to essentialized worldviews, though, always risk an ossifying of American Indian existence" (xvii). Warrior, it appears, agrees with Womack and Walters, but not as a hard-line essentialist. Rather, he acknowledges the need for American Indians to speak for themselves (not only in terms of criticizing and analyzing literature) and in his own works of criticism relies almost exclusively on Indian authors and critics.

On the other end of the spectrum, to look at Native American literature exclusively from the Euro-American point of view, using only Euro-American critics and theorists is only perpetuating the rape of the First People on this continent; it is talking about apples in the language of oranges; it is trying to fit that square peg into a round hole. Rather than once again usurp Indian rights and play the role of the "white academic," I think that it is important to

try to talk about storytelling, self-identity (rather than exclusively "Indian identity"), storytelling voice, and the role and responsibility of the storyteller in the works of these two Indian writers--Sarris and King---in a different way.

Walter Benjamin Was Wrong

For the sake of the argument, let us look at an example here. Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Storyteller" in *Illuminations*, (one of Benjamin's collections of essays that is frequently studied in academia), talks about story telling and addresses his concerns about the state of storytelling in his own country. His commentary, while insightful, has little (or no) bearing on contemporary Indian literature. To take Benjamin's dialogue on storytelling as a blanket statement on all of storytelling is to do both other cultures' literatures and Benjamin himself a disservice.¹⁵

As I quoted earlier, Benjamin wrote that "The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out" (87). Not only is

¹⁵ This is not meant to infer that nothing that Benjamin has to say in regards to storytelling cannot be used in context in a discussion

this not true in Indian literature, which, because it is based on Indian oral tradition, is handing down the wisdom (if you will) of the tribes for future generations, but such commentary also shows disillusionment regarding the general state of mankind; a sad commentary on truth as Benjamin saw it, perhaps, but a blanket hyperbolic statement that probably cannot be proven.

One of Benjamin's comments that especially bears on the discussion on storytelling here and in other chapters in this dissertation, is about the novel. Benjamin claims that "what differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature---the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella---is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it" (87). Peter Brooks, in *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, corroborates the point that Benjamin is trying to make:

What stands in opposition to storytelling, what is in the process of replacing it entirely, is of course the novel, inseparably linked to the invention of printing and the notion of the book . . . for the novelist is necessarily isolated,

on Indian literature. In Chapter 2 I will offer a more detailed

invisible, a hidden god who does not have the capacity to enter into colloquy with his fellow man, and thus cannot communicate that wisdom that is good counsel. (Brooks 81).

What I will show, in the following chapters, is how incorrect these notions are in regards to Indian literature, which will also give weight to my (and others') claim that most non-Indian criticism and theory rarely can be applied to Indian literature without much machination.

What we also must be both conscious and cautious of doing, as critics and theorists, is what Paul Cantor talks about in his essay, "The Primacy of the Literary Imagination, or Which Came First: The Critic or the Author?"

Literary critics need to accept their subordinate role. Critical theories should grow out of literature and not be imposed upon it from above. Critics can best learn what literature is by following the lead of authors, carefully looking at their work and engaging with it. Critics must also maintain a certain modesty and moderation in assessing the range of their theories. Critics

are often tempted to take a literary theory that has a legitimate but limited validity and try to make it cover all literary examples. (150)

This, then, is what I am hoping I have done in the pages that follow. Not to take an existing theory and make this literature fit, but talk about the literature and see what comes from it. To look at the role of the storyteller in these two Native American authors' works, to determine what they see as their importance, what they are trying to say with their stories, and how it gives them a sense of their own identity.

I myself can only tell stories of my family back two generations on either side. A Euro-American mindset, perhaps. A desire to forget the past and forge a new identity for each succeeding generation? Perhaps. But without that there is no center, no real roots, no real sense of belonging or understanding one's role in the continuity of humanity. Without the stories, we lose sight of tradition. As Tevye says, "Tradition. Because of our traditions, every one knows who he is and what God expects him to do" (Stein 3). When we lose our traditions and by extension our stories, we lose sight of who we are and our place in that society

and in the world at large. Rather than assimilate, Indian writers by bringing forth the stories and holding onto the traditions in a way other than simply through the passing down of oral traditions; through the written word they remember their heritage and hand down that valuable information to those who come after.

In regards to Tevye and his comments on tradition, the same could be said about storytelling. Because of a family's stories, each succeeding generation can know where it stands in the "great circle of life." Because while who a person is as an individual may be important in some cultures, in others, it is how that individual works to see to the continuation of his/her culture that is more important. For some cultures, the question "who are you?" is an intricately answered question. Simon Ortiz does not say, "I am Simon Ortiz." Rather, he points out "First of all, I'm Acoma, only then am I anything else" (Conley xiii).

Leslie Marmon Silko says, concerning the Euro-American academic necessity of theorizing, criticizing, and analyzing literature, "I believe that stories are alive. They're not just archetypes in a

way those dudes went around the world and said there's all these archetypes . . . I believe that there's a kind of living spirit in stories that can't be seen--- it's there when the story is all together, but if you break the words apart and say, 'Where is the spirit? Is it in this word or this word or this word?' it's like pulling a human apart and saying, 'Does this make you alive, does this make you alive?'" (Perry 324).

I have consciously chosen, therefore, not to embrace the alleged jargon of the colonizer. I do not claim to speak for anyone; I can only speak as I have been taught, and as I continue to learn how to do. I believe, along with a number of eminent Indian scholars and critics, that Indian literature (among other things pertaining to Indian culture) is best discussed through the use of what Indians themselves have had to say regarding Indian literature. What that does not mean is that Euro-American ideas have been dismissed as totally irrelevant; rather, those Euro-American ideas should no longer take first place. What needs to be done is what Arnold Krupat pointed out in 1988, that there needs to be "the refusal of imperial domination, and so of the West's claim legitimately to speak for all the Rest. . . [in order to do this]

Westerners [must] stop shouting. . . and speak with our ears open" (17).¹⁶ Clear communication of ideas cannot rely solely on academic theorizing. Theories and critical schools have their valid place in the exchange of intellectual thoughts and ideas, in many places, under many circumstances. But here I will tell you a story, in the clearest way I know how.

¹⁶ For all of the bad press Krupat has received over the past decade or so (and whether or not it is legitimate is not up to me to decide), he does offer some common-sense variety of commentary from time to time. He attempts, in the Introduction of *Voices in the Margin* (the title of which itself speaks volumes regarding his own position) to justify a Euro-American's point of view in the analysis of Indian literature, arguing that it does not have to be an "us versus them" universe being perpetuated. And that is right: it does not have to be "us versus them." Krupat feels, he writes, that he (and others like him) are "put in the position of having to choose between the two terms set in putative opposition, as if it were not really possible to write on Indian subjects without presenting one's *bona fides* in terms of having danced at powwows with so and so or having been taken as blood brother by so and so, as if one's analyses required the authority of personal experience to be valid, as if he who had much experience of native culture must automatically produce valid analyses of it" (7). Rather, the likelihood is not so much that Indians want Krupat dancing at a powwow, but that he take his own advice and speak with his ears open, and not as if he speaks for All. Seven years after Krupat wrote about his "between a rock and a hard place" position, Robert Warrior noted that "the sway of essentialism has now become less pronounced among American Indian critics" (xviii), thanks in part to Gerald Vizenor [Ojibwa] and his stance against essentialism.

Chapter Two

The Importance of Storytelling and The Role of the Story-teller

"I will tell you something about stories,
they aren't just entertainment,
don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
All we have to fight off
Illness and death.

You don't have anything
If you don't have the stories"
Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Whether we know the stories or not,
the stories know about us.
Leslie Marmon Silko,
Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit

What Do Stories Do

Children love to hear stories. Adults love to
read or watch reproductions of long stories and
love to tell and listen to shorter stories.
People need to talk, to tell about what has
happened to them, and they need to hear about
what has happened to others, especially when the
others are people they care about or who have had

experiences relevant to the hearer's own life"
(Schank xliii).

Let me tell you a story:¹

"Tell me about the brothers," she demanded. And he smiled, drew in a deep breath, and began the story again, the same story he had told her many times before, in the same words, with the same inflection in his voice. . .

"I never learned much when I was in school. I wasn't a very good student and the brothers did nothing to motivate me to do more than the bare minimum, as long as I was playing football . . .

"But Math was the toughest. It was Brother Anton who taught that, if you could call it teaching. In his long brown robe, he stood at the front of the room, almost as if he was asleep, until we were seated, when his eyes would fly open and he would glare at us, all of us stupid boys at the 'Boys' School.' He always watched us carefully, and if it looked as if we weren't paying attention, or if we were actually sleeping in his class, his hand would slip into the

¹ With thanks to RWM---and asking forgiveness if I got it wrong.

pocket of his robe, extract that tiny little golf ball, and he would let it fly—in a gentle, soaring arc so that it didn't actually cause any damage, but just enough so that it would catch the offending party right on the head. GONK! Caught again. We had to retrieve Anton's golf balls for him, and he was never without them. For some reason, I liked the guy. He was one of two half-way decent brothers in that place. Couldn't say the same for Brother Aubertus, though. Nasty kind of a guy, always sneaking up behind us in the hallways, accusing us of all sorts of misdeeds in that great booming voice of his, never giving us a moment's peace. . . ."

"But math class," the girl interrupted.

"Who's telling this story, me or you?"

"You are," she acquiesced, "but you left out the best part."

"You could tell this just as well as I. But you are right. I liked Anton, and he was kind of a great guy. He made math pronouncements on us, and if anyone challenged him, he'd call his bluff. 'Wanna bet?' he'd ask us, and someone would have to bet with him. What did he bet? A carton of cigarettes. Of course, we were always wrong, and he was always right. Boy, that guy

got more cartons of Camels from us. He never had to buy his own cigarettes.

"The best thing that ever happened to me was leaving that school. Best thing of all. . ."

Roger Schank believes that there are three basic reasons for telling stories: to "derive some satisfaction from telling a story, [to] derive satisfaction from the effect we believe, or convince ourselves to believe, that a story will have on our listener, [or] because of the effect we believe that story will have on the conversation itself" (41). However, there are more reasons for telling stories than Schank discusses in *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence*. What Schank is doing here is narrowing the scope of storytelling to one thing: some sort of self-satisfaction on the part of he/she who tells (or writes) the story. Yet there is more than one side to the telling of stories. There is, indeed, the teller/writer; there is the listener/reader as well; and there is the story itself, as well as all the history that comes together to make up the story.

One of the first questions important to address in any discussion about stories and their telling

concerns purpose. Beyond satisfying an individual need for self-expression or anger or desire for understanding, there are even more important reasons for the telling and sharing of stories.

Storytelling serves a variety of purposes, none of which are mutually exclusive. Storytelling can instruct; it can serve as a reminder of incidents from the past; it can serve as a connection to people's families and ancestors and their lives; it can help people to define who they are and what their role is in society; and it can entertain. If those five purposes, then, are taken in terms of this introductory 'story,' how can the purpose of that story be determined?

Stories instruct. What did the girl who requested the story learn from its retelling? That the father spent his formative years in the care of these special people called 'brothers;' that he wasn't much of a student, one who didn't care for studying; that he held little or no respect for most of the Brothers; that most of the Brothers were not very good or dutiful teachers; that some of the Brothers were rather sadistic in their treatment of the students in their care. She probably also learned, without it being

said, a mistrust of the religious, and possibly a healthy fear of school and the figures of authority presented therein.

Stories serve as a reminder of the past.

Obviously, on the surface, in this instance, that is all that the man is discussing: his past. He has told this story before, and will tell it again. In requesting this particular story, the girl is asking to be taken back to a time before she can remember; to a time before she was born. It is a time that she will never experience personally, yet it is a time that she still wants to know something about. History shows that even when the past is not heeded, humans still recollect it and retell it, and, depending upon the episode presented--such as major disasters like the sinking of the *Titanic* or the crash of the *Hindenburg* or the defeat of Custer at the hands of the Sioux--are fascinated by it and tend to thrive on the repetition of the story, no matter how inaccurately the details may be presented.

Stories serve as a connection to people's families and ancestors and their lives. In conjunction with reminding us of the past, stories--especially those connected to our forefathers--bring to light

specific information we might never have otherwise. While we can read about the happenings mentioned above, there is no library of books that hold the stories of our mothers, grandparents, fathers, all our relations. To hear those stories, in a sense, can bring those people to life for us, showing us who we came from and offering, perhaps, insight into the people who we ourselves are. In this instance, the girl lives vicariously through the man, in a time and place in which she can never live. Not only is the experience of a school taught exclusively by Brothers no longer available to her, but in her own role as a female, even if that school experience was available, she would be excluded from it. But the story helps her also to understand the man better--what kind of a boy he was; what kind of upbringing he had; what was acceptable to his society at that time (i.e., betting a carton of cigarettes with a teacher and actually handing those cigarettes over when the bet was lost); how he felt about being educated that way; his attitudes towards the religious environment in which he came of age. By him telling the story and her listening to it, they both are able to learn more about themselves.

Stories help people to define who they are and what their role is in society. Many stories we hear as children are those that are told to us by both our immediate and extended families about their own lives and the lives of people who came before them. Through this information, we begin to understand--on a primitive level--who we are in relation to the society around us. We learn through these stories, perhaps, that we are Catholic; that we have mixed French and English blood; that we have had a long-standing dislike of a certain ethnic group; that we have a long history of doing good deeds; that we are socially inept--the list is endless of what we learn from those stories. Without consciously making the decision to define ourselves as such, that is exactly what is happening as we absorb those stories, making them our own, perhaps handing them down to other siblings, and then our own children. The girl in this particular instance comes to know that she is of a class that prides itself on private, Catholic education, and as such has certain expectations for its members--whether they appreciate that education at the time or not. In this simple story, the girl does not define who she is on her own, individually, as much as who she is

through the life of the man who is (re)telling the story—her father. Her expected role, we can surmise, is to follow in the tradition of this family and accept her Catholicism and resulting Catholic education as well. She would not be able to completely define who she is and her role in society on the basis of one family story; there must be more that she has heard, or has yet to hear, that will continue that process for her.

Stories can entertain. On one level, we can read this transcript of the story shared between the man and his daughter and without looking at it in much depth, be entertained by the mental images that it brings to light: an older, religious man of authority, tossing golf balls at students, accepting their cartons of cigarettes without a second thought. We can marvel that someone like this was even allowed to teach, given the difference in teaching styles between that time (1944) and the present. On the surface, we can be entertained by stories, and even when analyzed to a certain extent, we can still hold onto the entertainment value that some stories present. Stories are more important than mere entertainment, but on some level, while instructing and reminding and

guiding us, they can also entertain us as well. What is important to remember is that it is not the sole purpose of stories simply to entertain.² The greatest lessons of stories, writes Angela Cavender Wilson [Dakota],

are to the young people, the children, and grandchildren of the elders and storytellers, who will gain an understanding of where they came from, who they are, and what is expected of them.

(35)

People also tell stories "because they know that others like to hear stories" (Schank 15). Telling each other stories is a way of bonding: in this instance, it is a family bonding, but sharing stories with others can bring a variety of people from different communities together as well.

Of course, it may be solely a Euro-American point of view to speak in terms of stories and their

² To this claim, one may ask, "What is the purpose, beyond mere entertainment value, of "popular" writers such as Stephen King, Danielle Steele, John Grisham, and the like?" On the surface, it is tempting to write off the purveyors of "beach-reading" books as mere entertainers and their books as mediocre with comfortable plots and characters and "happy-ever-after" endings. However, even stories such as these are commentaries on American culture as perceived through the eyes of the writers; social commentaries on mainstream American society that may or may not distort

entertainment value.³ Many Indian writers, such as Leslie Marmon Silko, tend to view the art of storytelling as more than simply entertainment. Joseph Bruchac [Abenaki] says that storytelling has always served at least two major functions. "One of those functions is to entertain. An interesting story is easier to remember. The second major function of storytelling is to instruct" (*Roots of Survival* 53-54). Robert Conley believes that:

storytelling to American Indians traditionally is more than entertainment and more than education. It is vital and necessary to continued life--the life of the tribe and the life of the world itself. Creation stories are told ritually to ensure the continued existence of the world.

(xiii)

reality but which do have socially critical value beyond entertaining the masses for large sums of money.

³ Alan Velie has commented upon this in *American Indian Literature: An Anthology*: "For us [those raised in the Euro-American traditions of literature] literature, however highbrow, is almost always purely entertainment--cerebral entertainment perhaps, but entertainment nonetheless. We define art as that which appeals primarily to our aesthetic sense, meaning that it stirs our sense of beauty but has no practical purpose" (7).

Not even modern-day mainstream Americans⁴ live in a totally ego-centric vacuum. Despite the societal pressures to achieve higher, to strive for an ultimately unattainable form of perfection, to get-more, be-more, do-more than others, solitary independence and unique individuality is impossible. Long after the mantra of the 1960s of "do your own thing," most members of this mainstream society have been able to realize that this independence and individuality has lead to fracturing, splintering, and the feeling of spiritual and psychological emptiness. Society has learned this the hard way, bearing witness to the rise of cults, splinter religious groups, underground militias, and gangs that have spread from the inner-cities to suburbia. What the rise of all this is ultimately showing is that the cult of the individual, for so long lauded as a beneficial offshoot of capitalism, is ultimately leading to alienation, frustration, feelings of worthless

⁴ Scott J. Howard refers to *mainstream American culture* by the acronym MAC, by which he means those part of American society who are not deemed "other." Howard contends, in a sweeping generalization, that this group "is more concerned with the transmission or retrieval of information or data detached from its context" than non-MAC individuals. For MAC, "value, meaning, and understanding—collectively known as knowledge—are of secondary importance" (47). This appears

inadequacy, and hopelessness. Indeed, "no man is an island," and belonging, being a part of one's community, not simply "looking out for number one," is being recognized, in a long-overdue way, as being more important to the sanity and stability of society than the relentless pursuit of fractioned individuality.

A society learns, painfully slowly at times, that there is no true community when all that is obvious is a collective of self-seeking individuals, without roots, direction, or a shared common knowledge of themselves. Part of coming to an understanding of the importance of the community and the individual's role in it comes from understanding the connection between past, present, and future as a collective. What makes that connection is the telling and retelling of stories.

Story is the umbilical cord that connects us to the past, present, and future. Family. Story is a relationship between the teller and the listener, a responsibility. After the listening you become accountable for the sacred knowledge that has been shared. Shared knowledge equals power.

to be a validation of the point made by Velie in the previous footnote.

Energy. Strength. Story is an affirmation of our ties to one another. (Williams 130)

Through the telling of stories, society is capable of grasping the idea of itself as a collective rather than as a band of individuals without a center, without common ground. Once society has understood that idea, its members must be capable of looking outside of itself as a collective and understanding not only its own world-view, but attempting to understand what else is "out there." Not only can man not live in a self-perpetuating vacuum, but due to the way the world is now, so interconnected and global, separate collectives cannot stand alone, either. What connects separate collectives (or tribes, or societies, or countries) is each one's attempts to understand not only inside but outside its own world-view. "Through words derived from one's thoughts, beliefs, acts, experiences, it is possible to share this awareness with all mankind" (Ortiz *Earth Power Coming* vii). It is through the telling and sharing of stories that this may be achieved. Gerald Vizenor goes a step further, claiming that "you can't understand the world without telling a story. There isn't any center to the world but a story" (Coltelli 156).

Indian nations have understood the importance of the telling of stories since before the European invasion of the North American continent began.⁵ Oral stories taught the members of the tribes who they were, where they came from, how to be responsible members of their groups (clans, societies, families), why the world is the way it is, and how to interact in it. Not a stagnant, dying culture, but living, growing nations, Indians have been more than able to synthesize new information and ways of adapting to changes in their world---especially after the advent of the colonizers. One way of doing this has been to see to the continuance of the oral tradition, segueing from the important tradition of oral literacy into the written word. Simon Ortiz writes:

we come from an ageless, continuing oral
tradition that informs us of our values,
concepts, and notions as native people, and it is
amazing how much of this tradition is ingrained

⁵ I do not mean to imply that other cultures, other civilizations are lacking in awareness of the importance of stories. One only needs to mention Homer as perhaps the original teller of what has come to be known as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to realize that the Greeks knew of the importance of handing down the stories. There is also the Old Testament in *The Bible* as well as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* to name others. But the point is only that Indians have continued to perpetuate the earlier oral traditions through their writings for the last 100+ years, a point I will

so deeply in our contemporary writing. ("The Language We Know" 194)

The stories are no longer told only to the listeners, they are written down, mostly in English,⁶ adapting and growing in order for the people to both understand and perpetuate each nation's culture, but to a lesser extent to show other nations and cultures that Indians---and storytelling---have not died.⁷ "The contribution of stories. . . should be recognized as celebrations of culture, as declarations of the amazing resiliency and tenacity of a people who have survived horrible circumstances and destructive forces" (Wilson 35).

Simon Ortiz writes:

elaborate on further in the section "Defining Storytelling Within the Orality of Written Narratives" of this chapter.

⁶ Although some Indian writers, among them Luci Tapahonso who writes some of her poetry in Navajo, and Ofelia Zepeda (Tohono O'odham) incorporate their own languages in their writing, most are writing in English, however limiting that may be. Joy Harjo writes in *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*, "I do not believe that English is a new native language in spite of its predominant use as a vehicle for native literary production. What we have is a native literature produced in English that is written for an English-speaking audience and that incorporates a native perception of the world in limited ways" (25)

⁷ Craig Womack points out an inherent problem in educating mainstream cultures about Indians and their ways. In *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, he writes, "educating white folks about Indians can only be taken so far. Hotgun claims it's like teaching hogs to sing: it wastes your time and only frustrates the hog" (21).

The literary tradition being developed through the words of contemporary Native American writers and poets affirms this; the writers and poets know where they come from and they know what their commitments and responsibilities are to the Earth who is the mother and the Great Spirit who includes us all. The literature being written by Native Americans is fundamental to this nation's identity; without it there is really no humanistic-spiritual tradition and no sense of the true self. My poetry and prose fiction will probably always come from 'stories,' because there are always the stories and they aren't just stories. . .and because the world continues and we continue with it, the stories will go on, constantly in the making, changing, growing, reaffirming the truth that there will always be the stories. ("Always the Stories" 69)

The telling and sharing of stories becomes a necessity for society to understand not only who each person is as an individual, but also how the individual is a part of her/his culture, as well as her/his relationship to the world as a whole. "For Indian people, it has been the evolvement of a system of life

which insists on one's full awareness of his relationship to all life" (Ortiz *Earth Power Coming* vii).

Telling stories, handing down one's traditions and beliefs, "is renewal, it is continuance, and it is remembering. In remembering there is strength and continuance and renewal throughout the generations" (Hobson 2). The father who is telling the story at the start of this chapter is doing such remembering, sharing the stories (this one and presumably others) with his daughter, and through such telling is seeing to this "continuance and renewal."

Stories come in a variety of forms. Some are vague and difficult to comprehend. Others are humorous; others tragic. But "important stories aren't necessarily exalted or clever. Some are thunderingly obvious. Pounding their lessons home like railway workers driving spokes into the ground. But even at their most ordinary they deliver something powerful to us" (Fulford 81). Above all, "storytelling conveys the personal, individual side of a people, something that the analytical categories and constructions of history and anthropology cannot" (Howard 52). The story that I started this chapter with is a good case in point

regarding Howard's comment on storytelling. The listener/reader of this particular father's story can indeed feel the personal and individual side of one Catholic family. One can read in historical narratives about how Catholics routinely send their children to parochial schools, and see generalized statistics about the type of education they received. But it is in the personal story that what lies behind history and statistics can be told.⁸

Defining Storytelling Within the Orality of Written Narratives

Raymond Carver wrote a short story called "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" that showed this "love" they are talking about to be the antithesis of the accepted notions of what "love" is or should be. What I am trying to do here is to show, like Carver did with "love," that what we are talking about when we talk about "storytelling" in this context, is not simply the generally accepted Euro-

⁸ It may be stretching a point, but I can draw a broad analogy between the father's story and stories that Indians have told and written regarding their own boarding school experiences. History can tell us one thing about the benefits of a Carlisle Indian School education as well as about parochial schools; Indians and Catholics themselves can give us the real story behind the historical narrative.

American notions of storytelling, and to remark on the differences between *storytelling* and *story-telling*.⁹

Storytelling is the oral art of presenting stories, whereby there is usually a speaker (the storyteller) and an audience that can respond to the speaker in a number of ways---where the audience does not have to consist of more than one person. The storyteller's audience has many options: the members can listen passively; can respond by applause, laughter, or tears; or can take an interactive role in the storytelling by contributing vocally to different parts of the story being told, adding details, shouting encouragement, or responding directly to the storyteller's words.¹⁰ Story-telling, on the other hand, is the case when the stories are written down, either in the form of poetry, short stories, novels, dramas, autobiography, or non-fiction essays.

⁹ So what is the difference? How can the difference between the two be discerned? *Storytelling* has an emphasis on the first syllable, with most of the emphasis on the word *story*. With *story-telling* the emphasis is on the *telling*---which in this case refers to the written word.

¹⁰ Joseph Bruchac points out that among the Seneca, "a storyteller about to recite a *ga-ga'* or folktale would say '*Hanio!*' Only if the response of '*Hah!*' was given could the story then be told. The attention of the listeners had to be focused on the story. . . At intervals during the relation of a story the auditors must exclaim '*Hah!*' This was the sign that they were listening. If there was no frequent response of '*Hah!*' the story teller would stop and

The most commonly-accepted, universal notion of 'storytelling' is one that conjures a variety of visions: of a parent orally transmitting either a culturally-accepted fairy-tale or family history to a small child; or a librarian encircled by an assortment of young children recounting yet another folk-tale; or a group of friends recounting to each other things that have happened to them or others. "Storytelling" connotes orality, and even when the blurb on a novel or short story collection's book-jacket proclaims the writer as a "master storyteller," the vision arises of a speaker weaving words to a captive audience. In the oral tradition, Momaday tells us:

one stands in a different relation to language. Words are rare and therefore dear. They are jealously preserved in the ear and in the mind. Words are spoken with great care, and they are heard. They matter, and they must not be taken for granted; they must be taken seriously and they must be remembered. (*The Man Made of Words* 15)

inquire what fault was to be found with him or his story" (*Roots of Survival* 75-76).

Storytelling is the pre-cursor of *story-telling*. In regards to this, Momaday also wrote that:

American literature begins with the first human perception of the American landscape expressed and preserved in language. *Literature* we take commonly to comprehend more than writing. If writing means visible constructions within a framework of alphabets, it is not more than six or seven thousand years, we are told. Language, and in it the formation of that cultural record which is literature, is immeasurably older. Oral tradition is the foundation of literature. (*the Man Made of Words* 14)

Leslie Silko has defined what *story-telling* means to her by noting:

when I say *storytelling*, I don't just mean sitting down and telling a once-upon-a-time kind of story. I mean a whole way of seeing yourself, the people around you, your life, the place of life in the bigger context, not just in terms of nature and location, but in terms of what has gone on before, what's happened to other people. (Salyer 1)

What I want to focus on here is not simply the once-upon-a-time type of storytelling that Silko comments on, but rather on the continuing evolution of storytelling, from campfire oral stories to the written word, which is what Sarris calls "a fundamental aspect of culture" (*Slug Woman* 4). Telling stories, both orally and through the written word are, as Angela Cavender Wilson says, "not merely interesting stories or even the simple dissemination of historical facts. They are, more important, transmissions of culture upon which our survival as a people depends. When our stories die, so will we" (35). Indian writers, by making not so much a transformation from oral storytelling to the written word, but rather a "reorientation" (Owens 6) are, in a sense, giving a re-affirmation of the continuation of their tribes and nations. The "coercive power of language in native American oral traditions" (9) appropriates the written form of communicating ideas and history brought here by the colonizers, and re-affirms yet again the power and life-affirming abilities of understanding culture and self that was once handed down orally, only now story-tellers have

the ability to do so through the "syntagmatic reality of written language" (6).

When Walter Benjamin noted that his notion of storytelling was dead, he was not speaking for the myriad cultures for whom storytelling is very much alive, nor did he entertain the notion that storytelling could indeed evolve---at least not in his essay "Storyteller." But Benjamin was writing in a time, place, and culture alien to a time, place, and culture of Indian nations. From Benjamin's point of view, his commentaries on the death of storytelling were probably as valid as Derrida's commentaries are valid to his own unique time, place, and culture. Nevertheless, it is important, in light of a previous discussion regarding the almost complete inability of Western theory and criticism to adequately address Indian literature---both oral and written---to attempt at least a short discussion regarding Benjamin's writings on storytelling.

Benjamin, as Peter Brooks notes, identifies traditional storytelling with the traveler, "who returns from his wanderings with something to tell, but also with the preserver of local traditions,

rooted in his native place" (81)¹¹. So far, so good. But Benjamin claimed that "the art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out," (87) which of course can only be looked at in the context of Benjamin's own culture and his time in history. It is the struggle against the dying out of wisdom that is the impetus behind Indian writers who continue storytelling, who continue with the oral tradition of handing down tribal wisdom, yet who also appropriate the "enemy's language" so that not only their own tribal peoples will remember and continue to learn from the "epic side of truth," but so that the Others--the colonizers and their descendents--can know of it as well. Indian storytelling (both oral and written) continues in the face of rash statements such as Benjamin's, because Indians know of the importance of continuing to put forth wisdom and truth and knowledge. John Scenters-Zapico, in his discussion of Momaday in his essay,

¹¹ "It would appear," Brooks comments about Benjamin, "that we are faced with a fully nostalgic and romantic view of storytelling, one we may even judge to be utopian and mystified" (83). It is that "nostalgic and romantic" view of storytelling that may be at the heart of the difficulty with Benjamin's essay. For while Benjamin seems to be unable to comment on the changing nature of his "ideal storytelling," Indian cultures have had no difficulty

"Cross-Cultural Mediation: Language, Storytelling, History, and Self as Enthymematic Premises in the Novels of N. Scott Momaday," is only one of many critics who point out that:

the verbal tradition, deeply rooted in close-knit cultural interaction, is what keeps a culture's myths, legends, etc., alive in the community and within the individual. These cultural notions are the important premises that traditionally serve to unite the society. As they are lost, so are the seams that unite the Native American cultures. (504)

By transmitting the stories through the power of the written word, Indian writers are ensuring that these "seams" are strengthened and cultural unity retained.

Benjamin also believed that "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained" (91). Not only are the stories being retained, but they are going beyond the immediate circle of tribal and national specificity, and are slowly being absorbed by

making this transition from oral to written while still retaining the spirit of the oral tradition.

a mainstream culture that claims---superficially at least---to be trying to understand.

While Benjamin appears almost accepting of the short story as a "close second" to storytelling (in that Benjamin says that "a man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship" (100)), it appears that he will not consider the novel as any sort of extension of storytelling.

What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature . . . is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience--his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. (87)

Brooks, in his discussion on Benjamin's theory of the isolated, non-communicative novelist, concurs:

What stands in opposition to storytelling, what is in the process of replacing it entirely, is of course the novel, inseparably linked to the invention of printing and the notion of the book . . . for the novelist is necessarily isolated, invisible, a hidden god who does not have the capacity to enter into colloquy with his fellow man, and thus cannot communicate that wisdom that is good counsel. (81)

There is so much wrong with Benjamin's theory of isolation and the novel with regards to Indian writers that it is difficult to know where to begin to refute him. Vizenor simply points out that Benjamin "reads the novel in the ruins of storytelling, an aesthetic modernism, but his mutable nostalgia for the past would be a misconception of tribal aural stories and literatures in translation" (*Narrative Chance* xii). Benjamin's notion of the isolated novelist incapable of counseling others and unable to express himself is a notion that is rejected by Indian writers. According to Sarris,

the novel is not just a *representation* of interaction but also an *occasion* for interaction. A reader's intermingling internal voices hold

dialogue with the intermingling voices of the novel. (*Slug Woman* 4-5)

Indian novelists may be solitary in the actual act of writing, but they should not be considered "solitary individual[s]" incapable of expressing themselves, unable to counsel others.¹² Indian writers may not have physical collaborators during the act of writing the story, but because of the concept of collective memory, of sharing the stories, it is difficult to believe that most writing by Indians is the product of one lone individual's imagination. Owens points to the absurdity of this concept when he notes that

the concept of a single author for any given text, or of an individual who might conceive of herself or himself as the creative center and originating source of a story, or of the individual autobiography, would have made as little sense to Native Americans as the notion of selling real estate. (9)

The words, the stories, frequently come from tribal experience, not solitude.

¹² There is always an exception to the rule. In this case, it should be noted that in a number of interviews, Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris said that they frequently collaborated in the works that they were writing.

Rather than distancing oneself from community, the Indian writer brings her community into the novel in a "process of reconstruction, of self-discovery and cultural recovery. In Laguna author Paula Gunn Allen's term, it is a *re-membering* or putting together of identity" (Owens 5). Indian story-tellers---and by extension, novelists---are very much "the traveler, who returns from his wanderings with something to tell" (Brooks 81). The challenge, then, to Indian novelists is that of "making themselves understood in a prose form quite foreign to traditional Native American discourse" (Owens 9). As the colonizers systematically appropriated, for their own use, things found in (or stolen from) indigenous nations, so now have Indian writers appropriated the Euro-centric form of the novel in order to "emerge out of the experience of colonization and assert themselves" (Ashcroft 2).¹³

Traditionally, the audience of a storyteller "consisted of tribe or clan members who could be counted on to contribute a wealth of intimate

¹³ If, indeed, "one of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language" (Ashcroft 7), then it can be surmised that Indian writers are accomplishing more than seeing to the continuity of their lives, beliefs, and nations. By appropriating the enemy's language, and by appropriating its written forms of expression, by extension

knowledge to the telling of the story, to thus actively participate in the dynamics of the story's creation" (Owens 13). Although the novelist does not have the interactive experience with and input from an audience who is right there during the telling, the audience for the Indian novelist must also take an active role in understanding the story that is unfolding.

Today. . . the Native American novelist's audience will likely consist of a heteroglot gathering, including tribal relations; Indian readers from the same or other tribal cultures who may not be familiar with the traditional elements essential to the work but who may recognize the coercive power of language to 'bring into being'; and non-Indian readers who approach the novel with a completely alien set of assumptions and values. (Owens 14)¹⁴

Indian writers are throwing off "imperial oppression" by no longer allowing the colonizers sole control over language.

¹⁴ The necessity for understanding the culture from which the writing comes will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3. Greg Sarris comments upon this extensively in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, in brief saying that "for cross-cultural communication to be open and effective, interlocutors must be aware of their boundaries, both personal and cultural, so that they might know the limits on and possibilities for understanding one another in the exchange. That is, in understanding another person and

Even Benjamin allows that "a great storyteller will always be rooted in the people" (101). The Indian writer of novels is rooted in her/his people, and the subject matter of these writers' novels (as well as other writing) asserts "the traditional sense of Indian peoples that not the individual as personal self, but, rather, the person as transmitter of the traditional culture was what most deeply counted"¹⁵ (Swann xii).

Benjamin wrote that "his [the storyteller's] gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life" (108-9) but Indian story-tellers tell more than one entire life---rather

culture you must simultaneously understand yourself. This process is ongoing, an endeavor aimed not at a final transparent understanding of the Other or of the self, but at continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both" (6). This may be too much to ask of the mainstream reader---or mainstream society.

¹⁵ This does not mean to imply that Indian writers do not write about themselves. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn comments that "quite the opposite is true. There is a self-absorption in my work which is inherent in my survival as a person, and my identity as a Dakotah. This self-absorption has always been a part of tradition, I think, for Dakotahs, in spite of the pervasive articulation that the Indian 'self' was somehow unimportant" (61). Which only means that it is not an all-or-nothing proposition that is being discussed; one cannot write about oneself and be completely distanced from that which makes up the identity of the self: one's culture. On the other hand, one cannot write about one's culture---and do it well---without understanding one's place in it, and by understanding one's self, another point that will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

than individuality, they encompass more and speak of the lives of their tribes, their nations.

Story-telling is the art that will not die, the definition and life of which has evolved from Benjamin's antiquated and narrow definition, and which continues to evolve even now as communication, technology, and communities and cultures change.

The Role and Responsibility of the Teller of Stories

Far from being a disinterested third party, a mere writer of words on a page, one who is only interested in whatever self-satisfaction comes from seeing one's words on the printed page, a story-teller holds a pivotal role in the creation or the retelling of the story; and with that comes myriad responsibilities.

The story-teller's role is to bring to life in whatever form she or he has chosen---a poem, novel, play, short story, autobiography, non-fiction essay---as true a representation as possible of the lives and cultures about which she or he is writing. While this may not always be possible because there is no such thing as total objectivity, nor should there be, in fiction, it is something that story-tellers need to

take into consideration when offering their works to the audiences that will read them. In turn, what readers must remember is that the story-teller is only presenting her interpretation of events and lives, and that she has not taken on the role of tribal, national, or cultural spokesperson. "There is no one story, nor can there ever be," Sarris writes. "I cannot assume knowledge and authority to speak for others and their relationships. The objective is to open a dialogue" (*Slug Woman* 87-88). Nor can one Indian writer be held up as the spokesperson for all Indians, just as Saul Bellow or Bernard Malamud cannot be held as spokesperson for all Jews, or Shakespeare and Charles Dickens for all Englishmen, nor Toni Morrison and Alice Walker for all African-Americans. The term "Indian," especially, is generic, meant to include all indigenous peoples of America, but as Sarris points out

what an Indian knows from his or her tribe may not apply to other tribes. In terms of their histories, cultures, and languages Indian people are different, sometimes radically different, from tribe to tribe. (*Slug Woman* 91)

But even to anoint a spokesperson for a single tribe--
-say Sherman Alexie speaking for all the Spokane---is
ludicrous. A writer of whatever race can only write
what she knows and present the truth as she knows it.

One of the roles of the story-teller is that of
transmitter of information---information regarding
cultures, myths, creation stories, and/or individual
and collective lives. While the story-teller is
telling the story as she knows it, she also is
"expound[ing] these facts in a certain way to create a
universal"¹⁶ (Barnes 97). The role of the story-teller
is of the writer who is "link[ing] humanity together
in chains of narrative" (Fulford 80).

Traditional storytellers must have the ability to
"shape the story to fit his or her audience [which]
allows for the successful transmission of cultural
values embedded within the story" (Howard 51).
Traditionally, the storytellers would tell their
stories

in the depths of winter when the village is safe
from ambush and the work of both men and women is

¹⁶ One cannot assume that any given story-teller can write a
piece of literature that is going to be universal in an
all-encompassing sense of the word, only that the story
can, and should, be universal for a specific culture, while

completed for the long cold. . . Then there is time to relax, to sit back and listen to stories, to be entertained and to be instructed, as traditional stories are teaching instruments, educational, for sharing knowledge and practical know-how. (Kenny 44)

But story-tellers (those who write the stories) often do not have an actual audience in front of them, nor do many audiences have the time to sit and relax when "all the work is done," but these story-tellers must determine their audience in their own minds, not knowing exactly who might be on the receiving end of their works. Story-tellers can anticipate an audience, or write to an intended audience, but again they have no way of forecasting exactly who this audience is and often cannot, or will not, "shape the story" to fit.¹⁷

at the same time, perhaps, holding out understanding and a sense of belonging to those outside the specific culture.

¹⁷ Thomas King, in an interview with Jace Weaver, has specifically noted that he does not write for the non-Indian audience. "I really don't care about the White audience. . . because they really don't have an understanding of the intricacies of Native life, and I don't think they are much interested in it, quite frankly. They're interested in aspects of it, but not in the intricacies" (quoted in Weaver 150). King spoke those words in 1993. By 1999, Scott Howard wrote "like most things there is always more than meets the eye, and until those of us who are outsiders take the time and effort to look below the surface, to see, in Severt Young Bear's words, the truth and the heart of the meaning, non-Indian understanding of native cultures and storytelling will be

Another role of the story-teller is of one who is handing down cultural information, etching this on paper so that it is remembered and not lost and thus will always be available for future generations. All great story-tellers throughout history have done this (some to a lesser degree of success than others) while still other story-tellers, while fulfilling this part of their role, neglect the first part---getting the information right, which leaves future audiences with an inaccurate and often biased view of the story-teller's culture.¹⁸ Linda Hogan has said that

telling our lives is important, for those who come after us, for those who will see our experience as part of their own historical struggle. I think of my work as part of the history of our tribe and as part of the history of colonization everywhere. (Hogan 233)

at best superficial, at worst, completely wrong" (Howard 52). The question remains: have attitudes changed? Do the "outsiders" want to take the time? Perhaps not. But since "White audiences" economically overshadow Indian audiences, Louis Owens is quick to point out, that "while writing for the Indian reader, the Indian novelist who desires publication must also write for the non-Indian" (14).

¹⁸ This was discussed in Chapter One, where the point about Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock was being discussed, as well as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*. In both these cases, what is being seen is solely from the narrow vantage point of the author about society as each knew it

N. Scott Momaday puts it quite succinctly in an essay in *Man Made of Words*:

The storyteller is the one who tells the story. To say this is to say that the storyteller is preeminently entitled to tell the story. He is original and creative. He creates the storytelling experience and himself and his audience in the process. He exists in the person of the storyteller for the sake of telling the story. When he is otherwise occupied, he is someone other than the storyteller. His telling of the story is a unique performance. The storyteller creates himself in the sense that the mask he wears for the sake of telling the story is of his own making, and it is never the same. He creates his listener in the sense that he determines the listener's existence within, and in relation to, the story, and it is never the same. The storyteller says in effect: 'On this occasion I am, for I imagine that I am; and on this occasion you are, for I imagine that you

to be at their specific point in history, which we now perceive to be a racist point of view.

are. And this imagining is the burden of the story, and indeed is the story'. (3)

The story-teller's words can be serious, playful, comic, even tragic (or a combination of all four), so long as they are creating (or re-creating) important stories that are written to be remembered, that mean something to both the story-teller and his audience. Story-tellers may be writing fiction, but the stories are also history.¹⁹ Traditionally, Momaday writes,

in the oral tradition stories are told not merely to entertain or to instruct; they are told to be believed. Stories are not subject to the imposition of such questions as true or false, fact or fiction. Stories are realities lived and believed. They are true. (*Man Made of Words* 2)

¹⁹ Jimmy Durham [Wolf Clan Cherokee] writes that "for us, history is always personal. (I remember the Trail of Tears and Sequoyah's efforts as though I had been there.) History is directly involved with our families and our generations; tied with sacred white cotton string to the sweet and intense memories of our brother or sister is the desperate and intense hope of each generation to change this history" (159). By remembering, by ensuring that each succeeding generation in turns remembers and hands down the remembered history to subsequent generations, is one way of changing the history---that is, by making new history, a way of making things better by not forgetting how it was. And it is "creative expression which brings about realization and regeneration. This then is the way that people deal with the world, especially when times and events prove difficult and harsh" (Ortiz *Earth Power Coming* viii).

The oral tradition of stories, as has been discussed, has been carried over to the written word by the story-tellers, and these written stories (and by extension, novels) are also "realities lived."²⁰ They may be presented under the guise of fiction, but they are also "true," and to be believed.

Because the story-teller "exercises nearly complete control over the storytelling experience," (2) she must be aware of the responsibilities that come with such control. These responsibilities are numerous. Because story-tellers "not only create new stories but amend traditional ones that are passed down through the generations, sometimes choosing their own details while retaining the story's fundamental characters, plot, and moral" (Howard 50), story-tellers are responsible to their specific cultures, or more specifically to their individual tribes. Angela Cavender Wilson notes that

Native people have an unbreakable belief in the beauty and the significance of our cultures, and

²⁰ Barney Bush [Shawnee] says that he is a writer "simply because America stresses the written word as the primary establishment of truth. If it is not written down, then one has no 'proof'." (220-221). That is, mainstream society is more likely to accept as true stories from Indians that appear in written form, rather than those "myths" handed down by word of mouth.

this is reflected in our stories. They are testimony to the richness, variety, detail, and complexity of the interpretations of history. Our role as historians should be to examine as many perspectives of the past as possible---not to become the validators or verifiers of stories, but instead to put forth as many perspectives as possible. (35)

For the traditional storyteller, Owens writes, "each story originates with and serves to define the people as a whole, the community" (9). This is not only part of the traditional storyteller's responsibility, but of the story-teller who transmits the life of the tribe to paper as well.

Succinctly, the story-teller has three major responsibilities: to herself, as the writer, the creator, the re-teller; to her community, her tribe---which includes both ancestors and generations yet to come; and to her audience which may or may not consist of people who understand and share the culture about which she is writing. Linda Hogan [Chickasaw] adds the following to those responsibilities:

Especially because I'm a person from a tribe in the United States of America, I feel charged with

the responsibility to remember. I suppose *any* poet in *any* tribal situation feels that charge to address the truth which always includes not just the present but the past and the future as well.

(Moyers 163)

Because Indian writers come generally from oral cultures, many have an incredible gift of memory that serves them in their craft.²¹ Being charged to remember is a responsibility not taken lightly. Writing "should reflect oral tendencies to engage the larger world in which the spoken word lives so that it is seen for what it might or might not be beyond the page" (Sarris *Slug Woman* 45 - 46).

This responsibility is, indeed, not taken lightly. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn talks about her ultimate responsibility as a writer, saying that she must to commit something to paper in the modern world which supports this inexhaustible legacy left by our ancestors. (63)

²¹ Joy Harjo, in an interview with Bill Moyers, said, "I've always been amazed at what native people can remember. Native people are generally from oral cultures---they may be able to read and write, sometimes even in their own language, but the expression of the culture is primarily oral. So they're incredibly gifted in memory and in telling stories" (Moyers 164).

In accomplishing this purpose, by accepting her responsibilities as story-teller, the writer

projects his spirit into language and therefore beyond the limits of his time and place.

[Writing] is an act of sheer transcendence.

Spiritually he will survive as long as his words survive. He inhabits his vision, and in the telling his vision becomes timeless. The storyteller and the story told are one. (*The Man Made of Words* 27)

By being responsible to himself---that is, by writing the truth as he knows it---and by being responsible to his community and (by extension) to his audience, whoever they may be,

the *story-teller* joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel---not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the

storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). (Benjamin 108-109)²²

The Role and Responsibility of the Audience

As important to the story-teller as her material is the audience who will accept and read her work. If the role of the story-teller is to bring her work to life by means of as true a representation as possible of the lives and cultures about which she is writing, the audience of the story-teller must, one assumes, be perceptive, astute, and familiar with the culture that is being presented, or be willing to become familiar with it.

As stated previously, a writer does not (and cannot) write in a vacuum. Personal journals and some personal poetry are exceptions to this statement. A story-teller should have and probably does have an audience in mind during the writing of her story. For some writers, this is specifically their own society and culture. Others (especially, as Owens pointed out, those who wish their works to be published) while writing to their own cultures, want to reach a larger

²² The italics here are mine. Benjamin was referring to the oral storyteller, not to the writer of stories.

audience, one that may be totally unfamiliar with what King referred to as "the intricacies" of a specific writer's culture.

The audience, or in the case of the story-teller, the readers, must "come to terms with their biases, so that they might better understand the text they are reading and their relationship to it" (Sarris *Slug Woman* 6). What Sarris is suggesting readers do is to be aware of their position as, perhaps, uneducated bystanders in the reading of other cultures' works---uneducated but also willing to shed whatever negative constructs they may have surrounding them as a result of their lack of understanding or their ignorance.

For instance, it is all too easy for members of King's "White audience" to look at Indian literature expecting to see a reflection of what they have come to expect in a portrait of "The Indian"---either the painted warrior mercilessly slaughtering the helpless, innocent white frontiers-people, or the equally appalling idea of the "Indians with a plight," poor and down-trodden and oppressed.²³ Some Indians may

²³ Louis Owens notes that "with few exceptions, American Indian novelists are in their fiction rejecting the American gothic with its haunted, guilt-burdened wilderness and doomed Native and emphatically making the Indian the hero of other destinies, other plots" (18).

indeed be "poor and down-trodden and oppressed" but it is by no means the entire story of all Indians. To view Indians with that narrow a mind-set is the same as categorizing all African-Americans as lazy and shiftless and belonging to inner-city gangs, all Frenchmen as horny drunks, or all Arabs as terrorists. Attitudes such as these only lend credence to the belief in the ignorance and stupidity of those who hold them.

The task at hand, for the audience (readers), then, is not necessarily to "assimilate the text or any element of it to [them]selves nor to assimilate [them]selves to the text. It is not to reduce difference to sameness nor to exoticize or fetishize it. Rather, the task is to become aware of our tendencies to do any of these things" (*Slug Woman* 128). If the audience/reader is aware of his tendency to do this, one could assume (or at least hope) that such behavior can be modified, in the spirit of understanding what it is the story-teller has to offer.

Scott Howard believes that "non-Indians should resist making judgments about stories . . . told by Indian people, because the function such tales serve

in the Indian community is complex and vital, especially with regard to the transmission of various cultural values. Indian people's greatest struggle has been adapting to a constantly changing world while at the same time retaining the values and social relations of traditional society" (49). But it can be possible for the non-Indian audience to begin to try to understand the complexities involved in story-specific Indian communities and cultures, if that audience can detach itself from its predisposed illusions regarding Indians and put aside pre-existing biases. More than that, before beginning to understand story-specific Indian cultures,

for cross-cultural communication to be open and effective, interlocutors must be aware of their boundaries, both personal and cultural, so that they might know the limits on and possibilities for understanding one another in the exchange.

That is, in understanding another person and culture you must simultaneously understand yourself. (Sarris *Slug Woman* 6)

Non-Indian audiences may have difficulty achieving the level of awareness necessary for this cross-cultural communication to work, but it is still certainly

possible. If it does not work, different nuances and levels of meaning, and often times the intense humor being offered in Indian writing, will be lost on this particular audience.

Sarris charges the story-teller's audience to be aware of the subtleties involved in the reading of any story and asks that both reader and writer "show us as much as we can learn together about one another. Let us tell stories that help us in this. Let us keep learning" (*Slug Woman* 46). Sarris, at least, shows a willingness for the cross-cultural communication channels to be kept open, for the understanding to be a two-way rather than a one-way street. In keeping these lines of communication open, Sarris is also aware, and wants others to be aware that not only is there not just one story, but "the objective is to open a dialogue with the text such that I can continue to inform and be informed by the text" (87-88). There is no one universal story, for there will always be different view points, different vantage points from which to both read and write texts. The reader who is willing to take on the responsibilities I have discussed above must remember, above all, that the story continues, and must also be ready to be open-

minded (as well as critical) when reading others' stories.

Putting It Into Practice

In the two chapters that follow, I will discuss the works of Greg Sarris and Thomas King within the context of the information presented in this chapter with regards to the acceptance of responsibilities in their roles as story-tellers. With the analysis first of Sarris's stories in Chapter Three and then of King's stories in Chapter Four, I hope that my readers will be able to see how each man has extended his understanding of their oral traditions as is clear in their writing; how each accepts and follows through their primary responsibilities as story-tellers; and how their stories may have lead each to an understanding of self and each one's place in his respective community.

Telling Stories

Many things
are not in books.

Now, listen, carefully,
those elders said.

This is important,

remember it well.

Then, they would say
what needed saying.

Those stories
would be told, to you.

Every year, sometimes,
it is how things are.

Tales of Rabbit,
and fox, and others.

Just stories,
many might say,

But each one
has many lessons.

If you heard it right,
and remembered well

One day you
will be asked to tell

Those stories,
and you will say,

This is important,
remember it well.

The little ones
will listen then,

With wonder
and eyes wide.

John Berry, 1999, Oklahoma

Chapter Three

'There Is More To The Story'

One party may write a story, but one party's
story is no more the whole story than
a cup of water is the river.

--Greg Sarris
Keeping Slug Woman Alive

Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible
as one would mostly have us believe

--Rainer Maria Rilke
Letters to a Young Poet

My job as a writer is to show you
that we are people who happen to be Indians.

--Greg Sarris

Greg Sarris admonishes his readers in *Keeping
Slug Woman Alive* to remember that

when you hear my stories there is more to me and
you that *is* the story. You don't know everything
about me and I don't know everything about you.

Our knowing is limited. Let our words show us as
much so we can learn together about one another.

Let us tell stories that help us in this. Let us
keep learning. (46)

There is more to the story than meets the eye; or as
Hamlet said, "there are more things in heaven and

earth, Horatio,/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy"
(*Hamlet* Act I, Scene V, 166-167).

There, succinctly, is the difficulty that mainstream American culture has with understanding Indian literature. The truth is that there are more things to learn and understand than what has been offered through standard, traditional Euro-American education. Children in most American schools have been taught to read what has become known as American literature through the lens of a white, mostly male, mentality, which all goes back to the beginnings of colonization of this continent with Manifest Destiny and its attendant Divine right to conquer mindset that began and perpetuates the "us-versus-them" or the "civilized versus the savage" intellect that continues to rule modern American thought. Reading "American literature" from a white male viewpoint may be fine for 49 percent of the population (give or take), but that leaves approximately 51 percent of the population who have histories, beliefs, religions, cultures, and practices that do not fall into the category of "white" and "male" and Euro-American. How is the rest of American culture to react to this predicament? Or better still, how can those who are docttrinated to

read from this perspective first understand literature written from a non-white, non-male perspective, or even find something of universality that people want and need when reading literature? What happens when these carefully created readers from many different backgrounds, encounter writing---poetry, stories, novels---from a different perspective? What often happens is that readers "reject other stories and voices every time we judge their worth through conventional Euro-American standards of what constitutes good literature" (Harjo and Bird 28). What does learning to read and comprehend literature through these conventional standards do to a person's perspective? Obviously, it renders such a perspective skewed.

Non-Jews who read Bernard Malamud's story, "The Magic Barrel" are frequently confused by the end of the story, and not only by the ending, but by specific references to particular aspects of Jewish customs that Malamud mentions in the story. Especially confusing is the scene where the rabbinical student, Leo Finkle, goes to find the matchmaker and encounters the matchmaker's wife. Is Pinye Salzman of this world? Is he magical? What are the references that the

matchmaker's wife makes concerning her husband? His office is "in the air" and "in his socks" she tells Finkle (Malamud 1881). And why would he consider his daughter dead to him even though she is living when he chants the prayers for the dead? What is Malamud saying in regards to Finkle's attitudes towards his chosen calling?¹

Thus, the inability of readers to understand the nuances and meaning of some literature written by or concerning people considered outside the mainstream society is not unusual. Non-African-American readers of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* may be able to empathize with Sethe's difficulties but they cannot completely understand how strongly she feels about her children remaining free from slavery. A possible reaction to the scene where Sethe cuts her young daughter's throat is to question how she could do that. What kind of a woman would intentionally kill a child she so professed to love? Never having come from the horrors of slavery that Sethe came from, never having lived

¹ I admit to always having been confused about "The Magic Barrel." When teaching a course on American Literature 1865 - Present that included Malamud on the syllabus, I knew that students would have a number of questions about the story. Anticipating my inability to answer the questions, I asked a variety of practicing and non-practicing Jewish

through torture and being owned by another human being, Outsiders cannot understand---nor can many of them justify---Sethe's actions. Many also react with that same horror while soothing their ruffled consciences by assuring themselves that it is, after all, just a "story," and could not possibly be true. Yet it is stories such as these that also fall under Momaday's admonition that "stories are realities lived and believed. They are true" (*The Names* 2).² Joseph Bruchac also says that:

[stories] are not 'myths and legends,' in the popular sense, stories which are untrue and belong to some distant past. They are, in fact, alive. No story exists in isolation. Stories are a part of the life of the people. (91)

Sethe's story is "part of the life of the people," a story that tells the reader not only what could have happened in history, but what indeed did happen. It is not a "pretty" story, but one that needs to be remembered in order that humanity does not let it happen again.

friends to interpret the story for me. None of them could satisfactorily explain the ending, either.

² I am not claiming here that Morrison's story *Beloved* is absolute fact. It is true in the sense that it is possible,

The misunderstanding and confusion can also hold true for the traditional Euro-American reader who encounters Amy Tan's story of Chinese mothers and daughters, *The Joy Luck Club*. The universal in this instance is the age-old conflict between mothers who do not understand their changing daughters and the daughters who are struggling to break away from the roles that their mothers have chosen. But the non-Chinese reader questions the mothers' motives and their inability to accept their daughters' rejection of the old ways, just as the non-African-American reader cannot quite accept the crime Sethe has committed. The Outsiders, those classically-trained American readers, in not understanding the culture in which the stories are steeped, do not totally understand the nuances of the dilemma that these women face.

On the other hand, this classically-trained reader can understand Shakespeare, even though the culture from which he came is 400 years in the past. The reason is that this is the literature that the reader is taught throughout his/her schooling to

probable, to be believed. And in truth, it is based on a factual story of escaped slaves.

understand. Shakespeare, for the most part, deals with white, English people from a variety of classes, and he is writing for a white English audience.³ Outsiders to everything but white male culture have difficulty understanding anything but that white culture, and as a result, the rest of the world, and the rest of literature, is seen from only that one, particular perspective. Often times, because of this, many nuances of non-white mainstream literature are misunderstood, misinterpreted, or completely overlooked.⁴ To really understand and appreciate the writings of contemporary Indian writers, Bruchac says "it is also necessary to have some understanding of the living cultures which shape their thought and language" (*Roots of Survival* 17).

Duane Champagne claims that there is a "bias in Western scholarly culture toward economic and

³ Granted, *Hamlet* is allegedly about a Dane. But how much Danish culture is present in the story? Other than mentioning Denmark from time to time, and the battle brewing at the end of the story, Danish culture is absent. These are ersatz Englishmen that Shakespeare is writing about.

⁴ Louis Owens speaks to this point in *Other Destinies*: "readers who fail to bring at least some knowledge of traditional Chippewa trickster tales to the fiction of Gerald Vizenor---not to mention an openness to trickster discourse---are very apt to find themselves confused and perhaps appalled. Unaware of the crucial role of play and humor in Native American cultures, readers groomed by stoic

political interpretations" that "directs many scholars away from cultural interpretations" ("American Indian Studies is for Everyone" 192). True as that may be, cultural interpretations cannot be ignored if anything is to be learned from and discussed in relation to non-Euro-American literatures.⁵

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn cautions readers (she refers to them as artists and critics) that what must be understood is that

popular Native American fiction is as extricably tied to specific tribal literary legacies as contemporary Jewish literature is tied to the literary legacies of the nations of Eastern Europe or contemporary black literature is tied to the nations of tribal Africa.

("Intellectualism and the New Indian Story" 134)

stereotypes will miss much in Vizenor and most other Indian novelists" (15).

⁵ The sweeping advent of that beast known as "Cultural Studies" that has put in an appearance in many universities and colleges over the course of the past fifteen to twenty years would show that there is a more than passing interest in some version of "cultural interpretations." The validity of such programs is yet to be proven in terms of "cross-cultural communications." The fear that I have heard people speak of is that the wave of "Cultural Studies" experts will take over in much the same way that anthropologists did in the first part of the twentieth century. Those fears may indeed be well grounded.

This leaves the non-Indian reader of Indian literature with three options. This reader can ignore the literature completely, not realizing (or unwilling to accept) that there can be, nevertheless, an aspect of universality that can reach to the non-Indian reader. The next option is to read the literature without any cultural information and background, while being willing to accept that a lot of references (as well as humor) may be incomprehensible, but settling rather for finding in the literature that which the non-Indian reader can take as her/his own---that is, finding that aspect of universality that speaks to an individual, even if their interpretation is colored by culture-specific biases. Or this reader can try to learn, opening avenues of different varieties, being willing to take off Euro-American tinted glasses and look, for perhaps the first time, at life and the world from a different (not "Other") perspective. "As in all human groups, culture, institutions, and social and political processes are usually understandable to most anybody who is willing to learn" (Champagne 182).

All of this then asks the question: must readers take on so much responsibility when reading Indian literature? The answer is a mixed yes-and-no. "No" is

the easy answer. Contemporary cultures still read Dickens and Shakespeare, but how many truly understand without reading all the footnotes explaining the references, the vocabulary, the inside humor? I am not suggesting that Indian literature come with footnotes as Penguin editions of Dickens and Shakespeare do, but rather to make the point, yet again, that in order for a closer understanding of the materials to be gleaned by the reader, because there is "more than meets the eye," there needs to be more than a passing understanding of the culture behind the stories. At the same time, what needs to be remembered is the reasons behind the telling of stories, the purpose of the stories, what the reader learns from stories, what the writer learns from her stories, as well as the responsibilities of the audience in its response to the stories being read. So, the other answer is "yes," this is an additional responsibility for the reader who truly does want to take the step outside mainstream culture, to do more than broaden her understanding, to go so far as to clearly see how inter-connected everyone who makes up American cultures can be.

All our stories, I hope, and especially Indian stories---too long held in the purview of anthropologists and scholars who have ignored both the Indians' place in Indian literature as well as the necessity for clarity and understanding—"must be written, and they must be written in a vocabulary that people can understand rather than the esoteric language of French and Russian literary scholars that has overrun the lit/crit scene" (Cook-Lynn "Intellectualism" 137).⁶ This is not suggesting that stories (or any writing for that matter) be "dumbed-

⁶ There is a difference between different types of writing, "academic-speak," high-brow, low-brow, "beach-reading" and other categories. I am not suggesting here that stories all be written one way only, but that stories be made accessible to more than simply academics. All kinds of stories. Humorous, tragic, apocalyptic, wisdom-filled, intellectual and crass. Stories need to be intended for everyone. Alan Velie, in *American Indian Literature* points this out about traditional Indian literature: "One characteristic of traditional Indian literature that sets it apart from mainstream American literature . . . is that it was an organized part of everyday life, not something to be enjoyed by an intellectual elite. Traditionally, all members of an Indian tribe listened to tales and composed and sang songs. Americans have some universal art forms—television programs, for example—but most people consider them subliterate, if entertaining. Traditionally, Indians did not make a distinction between highbrow and lowbrow art; all their works could have been considered popular culture in the sense that they were intended for the whole tribe" (7). Perhaps the point being made here (in the chapter) is that stories need to be accessible to everyone, and looked at in terms of how they can help people to understand themselves and each other, more than the esoteric "art for art's sake" that has captured the imagination of academics, intelligencia, and the elite for generations.

down" at the expense of the beauty of language or the message being presented, but rather that it be brought about in such a way that it is accessible to all. It appears that Cook-Lynn, in her own way, is championing clear, intelligent, and concise writing, a telling of the stories by the people who have lived them, rather than by those who simply *think* they know.

Greg Sarris is one of those writers.

Sarris Background and the Pomo

Sarris describes himself as the "son of a Filipino-Pomo/Coast Miwok Indian-Spanish-prize fighter father and a sixteen-year-old Jewish-German-Irish mother" who grew up among many different people (*Last Woman* 70). When his mother died from being given the wrong type of blood during a transfusion shortly after his birth, Sarris was adopted and raised by a white family, George and Mary Sarris. After they adopted Sarris, they had three children of their own. Sarris reports that George had problems with alcohol and became more and more abusive. As a result, Sarris was allowed to roam and find other places to live. He was unaware of the fact that he was blood-related to many of the Indians he was growing up with until he was a

teenager and he finally found out he was Indian. His father, Emilio Hilario, was half-Filipino and half-Indian. Hilario's mother was Coast Miwok and Kashaya Pomo (*Mabel McKay* 56-57).

In his youth, Sarris spent time on the streets, fighting as a release for anger that he has categorized as that which was "of a mixed blood caught in the middle" (*Slug Woman* 112). "I wanted my anger," Sarris writes.

In the city park I beat the hell out of a white boy just because I didn't like the way he was looking at me. Not many Indians I knew liked and trusted whites. I was a good Indian then. Any Indian could see I was. Rejection. Distrust. Anger. Hatred. These things seem to characterize so much of the history of Pomo and white interrelations. (*Slug Woman* 93)

Realizing, perhaps, that the road he was traveling, was a self-destructive one that would probably lead to his becoming another statistic of early brutal and sad death, Sarris chose another road instead. Working in the kitchen in a local restaurant, he noticed that many of his friends' parents worked these dead-end jobs as well, and he determined not to do the same. By

this time, Mary Sarris had divorced George, so Sarris moved back with her in order to find a quiet place to study. He pulled up his grades, graduated high school, and followed that with college, learning more about himself and who he was in relation to the other Pomo Indians with whom he had been growing up, who he later learned were his relatives.

Sarris is of Coast Miwok descent, which is a tribe that lives just south of the Kashaya Pomo with whom he grew up (*Last Woman* 9). Mabel McKay, about whom Sarris has written at length, and from whom Sarris learned a great deal in regards to the Pomo, their heritage, stories, and history, was a Cache Creek Pomo, "the last of many things: dreamer, sucking doctor, traditional weaver." She was "an appendage to that old world of the Pomo, a world at least ten thousand years old and nearly vanished today" (*Last Woman* 38). Sarris first met Mabel McKay when he visited her home with his friend, Marshall, who was Mabel's adopted son. Throughout his writing, Sarris incorporates much of what he was taught through Mabel McKay's stories and life, information that he has recorded in both *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* and *Mabel McKay:*

Weaving the Dream, as well as the doctoral dissertation he wrote when he attended Stanford University in the late 1980s, *The Last Woman From Cache Creek: Conversations with Mabel McKay*. The cultural background and information, as well as the stories about the people Mabel and her friends knew, also found their way into Sarris's fiction, *Grand Avenue* (a novel in stories) published in 1994, and *Watermelon Nights*, published in 1998. Set in Santa Rosa, California, these works are centered on the Pomo who have gathered in the section of town known as South Park after drifting around northern California after they were driven from their reservation lands.

It was mostly from Mabel that he heard the stories. Sarris writes:

I have heard the stories. I have heard the old timers talk about the past. Many of their parents and grandparents fought wars, escaped slavery. And among the Pomo, these stories do not die. . . . Of course, for the Pomo, the wars continue today; their wars are born of the old wars and subsequent separation; their wars are the wars of the dispossessed, split from their ancient lands and tradition and relegated to the margins of

society where their struggles against invisibility are undermined by poverty, disease, and inadequate education. (*Last Woman* 43-45)

From these life stories, histories, and cultural information that Sarris learned from his Pomo relations and Mabel McKay, come the stories that Sarris himself is writing. Not only for the Pomo do the stories not die, but they also live on for Sarris, his audience, and the descendants of the Pomo about whom Mabel told her stories in order that they be remembered.

Although Mabel McKay was the last Pomo from Cache Creek, the Pomo are not disappeared from northern California. Pomo "still exist in large numbers, on over a dozen reservations, locally known as *rancherias*, and in many of the towns and cities in Lake, Mendocino, and Sonoma counties [in California]. The old songs are still sung, dances danced, and stories told" (*Last Woman* 49). Sarris has kept alive the stories, and the life, of Mabel in the character of Elba Gonzalez in *Watermelon Nights*, which I will discuss in detail later in this chapter.⁷

⁷ Much of the following information is meant as background information for understanding parts of *Watermelon Nights*, especially the second section which is narrated by Elba

Although the term *Pomo* was given to these northern California Indians by anthropologists, where the term actually came from depends upon who is asked. According to Susan Billy [Ukiah Pomo] some believe the word 'Pomo' is derived from Poma, the name of a particular village. (*California POMO*). Sarris writes that Yanta Boone, who was Mabel McKay's father, had come from the Potter Valley Pomo, who were called the Red Earth people. "Poomo, red earth. Linguists and anthropologists took the word and used it to group together all the peoples of the area who spoke related languages" (*Mabel McKay* 58). Whatever the origin of the name of the connected bands who make up the Pomo people, what has been determined is that there are more than 70 different tribes within what is known as Pomo country. According to information from *California POMO: Tribal Information*, almost 5,000 people identified themselves as Pomo in the census conducted in 1990. Not all bands of Pomo are federally-recognized. Many are still seeking re-federalization

Gonzalez, the grandmother, who grew up on a Pomo reservation and is witness to the rich culture and heritage of the Pomo, something that is missing in her daughter, Iris's life, but which is embraced again by her grandson Johnny Severe.

after the policy of termination that was conducted in the 1950s and 1960s.⁸

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Pomo lived in a large area of northern California that went from the coast to far inland. According to Elizabeth Colson, who recorded the biographies of three Pomo women in the early 1940s,⁹

The Pomo were organized in bands or villages which inhabited one continuous block of territory, with no foreign bands to disturb what little unity the Pomo as a group possessed. These bands belonged to one linguistic unit---but one large enough to include a number of mutually

⁸ According to information in *California POMOS: Tribal Information*, the following are currently recognized rancherias whose populations are entirely (or substantially) Pomo: Hopland, Guidiville, Pinoleville, Coyote Valley, Redwood Valley, Sherwood Valley, Manchester/Point Arena, Potter Valley, Little Lake Band of Round Valley, Cloverdale, Dry Creek, Stewarts Point, Lytton, Robinson, Upper Lake, Big Valley, Elem/Sulphur Bank, Scotts Valley, Middletown, and Glenn County Grindstone. "The land bases of these tiny, scattered sites vary from zero to 177 acres and populations from 15 to about 400." (*California POMO*). More than two-thirds of tribal members do not live on tribal land. One list of both unrecognized and federally recognized tribes of California Indians can be found on the Internet at this URL: <http://www.nativeweb.org/hosted/sos/cacombed.html>. Another list of California Indians is located at this URL: <http://ceres.ca.gov/ceres/calweb/native.html>

⁹ The women whom Colson interviewed were Pomo, but each were from different bands: Tanner Valley, Manzanita, and Lucerne. Sarris grew up with Kashaya Pomo, and Mabel McKay was Cache Creek Pomo (Colson 1).

unintelligible languages. Neighboring bands could not necessarily understand each other. (Colson 16)

During these times, the diverse bands of Pomo kept to themselves, paying formal visits to other bands, but with few if any informal gatherings of the different bands. Trespassing on other Pomo territory was not tolerated. Most Pomo married within their own bands. At the center of each Pomo band's territory was the large "earthhouse"¹⁰ which was partly underground and served as a ceremonial center for the band.

Before the tribes were scattered due to the arrival of the Mexicans from the south and the Russians from the north---before the advance of the white settlers into the area---the Pomo lived in their individual areas in long brush houses that were inhabited by extended matrilineal-based family groups. The houses were considered the property of one of the

¹⁰ Although Colson refers to these as "earthhouses," Sarris calls them "roundhouses" in *Watermelon Nights*. Both Mabel McKay and Essie Parrish also call them "roundhouses" in *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream*. Given the understanding that many anthropologists who collected autobiographical stories from different Indian nations frequently either mis-translated the information given to them, or were given mis-information (intentionally or unintentionally), one can come to one's own conclusion concerning what these ceremonial lodges were (and are) called.

older women, who acted as custodian for the extended family (Colson 17).

Colson reported that the chieftainships in the Pomo villages were mostly passed down through the maternal line, with women occasionally given the title when there was no suitable male heir, although male relatives performed the actual functions of the chief. Some Pomo groups also allowed women to lecture the people in the village in the same way that the male chiefs did.

Colson wrote at length in regards to "poisoning," which she termed a form of witchcraft (18). Mabel McKay also talked about different people being able to poison others and that this was something that she as a doctor would have been able to counter through songs and healing. Colson writes that

this belief in poisoning [in order to keep social control in the villages] led to circumspect behavior, for few cared to run the risk of arousing enmity which might lead to a "poisoning" or dared to express their own antagonisms as that was equally likely to result in a retaliatory "poisoning." (19)

The fear of poisoning perhaps also explains the fear and mistrust that Pomo had for strangers outside of their own groups. Mabel McKay told Sarris that one of the ways to determine if a stranger who approached the house was there to poison an occupant was to offer the person meat. A poisoner would have taken a vow not to touch meat, would refuse the gift, and thus reveal him or herself to be a poisoner.

In Allen James's autobiography, *Chief of the Pomos*, James says of poisons and poison men that the design and types of poisons are many among the different tribes of Indians. The Indians themselves know nothing about each others' poisons. The poison man himself doesn't want anyone to know that he has the power to poison people. Poisoning usually starts over a fight, quarrel, misconduct or a remark. Sometimes a great man is envied, sometimes a person possess more things than others. Sometimes a person has greater abilities than others. There are usually many people in a tribe that possess these abilities, so if one poison family suspected that his son had been poisoned by a certain person, he would retaliate by poisoning that certain person.

So this type of thing goes on and on
indefinitely. (135)

Healers, or doctors¹¹, in the tribe would be called upon to counteract the harm done by poisoners. Yet counteracting poison was only one of the many duties of the healers/doctors, who performed their healing ceremonies using ritual songs and dances. Bole Maru dreamers (discussed below), who were also doctors, were taught their songs through their Dreams.

¹¹ Among the Pomo, there were doctors and there were also *sucking doctors*, who were traditionally considered the most valuable and powerful healers. "The practice of sucking to extract disease is ancient among the various central California Indian tribes" (*Slug Woman* 65). Essie Parrish, who in addition to being the Bole Maru leader, "directed all Kashaya Pomo religious activity," and directed the dancing and singing for specific ceremonies, including healing ceremonies, was a sucking doctor. So was Mabel McKay. In *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream*, Sarris includes a lengthy description of a time when he himself watched Mabel as she performed her duties as a sucking doctor: "Then Mabel sat down in her chair opposite the patient. 'Near as I can say in English,' she said, 'this woman has a polliwog-trout salmon in her. She got it when she was a young girl, when she went into the river at the wrong time of the month. It's been living in her all this time. It's why she's never had any children. It's why her eye is big. It's why the white doctors can't help her.' Mabel was quiet a long time. Then she started singing again and Susie picked up the song. She leaned over the woman on the couch, started rubbing her forehead, then put her mouth over the woman's eye. She rose up, grabbed her basket from the floor, and spit into it. She sang a few more songs. Then we all got up and turned four times. . . . I went forward and looked. In the basket I saw a salamander-like creature. Maybe something more like a fish. It was about an inch and a half long, red with a black stripe down its back and two bulging black eyes. It was moving, its tail flicking back and forth. 'Now you've seen what people don't believe,'

The songs of the Dreamers/doctors were their sole property, and no one else was allowed to sing the songs unless the Dreamer gave the song to them. To steal a person's songs was unthinkable. An important aspect of this tradition was (is) the stipulation that songs and dances brought forth through a Dreamer's Dream must not be used after the Dreamer has died (*Slug Woman* 70). "Prayer songs given by the Dreamer to particular individuals for protection and health may continue to be used after the Dreamer's death only if she has given explicit permission" (70) although in some cases, certain songs could be passed down to the Dreamer's successor, if there is one.¹²

In the late eighteenth century, the Russians made their way down into northern California, into the area of the country where the Pomo lived. They were predominantly fur traders who had first invaded Alaska, disrupting the lives of the Alaskan Indians as well as other coastal tribes along the Pacific Northwest. In the early 1800s, Russians established a

Mabel said. And then she turned with the basket in her hand and went to the back of the house" (118).

¹² Songs are not reserved solely for the purposes of healing. One time, while driving in heavy fog with Mabel McKay, Sarris recounts the story of how she said she knew of a woman who had a fog song. Mabel sang the fog song, "a

permanent base at Fort Ross on Bodega Bay, an important seacoast site for the Pomo in the summer, where they hunted the sea otter to near-extinction for their fur trade (*California POMO*). The Pomo resisted the invasion of the Russians through small acts of sabotage and attacks on overseers, but the Russians, like other invaders, took what they wanted from the lands of northern California as well as from the sea off the coastline, and in the process, through murder, enforced labor, slavery, and the diseases they brought with them, managed to significantly reduce the Pomo population without thought to the consequences.¹³

The abandonment of their outpost by the Russians did not bring peace and stability to the Pomo. By the mid-1800s, the "Americans" arrived, lured by the discovery of gold. In addition to the earlier encroachment of the Russians, the Pomo had to deal

song that was soft and low sounding. The fog lifted, a tunnel led on clear" (*Mabel McKay* 51).

¹³ While Elizabeth Colson may indeed be (or have been) a gifted anthropologist, adept at recording customs and cultures of her subjects from an anthropological view point, she describes the years of abuse suffered at the hands of the Russians in only one short sentence: "The first prolonged contacts were with Russians who for a short period settled in that area" (21), which hardly begins to describe the near-extinction of the sea otter, enforced slavery suffered by the Indians in the area, or the disruption of Pomo culture and traditions, as well as the

with the intrusion of the Mexicans, although most of the destruction of the indigenous population of California by the Mexicans occurred further south than the Pomo territory. Mabel McKay referred to this time as "the raping time," because not only were many of the Pomo forced into labor by the invading outsiders, but they were also abducted and taken into slavery, or murdered, with many women and children suffering the indignities of rape. "They took the girls and raped them that way---tying them with ropes, like cattle. A lot it happened that way" (*Slug Woman* 55).

The search for gold and the "settlement" of the land in California by the new invaders further reduced the population of the Pomo as well as many other tribes. Constantly routed from their traditional villages, the Pomo suffered devastating losses to their people and their way of life. If enduring the atrocities committed against them by the Russians and the Mexicans was not enough, others drawn to California further terrorized the indigenous population with their greed for land and gold. Not only were the Indians of this area considered "fair

probable infusion of the first white blood into the bloodlines of the communities terrorized.

game" for slaughter by the incoming settlers, but according to reports in *California POMO*, the United States Army also massacred the Pomo people.¹⁴ Sarris recounts the details of this massacre as well,

¹⁴ Paula Giese, in *California POMO* writes of one of these massacres, unrecorded in history books, but buried in an "obscure California history journal of 1931." According to Giese's research, William Benson (1860-1930), an elder, band chief, and tribal historian told some California historians the story of a little-known U.S. Army massacre of Pomo people in 1850. Giese writes: "This [massacre] seems to have been the first massacre of nearly all of peaceful village's inhabitants conducted by the U.S. Army--a kind of warm-up for later, better-known infamies such as the dawn massacre of Black Kettle's Cheyenne band at Sand Creek in 1864, [and of the] Nez Perce and Walla Walla in the 1870s. It occurred on Clear Lake, the largest freshwater body in California. Two abusive Americans, Charles Stone and Andrew Kelsey, had captured and bought hundreds of Pomo, forcing them to work as slaves on a large ranch they had taken over in 1847 from Mexicans. [This is] Benson's description of what led to the massacre: One day in early 1850, Shuk and Xasis, who had been working the cattle herds, lost one of [the American's] horses. Afraid of their inevitable punishment (they would be whipped to death), they met in council with all the enslaved people to decide what to do. Shuk and Xasis wanted to kill Stone and Kelsey. They said they would be killed as soon as the white men found out their horse was gone. Five Pomo men were assigned to strike first. They killed both [Americans]. The people fled to the hills, expecting the American soldiers to come. They planned to meet these troops in peaceful council and explain the conditions of brutal slavery that had led to what they had done.

"In May of 1850, a detachment of Army regulars led by Captain Nathaniel Lyon entered the Clear Lake area to punish the Indians for the killings. Unable to find the band of slaves who had fled, they attacked a small Pomo village, Badannapotí, on an island on the north side of the lake---later called Bloody Island by the Pomo. Men, women, and children, unable to flee, were massacred by the U.S. Army there. On their way home, the troops continued their bloody actions, massacring every Indian group they encountered, mostly Pomo groups." Giese reports that she could find no account of the massacre in any "good" history

retrieved from Victoria Kaplan's book of stories collected from personal testimony, county and state records, and historical societies, *Sheemi Ke Janu (Talk From the Past)*¹⁵. Clifford E. Trafzer and Joel R. Hyer also have a very brief summary of this massacre in *Exterminate Them*, which does not mention the Indians involved individually, but rather simply as "several Pomo" (18).

The Russians, the gold-searching Americans, and to a lesser extent, the Mexicans all proved to be major disruptive forces in the lives and culture of the Pomo in northern California. After massacres, enslavement, and disbursement, many Pomo could not return to their traditional villages. The best lands

books she encountered while researching the information for this article.

¹⁵ *Sheemi Ke Janu* is subtitled "A History of the Russian River Pomo of Mendocino County" and is a textbook that was developed and designed primarily for high school students, growing out of "a need to depict contemporary Pomo life within the regular school curriculum and to correct the classroom images that only portray without explanation a traditional life-style of 200 years ago" (i). In regards to the word "Pomo," Kaplan says that it translates to one of the following: "at red earth hole," or "those who live at or reside in a group or place" (26). According to Kaplan, "the word Pomo comes from the combination of two different words in what is called the Northern Pomo language: *poomoo* and *po'ma*. The first is the name of a village that was at the south end of Potter Valley--*Poomoo*--which means 'at red earth hole.' 'Poo' refers to magnesite, the mineral from which 'Indian gold,' long polished salmon-colored beads, are made. 'Mo' means 'hole,' and the long vowel 'o' added to it means 'at.'" (29).

in northern California were being stolen by the invaders, land that was abundant in game and good planting ground, and as a result the Pomo were relegated to isolated spots, far away from their traditional hunting, fishing, and living areas. Many of their staple foods, such as acorns, had become more difficult to acquire, once they were no longer living in their ancestral villages.

Although the Pomo did not live in the gold mining country so eagerly sought after by the white speculators, they were still either forced from their lands or begrudgingly allowed to stay so long as they worked for the new white owners. The United States government, as it did with many Indian tribes, entered into treaties with the Pomo that were supposed to guarantee the Pomo reservation lands large enough to take care of all their needs, in return for the Pomo voluntarily giving up some of their traditional land. These treaties were never ratified by the United States Senate, and instead, Pomo land was seized and the people were left to do whatever they could to help themselves (Colson 22). Colson reports that

by 1860, it was decided to remove them completely from their land. Some were sent to a reservation

on the coast whose mismanagement seems to have been peculiarly flagrant even for that day. Others, at a slightly later date, were rounded up and sent some sixty miles north to the Round Valley Reservation. Here they were held with other California tribes, their ancient enemies, and subjected to the raids of white outlaws who also coveted the Round Valley area. Soon most of the Pomo escaped and started the trek back to their own valleys. (22)

Despite all they had endured, the Pomo held onto their culture. During this time, in 1871, "the revivalistic Bole Maru (Dream Dance) cult started and spread throughout Pomo and Miwok territory" (*Slug Woman* 10). Sarris explains:

Local cult leaders, known as Dreamers, organized their respective tribes around this one cult. Dreamers were guided by their dreams, and they inculcated an impassioned Indian nationalism in the homes and roundhouses. Here again the Kashaya [Pomo], who survived in relatively large numbers, were somewhat distinctive. They produced exceptionally strong cult leaders. (*Slug Woman* 10)

Essie Parrish, a close friend of Mabel McKay and also a doctor as Mabel was, was the last Kashaya Pomo Dreamer, from 1943 until her death in 1979.¹⁶ Mabel McKay was the last Bole Maru Dreamer.¹⁷ Essie was a very strong Dreamer and healer, who made prophecies to her followers and to Mabel. She predicted that another Dreamer would come along after her death, but that it would be a long time coming, and that in the interim the Roundhouse should remain closed and locked, without ceremonies and without dancing. Mabel herself locked the Roundhouse after Essie died, and had Essie's son-in-law dispose of the key. (*Mabel McKay* 124).

The Bole Maru, which was sometimes called Bole Hesi, religion came to the Pomo from the Paiutes from Nevada. It was from the Paiute Wovovka who visioned

¹⁶ Prior to Essie Parrish, Annie Jarvis was the Bole Maru Dreamer for the Kashaya Pomo. "She banned gambling and drinking; forbade inter-marriage with non-Indians, favoring unions with the Central Pomo of Point Arena if suitable matches could not be made within the group; barred sending the children away to boarding school; and discouraged any association with white people other than the minimum necessary in the course of work" (Oswalt 5). It would appear that Annie Jarvis could have been the inspiration for Big Sarah in *Watermelon Nights*.

¹⁷ Unlike Essie, who had a tribal congregation of her own Kashaya people, Mabel served as Dreamer and spiritual consultant for the Kashaya who remained faithful to Essie's teachings after her death. When Mabel was born in 1907 there were only six people left of her Long Valley Cache

the Ghost Dances less than twenty years later (*California POMO*). The Pomo and the Wintu embraced the Bole Maru, and incorporated it into their traditional practice. The leader of the Bole Maru, who was the first dream dancer and doctor, was Richard Taylor, a Cache Creek Pomo and brother to Sarah Taylor, the grandmother who raised Mabel McKay.

In *Mabel McKay*, Sarris gives a vivid description of the Bole Maru that he heard from Mabel, who participated as a young child (although as a child she was not supposed to be in the Roundhouse; Sarah smuggled her in under her skirts when Mabel cried about being left alone):

The men who danced wore elaborate and colorful Big Heads, great feathers on top, and streamers of yellowhammer feathers down their backs. The women sometimes wore headdresses, but not nearly as large and lively as the men's. Some wore shell pendants, abalone and clam, over their faces and on their dresses. In their hands they held long scarves, which they moved and waved as they danced in a wide circle around the men in the

Creek Pomo tribe. When she died in 1993, Mabel was the last Cache Creek Pomo. (*Slug Woman* 11)

center. Frank Wright and Charlie Wright were Sectu, Roundhouse bosses. Frank stood on top of the Roundhouse, just in front of the smoke hole, and called in the different groups. (24-25)

When the Bole Maru began with the Pomo in 1871, distrust of and antagonism towards the whites who had invaded Pomo land was understandably great.¹⁸ Part of the beliefs involved in the Bole Maru included the prophesy of the cataclysmic destruction of the earth and of all the invaders, which would preclude a return to the way of life known before the arrival of the Russians, Mexicans, and Americans. Although the prophecies did not come true, the different Pomo (and Miwok and Wintun) tribes held onto the spirit of revitalization that they realized from the Bole Maru and eventually produced their own prophets---or Dreamers---"who carried on and developed the Bole Maru

¹⁸ The animosity and mistrust between the two groups continued long past first contact and massacres. In 1940, Colson reports, the Pomo were segregated into a caste position. "Almost without exception, [Pomo] were hired only as field workers. Pomo were only seated in one section of the local theater. They were not served in any restaurant in the town except for one run by a Chinese proprietor. In the stores, they were waited upon only after the whites were served. Pomo were not admitted to the local hospital as patients. In the churches, they were not welcome. In the schools, the children refused to play together. In high school, Pomo children were usually left out of the social

religion in specific ways, with specific dances and rituals" (*Slug Woman* 66).

The Bole Maru provided a way of uniting the Pomo after and during the continued devastation caused by the invaders:

The Dreamers stressed the afterlife and preached the Protestant work ethic and Puritan principles of cleanliness and abstinence. They forbade gambling and drinking. They insisted that women keep their bodies covered at all times, particularly during ceremonial activities, in Victorian-style, high-necked long dresses that covered the legs and upper arms. The Dreamers were predominantly women, and while they were not called chiefs, they assumed the role of tribal leaders, organizing their respective tribe's social and political activities around the doctrine of their Dreams. (*Slug Woman* 66)

One of the aspects to the Bole Maru religion that Sarris references in both *Watermelon Nights* and in *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream* involves a character known as the Moki. In *Watermelon Nights*, the Moki

life of the high school students. The Pomo were quite aware of the segregation and resented it" (28-29).

comes to ensure that the Waterplace Pomo have been pure enough, that they have followed all the regulations that would ensure the fulfillment of the prophecy and turn luck around for the tribe. Elba Gonzales, who is telling this section of the story, said that "each of us was responsible; anyone who drank whiskey or gambled or fooled unnecessary with a white person could ruin things. We had to be prayerful, pure of heart and mind" (*Watermelon Nights* 152). The Moki would look into the hearts and minds of the people and know if they were pure enough. The specter of the Moki is terrifying to Elba, who is ten years old at the time.

What I seen was something darker than the dark, raven black, an enormous cloak of feathers shaped like a Christmas tree, pointed at the top and fuller below, not the size of a man, but bigger, at least eight feet tall. And then it moved. . . It floated, a tree of raven feathers, and stopped so close I could see the frayed ends of some of the feathers. I could smell it, musty and old, dank, like the inside of a deserted house in winter. And while I couldn't tell where its head and eyes sat, I felt it looked at me. I was

afraid, and yet I had no reason to fear, at least that's what I kept telling myself. I done nothing wrong: My dress was clean and reached below my ankles; the sleeves of my blouse, also clean, hung far past my wrists, in fact, almost over my hands, and the collar was buttoned tight at the neck the way Big Sarah showed us girls. (152-153)

In *Mabel McKay*, which is Mabel's life story as she told it to Sarris, the Moki is referred to as the clown¹⁹. "A man covered head to toe in a striped black-and-white eagle feather cape. Nothing showing but his eyes and nose, so that no one knew who he was. The crucial element of the Hesi²⁰ dance. The Moki checked to see that all the rules were followed. He squealed, made high-pitched noises that were unearthly.

¹⁹ A great number of Indian tribal religions have references to clowns involved before, after, and during certain ceremonies. In many instances, such as the Bole Maru, it is the clowns' job to ensure that the people are acting as they are required according to the ritual and ceremony. Indian clowns are not to be confused with Western clowns from circuses, whose sole job is to act outrageously and entertain the crowd.

²⁰ The Bole Maru is called the Bole Hesi among the southwestern Wintun immediately east of the Pomo (*Slug Woman* 65). Sarah Taylor, who raised Mabel, associated herself with the Rumsey Wintun, because her son danced with them, and because she had been living in their territory and she wanted to show her respect. Her association with the Wintun would explain Mabel's reference to *Hesi* instead of *Maru* since Mabel lived with Sarah for much of her early life.

Sometimes, he imitated people, their voices and gestures" (24).

Elba's Waterplace Pomo are ultimately deemed unworthy by the Moki, allegedly due to Chum's involvement with the son of the white man who owns the rancheria on which they are living, and as a result, the Moki never returns, and neither does prosperity return to the Waterplace Pomo.

One aspect integral to the culture of the Pomo is their basket-weaving, which has become famous throughout the world. Mabel McKay was the last traditional weaver, "a weaver whose work is associated with power and prophecy" (*Slug Woman* 51). The Pomo had always been basket-weavers, collecting the raw materials needed to weave their baskets from the areas around their traditional villages. Their baskets were not ordinary, but rather incorporated many intricate designs, often with feathers, and some being as tiny as eraser-heads. Many of the baskets they produced were intended for ceremonial use; often times, a person's baskets were buried with them when they died. Even the usurpers, the Russians, Mexicans, and Americans, recognized the brilliant craftsmanship that went into the design and creation of the Pomo baskets,

collecting many of them and removing the baskets to their permanent collections when they returned to Russia, Mexico, and other parts of the United States. "By the end of the nineteenth century, basket collecting had become a popular pastime and even an outright occupation for some, who traded, bought, and sold baskets far beyond the confines of Pomo territory" (*Slug Woman* 52). Many of Mabel McKay's baskets are exhibited at the Smithsonian Institute.

There were many rituals and rules to follow in both the gathering of the materials for the baskets and in the weaving itself. Some of these rules appear in the chapter entitled "The Water Place" in *Grand Avenue* when Nellie, an expert weaver and healing woman, takes on Alice Goode as an apprentice of sorts, because Alice is the first Pomo in a long time to show an interest in learning the art and keeping it alive. Nellie explains the collecting of the sedge roots and the cutting of the willows along the creek needs to be done first thing in the morning, that the women doing the collecting have fasted and that they must never be menstruating.

Elba, in *Watermelon Nights*, learned at an early age how to collect the raw materials and to weave

baskets, by watching Chum, Nellie's mother, weave cradle-baskets, which she learned must never be stored upside down, which would be bad luck for whatever baby was put into the cradle.

Baskets were used during different ceremonies and had different purposes. Baskets were used for storage and also for cooking. It was not until the Pomo realized that the white people looked upon their beautifully crafted baskets as both useful commodities and collector's items and were willing to pay (however little) for them, that the Pomo were able to increase what little income they were able to make working for the whites in other positions as farm laborers, cannery workers, and house servants.

Before her death, Mabel McKay was the best and most highly regarded present-day basket-weaver of the Pomo (*Slug Woman* 51). Mabel's baskets were always in great demand, and she had many people putting in orders for them. However, unlike other Pomo who would simply weave the baskets and relinquish them for payment, Mabel wove her baskets, and the designs in them, according to her Dream---that is, according to the instructions given to her by her Dream. As a

traditional weaver, her work was associated with power and prophecy:

"Everything is told to me in my Dream. What kind of design, what shape, what I am to do with it--- everything about the baskets---is told in my Dream." (51)

The baskets woven by the Pomo---especially the ones crafted by Mabel through her Dream---are, according to Sarris, living:

[Mabel's] baskets are living. They live with her. They live with their holders. Mabel's baskets and so many Pomo baskets I have known have stories, songs, and genealogies. They have helped us on our travels and told us who we are as a people. They have healed the sick and forecast momentous events. The weaver's hands move, and the basket takes form so that the story can be known. And the baskets keep talking. (61)

Traditional Pomo basket-weaving "needs dedication and interest and increasing skill and knowledge."

According to Elsie Allen, in her 1972 book *Pomo Basketmaking: A Supreme Art for the Weaver*, basket-weaving also needs "feeling and love and honor for the great weavers of the past who showed us the way" (15).

Much of what Sarris learned from Mabel McKay about Pomo culture and history has found its way into his writing, where, as a story-teller, he has held up his responsibilities, to himself, to his tribe, and to his audience, as I will show in the following discussion of his two works of fiction.

Watermelon Nights

Watermelon Nights is Sarris's first novel, published four years after *Grand Avenue*, a collection of loosely connected short stories.²¹ *Watermelon Nights* is the story of a family, although not a family in the Euro-American definition of the word. Told from three different perspectives, in three distinct voices, Sarris weaves an intergenerational portrait of life of the Waterplace Pomo, beginning the story with the youngest generation, 20-year-old Johnny, picking

²¹ *Grand Avenue* is subtitled "A Novel in Stories," but to call it a novel could be considered a stretch for some. Granted, most of the characters in *Grand Avenue* are related in one way or another, they all live in the same area of fictionalized Santa Rosa, but the continuity of stories that is found in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, for example, is missing in *Grand Avenue*. The stories themselves stand alone and do not necessarily need the others for the reader to comprehend them and get a sense of closure from each one. The other perceived difficulty in calling *Grand Avenue* a "novel" is that it asks the question that has never been completely answered, "What is the definition of 'novel'?" I prefer, despite the sub-title, to consider

up with his grandmother, Elba Gonzalez, and finally ending with Johnny's mother, Iris. What they have to say informs the reader of both the history of the Pomo in northern California, as well as the resilience of the tribe to the pressures of white society to assimilate and disappear, while detailing just how difficult it has been for the different members of the Pomo to secure a place in the world while understanding who they are and what their community means to each of them. These three descendents of the original Rosa, from whom all the Waterplace Pomo come, must understand who they are as Pomo people, which involves remembering the stories and the traditions, integrating those stories and traditions with themselves, and finding their place in the continuation of the tribe in a time and a place that continues to be hostile to them.

One of the pervading themes echoing throughout *Watermelon Nights* is that of sadness. All three narrators mention the sadness that is pervasive in the lives of the Pomo, which by extension is their lives as well. "Sadness, anger, hatred: That was the story,"

Grand Avenue a collection of inter-related stories. Others may perceive it differently.

Iris says (*WN* 380), and Elba echoes her: "Sadness. See, the same story. Sadness. It kills people" (381). Yet the overall feeling that the audience, the reader, is left with, which is intentional on Sarris's part, is not of despair or hatred or anger, but rather one of hope and understanding. That hope comes from the meaning behind the title itself.

Near the end of Johnny's story, before he is to leave South Park, the section of Santa Rosa where many of the Pomo have come to live, on what is probably the hottest night of the summer, he steals a watermelon from the back of a truck filled with watermelons and brings it to his grandmother. She asks him what does the watermelon mean, and he sits for hours trying to think of what to say to her.

By two in the morning, still without an answer for Elba, Johnny leaves the house to find relief from the heat. He walks the streets, amazed to find the entire neighborhood still up, still visiting each other, and all of them are eating watermelon. Two young boys had seen Johnny take the watermelon he brought to Elba, and they followed his lead, giving stolen watermelon to the neighborhood, uniting it in a way it hadn't appeared united before. Sharing the

sweet, cool watermelon brings a small happiness to the Pomo in South Park, makes them forget about the pain and anger that infuses their everyday lives. Such a simple act as giving out stolen watermelon, as being kind to each other, can make their lives seem so much sweeter. The realization that they can, indeed, share kindness with each other can help to hold them together as a community, as a people.

How is it possible to keep living, to keep families, tribes together and understanding of each other without hatred, jealousy, and anger to tear them apart? Sarris has said that "the answer is not politics, it's kindness. That is what has kept Indian people going amid the meanness in all of us" (Gritts 7). Elba even tells Iris that "kindness is the only thing that helps us" (WN 358). This is only one small night of watermelon for the Pomo of South Park. With *Watermelon Nights*---plural--- then, the reader could infer more than one small kindness, that many small kindnesses together can break through the anger, the displacement, and the fear that binds this community and the individuals who make it what it is.

Included in the answer, "kindness," in *Watermelon Nights* is also a clear picture of "the various forms

of hate. The things we do to each other. The way we internalize impressions and what we do to get over it" (Gritts) that Sarris brings forth especially in the character of Felix, Johnny's third cousin, and the Bill sisters, Lena and Mona. And *Watermelon Nights* is a multi-generational story about Indians, "an epic story about Indians in the twentieth century, and it is also a story about families. About mothers and sons, mothers and daughters and the things that keep a family together, a tribe together, a people together" (Gritts).

One of the aspects of *Watermelon Nights* that shows clearly Sarris's connection to the oral storytelling tradition is his choice of first-person narrators. It is as if Johnny, and Elba, and then Iris each are simply telling their own life story to a friend, a relative. "I'm just talking to make sense of it" Johnny says (*WN* 3), and he also finally understands, "What can anybody do but tell their story over and over again? Maybe use different words, describe it different. But it's all the same" (97). His mother, Iris, in trying to understand herself as a person and especially as an Indian person, as well as her role as Johnny's mother and as Elba's daughter,

realizes that she must re-tell her own life story, that she must "go back, take clues, gather designs from our past. It is the hard way. It is my story" (295-96).

Sarris has said, "what is a good story or a good book but a good piece of gossip? It tells you something about somebody" (Gritts). The three narrators of *Watermelon Nights* are trying to tell the audience, the reader, "something about somebody" so that we may understand.

Let me tell you a story:

When the families got together during the holiday times, there was not a minute's peace for anyone. With so many children, aunts, uncles, parents, and dogs all underfoot the most one could hope for was to make it through the day without a fight, without falling, without one of Nana's pies being stolen and furtively consumed by one of the rowdy boy-cousins in the small backyard under the Elm tree. The elm tree that used to shade not only Nana's backyard but the shoe factory behind the tall stone wall.

She knew all these relatives, the fighters and the drinkers and the keepers of secrets, the "rich"

line and the "poor" line and the ones who were part of the vast American middle-class: Great-Aunt Celia, her husband Uncle Jack (childless, and that was Jack's fault, she once heard a cousin whisper in secret); Aunt Marie and Uncle George with their brood—Marylynn, Debbie, Judy, Beth, and George Lynn; and the cousins from next door, Donna, Theresa, George, Philip, Dorothy, Priscilla, and their parents Uncle Henry and Aunt Lorraine.

But there were more, in addition to her parents and her sisters and brothers, more who did not show at these gatherings. Great-great-aunt Blanche and her husband; an uncle named Gus; great-grandmother Tremblay, sitting as always, in her darkened den with the television going, whispering in French and no one quite understood her.

And that was only a small portion of one side. She knew, she thought, where they came from.

"Grandfather Southam came from England, from a small town near Manchester called Southam" and she was impressed that there was a town named after her forefathers, not realizing that it was probably the other way around.

"That was Henry and his father Henry Baum Southam. Nana Southam was a Tremblay, Celia her sister. Their mother, Great-Grandmother Tremblay was originally a Tetrault. She had a husband named Gus and a sister named Blanche," which was a misnomer if there ever was one, as Blanche was one of the darkest people she had ever seen. She had heard that it was perhaps these Tetraults who came down from Canada to work in the shoe factories or in the mill towns along the north shore by Beverly, Salem, Peabody, Marblehead. But something, someone was still missing.

Somewhere along the Tetrault line, or perhaps the generation before, a mother's husband died and she remarried, sending her children to be raised by an aunt. The information she received was foggy around this point, she couldn't determine where in Canada they had come from, where---allegedly---in France the earlier ones were supposed to have emigrated to Canada, and records that could substantiate this background were forever lost she thought. First of all, Nana Southam burned just about every scrap of historical information when she cleaned out the attic back in the early 1950s. Other records---birth certificates, death certificates, marriage

certificates---well, they were good Catholics in those days and the records were handwritten and kept in the church. The St. Joseph's Church in Salem burned down, taking with it all the records.

"Who are the rest of the people?" she wanted to know. "Where did they come from? What did they want? Who were their families?"

The genealogy from her other side was even more confusing, littered with second- and third-cousins, from her grandfather's family where there were twelve children, and her long-dead grandmother's family of another twelve children. They, too, were alleged to come down to America from Canada, many of them from Nova Scotia. When Aunt Lil and her brother Father Harry died, that ended the tenuous connection to the Neary family. Her father's father, at 94, still lived, but refused to talk about the past. The line was coming to an end and she was unable to go back any further. And still there were too many unanswered questions, and the ones that were answered were never clear, never concise, never detailed enough to give her concrete information, she felt, to know to her satisfaction who she really was.

One of the themes prevalent in fiction written by Indians in contemporary times, according to Louis Owens, is the "recovering or rearticulation of an identity" which is a process that is dependent upon a "rediscovered sense of place as well as community" (5). While discussing some of the earlier works of Indian authors such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich, Owens remarks that

the consciousness shared in all of these works is that of the individual attempting to reimagine an identity, to articulate a self within a Native American context. And in every case the mixedblood turns at the point of division back toward an Indian identity and away from the collective dream of white America. (22)

This idea of identity and the articulation of self within an Indian context and the rediscovering a sense of place and community are two of the themes that Sarris successfully wrestles with in both *Grand Avenue* and *Watermelon Nights*.

The most basic question that can be asked in regards to identity is "who are you?" As stated before, for Indian writers the question is not so much an answer that is focussed on the self, but on one's

family and by extension, the individual's place in that family. Joseph Bruchac explains that

when you ask a Native American person about himself or herself, they will often begin by talking about their family. That is because our families make us who we are. (*Roots of Survival* 19)²²

The difference between the short family story that began this section and the stories that Sarris tells is one of identity. The unnamed narrator of that story can tell you *who* she is by way of a name and a town that she lives in, but she has no complete concept of herself as part of a family that makes her who she is. While there may be names missing here and there on a genealogy chart, the characters of *Watermelon Nights*, the Waterplace Pomo, know who they are in relation to their entire families, tracing their lineage back to

²² This concept was discussed briefly in Chapter 1 in comments from both Simon Ortiz ("I am Acoma first") and Carter Revard's discussion of Geronimo. Simon Ortiz has also written in *Men on the Moon* that his "identity as a Native American is based on the knowledge of myself as a person from Acoma Pueblo, a cultural and geographical place" (Ortiz *Men on the Moon* ix), which ties the individual person to not only his family and culture, but to the land where she is from, a point that will be discussed later in this chapter.

the one woman who is considered to be the founder of their tribe.²³

Sarris begins *Watermelon Nights* not simply as a story about one individual's attempt to define and embrace an identity, but with an attempt of the entire tribe to come to terms with identity, in this instance, through federal recognition of themselves as Waterplace Pomo. Johnny Severe, the 20-year-old narrator of the first of three sections of *Watermelon Nights*, realizes while the families are busy filling out their genealogical charts (one of the things they must do in order to convince the government that they are, indeed, a tribe and not merely a loosely connected group of Indians), the sometimes complicated inter-connectedness that brings the Waterplace Pomo together. Johnny comments, "A tribe, hell, it's a family. One big family" (7). And the connections of Johnny's tribe are indeed complicated, with almost everyone being related in one way or another, by blood or marriage or both.

²³ Of course the other inherent difference between the two is that the story presented is about a non-Indian person and Sarris is writing about Indians. The opposite can also be true in that there are some Euro-Americans who allegedly can trace their descendents back to the *Mayflower* arriving in Plymouth, Massachusetts, as well as some Indians not

In *Watermelon Nights*, and also in *Grand Avenue*, it is the families, all the relations—as complicated as they may be—that make up who the Waterplace Pomo are. Sarris does not make understanding the bloodlines easy for his reader. *Watermelon Nights* is told in three different sections, by three different members of the same family, but not in chronological order, as a Western-trained reader would expect. Johnny Severe speaks first; Elba Gonzalez, his grandmother, tells her story in the second section, and her daughter, Iris Gonzalez Pettyjohn---Johnny's mother---concludes the book. Through each of the narrators is the reader able to piece together the complicated (and often times confusing) genealogy of the tribe.²⁴

It is important to keep in mind that the tribe can trace themselves back to their common ancestor, a woman named Rosa, and this story is one that Elba (and others) repeat many times during the course of the novel, signifying the importance of family, so that

knowing any relatives beyond an immediate family. Both the latter cases, it seems, are rare.

²⁴ Sarris includes a genealogical chart in the connected series of stories in his first book, *Grand Avenue*, and many, if not all, of these characters appear in *Watermelon Nights*, or they are at least referred to. This chart, and necessary additions to it, was not included with *Watermelon Nights*. For purposes of clarity, I have included an attempt

others may remember the special connections that they share. At one point, Elba tells the story of Rosa to Iris's date, the white man who is the son of one of Elba's previous employers, Patrick Polk. Rosa, she tells him, was the lone survivor of a smallpox epidemic, the last of the Waterplace Pomo, living on acorns, berries, and fish when she was found by the Mexican general, who took her to become his servant/wife. Elba, who usually truncated the story when telling it to Iris, talked for two hours to Patrick Polk, telling the entire story of the tribe, of her roots, as if she wanted him to truly understand her, and by extension, understand Iris.

The second Rosa, Old Rosa's daughter, ran away from the abuse that she saw her mother suffer under the general, and on returning, she tried to get her other siblings to run away with her. She finally left, married an Indian from near Sebastopol Lagoon, and from her the Waterplace Pomo grew to the tribe it was in Santa Rosa, in South Park, and on Grand Avenue.

Old Rosa's story mixed with the other stories, sometimes killed them like the new animals and

at a complete genealogical chart at the end of this chapter.

grasses that spread over the land at the same time killing the old animals and grasses.

Sadness, anger, hatred: That was the story. It was there before, that kind of story, but this was new, a new version with details like smallpox and rifles and slavery, and would affect the people like nothing they could remember. (WN 379-380)

The people, who by Johnny's time have come to understand that they must seek federal recognition as Waterplace Pomo in order to get their reservation back, have lost their reservation at least twice, depending upon who is telling the story. The Bill sisters, Lena and Mona,²⁵ blame Nellie Copaz and Zelda Toms for the two losses--Nellie, because of her mother's affair with Westin, the son of the ranch owner, and Zelda, because she allegedly lost the deed to the reservation in a card game.

Although Mona and Lena, in a nasty confrontation during a tribal meeting to discuss progress in the

²⁵ Lena and Mona are the two daughters of Ofelia and Elmer Bill, who took Elba in after her young son, Charlie, burned to death in the fire intentionally set by Zelda Toms. Ofelia was the last surviving daughter of the twelve children of Clementine, who raised Elba after her mother froze to death when she had been drinking. Clementine was

recognition process, refuse to admit to being related to any of the Pomo from Santa Rosa, claiming that they "is the only ones got Waterplace Pomo full on both sides," (WN 60), the fact is, as Elba explains to Johnny, that "we're all mixed up with the other tribes too. But no matter, what we got in common is that one ancestor, the first Rosa" (30).

What Sarris is doing here, in addition to weaving an intricate web of relatedness, is showing that the connections go back much further, beyond one tribe, and even include other tribes, other races: Mexicans, Filipinos, Blacks, and whites. That is the irony in what the Bill sisters are claiming: despite their insistence that they are Waterplace Pomo on "both sides"--Ofelia and Elmer--as descendents of the first Rosa, they are also part Mexican as well, for without the Mexican blood, the tribe would have completely died with the death of Rosa.

Felix, whom they surmise to be a third cousin to Johnny, believes he knows why the Bill sisters act the way that they do:

Elba's cousin and a basket-weaver who died of tuberculosis when Elba was eleven.

"Because they ain't done nothing. Sit and rot and every time anybody else starts to move, they got to stop them, knock them back down. We're at the bottom of the barrel, man, and nobody wants nobody to get out. It'll make everybody confused because if we're all not at the bottom of the barrel then who are we? Them two, they ain't no different from other Indians, only thing is, they're out with it. Ain't you heard Indians talk about each other behind folks' backs?" (WN 68)

The Bills, and Felix as well, who are so caught up in the pervasive anger and sadness that has permeated them since the death of their parents, fail to recognize what Elba knows about kindness being what is needed for the community. Thus it is interesting to note that neither the Bills nor Felix appear with the others on the night of watermelon-sharing, although Johnny delivers one to the Bills house, his own act of kindness towards them.

Johnny has his own theory regarding the Bill sisters and their claims: "These days the more Indian you are the better, the more white the worse" (WN 5-6), especially "now with everybody wanting to be full blood and all" (11), but "the truth is, we're all

mixed up" (6) which is what he has also been told by Elba. Johnny himself is one-quarter Indian, but he realizes that blood quantum is not what matters, it is the community, the tribe, that does, although he does not definitively come to this conclusion until the end of his story. It is after the watermelon night that Johnny has finally come to that turning point towards his Indian heritage that Owens refers to.

Despite the Bill sisters' insistence that they are the only true Waterplace Pomo, the rest of the community definitely identifies themselves as such, without regard to the inter-marriages that have taken place. What Sarris is focusing on, beyond the tribe's identification as Pomo, is the three narrators' identification as Indians. He lets each of the three narrators "tell their story," as they each come to understand who they are and who they are meant to be as Pomo.

The stories they tell are characterized by sadness and meanness, which all three of them point out, Elba the most frequently. "It's a song, she says, that keeps getting told over and over, passed from one generation to the next" (WN 6). The sadness is there because of the situations that have happened in all of

their lives. Johnny sees it in people as well. He sees it in his friend, Tony Ramirez, who wants nothing more than for people not to hurt each other while he is being trapped and manipulated by both his mother and his pregnant girlfriend; he sees it in Alice Goode, who carries the burden of worry for her entire family, especially after her sister Justine is killed in an accidental shooting and her mother, Mollie, has a difficult time dealing with both Justine's death and the pressure of trying to provide for her three other children on her own without a husband to help.²⁶

And mostly, Johnny sees the sadness in Felix, especially after Felix tells him how he saw his father kill his mother. While Alice, Johnny, and Elba are able to deal with the sadness and continue to make the most of life, Felix is incapable of doing so. Felix is one of those people who never makes the decision "to turn back toward an Indian identity and away from white America" that Owens describes. Felix does not enjoy any moments of catharsis, nor is he enlightened

²⁶ Justine first appeared in the story "How I Got To Be Queen," in *Grand Avenue*, which dealt with Mollie's move to South Park and Justine's attempts to fit into society there. By *Watermelon Nights*, Justine has already died. Her death, however, is chronicled in the movie adaptation of *Grand Avenue*, which Sarris wrote for HBO. *Grand Avenue* the

by any sudden epiphanies. Rather, Felix has been swallowed by the sadness that Elba has referred to, and in his case, he is so embittered he is incapable of seeing any sort of kindness.

It appears that Felix is showing kindness towards the Bill sisters, when he appeals to their near-beatification of their dead parents. But Felix, who is also an orphan, uses this to form a superficial bond with Mona and Lena, to garner their sympathies and to prey on their weakness. Felix does this again when he instantly understands that Tony is being used and manipulated by his girlfriend Vivi and he admonished Johnny for not trying to help Tony. Despite the façade of empathy, Felix is too embittered to mean what he says; rather, his ultimate plan is to simply manipulate and use everyone he can for his own gain, his own need. Felix has honed manipulation to a very fine art, whereby the people he is manipulating are not even aware of it. He sees people's weaknesses and aims right for that. His Auntie Mollie's need for love. The Bill sisters' need to have their parents mourned and recognized. Women's hungers. White folks'

book and *Grand Avenue* the movie will be discussed further below.

need to feel better than anyone else. Felix plays them all. Johnny recognizes this:

Felix knowed it well, a poisonous basket weaved together with their fear and hatred. My Indian community. And Felix knowed it well, well enough to see the weave and know how to carry his life in it. Grab a hold of people's fear---Tony's eyes, Raymond Pen's insecure heart---and turn the screws. (WN 123)

Alice knows this too, as she finally tells Johnny after his beating. "I seen everything. I seen the whole story before it even happened. Felix works in places where people won't talk" (WN 129).

Felix does not share in the watermelon night; rather, he sees the world as coming to an end, that things are coming apart because "nothing's attached" (WN 41). The meanness and the anger which is etched so deeply into Felix is, as Elba has said, "a song that keeps getting told over and over, passed from one generation to the next" (6). The anger that fed Felix's father and caused him to kill Felix's mother has surely been passed to Felix, and Sarris finally brings this out near the end of Johnny's monologue, when Johnny receives the last bit of information

regarding Felix from Alice Goode and realizes just how dangerous Felix is: he brutally beat an ex-girlfriend and dumped her out of his car to die; he tried to strangle Mollie and threatened to kill her; and he is the instigator of the beating and humiliation that Johnny suffers in front of all his neighbors. Felix cannot understand the meaning of kindness because he is too wrapped up in taking care of Felix, despite his claims to Johnny early on that they are relatives and need to take care of each other. Felix is more white than Indian, according to Johnny's definition:

They was a ball of contradictions. Peace and love and they didn't know how close to the surface their own greed and hate lived. They couldn't see how nothing was connected to nothing else, much less the parts that make each of them a person.

(45)

One of the main things that Elba, Iris, and Johnny have had to cope with and either accept or reject is not who they are as individuals, but who they are as Pomo Indians. Each has had a widely different life; each has her or his own way of interpreting events that have happened; each comes to his or her own conclusion and decision, although for

Johnny, and especially Iris, it has been a difficult path. Elba has accepted life differently.

Elba is the only one of the three main characters who actually grew up on the reservation---Benedict's Rancheria. Surrounded by the other members of her Waterplace Pomo tribe, Elba from the beginning never questions who she is in terms of her Indian identity. Life treats her and her friends and relatives harshly, and although Elba, in her turn, bottoms out and could have succumbed to the ravages of alcoholism, she finds a strength to move on with her life, despite her poverty and her tragedies, and in her own way, she brings the tribe back together in South Park, to begin yet again the rebuilding process.

The things Elba talks about when she tells her story frequently make direct connections to stories Sarris heard from Mabel and his relatives: the displacement from the reservation; the activities in the Roundhouse; Bolo Maru dancing and the visits from the Moki; the discrimination against the Indians in town and how they were ignored in stores and were only allowed to eat in the Chinese restaurant, among others. In accepting the responsibilities of the story-teller, Sarris, in both *Watermelon Nights* as

well as *Grand Avenue*, is providing that true picture of Pomo history and how it has affected the tribe. Sarris, as he shows throughout both these books, fully accepts his responsibility as a story-teller, especially in regards to handing down the stories so they will not be forgotten, by telling the truth in a true representation of the people and their culture.

Elba does not have to "reimagine an identity"--- she knows who she is and is proud of her heritage. She has learned through the harshness of her early life about the kindness necessary in healing people, individually and communally. She learned this when she overheard Zelda admitting to intentionally causing Elba's son, Charlie's death. Elba was listening at the window when Zelda hysterically confessed to Big Sarah:

I pulled back from the window, caught my breath. I thought I'd lunge forward, that I had stepped back only to launch myself off my feet and through the glass to snap her neck with one swift blow. But nothing moved me. I kept looking at Zelda, fearful, crying. Something akin to what I felt in the orchard come over me, but it wasn't a weakening, a collapsing into myself. It was an emerging, as if from an old skin, and I felt wet,

alive. She looked old, pitiful. 'I forgive you,'

I said out loud and begun to walk. (WN 285)

What Elba attempts to do---and she accomplishes her objective---is to rediscover that sense of place, to restore the Pomo community. "Separation of a people from their land and age-old way of life and separation of families from tribes and of family members from one another splintered tradition" (*Slug Woman* 53). It is the splintering of tradition that has brought about much of the meanness and anger that consumes not only the Bill sisters, but Felix, and even Iris, as will be discussed further below.

It becomes obvious through Elba's actions that it is her intention to draw the tribe back together when she buys a home and moves to South Park. She does this through her own connection to the little plot of land on which her house sits. She makes it beautiful, in a wild and scattered sort of way, as Johnny points out, and through Elba, the others one by one find their way to South Park to live. They are drawn to Elba---Iris would say that she willed them there. This is specifically shown first while Iris is still in high school as one by one the relatives appear at the house and Iris meets them for the first time, and again when

Iris returns to her mother's home when she is pregnant with Johnny and needs her help. During this time, everyone comes to visit with Elba, not out of mere politeness, but because of the deeper connection that they have with her as a Pomo elder. The tribe has been scattered many times before, but now, through Elba, they are drawn together again. In one of the few instances where Iris actually understands what is happening, she notes:

She'd [Elba] taken to sitting in the garden again. . .I sat on the back steps, and asked her what she was thinking. She gazed down from the sky, and without looking at me, looking instead at the old wooden gate on the side of the house, said, 'My people.' She wasn't wistful or morose when she spoke; it was more as though she was acknowledging something, her memory, say. . .She wasn't just sitting in her garden merely remembering her people---she was calling them! And when the dead---and the living---appeared just outside the gate waving to her, she did more than acknowledge them and wave back. She told them of her plans. (357)

The Waterplace Pomo do not have a traditional land base anymore, not a communally owned reservation, but they are drawn together into a community once more and as such make up a large extended family/tribe, as Johnny points out. He understands the connection that keeps them all together, noting when he first meets Felix that Felix said "we," which Johnny knows "meant he was part of the tribe. Which meant he was Indian. Which meant he was a cousin" (WN 4). When the Waterplace Pomo were separated from their land, they became "lost in a wilderness of broken histories and ideas" and without that center, they "turn[ed] upon each other and the earth herself by substituting destructive manipulation for creative integration" (Salyer 133).

It never occurs to Elba to deny who she is as a Pomo Indian. She grew up speaking her tribe's language and learned English through what little schooling she and the other Indian children got when they were at Benedict's Rancheria. Through the teachings of Big Sarah in the roundhouse, which the tribe attended every night for three and four hours a night, Elba learned a healthy mistrust of white people, the *masan*, a mistrust that was reinforced time and again

throughout her life, first after Chum's death when the tribe was forced to leave Benedict's ranch, and she watched the white women in town who were so proud of themselves to be giving the "homeless Indians" food before they found another plot of land to live on, and especially after being raped by three white men shortly after the death of her baby, Charlie.

Elba's attempts to instill in Iris both pride in and understanding of their heritage as Pomo Indians are not very successful. Because the land is so intrinsic to the identity of the tribe, and they are dispersed, Iris grows up without feeling this communal bonding first-hand. This is why Elba settles in South Park, a place no one really wants, and draws the Pomo back together.

Iris's early years were characterized by an instability brought about by a number of moves, when jobs ended or friends of Elba's died. Despite the rootlessness that came with constant moving, Elba provided for Iris as best she could, and she made sure that Iris went to school, to learn how to make her life better than the one her mother had to live. Iris was unaware that she had numerous relatives in the area, as she was also unaware of her mother's life

before her birth. It is not clear that Elba told her much about her own mother's death (drunk and frozen in the cold), her life with her cousin Clementine, the fact that she was sold into marriage for \$20 when she was only eleven, or that she suffered two still births and three miscarriages by the time she was sixteen years old, and that once she returned to the reservation she made her living as a prostitute. Instead, what Iris saw was a large, brown Indian woman of the "old school" whose only pleasure in life, Iris thought, was making Iris miserable. She looks down on her mother, and on other Indians:

She's an Indian, old school. She keeps the white world of pious oaths and new and newer things at bay with a flick of her wrist and a girlish chuckle. At night she prays in the old language; the walls are like the ears of a million attentive children reverently holding the high s's and abrupt starts and stops of her language, words whose shape my throat and tongue never learned. Of course, the fact that my mother is Indian does not automatically explain her power. Most of the Indians I know, most of the Indians I have known, are bankrupt, and I mean in every

sense of the word. If they could as much as lift their heads to the sky, let alone see the stars, they'd have done more in that minute than they had done thus far in the entirety of their miserable lives. (WN 291-292)

Iris attributes miraculous power to her mother, considering her a woman who "works like water: Cup her into your hands and she looks pure and simple, and yet she erodes mountains, cuts wide and winding swaths through open fields. She wore me down and wore me down, sanded and filed away my resistance until I was a smooth obsidian chunk that she could carry in her hand" (WN 295). Iris feels alienated from both her mother and the white world to which she aspires and believes this is the way she is supposed to be. She is aware of this chasm from a very early age. In the present, when the three of them are telling their stories, Iris has finally realized how she has always been an outsider, and she knows that in order to understand, she must remember her life, re-tell it. "I must go back, take clues, gather designs from our past. It is the hard way. It is my story" (WN 295-296).

Without her tribal identity, Iris does not grasp what it is Elba has always been trying to teach her. She does not feel any connection to the Pomo because she does not know them. Iris did not grow up with the voice of Big Sarah admonishing her to beware of the whites ringing in her ears. And she ignores her own mother's warnings. When Elba tells her, "Don't try to be one of them. . . the white people have their ways" (WN 313), Iris contributes her mother's warning to what she erroneously believes to be Elba's ignorance and jealousy about what she does not have. What Iris wants is to be an accepted part of the white culture with which she is surrounded. Elba knows this will never happen, and tried to help Iris, but each time she asks Iris if she can hear Old Uncle singing, one of her ways of bringing Pomo culture to Iris, her daughter replies "no," with increasing irritation. In her ignorance and determination to be someone she is not, she rejects her mother without attempting to understand her.

Iris does not even truly understand she is Indian until she is called one at school when she is eleven years old. She knows her mother is Indian, but that is not something she associates with herself. Sarris

reiterates Iris's conflict numerous times throughout Iris's telling of her story, reiterating Iris's rejection of both the kindness and understanding of her mother as well as herself as an Indian.

Elba, although it appears to be contradictory, wants Iris both to succeed and to be mindful of who she is. What she wants is for Iris not to have the same harsh life that Elba has known. Iris interprets this as meaning that she needs to be successful in the white world. Rather, Elba wants Iris to be aware of the downfalls of the white world while embracing her Indian heritage. When Iris is studying determinedly for a spelling bee, Elba gives her both a dictionary (from the white world) and a piece of angelica root (from the Indian) to protect her, almost as if she is asking Iris to make a choice between the two worlds²⁷.

As I already mentioned, Iris's problems are compounded by her being raised away from her tribe. Iris does not understand the connection that Elba has known with her Indian people. What Iris sees regarding

²⁷ It could be construed that Elba is not asking Iris to make a choice between the two, but offering her *both* the white world and Indian world by giving Iris these two objects. However, given Elba's relationship with whites, and the comments she makes to Iris warning her to be careful of whites, I think what Elba wants is for Iris to take what she can from white society while remaining true to her Indian roots, but she wants this decision—this choice—to be Iris's.

Indians is poverty, lower-class status, constant work and drudgery, and her mother, a "brown, scary Indian lady." In opposition to that, Iris sees the white side of affluence, and without the grounding in tribal traditions and a community to help her to understand what being an Indian means, she is, indeed, as her son Johnny later points out: "one of the lost generation, that all [her] problems have to do with being lost between two cultures, white and red. 'You're on the fence, nowheres,' he told [her]" (422).

Long before Iris comes face to face with that accusation and the truth of it, she makes a conscious decision to reject her mother and her Indian ways. She wishes to pass as white, noting that

I was lighter than Mother. At night, while taking a bath, I'd hold her white, enamel-backed hand mirror over my stomach and on my thighs, where the sun hadn't touched my skin, and imagine my entire body the fair color reflected in the round of glass. I would be almost the color of my classmates at Henry C. Fremont. And my hair wasn't too thick or black, and didn't grow low on my forehead the way Mother's did. I didn't think I was ugly, not just to look at me. And my

clothes were acceptable, dresses clean and what everybody else was wearing. (WN 302)

She envies her cousin, Anna, because Anna was lighter. Iris tries so hard to be accepted by white society as a child that she humiliates herself in front of the entire community, which ultimately results in another expulsion: she and Elba leave town.

Iris is so intent on being someone other than who she is that she does not actually listen to what her mother is trying to teach her. Instead, she believes Elba is manipulative, plotting everything carefully with the intention of holding Iris back and saddling her with strange Indian beliefs. Iris, Elba tells her, has more imagination than she has intelligence. Iris considers Elba the source of all her difficulties, interpreting what Elba tells her to suit her view of her mother: as the instigator of her problems. Elba frequently told Iris that she would live life "the hard way."

Of course I didn't know what she meant, the full scope of her words. At the time, I took them as a reproach I could turn my back on; I had reason to. Later, I saw what she said as a curse, her curse; and later still a vision she had, as clear

as a reflection in glass, of my life up to and including this very moment. (WN 294)

She is torn between hating her mother and hating being Indian, and the guilt she sometimes has for feeling that way. At one point, Iris cleans the house:

So I got busy. With my hands in the soapy water, a million thoughts crossed my mind. Mostly about Mother. Yes, she lived in her own small world. And, yes, she did her best. She gave me a roof over my head, enabled me to live in a world of choices, options, an older, bigger world. For all the trouble it caused in the past, she at least exposed me to that bigger world, a world that was not her world, where there was little or no possibility for her. I hadn't attempted ever to meet her halfway. I'd been too busy trying to push her back, hide her, ignore her. I pretended she wasn't there. If, indeed, appreciation had washed over me, then what it left in its wake was guilt. Guilt and grief. (374)

This is the beginning of a turning point for Iris, but she leaves it in a small corner of her heart for years, until her son Johnny is beaten up and Iris experiences her moment of catharsis.

Despite her intense desire to assimilate, Iris also realizes she is always going to be the outsider, wanting something she can never have. Before she graduates from high school, she feels again that deep chasm between herself and everything around her, both white and Indian. She has struggled to define herself, but has no idea who she is:

And that's what I was feeling: the away, the distance between me and everything else. Who was I? I sensed a loss, a missed opportunity. I would never be a high school senior again; for the life of me, I could never tell you what it was like to be a senior, because, in a real sense, I was never there. I was left out, somewhere else. And just then, looking in the mirror, the thought occurred to me that I might be forever left out.

(WN 361)

Without realizing it then, Iris had indeed become one of the "lost generation" that her son Johnny talks about. Iris straddles both communities but can only observe each one without being an active participant in either. This is her ultimate identity-based tragedy.

She turns from the Indian community after Anna's rape and after witnessing Billyrene's gang rape, and while still an outsider, embraces the white world that has rejected her mother and other relatives. She inhabits the fringes of white society, working in a JC Penney store, and marrying her white boss. She is lonely, however, and feels as if there is something missing. Her emptiness does not manifest itself until the day that she has a fleeting encounter with a race horse jockey, John Severino, and learns later that she is pregnant.

When Iris is living with Elba, during her pregnancy, there is a time there when it almost seems as if she is going to "turn back toward an Indian identity and away from the collective dream of white America" (Owens 22). Just before giving birth to Johnny, Iris experiences a fear of the process and of the future, a fear not uncommon in pregnant women, and she confides this to Elba. Her mother responds:

[Elba] lit a piece of angelica root and then led me down the back steps slowly and carefully, for it was nighttime and I was so heavy. Arm in arm, we went in a loose circle through her flowers and shrubs four times, just as we had before, shortly

after I had moved back home with her. And again she sang her angel song, the song I was supposed to hear all my life. This was the second time I'd heard it. The first time I didn't think much about it. Now it sounded beautiful. (WN 417)

Yet even after Johnny is born, Iris's struggles begin anew, but this time over what she sees as Elba's control of her son. There is a special bond between Elba and Johnny, a bond missing between mother and daughter. Johnny "sees Old Uncle in things," (295), something that Iris was never able to do, despite all of Elba's promptings and help. Iris resents the strong connection between Elba and Johnny, and this causes the gulf between them to widen even further; at this point Iris chooses the white over the Indian. She returns to her job at JC Penney's, back to her large house in the nice "white" section of town, and minimizes contact between herself and the Indians of South Park. She doesn't understand Johnny's involvement, "helping the so-called tribe" (422) and despite her best efforts to interest Johnny in attending college, to "make something of himself," it all comes to naught.

Iris is completely alone. Johnny's beating provides the moment of understanding that Iris had needed all her life. With great strength she visits Johnny and tells him to go, "wherever you can be happy" (127) and that she is proud of him. Johnny decides against moving to San Francisco and shortly thereafter invites Iris to attend one of the weekly tribal meetings. Sure, she tells him, and thinks to herself, "what have I got to lose?" (424).

Iris makes a simple decision to attend a tribal meeting, something she would never have considered doing in the past. After a lifetime of rejecting her Indian community and her ties to them, she is finally able to realize, in a small moment of catharsis, that it is where she really belongs.

Her dream, her vision, at the end of her story (which is far from the conclusion of their never-ending stories) comes in her garden, where she imagines

Mother and Johnny in chairs on either side of me.
And Anna coming through the wooden-slat back
gate, swung wide open, and, behind her,
Billyrene, then Zelda, yes, in her raggedy dress.

Children. Mae-Mae and Roberta and Alice. Patrick.
Mary Beth. (425)

What she sees is not the heavens, the far stars,
but something she says she already sees---a wish.
Iris's wish is that they all are together, all sharing
those small kindnesses, the community that Elba has
worked hard to keep together. The sadness that has
pervaded all their lives is not and never will be
completely gone, but Iris is now finally turning away
from the rejection she once made of her Indian-ness.
There is hope, then, at the ending that is not really
an ending, that Iris is finally home.

It is Johnny who starts the story, and who
provides the bridge between Iris and her mother.
Johnny, like Elba, has always considered himself
Indian. This connection between him and Elba appears
when he is as young as five months old and he rolls
himself off the sofa to try to follow Elba out the
door rather than staying with his mother. Johnny has
had the ability to "see" things, and Elba nurtures
this ability of his.

When I was five [Johnny says], I seen a frog that
has a missing toe. When I looked close, I seen it
had one of its front legs stuck out, like it was

wanting me to see something, and where the middle toe should've been was nothing but a little nub. Than I seen it again the next summer, and again the next summer, and the summer after that. "Four times now," grandma said. "Means you got that spirit---you're gonna see things". . .Grandma said one say I could heal people. But I'm no doctor. I never gone that far. (WN 21-22)

Iris is annoyed by Johnny's willingness to embrace Elba and all that she stands for, to be who he is supposed to be, in much the same way that she was annoyed by Elba's constant question when Iris was younger: "Can you hear the song?" Iris could not hear it because she turned her heart away from it, from all things Indian. But Johnny is more open, more trusting, more connected to his grandmother and the Pomo and his concept of being Indian and part of the community. He consciously makes this decision early in his life, most especially when he runs away from Iris for the last time when he is fourteen and goes to live with Elba permanently. Asked to choose between the white world and the Indian community, Johnny follows his instincts.

Johnny understands his grandmother and her beliefs in a way that Iris has never been able to. He appreciates Elba's gifts, which includes the gift she gives to Johnny of his heritage---the one that was rejected by Johnny's mother. Johnny says of Elba that "she sees more than even I can tell you of my own story; her sense of things is clear" (WN 3), even though she is not always forthcoming in a clear way with information that Johnny wants. She frustrates him in much the same way that she frustrated Iris, except that Johnny understands there is a lesson to the way she gives information piecemeal. It would be easy to have all the answers handed to him; Elba's way is to make Johnny see things for himself.

Johnny's dilemma comes about with his involvement with his cousin, Felix. Felix's anger and sadness work together under the guise of friendship, to shake Johnny's complacency and causes him to question his place in the community, which almost results in his abandonment of the Pomo for the white world in San Francisco, alone and without his traditions. Felix's betrayal disturbs Johnny in a way that involves more than just his questioning of his place in the tribe; it forces Johnny to question himself as a person, and

who he is in relation to his own sexuality. His brief homosexual encounter with Felix and the feelings that it awakens in Johnny and the end result of his beating and humiliation in front of the Pomo cause him to question the role he is meant to play in his life, both as an individual and a tribal member. That members of his own tribe, the one he has worked hard for in the federal recognition process, people who have known him all his life, that they could turn on him so quickly and without warning astonishes, angers, and saddens Johnny. This is Johnny's ultimate turning point: to stay with the Indians or to run away, as his mother had done before him, to try to become part of the white world.

Iris, of course, is another outside force that is working to tear Johnny in two. Johnny sums up his relationship with his mother succinctly: "Can't live together, which is the story of me and my mother. She sees black, I see white, ever since I can remember" (WN 15). One of the things that Johnny can "see," however, is what lies at the core of the person who Iris has become, that being "her own loneliness" (WN 17).

Iris is asking Johnny to make a choice: between her and the white world she has chosen, or Elba and the Pomo and his Indian culture and heritage. Yet Johnny sees three choices in front of him and is not sure which to pick. Sarris shows this in the scene where Johnny is sitting in his room, staring at three items there. One is a college catalogue that his mother has left for him to look through, another is the genealogical chart form that he must fill out before the tribal meeting on federal recognition, and the third is a necklace, allegedly representing "wisdom," that Felix has given to him:

I looked back and forth from Mom's note to the chart, and to the necklace coiled on the corner of my desk where I'd left it. Loneliness was everywhere. Things swirled, and mixed in my brain, grew heavy and pulled me down. Back and forth my eyes gone, note to chart to necklace and back again, before they stuck finally on the necklace. A solid strand. A noose, pulling me deeper and deeper into a dark well. (38)

In much the same way that Iris was given the choice by Elba---between the white world in the form of the dictionary, and the Indian world in the form of

the angelica root---Johnny is trying to make choices as well. For the time being, Johnny chooses Felix. Once Felix betrays him and his humiliation is complete, Johnny turns back to the choices again: white versus Indian. Because he saw the Pomo turn on him, because they stood and watched Felix beat him, Johnny lets his anger and sadness get the better of him, and he reasons that to abandon the tribe is the right thing to do for his own self-preservation.

But Johnny knows, through learning from Elba and being a part of the tribal community, that the answer is not the individuality that matters. Being individual only leads to more sadness and alienation. The end result of Johnny's ordeal helps him to realize that "the individual alone has no meaning" and that his identity can be found only "in his society, past, and place; unlike whites, he feels no meaningful being, alone. Individuality is not even the scene of success or failure; it is nothing" (Bevis 23).²⁸

²⁸ In his discussion on individuality and the different concepts of such between Euro-Americans and Indians, William Bevis, in his essay. "Native American Novels: Homing In," writes: "I suggested earlier that, to white Americans, the individual is often the ultimate reality, that therefore individual consciousness is the medium, repository, and arbiter of knowledge, and that our 'freedom' can be hard to distinguish from isolation. In contrast, I suggested that Native Americans valued a

Johnny knows, of course, that a person must be an individual, but at the same time must be able to maintain community. "You become self-responsible," Paula Gunn Allen has said, "you are responsible for what you do, and you are part of the community. Your responsibility extends to the whole group" (Perry 15).

Johnny inadvertently recognizes his responsibility to the whole group when he becomes aware that his action was the impetus behind what caused the "watermelon night" to occur. "It was a kindness, what those kids done," Johnny's Auntie Mollie tells him, and it is at this point that Johnny realizes the answer to Elba's question: what does the watermelon mean? He sees first hand that kindness is what it takes to bring the community together, and as Elba before him had a moment of catharsis during which she forgave Zelda her horrific sin, Johnny too has his moment and forgives the South Park community. Through his own act of kindness (his forgiveness and his role in instigating the watermelon distribution) he

'transpersonal self,' and that this 'transpersonal self' composed of society, past, and place conferred identity and defined 'being'" (Bevis 22), which corroborates the suggestion that both Owens and Leslie Marmon Silko as well as Joseph Bruchac (among others) have made that significantly ties Indian identity to both the tribal community and the land base of each tribe.

understands that the confusion he felt about the choices that he had to make was not necessary, that the answer was there all along, in the Pomo community, in being together. And it is at this point, when he realizes that he can be who he is as well as being a contributing member of his tribe, that he turns to bring his mother into the circle as well. It is his wish, it has always been Elba's wish, and it becomes Iris's wish, too.

Grand Avenue

Being able to hear the voice of a people often makes those people come alive for an audience. Third-person narrators are capable of presenting a story from an all-encompassing point of view, which in effect forces the reader/audience to come to its own conclusions regarding what is being presented. A first-person narrator can be looked at in two ways.

Readers who are trained in the Euro-American tradition of reading literature are aware of the possibilities of a first-person narrative containing unreliable aspects, because after all, objectivity is unreliable in and of itself. Readers have come to believe that there is no such thing as total

objectivity, and as skeptics, tend to look askance at first-person narratives, waiting, in a sense, for the lies to be exposed and the "real truth" to seep through the cracks. First-person narrators have been known, in literature, to either purposefully or unintentionally misguide their audience---Agatha Christie is one example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is another, of authors who have utilized this form.

On the other hand, while keeping in mind that the first-person narrator can only describe events as she or he sees them, the audience is still capable of accepting that what is being told to them is indeed, as Momaday has said, "the truth," that the story being told by the first-person narrator is not "subject to the imposition of such questions as true or false, fact or fiction. Stories are realities lived and believed" (*The Names* 2).

If the story-teller is living up to his responsibility of presenting truth to the audience, in developing a picture of the culture as she/he sees it, then the audience can assume that they are not facing an unreliable narrator. The disadvantage of a first-person narrator is that the audience is being given information---stories---specifically from only one

point of view, but, in some cases, *truth* from that point of view nonetheless. If stories from Indian writers are considered to be an evolution of stories from the oral tradition of their cultures, one way to emphasize that oral tradition would be to use a first-person narrator, which is how stories were told in the first place.

According to Momaday, "stories are true to our common experience; they are statements which concern the human condition" (*The Names* 2). The stories that Sarris presents in *Grand Avenue* (as well as in *Watermelon Nights*) are painting a picture of the human condition, as Sarris has seen it, delivered from a first-person point of view, which takes the audience directly to the heart of the situation in a closer connection than can be rendered from a third-person point of view. In other words, in Sarris's stories here, it is as if the narrators are speaking to the audience as *individuals*, in person-to-person narratives, "this is how it is," actually *telling* the story rather than simply presenting the facts in a distancing, third-person narrative in much the same way as the oral storytellers would have done. It is the voice Sarris uses that reinforces the *truth* of the

stories, and Sarris adopts a variety of voices to bring to life the people and conditions surrounding a small area of Santa Rosa known as Grand Avenue.

Three of the narrators in *Grand Avenue* are also players in *Watermelon Nights*²⁹. First there is Anna, daughter of Ida, who has married a Portuguese man and has had six children. She tells how cancer has stricken her eldest child, Jeanne, and how the community has reacted to her illness.³⁰ Nellie tells two stories here. She is the daughter of Chum (Juana Isidra) who hanged herself after her affair with Westin Benedict. Nellie is a basket-weaver and doctor to the Pomo. Then there is also Alice Goode, Mollie's daughter, who, in *Watermelon Nights*, finally fills in the missing pieces of Felix's story for Johnny so that

²⁹ Perhaps the only inconsistency from *Grand Avenue* to *Watermelon Nights* is the background information on Steven Pen, the narrator of "Secret Letters." Although he does not know it, Steven's father is also the father of Pauline, one of Zelda Toms' children. Steven and Pauline are the parents of Johnny's close friend Tony Ramirez. In *Grand Avenue*, Steven is a postal worker, married to Reyna, an Apache, with two children, Raymond and Shawn. In *Watermelon Nights*, Steven appears as a teacher, and the mother of his son Raymond is not Reyna, but a woman who has long since disappeared. Otherwise, all the characters from *Grand Avenue* made the transition to *Watermelon Nights* without changes. The movie version of *Grand Avenue* takes more liberties with the characters and situations, which I briefly discuss in a later footnote.

³⁰ In *Watermelon Nights* Johnny mentions briefly that Nellie Copaz healed Jeanne, and that Jeanne recovered from the

he understands the pervasive nature of Felix's anger and sadness. Alice, in *Grand Avenue*, realizes her own inner strength in "How I Got to Be Queen," and embraces her heritage as a Waterplace Pomo in "The Water Place," when she goes to Nellie Copaz---breaking the unspoken agreement that has most of the community shunning Nellie---and asks to be taught how to make baskets. Alice, like Nellie, is a special person with special abilities, and Alice leaves Nellie with the hope that not only will the basket-making tradition continue, but that Alice may one day become a healer as well. Alice is the future of the Waterplace Pomo, as she embodies both respect for the past, concern for the future, and a respect for herself as an Indian.

"As a way to strengthen the people--to connect them with their pasts and thus their identities---storytelling is invaluable" (Sol 31). Stories, as detailed in Chapter 2, can do a number of things, none of which is mutually exclusive (although stories by definition do not need to encompass all five possibilities): instruct; be reminders of the past; serve as connections to families and ancestors and

cancer that, in *Grand Avenue*, brings her to the edge of death.

lives; help readers to define who they are and delineate societal roles; and entertain.

The stories that make up *Grand Avenue* are, first and foremost, stories that instruct. Not only can the reader/audience learn from the stories, but the audience also becomes aware that the characters themselves are ultimately educated by something that happens to them or to their immediate family during the course of the book. Each story, with the exception of "Sam Toms's Last Song," is told by a first-person narrator. Yet each narrator--as well as Sam Toms--learns something during the course of the narration, whether it be about him- or herself, the community, or about basic human nature. The close tribal connections that each inhabitant of Grand Avenue shares is brought to light in each of the stories, sometimes through a struggle to break free of the bonds keeping some of them in near-poverty, other times through a closer understanding of themselves as close-knit family members, and sometimes through small, personal victories. In most of the stories, the people ultimately remind themselves that they belong together, that they must help each other in order to survive.

Both "The Magic Pony" and "The Indian Maid" deal with characters who, for one reason or another, want to escape from the lives they are living on Grand Avenue, partly due to the poverty and partly due to intense family difficulties.

"The Magic Pony" is narrated by Jasmine, daughter of Frances and granddaughter of Zelda Toms. Through Jasmine's eyes the reader views a vivid picture of her cousin Ruby and her auntie Faye after Jasmine has decided to move in with them as an escape of her own, away from the crowded conditions and noise that permeate her own small home. Jasmine sees first-hand the meanness that both Felix and Elba talk about in *Watermelon Nights*, in this instance in the way that Faye's sisters (and even grandmother Zelda) vie for the attention of Faye's new boyfriend, with the clearest of intentions: to take him away from Faye, which one of them eventually accomplishes, much to Jasmine's disgust. What was once peaceful and quiet at Ruby's house has turned into a large party with all the sisters there, which disrupts even more the stable-appearing residence that Jasmine so eagerly sought. Both Faye and Ruby seem to live in a world distant to the harsh realities of life on Grand

Avenue. Faye believes she has been cursed so that she destroys any man she loves. She has an elaborate ritual that she has devised, based on crosses she has painted on the living room wall, and she instructs the girls through this ritual on a daily basis.

Ruby, too, escapes into her own reality, but she is somewhat aware of the difficulties that she will inevitably encounter as Faye's daughter. Ruby wants nothing more than to rescue the crippled pony who resides at the slaughterhouse near Grand Avenue, somehow relating her own experiences and her own life to that of the pony. She feels that she is like the pony: not good enough, somehow defective, a person who is easily disposed of and forgotten.

Yet Ruby cannot convince anyone in the area with a farm to save the pony from the slaughterhouse, so in an act of desperation, she sets fire to the barn where all the horses are kept, setting them free. She is, of course, immediately taken into the custody of the juvenile authorities, but jubilantly tells Jasmine, "He's free. He flew away," (26) which is exactly what she wishes that she could do. Later, in "Slaughterhouse," Ruby appears again, still searching for a way to escape what she sees as a dead-end life

on Grand Avenue. However, feeling now that there are no other choices offered to her, she makes the same choice made by her grandmother Zelda (and her great-aunt Ida and Elba Gonzalez): to become a whore.

Like Ruby, in "The Indian Maid" Zelda's youngest daughter, Stella, also aspires to a life that is different from the one she has known. Stella has more options open to her than Ruby, as she has taken advantage of the education that has been offered to her, despite the constant criticism and scorn bestowed upon her by her sisters, who call her "little Miss A-student" (173). Stella's escape will be to take a job in Arizona, away from Grand Avenue and her family. Yet here, too, is an instructional story: in the process of preparing to leave, Stella learns more about her sisters, her mother, and herself. This is an education in itself, one that began long ago, when Zelda trained to become a maid, determined to be the best one that she could be, which was one of Zelda's attempts to escape. In Zelda's story, however, she realizes how her selfish employer is taking advantage of her, so she takes an opal ring and quietly leaves, returning to her family. Zelda has recounted this story many times to her daughters, and the story always ends with

a dream that Zelda had the night that she left her job. She does not tell her children her dream; rather, she leaves it up to them to tell her what they think she dreamed that night.

After a near-catastrophe at the cannery where the sisters work, when Stella saved their lives by noticing the bursting steam pipe moments before it would have fallen on them, Stella, in the close company of her now-grateful sisters, understands finally what it was that her mother must have dreamed of: Zelda, back at the reservation, being together with her family, sharing a meal. "They were all happy, I might have told my mother that night. They didn't fight. It was simple, a lesson an eight-year-old could discern. Appreciate one another. Get along. Share" (183). This is the same secret that Johnny Severe finally came to understand when Elba asked him what the watermelon that he brought to her meant, and the subsequent sharing of the watermelons by the entire neighborhood of Grand Avenue. The lesson Stella is learning, which by extension is the instructional part of the story, is one that Sarris continues in *Watermelon Nights*: put away the meanness, bond together as a community or as a family, lay aside the

self-hatred that can slowly erode a group's common traditions and history and future.

Zelda gives the opal ring, which she has kept throughout the years, to Stella on the day that the sisters tell Stella the truth about Zelda, something that Stella, as the youngest child, was not privy to growing up. None of them know who their father is, Zelda had so many men during her lifetime. The sisters coldly inform Stella that Zelda was a whore. Billyrene tells her:

Yes, Stella, you're a bastard like every one of us. You, me, Pauline, Rita, Faye, Frances. Yeah, our last name is Toms. It was mother's name all her life. Who do you think your father is? (177)

On the way back from the accident at the cannery, when Stella has her epiphany regarding Zelda's dream, she almost throws the ring out the window, in an attempt to discard and forget about the past, and to focus instead on the future. However, she stops herself, deciding instead to keep it as a "reminder." Without verbalizing her reasoning, Stella is holding on to the history, which is as much a part of her as her family is, as much as her other tribal community members are also part of her.

There is no neat and tidy resolution in "The Indian Maid," just as there is no such resolution in many of the stories in *Grand Avenue*, but the implication is that Stella is not going to run away from her family. Paula Gunn Allen has said that "the oral tradition stories are never resolved. The storyteller resolves them in English but in the oral tradition they aren't resolved" (Perry 10). Sarris, as a writer of stories, holds onto that oral tradition of storytelling in his writing. The reader has the option of leaving the story as it is, or of imagining the unspoken resolution/ending.

Alice Goode, Mollie's second daughter, surfaces as the "queen" in "How I Got to Be Queen," where she stands between her sister Justine and danger, saving Justine's life. Alice has become the mother of the family, first because of Mollie's drinking and then when Mollie was working or socializing at her sister's house when the Goodes returned to Grand Avenue. Alice's story is of a young girl forced to become adult before her time. She has had to take over for Mollie and become the one who takes care of the house and the younger brothers, as well as the cooking and shopping, without having much of a life of her own.

Quiet and reserved, Alice has accepted the situation she has been forced into without rebelling, unlike her older sister Justine, who has no respect for her mother and rebels by drinking, partying, and picking up as many young men as she can handle. She wants to show that she is tough and as a result gets herself into trouble that Alice resolves.

Alice receives advice from Justine about how to stand up and protect not only herself, but her family. Justine tells her, "You have to see who you are, Alice. Look around and see what you see. See what you can do. How you can be queen. The queen is the baddest. She knows it all. That's how she's queen" (130). Alice rejects the idea of being the "baddest," but does finally look around to see what she can do. When she brings about the abrupt end of the potentially violent confrontation between the neighborhood black girls and Justine by firing the gun that Mollie saved from her last marriage, she earns Justine's respect and also learns something about herself in the process. Being the "baddest" does not interest Alice, but being more than just the housekeeper for the Goode family does. Rather than aspiring to be the "baddest," Alice decides that the

other attribute of the queen, "knowing it all," is the one that interests her the most. Knowing it all, which of course she can never do, takes Alice away from the drudgery of her every day life, and connects her back to the essence of who she is: a Waterplace Pomo. Resolving the confrontation has caused Alice to open her eyes, and she says the same thing in this story that she will later say to Johnny in *Watermelon Nights*: "I seen more. I seen everything" (139). It is Alice's desire to "know it all" that will ultimately take her to Nellie Copaz in the story "The Water Place," because Alice realizes that in order for the future to be better, the past needs to be a part of it, which is something that both her mother Mollie and Justine have neglected to remember.

It is also in this story that while Alice is relating family history, the reader is given information that will come to bear later in *Watermelon Nights* and this is in relation to Felix, although Felix himself is not mentioned. Alice says, "Mom's sister Daily, she's in jail. Rose, [Mollie's other sister and Felix's mother] her husband killed her with a hatchet" (132). Thus, "How I Got to Be Queen" is not only an instructional story, but it is also one that

recollects the past and serves as a connection to Pomo ancestors and their lives. Alice also learns here how to define who she is in relation to her relatives and she begins to understand what her role is going to be as part of the Pomo community. Alice has won a small, personal victory in the process of understanding herself as well.

Nellie Copaz's personal victory comes to light in the one story in the collection that is not told in the first person: "Sam Toms's Last Song." Now one hundred years old, Sam Toms has been shuffled among his great-grandchildren not so much because they love their great-grandfather, but for the material things and the social security check that he would bring along with him. He managed, through his manipulations, to get himself into trouble with the law for selling cocaine, and has been living with the latest in a long line of relatives, pondering what he will do with the rest of his life, a life that has not necessarily been exemplary.

Although married to Maria and father to Dewey, Ida, Sipie, and Zelda, Sam Toms was also Elba Gonzalez's father, through his relationship with Maria's sister, Carmelita Gonzalez. Sam Toms is Nellie

Copaz's uncle through marriage, since Sam's wife Maria was Nellie's mother, Juana Isidra's (Chum) sister.³¹ But Sam, unlike Nellie and unlike other Pomo elders, has done nothing to contribute to the continuance of the Pomo (other than to produce various offspring) and Pomo culture. He, like Nellie and other Pomo healers, is the keeper of songs, songs that in his case he uses only for his own benefit, and not for healing and good.

At one hundred, Sam feels that he needs to remember his songs, as part of his effort to continue his own life. He can remember some of his songs, but others have escaped him. He decides, then, to take all his meager belongings and move in with Nellie Copaz and steal her songs. Taking someone's songs for selfish or evil purposes is contrary to the nature of traditional Pomo songs themselves, which was discussed earlier in this chapter.³² In *Watermelon Nights*, Elba repeatedly tells Johnny that meanness is a song that

³¹ Refer to the genealogical chart at the end of this chapter where the interconnections between the descendants of Juana Maria and Tintac are clearer when they can be seen in chart form.

³² The songs of the Dreamers/doctors were their sole property, and no one else was allowed to sing the songs unless the Dreamer gave the song to them. To steal a person's songs was unthinkable.

keeps getting told over and over, passed from one generation to the next" (6). While Elba may not have meant this literally, Sam Toms appears to. His meanness is apparent in his songs, and the idea that he would intentionally try to steal Nellie's healing songs shows how low and evil he has been and still is.

Nellie, however, knows Sam Toms well (as she talks about when she tells her own story in "Waiting for the Green Frog,") and when Nellie and Sam sit down across the table from one another, this sets up a "good versus evil" dichotomy, one that she ultimately wins. Instead of Sam Toms stealing Nellie's songs for his own selfish purposes, Nellie tricks Sam into singing his songs, which she captures in one of her baskets, leaving Sam without any songs at all. Throughout his life, Sam Toms has not worked his songs in the manner in which they were meant to be worked according to Pomo tradition. The evil that he has wished on others has come back around now to him. Nellie, who has been both traditional basketweaver and Pomo doctor, triumphs in a small personal victory over Sam Toms. Yet this victory, in one light, is more than a personal victory. Nellie, as she discusses in both "Waiting for the Green Frog" and "The Water Place," is

"not too old for miracles," (229) the miracle being the safe continuance of Pomo tradition and culture through both interpersonal kindnesses and the hope of the future--the children. Nellie's victory over Sam Toms and all the destructive forces that he represents is not just one for herself: it is one for all the Waterplace Pomo.

Unlike Nellie Copaz, a good percentage of the other Pomo who live on Grand Avenue do not have a secure sense of who they are, and during the course of the stories, they come to a slow understanding of both themselves and their family and tribal community. In "Slaughterhouse," the story mentioned earlier in regards to Ruby's attempt at change in her life, Frankie Silva, one of Anna's sons, has a coming-of-age epiphany. Looked at one way, "Slaughterhouse" is a story about the end of innocence, because in accepting a dare from his other friends, Frankie is witness to a sobering scene.

When they were growing up, Frankie and Ruby had been friends, sharing untold childhood hours deep in a fantasy world created by Ruby's rich imagination. After awhile, however, Frankie grew away from Ruby and their imaginary games, which alienated Ruby from yet

another person, lending credence to her belief that she was not good enough, that she was different. When Frankie tries to connect again with Ruby, it is she who rebuffs him and his attempts at a renewal of their friendship. By this time, she has already made her decision to escape, which is the scene that Frankie oversees in the slaughterhouse: he watches as Ruby is inspected by and ultimately accepted by the local pimp and madam, Smoke and Sally. Frankie understands suddenly that he and his friends are not the center of the universe, that life and the world and all its complications are more overpowering and encompassing than the games and dares that he and his friends involve themselves in. "Things was bigger than me," he realizes (72).

When he returns outside, Frankie's friends see him in a new light, and because he has accomplished the dare that none of them feel they could have accomplished, they now have more respect for him. However, unseen by them, the experience inside the slaughterhouse has changed him. When they ask him what he has seen, he tells them, "Nothing. Just some people dancing around" (72). He does not mention Ruby at all. Once, both he and his friends would have shared every

detail of what they had seen, but now Frankie looks at their lives from a different vantage point, one that realizes innocence can be taken away at a moment's notice and what was once perceived as good can instantaneously be reversed. Frankie's new-found knowledge is not heartening to him. By the end of the story, he looks up into the night, "and there was nothing in the sky" (72). It is as if his whole perception of the universe has been changed by this one horrible scene in the slaughterhouse, a place that not only brings death to unusable horses, but to childhood and childhood fantasies as well.

Albert Silva, Anna's husband and Frankie's father, who narrates "Joy Ride" never shared the childhood illusions that Frankie was able to enjoy for a short time. By the time Albert is starting to tell his story, any innocent life-illusions that he may have held have long since been ripped from him, leaving him uncertain, disillusioned, and unsure of who he is and what his life is supposed to be about. Driving in circles around Grand Avenue with a young girl he believes is a ghost from his past, Albert tries to reconcile who he has become with who he is slowly understanding that he should be.

Albert's story is one of community, of connections, of how everyone is related to everyone else, and how the past never leaves, as it is part of the present, and will continue onto the future. "Everybody's connected to everybody" (115) Albert says, echoing what Johnny Sever says in *Watermelon Nights*. Through the story Albert tells of his past, the connections become obvious. Albert's older brother sees to his sexual initiation one summer when they were working on the Benedict ranch.³³ It becomes obvious by the end of his story that the Indian girl who initiated Albert and subsequently serviced both of his brothers, was a very young Mollie. Both the reader and Albert are able to make sense of the complicated inter-connections through a comment Albert makes while driving around and listening to the young girl in his car:

I stopped [listening] after she talked about her mother, after she called her mother a low-down whore, after she said her mother had screwed every man in the county, that she'd been doing it

³³ The Benedict ranch is the one that the Waterplace Pomo had been ejected from after Chum's alleged affair with Westin Benedict and her subsequent suicide by hanging in the barn. why they must stay clear of the barn: "You see, a Indian lady hanged herself inthat barn" (97).

since she was a young girl living with an aunt near the river in Healdsburg. (116)

The young woman in the car, then, is not really a ghost, although she is the impetus behind Albert's thinking about the past. She is Justine, Molly's oldest daughter. As she talks, and as Albert listens, he realizes that "her words are the stories that are my life" (94). While he circles the neighborhood and listens to Justine, he remembers his own life and the harshness of his interrupted childhood with his mother's abandonment and his father's subsequent suicide after the death of his oldest brother.

Justine's talk remind Albert of how the connections bind all of them, Indian and non-Indian alike, no matter how much his father sought to keep them all separated through his unrelenting racism. His father will not even drive down Grand Avenue, which is the shortest way for them to return home; rather he circumnavigates the city, going home by a route that will not take him past the Indians and the Blacks whom he allegedly hates. Rather than seeing the differences and the separation, Albert thinks of other things:

Like how a Portuguese could be a black person:
you know, mixing with the Moore and all. Or how a

black person could be a Portuguese, mixing with a Portuguese. It could happen either way, or both.

(111)

It isn't until Albert encounters a slightly older Mollie that he becomes aware of how prophetic his thoughts had been. Mollie, pregnant at the time, tells Albert "you and your brothers, you're the only niggers I know" (110). She refers to his mother, who her aunt and the other Indians called Nigger Marie. Albert argues that he is Portuguese, but Molly tells him, "Part, like I got Irish in me. But your father too! You're all part nigger" (111).

Albert's entanglement with Indians continues throughout his life, even though his father has done his best to prejudice all his children against not only Indians but Blacks as well, trying to believe, as the Bill sisters do in *Watermelon Nights*, that there has been no miscegenation, denying the other parts of his heritage, confusing and alienating his children in the process.

But Albert falls in love with and marries Anna, a young Indian woman. Until he met Anna's mother, Ida, he did not realize that Anna was Indian. What Iris, in *Watermelon Nights* believed, that Anna could "pass," or

at least be thought Mexican instead of Pomo Indian, appears to be true. Although Albert allows that Anna is "a good woman, honest, devoted, hardworking," a mother who "loves my family" who is "everything I thought she was the moment I met her," (112) his childhood lessons do not allow him to be accepting and appreciative as he should be towards her. Until the night he drives around aimlessly with Justine, he has not concretely realized his own place in this community, nor has he acknowledged to himself their inter-connections. When they drive past Albert's house, Justine tells him not to stop because there is nothing but a "bunch of Indians" in there. Albert realizes then how they all form a family, a community:

A bunch of Indians in there. In my house, yes. Not just my wife and children and my wife's mother. It doesn't stop there. It goes on. Now my mother-in-law's brother, the Indian preacher man, and half his congregation pack in our house every night with their Bibles and prayers for our wins. And when Jeanne, our oldest, got cancer, it wasn't just the old preacher and his troupe of hand tremblers but all the Indians in the neighborhood. They came out of the woodwork. Long

lost relatives. Everybody's connected to everybody. Seemed I'd leave the house to take a breath of air and then come back, only to find the space I left filled by another Indian. (115)

Albert does not know what to do with Justine, now that he understands who she is. He cannot just drop her off. He pictures her as "a small hard rock in my hand," tossing her with all the strength he can muster, but he does not do this either. He cannot escape Justine any more than he can escape the other Indians in his community: he is a part of them as much as they are a part of him. Sarris ends "Joy Ride" with the picture of Albert and Justine still riding in the car, still circling in the neighborhood, Albert trying to decide what to do, with Justine, with himself, with his life.

Albert Silva may not know just yet how to be completely comfortable with himself and his family/community, and he may not even be aware of what direction he needs to take to find answers to his yet-unasked questions. As directionless as Albert seems, Steven Pen is the opposite.

Steven's childhood was not as outwardly disruptive as Albert Silva's had been, but a hidden

family secret provided the same shock of understanding that Frankie received the night at the slaughterhouse. Steven and Pauline, Zelda's daughter, were lovers as teenagers, and when Pauline became pregnant, Steven wanted to "do the right thing" and marry her. The hidden family secret he learned then from his father was the Pauline was his half-sister, from his father's relationship with Zelda Toms. Steven walked away from Pauline, as his father advised, and moved from the neighborhood, went to college, married Reyna and subsequently had two children of his own: Raymond and Shawn. A few years later, he ran into Pauline and recognized himself in Pauline's young son, Tony Ramirez. As a result of the accidental meeting, Steven, without giving the real reason, disrupts his family to move to Grand Avenue so that his postal route will include Tony's house, and he can be closer to his son. As Tony grows older, Steven volunteers to coach football, a game he knows Tony plays. Steven begins writing anonymous, encouraging letters to Tony when he suspects that Tony has started using drugs. The letters frighten Pauline, and they set up an elaborate trap to catch the "pervert" who they believe is stalking Tony.

Steven's secret—that Tony is his son—is exposed, but it has an effect that is the opposite of the one Steven assumed: rather than turning on their father and refusing to acknowledge their half-brother, Steven's children ask him simply, "When's Tony coming to dinner?" (208)

What Steven and the other adults involved have learned here is a lesson in acceptance and understanding, and they learn it from the children. A revelation that Steven thinks is going to tear his family apart actually brings it closer together, not through any machinations on the adults' part, but by a simple question from the children, one that shows their unambiguous acceptance of Tony without question and without recrimination. It is like the lesson that Stella learned in "The Indian Maid": "Appreciate one another. Get along. Share" (183). The only secret that remains hidden is the fact that Steven and Pauline are half-brother and -sister, but even that "will have to come out in time," (208) Steven says.

What always comes out in time are the stories. Johnny, in *Watermelon Nights* asks "what can anybody do but tell their story over and over again?" (97) and he realizes the importance of each person's story when he

talks about saying something to Elba about the watermelon, wondering if she would like his story: "It was just one story, but it was my story, how things meant for me" (142).

In terms of cultural connections, "Waiting for the Green Frog" and "The Water Place" and the two most finely detailed stories in the *Grand Avenue* collection, foreshadowing the kind of story-telling that Elba will present in *Watermelon Nights*. In these, the reader/audience can see most distinctly examples of stories that serve as both reminders of the past and as connections to families, ancestors, and their lives. If, as I believe, stories do help the reader/audience as well as the writer to define themselves and their role in society, these two stories, more than the others in the collection, fulfill that function as well.

"Waiting for the Green Frog" and "The Water Place" are Nellie Copaz's stories, the former dealing mostly with past history, the latter with the future, both in relation to the Waterplace Pomo, their culture, their customs, and their interpersonal relationships and problems.

In "Waiting for the Green Frog," Nellie details exactly how she became a healer, and how at first she did not want that kind of life. Nellie, whether she wants it or not, is destined to not only be a healer among the Waterplace Pomo, but one whose life work is to counteract the poison of hate that has insidiously destroyed many of the Pomo's lives. According to Nellie's story, it was the arrival of the green frog (followed by more frogs) that announced the beginning of the changes that would significantly alter her life and transform her into the healer that she was meant to be. The green frogs serve as predictors of change, foretellers of a new healer and the continuance of Pomo culture.

Once Nellie noticed the frog, the healing songs started to come to her. "One day a song hit me," she says,

just as if someone hit me with a stick on the side of my neck. And the pain spread until it was singing in my throat. That was my first song. Then another and another; on it went like that for many years. I never knew when I would get hit. My aunt said I was becoming with power. But like I said, I didn't want this life. (75)

In addition to her telling the story of her becoming a healer, Nellie also tells the story of her life, one that has been partially related by Elba in *Watermelon Nights*, and one that Nellie will continue in "The Water Place." In this story, Nellie ties the threads of connection even more tighter to those woven throughout other stories in *Grand Avenue* and *Watermelon Nights*. Nellie talks about her husband, Alfred Copaz, and his long-standing affair with the local madam, Mary Hatcher, who was mentioned in *Watermelon Nights* when Ida, Zelda, and Elba talked about the most important madam in the area. Mary Hatcher also happens to be Nellie's half-sister, although Nellie does not talk of this. Mary Hatcher was the daughter that Chum gave up when she was eight years old.³⁴ Nellie says of Mary that "she comes from two different tribes somewhere up north. But the story goes that her mother died and she was raised by her

³⁴ This is information learned in *Watermelon Nights*. It appears to be a small inconsistency between Sarris's two books, but an interesting one nonetheless. Perhaps it was intentional on Sarris's part to have Nellie not understand the connection between herself and Mary Hatcher. Given the fact that gossip spreads like wildfire, it appears odd that Nellie would not know this information. Yet, some secrets always remain. Nellie later tells Alice Goode that she needs to talk, to share what she knows: "Old-time people, they told stories, Alice. They talked. Talk, Alice, don't be like the rest" (220).

father's people, who hated and distrusted her mother's people. She was passed back and forth" (85).

Despite the fact that Mary Hatcher is reputed to be a poisoner, someone who has learned her arts from Sam Toms, and despite the fact that she has had two children with Nellie's husband, Nellie refuses to hate her. "I should hate morning, noon, and night and then some," she says, "but I cannot carry on my life that way. Poison is the handmaid of hate. It works where we are weak. It plays on the sourness in our hearts" (85). She equates poison with hate and with the meanness that Elba and Johnny have so frequently referred to in *Watermelon Nights*. She rejects this poison, and knows that if she were weak, she would be just as susceptible to it, and to hate, as Mary Hatcher has been. Nellie knows about poison; all the Pomo know about poison and its effects:

Indian people know about poison. It has been with us from the beginning. Poisoners know how to use disease and pain. And they know where. In the old days a poison man or woman lived separate from the camp, where the camp and everything else could be seen. Poisoners watched enemies. Nowadays you can't tell so easy. They way we

live, a poison person could be next door, in your own house. We are so full of hate and ignorance these days we can't see two feet in front of us.

(85)

Nellie has seen first-hand what this poison of hate has done not only to her but to the other people in her community. Nellie, in her role as healer, has been shunned by most of the other Grand Avenue residents, and by the time she is retelling her story in "Waiting for the Green Frog," is old and has not been called upon to doctor people in quite some time. Yet rather than being poisoned by it herself, she realizes, like Elba, that hate can do nothing but destroy, as she has seen happen to her grandchildren and others on Grand Avenue. Nellie consciously chooses not to hate: "I cannot carry on my life that way," (85) she says. And despite the effects of this poison of hate that she sees all around her, despite the fact that she knows it is pervasive and has continued to intrude in the Pomos' lives, Nellie refuses to let it surround her and take away her own hope for the future. In respect to this she says:

The thing is, poison hasn't gone anywhere. It's everywhere so people can't see, and what they

can't see they don't believe. Maybe in time it will take new songs, new words to stop the poison. I don't know. (89)

By the end of the story, Nellie is asked to heal a young boy from Santa Rosa who could not be helped by the medical doctors. Nellie recognizes the poisoning work of Mary Hatcher during her healing ceremony, and she is able to remove the effects of Hatcher's poisoning from the boy. She hears Hatcher's song, a powerful song that almost entraps Nellie herself, and destroys it.

Unlike Frankie Silva, who, at the end of "Slaughterhouse" looks up and sees nothing in the sky, at the end of "Waiting for the Green Frog," Nellie sits at her kitchen table and looks out the open window. She says, "I took a deep breath, then another and another, marveling at the endless stars" (91). Nellie is the one who is "waiting for the green frog." When the frog appeared the first time, Nellie started to learn her songs, started to begin her new life as Pomo healer. Nellie, like Iris at the end of *Watermelon Nights*, sees hope and promise in the future, rather than empty nothingness, and she is waiting and hoping for the promise that all she has

learned will not be forgotten. Nellie's hope for the future arrives in the person of Alice Goode, in "The Water Place."

As in "Waiting for the Green Frog," in "The Water Place" Nellie continues to tell her story, the story that Elba will relate part of in *Watermelon Nights*.³⁵ Nellie connects the Waterplace Pomo who used to live on Benedict's Rancheria to the much-larger group of Pomo who have settled on and around Grand Avenue. The connections Nellie started describing in "Waiting for the Green Frog" continue and are made more clear in this, the last story in the *Grand Avenue* collection. She has just met Alice Goode, and Nellie is startled to realize the people Alice is related to:

Sipie's granddaughter. When I moved from the country to this place on Grand Avenue, I found myself surrounded by my Aunt Maria's other

³⁵ As with the changing of Steven Pen's occupation from *Grand Avenue* to *Watermelon Nights*, the story that Nellie tells here is somewhat contradictory from the one Elba tells about the same situation in *Watermelon Nights*. In one, Elba relates that Chum (Juana Isidra) hanged herself and the next day, Benedict ordered them off the place. In Nellie's story, Nellie says that Benedict ordered them off because "an Indian named Juana was misbehaving and fooling around with Mr. Benedict's sons" (GA 214). Everyone but Nellie and Chum left, and later that night, Chum hanged herself in the barn. According to *Watermelon Nights*, Nellie went away to live with her father's people in Sebastopol Lagoon. In *Grand Avenue*, Nellie says that she married

children and their families: Dewey, the one they call Old Uncle, who lives with his sister Ida and her daughter, Anna; Zelda and her daughters. All of us had lived together out on the Benedict ranch above Santa Rosa Creek. Me and my mother; Aunt Maria and her four kids, Dewey, Ida, Sipie, Zelda. Even the old geezer Sam Toms, who was married to Aunt Maria at the time and is the father of her four kids. That was our rancheria, our place after the Spanish moved us off the creek. (212)

Alice, when she comes quietly to see Nellie, makes it very clear that she, like Nellie, is very much aware of who she is and the connections that entangle the Pomo on Grand Avenue. Asked who she is, Alice clearly explains who she is, not as simply Alice Goode, but by who she is related to. Alice identifies herself by her community and her relatives, not as an individual, something that Nellie recognizes as reminiscent of the old Pomo rather than the scattered, hate-filled group that many of the Pomo have become. Alice tells her:

Charles Benedict, the nephew of the man Chum was in love with.

"My mother is Mollie. Mollie Goode. Her mother was Sipie Toms" (211).

Alice has come because she wants to learn how to make baskets, in the traditional Pomo way, an art that none of the others on Grand Avenue have shown any interest in learning. Alice is amazing to Nellie, with her quiet ways and her interest in Pomo culture. She realizes that it is in Alice that she will be able to instill a renewed pride in being Pomo, teaching her the art of basket-weaving, possibly passing down her songs so that the healing she has been able to do may be continued. She sees the difference in Alice and is almost astonished at

how a young kid can be the way Alice is, untainted, clear. My grandchildren her age are angry, full of self-loathing. They don't like who they are. Their hearts are clogged. Their eyes don't see. Most kids are that way, and at such a young age. But not Alice. (223)

Although Alice wants to learn how to make baskets, and shows an adeptness that astonishes Nellie, the one thing that Alice is reticent to do is to talk, to share her stories with Nellie. Nellie understands the

importance of stories, as opposed to simply spreading gossip, and she tries to make Alice understand this:

Alice, I say, talk. It's important to talk. Us Indians here are all family. That's the trouble no one talks. Stories, the true stories, that's what we need to hear. We got to get it out. The true stories can help us. Old-time people, they told stories, Alice. They talked. Talk, Alice, don't be like the rest. (220)

Although Alice is a quick study in basket-making, it isn't until one of her last conversations with Johnny in *Watermelon Nights* that she finally learns that she needs to tell the stories. It is her reticence to share what she knows of Felix and his past that inadvertently helps allow the chain of events that will culminate in Johnny's beating to occur.

One of the few things that Alice does manage to tell Nellie is that the problem with her mother, Mollie, is that she never had a home. Pressured by Nellie to talk, she finally does:

My mother is Mollie. Mollie Goode. Her mother was Sipie Toms. My older sister is Justine. Her father is a Filipino and mine is a Mexican. My brother Sheldon's is white. And my other brother,

Jeffrey, his father is an Indian from Stewart Point. Justine and Mom fight. Justine likes black boys. Mom hates black people. She hates Mexicans. She hates whites. She hates Indians. She doesn't like it here. She doesn't like it anywhere. It's no place to live, she always says, but she doesn't know what a place to live is. That's what happened to her. She never had a home. (219-220)

Alice is able to make the connection between the Pomo's lack of land base---their home---and the sadness, meanness, and self-destruction that has permeated many of them. In one short oration, she is able to pin-point where Mollie's troubles--and a lot of the Pomo's troubles--have their root: the loss of their ancestral lands.

The beauty of Alice, Nellie realizes, is that despite all that has happened to her, despite the rootless and wandering childhood that she has had, despite whatever ugly gossip stories she may have heard, nothing has "clouded her vision. She is as clear as water, as open as the bright blue sky" (222). Alice embodies the hope of the future, due both to her understanding of her family's history and her acceptance of it as a part of her, as well as her

desire to learn the old ways, in part through the art of basket-weaving.

Nellie begins to believe that Alice can be more than a basket-weaver, that she could be the person whom Nellie hands her songs down to, and more--that Alice will be taught her own songs in much the same way that Nellie was taught hers. Alice's first basket that she works on while she and Nellie talk about family, is one in which she is weaving a sunflower design in. While she weaves, she tells Nellie that she just wants her mother to be happy. Shortly thereafter, very late at night, Nellie attempts to find out who has been stealing her flowers, and she finds Mollie being courted by Mr. Peoples, a black man who lives in the neighborhood. She remembers Alice's words, how Mollie hates everyone, but Nellie sees happiness on Mollie's face the evening Nellie spies Mollie with Mr. Peoples and she suddenly makes the connection and her suspicions about Alice appear true:

Something clicks in my brain. I think of Peoples and Mollie and the flowers and the way this girl wove with little on her mind but her family, a simple wish that her mother find happiness. And it happened. It came around in a full circle, a

picture I could understand, flowers and two people holding hands. This basket has power.

(229)

If that is not enough to convince Nellie, by the end of her story, she sees the little green frog again, the frog that she has been waiting for from her previous story, the frog that knows if a person is going to be a healer. Nellie hears singing, and she sees Alice, "singing as sure as tomorrow" (229). Nellie, she says, is "not too old for miracles" (229), and neither are the Pomo, since in this story, at least, with Alice, there is the promise that their heritage, culture, and traditions will be continued.

For the Waterplace Pomo whom Sarris has written about both in *Grand Avenue* and in *Watermelon Nights*, as well as for Sarris himself, heritage is an integral part of their identity and the basis of who they are. Simon Ortiz, in speaking of just this, has written:

I wanted to write about what that meant. My desire was to write about the integrity and dignity of an Indian identity, and at the same time I wanted to look at what this was within the

context of an America that had too often denied its Indian heritage. ("The Language We Know" 193)

Sarris, in prose form rather than in poetry, as Ortiz uses to articulate what he has described above, blends this integrity and dignity of Indian identity within the confines of a small part of America that has done its best to intimidate, humiliate, and repudiate this group of Waterplace Pomo. The picture that appears from *Grand Avenue* is one of a people bound together by their common history, who show their connections, how they are "all mixed up" together, from different tribes and different races. In a sense, *Grand Avenue* is the "sequel" to *Watermelon Nights* even though Sarris wrote *Grand Avenue* first. Where *Watermelon Nights* ends with the promise of Iris claiming her identity and becoming a true part of the Pomo as her son Johnny has already done, Sarris ends *Grand Avenue* with Nellie's story of Alice and the hope for the continuing of the Pomo traditions.

Sarris has said that "what has kept me going and keeps me going is this whole thing of the power of my own stories, where I come from. This is what you have got. Nobody can take that from you unless you give that away" (Gritts). Sarris takes his stories, what he

knows, what he has learned and what he has lived, and in shouldering his responsibilities as a story-teller, he gives those stories back to both the Indian and non-Indian community. By doing so, by telling his stories, in the "enemy's language," Sarris is ensuring their continuity. Indians have not been disappeared, but are enduring and thriving and still more than willing to fight the wars.

The "wars" being waged in Grand Avenue---against poverty, alcoholism, loneliness---are the "wars that continue today" that Sarris has commented on in *The Last Woman from Cache Creek*:

Their wars are the wars of the dispossessed, split from their ancient lands and tradition and relegated to the margins of society where their struggles against invisibility are undermined by poverty, disease, and inadequate education. (45)

The Waterplace Pomo who live on Grand Avenue are the people who have been relegated to the margins of society. The wars continue. Small kindnesses, small hopes keep them going. Their collected stories in

Grand Avenue may be fictions, but they are true nonetheless.³⁶

³⁶ In 1996, Home Box Office (HBO) presented the film version of *Grand Avenue* for which Sarris wrote the teleplay. With a cast comprised almost entirely of Indian actors (including Sheila Tousey and Tantoo Cardinal) this version of *Grand Avenue* presented a number of interesting changes from Sarris's book. Centered around the story "How I Got to be Queen," where Alice stands her ground and saves her sister Justine from being hurt or even killed by the gang of black women she has insulted, the teleplay fills in a number of blanks from the end of *Grand Avenue* the book and *Watermelon Nights*. In the movie version, the audience is shown the drive-by shooting in which Justine is killed, and also sees the healing ceremony that Nellie (with Alice's help) performs that causes Jeanne's cancer to go into remission. Both of these instances are mentioned in passing by Johnny in *Watermelon Nights* as already having happened, and do not occur at all in *Grand Avenue* the book. However, Sarris takes some liberties with his own novels in the teleplay *Grand Avenue*. Steven Pen, the mailman of "Secret Letters" is referred to as Steven Toms (which we recognize as being the name of Sam Toms, father of Dewey, Ida, Sipie, and Zelda, and also (in *Watermelon Nights*) the father of Elba through his relationship with his wife Maria's sister Carmelita. In "Secret Letters" Steven has a relationship with Pauline, one of Zelda's daughters, but although he wants to marry her when she becomes pregnant, is told by his father that he cannot---that Pauline is really his half-sister, born of the relationship that Steven's father had with Zelda Toms. Steven leaves Pauline, who gives birth to Tony, and marries Reyna, an Apache, with whom he has two children, one of whom is Raymond. In the teleplay for *Grand Avenue* these relationships are very different. Steven had a past relationship not with Pauline but with Mollie, Sipie Toms' daughter, and is the father of her oldest daughter, Justine. Mollie left *Grand Avenue* before Justine was born and has not been back since. With the death of Mollie's husband and her expulsion from the reservation where they lived, she and her children return to *Grand Avenue*, which causes the chain of events that lead up to Justine's death. It is Justine and Steven's son Raymond who fall in love, and in this case their relationship is not consummated before the truth comes out, truth that ultimately leads to Justine's desire to reconcile with her mother, which does not come about because she is killed before she can return home. Sarris also presents Alice's desire to understand her

Conclusion

Previously, I argued that one of the important things that the audience/reader must be willing to take on as a responsibility in reading stories by Indian writers is to attempt some understanding about the culture that is present in the stories. To that end, because the people in Sarris's stories are his representations of Pomo people, this chapter has included a great deal of information regarding Pomo history and culture. The point made that "the individual alone has no meaning" (Beavis 23) does not mean that Pomo people--or Indians in general--are meaningless as individual personalities, but rather that one's heritage and one's culture--in this case, Pomo culture--is the backbone that holds up the individual. Without that backbone there is no support, and the individual cannot stand, or stand for very long. The people about whom Sarris is writing are either very aware of this, or are in the process of becoming aware, or they are falling by the wayside, having lost their direction. Understanding themselves

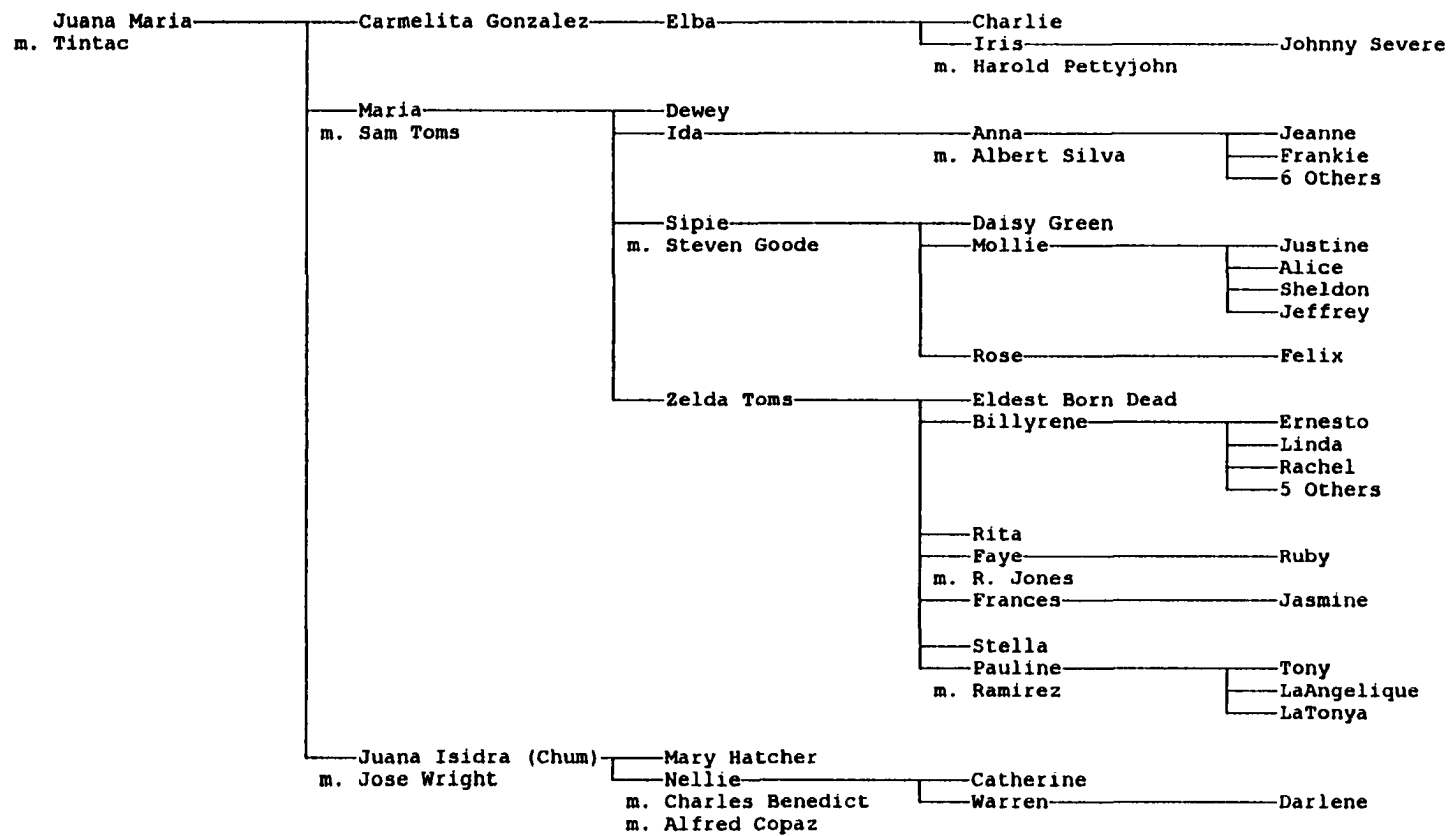
Pomo culture in more detail in the movie *Grand Avenue* than is seen in either the book or in *Watermelon Nights*. This is especially evident in the scene where she sings the bear song that Nellie taught her, and is one of the instrumental players in healing Anna's daughter, Jeanne.

as Pomo helps them to understand who they are, which is one of the lessons to be gleaned from Sarris's stories.

Paula Gunn Allen has said that one does need to become an individual, and that becoming is a human imperative. But the real issue is how to maintain community. Allen contends that one has to do both: Sarris understands this responsibility, and through his stories tries to extend this knowledge to others.

That dream
shall have a name
after all,
and it will not be vengeful
but wealthy with love
and compassion
and knowledge.
And it will rise
in this heart
which is our America.

Simon Ortiz
From Sand Creek 1981



Chapter Four

"It's Okay; We're Indigenous"

"Just because we are conversing
with one another does not mean we are
understanding one another."

Greg Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*

"Memories of home are the last
memories to be forgotten"

Joseph Bruchac, *Roots of Survival:
Native American Storytelling and the Sacred*

"You see, a man's got to know the stories
of his people, and then he's got to make
his own story too."

Louis Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*

Prior to this chapter, I have focused on a variety of areas concerning not only story-telling in a very general and broad sense, but more specifically about what I see as the role and responsibility of both the story-teller and her/his audience. In this chapter, I will focus on the fiction of Cherokee-German-Greek author Thomas King, and show how he, like Sarris in the preceding chapter, accepts his responsibility for the role he has undertaken as story-teller through an extension of the oral tradition into written narrative. King, like Sarris, is a transmitter of information—culture, myth, and

creation stories among other things--a transmitter whose myriad roles include that of a "linker," if you will, of humanity in chains of narrative. Through a discussion of King's three major novels, it will become clear how he also has accepted his responsibilities as a story-teller, to himself as writer/creator, to the community about which he is writing, and to his audience. King's stories, like Sarris's and other writers, also fall under the rubric of *what stories can do* as I outlined in detail in Chapter 2.¹

It is perhaps true that the theme of "identity quest" is reiterated time and again in Indian writers' works, but it stands to reason that it should be as such. Since it was governmental policy during so much of the colonized history of America (and Canada as

¹ I want to reiterate here what those five abilities of stories are and to also restate that by no means do *all* stories have to be capable of doing each one. I should also note, again, that these five pointers of what stories *can* do are neither inclusive nor mutually exclusive, and that I have settled upon these five after a more than lengthy study of stories across the board, from a myriad of cultures. I have also compiled the list based on what a number of writers have themselves had to say about the capabilities of stories. Therefore, stories: can instruct; be reminders of the past; serve as connections to families and ancestors; help the reader (and writer) define who

well) to assimilate the Indians ("Kill the Indian, and save the man"), one of the more forceful ways of accomplishing this objective was/is to strip the Indian of his/her identity--through loss of their language, lands, way of life (such as nomadic hunting), religious practices, and in many instances, genocide and/or the forced removal of a tribe's children to boarding schools for re-culturation². This loss of identity and removal from the land has caused many ongoing difficulties for Indian tribes throughout the United States and Canada, although slow and strident gains have been made by individual tribes to reclaim much of what was stolen from them.³ In an effort to reclaim that identity and to understand what has happened to bring this about, Indian writers have,

she/he is and her/his role in society; and they can entertain.

² Kateri Damm says of this that "historically, these institutions [boarding schools] have acted as tools of the State, often in concert with the Church, to civilize and control Indigenous peoples while nurturing and preserving the righteousness of imperialist attitudes" (13).

³ Recently, in September 2000, tribes in Canada have brought suit against religious denominations for cruel and abusive treatment of tribal children who were removed against the tribes' wishes and forced to attend schools for the purpose of cultural annihilation and acculturation. Also recently, the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) in America has publicly apologized for wrongs it has committed against Indian tribes in the last couple of hundred years. The BIA's counterpart in Canada is the DIA (Department of Indian Affairs). So far, no apologies have been forthcoming from the DIA.

on a consistent basis, paid closer attention to this issue than many others. Stories, both fiction and non-fiction, of the mixedblood who is unsure of his/her place in either the tribe or white society abound: N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*; Maria Campbell's *Half-Breed*; Louis Owens's *Bone Game*; D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*; James Welch's *The Death of Jim Loney*; Janet Campbell Hale's *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture*; and Betty Louise Bell's *Faces in the Moon* are only a few examples of identity searches. When so much emphasis is placed on Indian identity by not only the Other culture, but by the government (especially in terms of funding and for the purpose of categorizing authentic Indian artists), and also by other Indian tribes, it is a collorative that this continuing question be brought to light through the literature written by Indians as well. In each of the above-mentioned books, as well as others, the protagonist is searching for his/her identity, not, as I have stated before, as a solitary individual, but as a part of a community, a family. This identity can only be found in his "society, past, and place; unlike whites, he feels no meaningful being, alone" (Bevis 22-23).⁴

⁴ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, in *The Empire*

Louis Owens has said that "the recovering or rearticulation of an identity. . . is at the center of American Indian fiction" (*Other Destinies* 5). Yet while this may be at the center, it by no means comprises the entirety of Indian fiction. Although many protagonists in Indian fiction are characters who "truly find themselves between realities and wonder which world and which life might be theirs" (19), there are also strong, centered individuals, those both full- and mixed-blood who are secure in the knowledge of their tribal customs and cultures, who often serve as guides to those who are undergoing what often seems to be a painful identity search.

Lest the reader jump to the conclusion that these stories can be dismissed as more "plight" stories, the

Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures comment regarding the "special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (8-9). While I have no quarrel with the authors' discussion of the "identifying relationship between self and place," I do have difficulty with the terminology *post-colonial* to label not only Indian literature but literature of other displaced peoples as well. To label this "Post-Colonial" is to still give primary concern and attention to the "white" literature to which this literature is allegedly "post." It is insulting and demeaning terminology that should be abandoned. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn calls the invention of postcolonialism as a "subversive tactic . . . creating a new kind of imperial domination" ("Who Stole" 21) and I agree with her, although it is difficult to disagree with the comment that "the idea of post-colonial literary theory emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing" (Ashcroft 11). Yet again, the idea of post-colonial

opposite is true. Despite despair and poverty, frustration and self-abuse or alienation, most of these stories hold out the promise of hope and "the possibility of recovering a centered sense of personal identity and significance" (19). It is Paula Gunn Allen's believe that "the most important theme in Native American novels is not conflict and devastation but transformation and continuance" (101). Sarris's novel *Watermelon Nights* and short story collection *Grand Avenue* reflect this observation; so, too, do King's three novels.

What it is that provides the centering that enables the people in the stories to recover the sense of personal identity is an overwhelming acceptance of and nurturing from the community. Community, in a native sense, Thomas King writes:

is not simply a place or a group of people,
rather it is, as novelist Louise Erdrich
describes it, a place that has been "inhabited
for generations," where "the landscape becomes
enlivened by a sense of group and family
history." (*All My Relations* xiv)

anything is predicated upon the colonial as a starting point,
around which everything else is supposed to revolve.

While some ethnic Euro-American groups may understand this sense of community, most of mainstream American society in the twentieth century cannot fathom the idea that who one is as an *individual* must be first defined through identification with one's community and cultural heritage; that solitary individuality is self-alienating; and that one's identity can be centered in millennia-old customs based on one's family, traditions, and beliefs.⁵ Euro-Americans may understand the concept of belonging to a group, such as Democrats, Daughters of the American Revolution, St. Thomas Aquinas Church, the Boy Scouts, and so on, but still the group membership does not constitute the core of who they are, what they are meant to do with their lives, nor do most of those groups instill a sense of responsibility to first the community and then to the individual. That is, Euro-Americans can (and do) belong to these pseudo-communities, but it is only something that they do, not something that intrinsically defines who they are. King also says

⁵ While this is only one case in point, I should note here that students in my Honors English class in the fall of 1998, during a discussion on community, insisted almost unanimously at the start that they were *individuals*, not mere parts of communities. Not only did they insist on their autonomy, but claimed also that they were proud to be so. One also insisted that he was not a part of any community, defining himself as "alone."

that "this [Native] idea of community and family is not an idea that is often pursued by non-Native writers who prefer to imagine their Indians as solitary figures poised on the brink of extinction. For Native writers, community—a continuous community—is one of the primary ideas from which our literature proceeds" (xiv-xv). The communities mentioned above to which many Euro-Americans belong are not *continuous communities*, but rather are in flux depending upon the make-up of the membership, which consistently changes depending upon the policies of the people in power.

Jace Weaver centers an entire premise around the construction of community and its important role in Indian literature in his book, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community*. It is Weaver's hypothesis "that Native literature both reflects and shapes contemporary Native identity and community" and that what distinguishes it and makes it a valuable resource is what he terms in his study "communitism" (ix). Weaver writes that "literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community, including what I term the 'wider community' of Creation itself" (xiii). One's community is vitally

important to the sense of self being reconstructed (or simply strengthened) in many Indian writers' stories, and what is significant about the community and its values and role in the preservation of the self is that this is reflected in the literature being written. Not only do Weaver, King, and Sarris understand this particular construct, but most other Indian writers address this, either directly or indirectly, in their writing as well.

Sarris addresses the sanctity of community in a very direct way in both *Watermelon Nights* and *Grand Avenue* in the sense that Pomo culture and traditions play a very strong role in the ultimately binding capabilities of the community for the Waterplace Pomo. The specific customs that he backgrounds the stories with, the problems inherent to the Pomo based on their history of genocide and the fact that their traditional land base has been stolen from them, the cultural specificity with which he inculcates his stories is one way in which Indian writers can address the importance of community to individual members. King, however, takes a slightly different approach. Although King is of Cherokee descent, unlike Sarris who writes about his people the Pomo, King's community

of choice is the Blood band of Blackfoot, who reside both on and near one of the largest reserves in Canada.⁶ While this choice may seem odd, it only makes sense in light of the fact that this is where King has spent a great deal of his time in his adult years. King writes about the Blackfoot, but there is not much that is especially culturally-specific in his writing.

⁶ "The Blood Indian tribe, whose reserve lies north of Cardston in Alberta, comprises a component part in the great Blackfoot Indian Confederacy" (Mountain Horse 1). The Blood Indians, along with three other tribes, form part of the Blackfoot Confederacy. According to Mike Mountain Horse (1888-1964), "At Treaty Number Seven in 1877, each tribe was allotted a piece of land on which to live, and all have kept in close contact with one another. The Blood Indians first lived in log huts along the river bottom of their reserve. One of their chief industries was raising pony horses; another was the tilling of potato crops, when the spirit moved them" (14). The Blackfoot Confederacy is made up of four distinct "divisions who speak the same language, are well intermarried, and share a common tribal heritage" (Hungry Wolf 2). The following make up the four divisions: (1) Siksikah, which are the actual "Blackfeet" and are sometimes called "Canadian Blackfoot." Their reserve is east of Calgary, in Alberta. (2) Kainah, which means "Many Chiefs" are better known as the Blood tribe of Alberta. Their reserve is the largest in Canada. (3) Pikunni, which means "rough-tanned robes", are the closest Indian neighbors of the Bloods. They are the North Peigans to distinguish them from the fourth division, also called Pikunni, or the South Peigans. In Canada, their name is spelled *Peigan*; in the United States, it is *Piegan* (Hungry Wolf 3). According to Adolph Hungry Wolf in his book *Indian Tribes of the Northern Rockies*, there are a number of theories as to how this confederacy of Indians came to be called Blackfoot: "Some say that the people were first called Blackfeet because of dark soil they walked through in their Northern forest land, before moving out on the Plains. Others say the name comes from wandering over burnt prairies in search of Buffalo. As far back as legends tell, only one of the four Blackfoot divisions has actually called itself *Siksikah*, or Black Feet. The others have only become known that way in the English language, though all four now proclaim themselves proudly as Members of the Blackfoot Confederacy" (2). As of the 1981 Census there were 6,149 people living on the Blood Reserve, the one to which King refers in his novels (39). Hungry Wolf's book provides a wealth of information about the Blackfoot Confederacy, including origins and histories of the four

For example, while he centers part of his story *Green Grass, Running Water* around the yearly Sun Dance, he does not discuss the particulars of the Sun Dance. Only peripherally does he mention the setting up of the lodges, the fact that the women dance first and then the men, of the great socializing occasion that it is, and of the prohibition against picture taking during the Sun Dance itself. The people he writes about are Indians, it is obvious, but the bottom line is that they could be *any* Indians, *any* solidified community of native peoples, and that they happen to be Blackfoot is secondary in importance to King's discussion of community.

Both *Green Grass, Running Water* and *Medicine River* are set on the Blood Reserve in Alberta. And the main characters in King's third novel, *Truth and Bright Water* are also Blackfoot, although that is rarely discussed. This, according to King, is his attempt to

move away from a culturally specific area completely. The Indians in that piece [*Truth and Bright Water*] really aren't identified by tribe, and they're not even identified by geographic

divisions, American and Canadian treaties signed with the

area much. So I really am trying to move toward a more pan-Indian novel and to try to figure out a way to do that." (Weaver 151)

The communities about which King writes "exist as intricate webs of kinship that radiate from a Native sense of family" (*All My Relations* xiv). It has been more important for King to "struggle against stereotypes [that have] been a consistent part of King's life and writing" (Weaver 149) than for him to zero in on culture specifics in his work. King has said that he "like[s] to show Indians in different positions, different blood quantum[s] if you will, but a mix" (150), which is a reflection of King himself:

I'm this Native writer who's out in the middle—not of nowhere, but I don't have strong tribal affiliations. I wasn't raised on Cherokee land. That's a hard thing for me because I'd rather be accepted across the board by Native communities and Native people. (149)

Although some Indian critics (among them Elizabeth Cook-Lynn) have written vehemently against the concept of Pan-Indian *anything*, arguing rather for tribal-

specific validity as well as tribal sovereignty, King views this otherwise:

I think a lot of people think of pan-Indianness as a diminution of 'Indian,' but I think of it as simply a reality of contemporary life. Native culture has never been static even though Western literature would like to picture it that way.

(Weaver 150)

Thus to write a Pan-Indian novel, according to King, is to address more fully the complex issues with which present-day Indians are faced. King realizes that "it's important for people to hear those names [of specific tribes]. . . but I'll let other writers do that. I'll concentrate on what I know, and that's more of a pan-Indian existence and more urban and rural existence than a reservation one" (151). King has explained in interviews that what he has tried to do, especially in *Green Grass, Running Water*, but in his other novels as well, is to "look at something larger than just the specifics of a local area, something that talks about Native people in general, in North America, in Canada and the US" (Gzowski 66).

Herb Wyile believes that the views presented by both Sarris and King need to be taken into consideration:

In trying to provide a more nuanced account of the work of Native writers, then, not only does consciousness of different tribal traditions become important, but so does a recognition of those who write out of a more 'pan-Indian' consciousness, those whose work cuts across different traditions, and those who go beyond, as King puts it, the 'set of expectations that are used to make out that which is Indian and that which is not'. (108)

King's writings, in which he both upholds the value and importance of community as well as puts forth the ubiquitous search for identity problem, at the same time "illustrates the need for a more flexible understanding of the concept of 'Native' and for a greater appreciation of cultural syncretism and intertextuality" (108).

Beyond the issues of community and identity, and beyond addressing specific problems inherent for Canadian Indians that may not be present for American Indians, King's writing reflects a concern for what he

calls the "range of human emotions and experience that all people share" (*All My Relations* xvi). This is "a most important relationship in Native cultures, the relationship which humans share with each other, a relationship that is embodied within the idea of community" (Weaver 152). All of King's writings deal with these issues.

Medicine River

Community, search for self-identity, humor, a "refusal to romanticize Native life and make it 'all roses and clover'" (Weaver 152), and that range of human emotions and experiences that all people share are all aspects of King's first novel, *Medicine River*, a complex, intricately woven story that addresses a myriad of topics: relationships, basketball, AIM, suicide, spousal abuse, maturation, gambling, lying, coping with life and death. Most of all, *Medicine River* is a story about finding that sense of belonging and coming home.

One of the responsibilities of the story-teller is to his/her audience.⁷ King, as mentioned in a

⁷ King adds the story to the list of responsibilities of the story-teller. "My responsibilities are to the story. My responsibilities are to the people from whom I get some of the

previous chapter, focuses his attention on his Indian audience because he believes that the white audience "really [doesn't] have an understanding of the intricacies of Native life, and I don't think they are much interested in it" (Weaver 150). It appears that King sees his audience not only as Indians, but to a certain extent as Canadian Indians, as some of the problems to which he refers in this novel are specific to the Indians of Canada.⁸ In this instance, as with much of Sarris's writing, it is important for the audience--no matter if that audience is Indian or non-Indian--to have a modicum of understanding in regards to the particularities to which King refers. Will, the protagonist in *Medicine River*, seems to be facing what Louis Owens has referred to as "the dilemma of the mixedblood, the liminal 'breed' seemingly trapped between Indian and White worlds" (40), especially considering that as a mixedblood, Will is considered to be a "non-status" Indian. This suggests that within

stories or who share stories with me or about whom I'm going to write" (Weaver 151).

⁸ I am not inferring the American Indians would not understand King's references to the problem of "status," because many of King's American Indian readers would, indeed, know what he was referring to, but that this is one of the problems that Canadian Indians have had to deal with that American Indians have not. That is, it is a colonizer-specific problem thrust upon the Indians of Canada, in another governmental attempt at both assimilation and tribal alienation.

the context of Canadian law, Will has no rights as an Indian, because his mother (Rose Horse Capture) married outside of her tribe—she married a white man.

The question of status is defined by the Indian Act, a piece of federal legislation in Canada that "regulates virtually every aspect of reserve life, including band politics" (Silman 10). The Indian Act, until changes were made to it (after King wrote *Medicine River*), governed the lives of over 350,000 Canadian Indians, as well as more than 2,000 reserves throughout Canada.⁹ Part of the Indian Act is meant to define, from the Canadian government's point of view, who is Indian from a legal standpoint:

From 1869 until 1985 the determination of Indian status was determined by a patrilineal system; that is, by a person's relationship to a male person who is a direct descendent in the male line of a male person. When she married a non-status man, an Indian woman born with status lost it, [and was] unable to regain it even if she subsequently was divorced or widowed. (12)

⁹ Another difference between Canada and the United States: in Canada, land set aside for Indians is called "reserves"; in America they are "reservations." In Canada, the Indian nation about which King is writing are the Blackfoot; across the border in the United States, they are the Blackfeet.

The government's insistence on determining identity in this manner, then, is yet another example of the colonizer's attempt to "limit and control treaty and aboriginal rights and to promote assimilation and the elimination of 'the Indian problem'" (Damm 11). Rather than leaving Indian identity to the tribes, the *Indian Act* in Canada is the means by which the government regulates who is (and who is not) Indian, and therefore determines who is entitled to whatever "benefits" are bestowed upon the tribes by the government.¹⁰ As a result, according to Kateri Damm [Ojibway]:

This has led to a rather complicated and confusing number of definitions of Native identity, all of which have political, geographic, social, emotional, and legal implications. There are status Indians, non-status Indians, Metis, Inuit, Dene, Treaty Indians, urban Indians, on reserve Indians, off-reserve Indians; there are Indians who are Band members and Indians who are not Band members.

¹⁰ Sidner Larson [Gros Ventre] write about this topic that "in Canada there is a distinction made between *status* and *non-status* Indians. Status Indians are legally recognized by the government and have all the attendant rights and privileges. Nonstatus

There are First Nations people, descendents of First Nations, Natives, Indigenous peoples, Aboriginal peoples, mixed-bloods, mixed-breeds, half-breeds, enfranchised Indians, Bill C-31 Indians. There are even women without any First Nations ancestry who gained "Indian Status" by marriage. (11-12)

The regulations of the Indian Act explain why Will and his brother and mother were barred from living on the reserve when they return, and why they had to live in the town of Medicine River. Although Will's father has died, because Rose Horse Capture married a white man, her legal status as an Indian could not be regained. This section of the Indian Act has long been a source of contention between Indians and the government in Canada. One of the basic issues--the one that King frequently returns to in this novel--is that "the Indian Act penalized Indian women, but not Indian men who married non-Indians" (Weaver 199).

A woman who lost her status through marriage lost just about every right that she had as an Indian: her property, inheritance, residency, burial, medical, educational and voting rights on the reserve (Silman

Indians are apparently still considered Indian, but are not

12). What Will may not have been aware of, and what King does not address here, is the fact that had Rose Horse Capture been a man and married to a white woman, not only would he not have lost his status, but his white wife and any children would have had Indian status conferred up on them—a result of the patriarchal lineage system being instilled by the Indian Act itself. When the Canadian government instituted the Indian Act, it refused to take into consideration that some of the tribes in Canada were matrilineal and matrilocal. Rather than seriously attempt to understand life as the Canadian Indians lived it, the government proceeded with its plans to assimilate as many Indians as possible and to eradicate whatever Indian heritage it could. This was one of the ways that it attempted to “civilize” the “savages” and to continue to work to eliminate Indian identity.

Will, at least when he is young, because of his mother's example, never questions whether or not he is Indian, no matter what the Indian Act has proscribed for him. After Rose learns of her husband's death—he had deserted the family years before—she decides to

entitled to benefits” (31).

move back to Medicine River from Calgary, where Will and his brother James have grown up. Will and James and their cousins who have come to help them move, discuss living on the reserve:

"No," said Maxwell, "you can't. You guys have to live in town 'cause you're not Indian anymore."

"Sure we are," I said. "Same as you."

"Your mother married a white."

"Our father's dead."

"Doesn't matter." (9)

Will's response lends credence to the understanding that Will, although he knows his father was white, identifies as Indian. And although Maxwell informs him that he is "not Indian," no one back in town or on the reserve accepts Will as anything else. No one, despite knowing his parentage, makes reference to his mixed blood in any negative way.¹¹ Will, as far as the Blackfoot community is concerned, is one of them.

King makes other references to the laws accorded to status and non-status Indians. Will's father wrote

¹¹ Granny Pete, Rose's mother, was never happy with Rose's decision to marry her white man from Edmonton, but she did not abandon her relationship with her daughter, visiting in Calgary "every month or so" (MR 8), but Will and James never met any of

a letter to Rose in which he commented, "Sorry you had to leave the reserve, but Calgary's a better place for a swell girl like you. Stupid rule, anyway" (4). The rule he refers to is the one that states that non-status Indians cannot live on the reserve. Rose can move back to the reserve, but can only go as far as the town.

Will directly runs into restrictions due to the Indian Act when he tries to get a loan to open a photography studio in Medicine River. At the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), Whitney Old Crow "explained to Harlen [and Will] that his office couldn't make loans to non-status Indians, that he was sorry, but that was the way it was" (99).

Status or non-status, Will (like Eli Stands Alone in *Green Grass, Running Water*) lives away from the reserve until circumstances force his return, at which time he must make the conscious decision to stay and be a part of the Indian community or to return to his somewhat alienated life in Toronto. In both instances—Will's and Eli's—it is a death in the family that causes them to return. Both men have made lives for themselves far from Medicine River and Blossom

their other relations until the day they moved back to Medicine

(another town in Alberta close to the reserve) and both are reluctant to return. They have changed so much, but have yet kept open a chasm dividing their Indian heritage and the "white" lifestyle they have adopted. Other similarities between Will and Eli include their involvement with white women (although Will does not marry his the way that Eli does) and their near-abandonment of their families and roots. Yet they both return, and they both choose to remain. Jace Weaver points out that "both [Will and Eli] wonder if they can truly go home again. Sometimes they do not want to. Behind such characters is a desire to combat the 'romantic notion that every Indian in the world longs to go back to the reserve'" (152). Will and Eli do not harbor such romantic notions; rather what they both truly want is to be once again a part of their families and their community.

However, Will (unlike Eli) is not full-blood Blackfoot. Who Will is, how he identifies himself, is central to *Medicine River*, but the question "are you Indian or are you white?" is not one with which Will actively grapples. Although he has chosen for many years to live away from the reserve, and although he

River.

does not associate with other Indians in Toronto, Will never denies that he is Indian; rather, he chooses not to confront the issue. King subtly shows just which "side" Will does identify with in the way that he identifies Will's mother, Rose Horse Capture, and her side of the family by name, while Will's white father remains nameless, suggesting that Will's "white side" is unimportant to who he is in the Indian community. It is not until *Green Grass, Running Water* that Will is referred to by his whole name, when King notes that Latisha got "Will Horse Capture over in Medicine River to make up a bunch of photographs" (117) for the Dead Dog Café.

In order to ensure Will's place in the community, as well as his understanding of how important his people and community are to him, Harlen Bigbear takes it upon himself to re-integrate Will to the relationships and interconnectedness of the people of Medicine River and the reserve. Whenever Harlen has an opportunity to introduce Will to people in town, Harlen says, "This is Rose Horse Capture's boy, Will. Granny Pete's grandson" (*Medicine River* 139). This identifies Will as part of the tribe through his matriarchal line—not only by his mother, but his

grandmother as well, which is what Alice Goode does in *Grand Avenue* when she tells Nellie Copaz who she is. Just as Alice is not simply the individual *Alice*, but is defined by her connections to the Waterplace Pomo, so too is Will not simply *Will* the photographer, but he is a part of the community through his direct lineage.

Not identifying Will by his absent white father's name lends even more strength to his identification as Indian and that he should (and does) take his self-identity from his Indian side. Other than his father, with whom he has not had contact in years, Will's married girlfriend in Toronto, and his mother's one-time friend Erleen, Will's contact with white people on a personal, close level is minimal, and especially so after he returns to Medicine River. By deciding to return, Will subconsciously is totally abandoning that "white" part of his life, and he starts to understand his place as an integral part of the Medicine River community.

In Will's case, unlike other stories of mixedbloods who feel more of a conflict between "white side" and "Indian side," he is not being asked to make a clear-cut decision between his Indian heritage and

his white heritage because Will can barely identify with his white side. Will explains to Harlen "I don't even remember what my father looked like" (7) because "he took off when I was about four" (7). Will is never sure of the kind of person his father is, or what role he would have played in Will's life had he remained a part of it. Will does not know why his father left, but he does not question it. Will's absent father blasts a hole, albeit a small one, into the perfect fabric of who Will is, and his curiosity about a side of him that he has never known is a natural one. Will makes no attempt to search out those other roots, but he does think about them from time to time and because of his lack of information, he invents a "perfect father," changing the stories about him to suit the circumstances.

Despite Will's protests to the contrary, it is obvious that even if he did not miss the man himself, he missed what the man, as a father, is supposed to represent. Will's imaginary father "loved his family," Will supposes, and Will pretends that "I was always getting postcards and letters with pictures of him standing against some famous place or helping women and children take sack of rice off the back of trucks"

(84). Will imagines his father as benevolent, protective of people, helpful, kind and forgiving, and involved most in places where he is needed. Harlen, the ubiquitous Coyote/trickster¹² figure in the novel, uses Will's sense of loss as part of his intricate web-weaving designed to merge Will back into the Medicine River community. Harlen plays on both Will's insecurities and sense of responsibility when he encourages Will to talk to Clyde Whiteman--himself fatherless and recently out of jail--to "help keep him out of trouble." Harlen wants Will to talk with Clyde "like a father" (122), which, of course, Will does not know how to do. That Will would attempt to do this is important in the process of him continuing to become more integrated into his community.

When Will decides to return home and to permanently stay there in Medicine River, it comes as

¹² Darrell Peters says that King's "most useful tool is the notion of Trickster, and as in many traditional Native cultures, he uses Trickster characters and strategies to force is audience into self-awareness and the non-Native reader into an awareness of another cultural experience" (67). This is more readily apparent in *Green Grass, Running Water* than in *Medicine River*, and King again makes use of Trickster in *Truth and Bright Water* in the character of Monroe Swimmer. King has written in the introduction to *All My Relations* that "the trickster is an important figure for Native writers for it allows us to create a particular kind of world in which the Judeo-Christian concern with good and evil and order and disorder is replaced with the more Native concern for balance and harmony" (xiii). This is exactly what Harlen, Coyote (in *Green Grass*) and Monroe Swimmer want to achieve through all their actions.

a surprise even to him, just as his decision to open a photography studio in Medicine River seems to be more of an accident than anything he consciously planned to do. Yet when the pieces fall into place, it is Harlen who sees to it that Will is completely involved in the Indian community. Whether it was Will's decision to stay, or Harlen's meddling that caused that to come about does not really matter. To Harlen, Will was a Blackfoot, and as such belonged near the reserve, with his people, among his relatives. Between Harlen and Bertha, who works at the Friendship Centre, they know all the connections that binds the community together. Harlen tells Will, "Bertha says you got a lot of relatives on the reserve," (94) as one way of persuading him that he is needed as a photographer in Medicine River. It is Harlen who hands out Will's business cards to attract clients, Harlen who convinces him to join the basketball team, and Harlen who introduces him to Louise Heavyman. Harlen is Coyote/trickster, but he is still the means by which Will becomes a part of Medicine River, where Will finally can fully realize himself as who he is meant to be, and that is a man who is not simply *Will the photographer*, but Will defined by who he is—a

Blackfoot Indian--not just what he does.¹³ It is Harlen Bigbear, "the Trickster, who forces Will, and others, to (re)consider their situations and make decisions that lead to a reaffirmation of cultural identity" (Peters 68).¹⁴

Louis Owens writes that "central to Native American storytelling. . . is the construction of a reality that begins, always, with the land" (*Other Destinies* 193). The town of Medicine River is central to the lives of all the characters, as is the nearby reserve and the surrounding mountains. Harlen is quick to point out the connection to the land when Will returns for his mother's funeral (which he has missed):

¹³ Much has been written about King's use of the trickster Coyote in not only *Medicine River* in the form of Harlen Bigbear, but also throughout *Green Grass, Running Water* where Coyote actually is one of the characters. Monroe Swimmer, the "famous Indian artist" in *Truth and Bright Water* can also be identified as a trickster, one who wants to "make things right," who does so by painting the old church so that it disappears, changing the landscape from what the colonizers have done to it back to how it originally was. Because of the plethora of writings already in print regarding King's use of the trickster, and because of the nature of what I am trying to say here about King's writing, I have consciously chosen not to devote much discussion to this topic. A short bibliographic listing of articles regarding King's use of Coyote are included at the close of this chapter.

¹⁴ Paula Gunn Allen says of Coyote/Trickster that "he is also a metaphor for continuance, for Coyote survives . . . he survives partly out of luck, partly out of cunning, and partly because he has such great creative prowess" (158). As I pointed out before, this not only describes Harlen Bigbear, but also Monroe Swimmer in *Truth and Bright Water*.

"You got the Rockies, too. You see over there," Harlen said, gesturing with his chin. "Ninastiko, Chief Mountain. That's how we know where we are. When we can see the mountain, we know we're home." (93)

This is Harlen's way of telling Will that, despite the years he spent in Toronto, that Will is a Blackfoot and that Medicine River is his home. Paula Gunn Allen has written about the connection between Indians and the land that:

We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea that permeates American Indian life; the land (Mother) and the people (mothers) are the same. The earth is the source and the being of the people, and we are equally the being of the earth. (119)

For Will and for other Indians, "being separated from the land is to be lost in a wilderness" (Salyer 133), and by pointing out the mountain to Will, Harlen is showing him that he no longer needs to be lost, that here, on the land, he can (re)find himself. Ninastiko, for the Blood band of the Blackfoot in *Medicine River*, is the signifier of home. As long as it is in sight,

the connection between the people and the land remains concrete and viable.

King has written in the introduction to *All My Relations*, that not only are Indian writers concerned about the relationship between oral literature and written literature, but with the "relationship between Native people and the idea of community" (xii)¹⁵. One of the most important relationships in Indian cultures is "the relationship which humans share with each other, a relationship that is embodied within the idea of community" (xiv). Johnny Severe, in *Watermelon Nights* sums up the idea of community succinctly when he comments, "A tribe, hell, it's a family. One big family" (7). This "big family" and by extension, community, is what Harlen is showing Will the way back to. The people of Medicine River are family to Will, because "for Indians tribe means family, not just bloodlines but extended family, clan, [and] community" (Bevis 19).

¹⁵ King especially shows the importance of the relationship between oral and written literature in his statement that his responsibility is to the story and to the people to whom he has listened as they shared their stories with him. King takes the oral stories and from them, and his own personal experience, come the stories that he writes. It is what Sarris does with his stories, as well.

King shows this concept of community and family specifically when Will takes the family portrait down by the river. Harlen, again, is in the center of things, explaining to Will that agreeing to take a family portrait for Joyce Blue Horn involves a concept of family to which Will may not be accustomed. Harlen tells Will:

"Joyce is Mary Rabbit's daughter. She married Elvis Blue Horn. They got eleven kids. Will, when Joyce Blue Horn said family, she wasn't just talking about her and Elvis and the kids you know . . . Elvis has nine brothers and four sisters. . . And Joyce has seven sisters and five brothers."

"The photo special is for immediate family."

Harlen wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve.

"Oh," he said, "then we're only talking about fifty people or so." (205).

Consequently, nearly one hundred people turn up at Horsehead Coulee for the photograph and a picnic. This, then, is a different construct of "family" than Will has ever known. Harlen tells Will that "maybe you should greet everyone, so you know the people" (208),

once again making sure that Will himself understands that he belongs.

The picture-taking at Horsehead Coulee is an important event for Will, since it is here, for the first time, that he understands he is no longer an outsider, no longer the urban Indian with no identification who has been living a rootless existence in Toronto.

What starts out as a simple "family portrait" for Joyce Blue Horn quickly escalates into a community gathering. In addition to Joyce and her large brood, Harlen shows up to the studio, followed shortly by Louise and South Wing. "By noon, not counting Harlen and Louise and South Wing, there were thirty-eight people" in the studio (206). Harlen knows everyone and keeps introducing them to Will. Within another half hour, the small studio is crammed with fifty-four people, adults and children alike. As Joyce starts to hand around sandwiches to everyone, Louise suggests that they all go down to the river and take the picture there, "have a picnic, do some swimming" (207). Harlen decides to call "Floyd and the boys. See if they want to come, too" (207). Louise decides to stop

by the Friendship Centre and invite Bertha and Big John and Eddie to come to Horsehead Coulee.

By mid-afternoon more than 100 people are at the river at what started out as Joyce Blue Horn's family portrait. The elders from the reserve are there, too: Lionel James, Martha Oldcrow, and Floyd's grandmother, who speaks only Blackfoot. Lionel tells Will that "Granny says you remind her of him [her boy, a real good storyteller who died the year before in a car wreck]. She says maybe she should adopt you" (211). The gesture to adopt Will would solidify his place in the community.

Will wants to know who is going to be in the picture. "Everybody," Joyce tells him, so they gather the children, get chairs for the elders, and put everyone together for the community picture at the river. But they insist that Will be part of the picture as well. Floyd's granny moves over a bit so that Will can sit next to her. It is a difficult operation for Will, setting the timer and running back and forth, trying to get all those people still for a group picture.¹⁶

¹⁶ In 1994, the Canadian Broadcasting Company produced a filmed version of *Medicine River* starring Graham Greene as Will, with the script written by Thomas King, who played a small role as one

The group refused to stay in place. After every picture, the kids wandered off among their parents and relatives and friends, and the adults floated back and forth, no one holding their positions. I had to keep moving the camera as the group swayed from one side to the other. Only the grandparents remained in place as the ocean of relations flowed around them. (214-215)

The elders are the constant in the life of Medicine River. No matter who moves around, leaving the reserve, coming back to the reserve, it is the elders

of the basketball players on the Warriors' opposing team. In the film version, it is this scene at Horsehead Coulee that ends *Medicine River*. While staying true to the spirit of King's novel, a great deal of the intricacies behind Will and his return were left out of the movie, which in a linear fashion focussed mainly on Will's return to Medicine River for his mother's funeral—which he missed—and his burgeoning relationship with Louise Heavyman, as well as Will's reintegration into the community through the opening of his photography shop and his association with the Warriors basketball team. Supported by strong acting performances and a well-written script, the film, while wonderful in its own right, falls short of the complete picture King presents in the book. The film depicts Harlen as more of a nuisance, almost a huckster figure rather than one who truly does care about his community as Harlen in the book does. And one of the more interesting changes between the two media involves Will's white girlfriend from Toronto. In the movie, this woman is Will's boss, who arranges for his photographic assignments around the world. She comes to him in Medicine River when he has not returned to Toronto by the agreed-upon date, and quickly comes to realize that Will is going to stay. In the film, it is Will who rejects the white woman. In the book, however, Will's girlfriend is married with two children. It becomes obvious that she has taken up with Will in an attempt to extricate herself from her marriage. Once that is accomplished, Will is no longer necessary, and she leaves him. The film also leads the audience to believe that Will and Louise will eventually marry, which is not the case in King's book. Their relationship in the novel is much more

who remain, holding steady in the face of change. It is the elders who "provide a cultural anchor to which will, the lost 'non-status' Indian, is at last tied" (Peters 69), which is an apt metaphor considering the ebb and flow of the sea of relations that surround them, so many that Will has difficulty keeping everyone straight.

Harlen, as well as Bertha and others in Medicine River and on the reserve, has an uncanny ability for keeping everyone and how they are related straight: who they are, what each one's lineage is, what they are doing in their lives (although Harlen is not above stretching the truth in his quest to "give people what they need whether they realize it or not" (Weaver 148)). When asked, or simply as part of a conversation, Harlen can recite family trees at will:

"Big John Yellow Rabbit was Evelyn First Runner's blood nephew. Her father had married Rachael Weaselhead, which made Harley Weaselhead Big John's great-grandfather on his grandmother's side, which meant that Eddie Weaselhead, whose grandfather was Rachael's brother, was blood kin to Big John. Evelyn's sister, Doreen, had married

complicated than the film allows, which is one of the

Fred Yellow Rabbit just long enough to produce Big John before Fred went off to a rodeo in Saskatoon and disappeared. Doreen married Moses Hardy from Hobbema, who wasn't related to anyone at Standoff, but that doesn't have anything to do with the trouble." (53)

One of the most important relationships/friendships that Will finds himself involved in after his return to Medicine River is with Louise Heavyman, which is first engineered by Harlen in one of his unceasing attempts, "like the Trickster of traditional stories, to keep things ordered, focused, and centered" (Peters 69). Will, Louise, and eventually Louise's daughter, Wilma (whose father is a Cree from Edmonton), form their own unique sense of family.¹⁷ Will and Louise do not get married, despite Harlen and Bertha's rumors to the contrary, but nevertheless develop their own form of family. Louise, like Alberta in *Green Grass*, *Running Water*, one of the strongest portraits of a

shortcomings of adapting any book into a two-hour screenplay.

¹⁷ Although Louise formally names her daughter Wilma, after one of her own grandmothers, the child becomes known as "South Wing" because of a joke Will was making with one of the maternity nurses in the hospital. The nurse, who is convinced that Will is Louise's husband, Mr. Heavyman, informs him that his daughter has been born and asks what they are going to call her. Above her head, Will sees a sign informing people that they are in the "South Wing" of the hospital and tells the nurse that's what

woman character in modern fiction, wants a child but does not want a husband. She and Will come to love each other, but having a man on a consistent basis is not how Louise envisions her life. She is self-reliant, independent, and runs her own business. When Will helps her to look for a house to buy, Harlen nearly convinces Will that this is the time that Louise will acquiesce and decide to marry him. But when she has the darkroom in the basement ripped out, Will realizes that not all of Harlen's attempts at "fixing things" work, and he also realizes that the family he has with Louise is fine just the way it is. Their bond of respect and love keep them together more than a marriage license would have been able to do. This extended family of Will's is one of the reasons he elects to remain in Medicine River.

Part of what holds the family/community of Medicine River together is the Friendship Centre. Another is the basketball team, the Warriors.¹⁸ The team's games are a focal point for the community, and

they'll call her. The nurse thinks it's beautiful, "a traditional Indian name" (40).

¹⁸ Jace Weaver explains about King's affinity for basketball in *That the People Might Live*: "While in Lethbridge [where King taught at the University], his experiences with the Blood Reserve community and playing on an all-Native basketball team gave him the material for short stories that evolved into *Medicine River*."

attendance is if not high at least steady. Harlen recruits Will for the team, even though Will insists that he can't play basketball well. Harlen lectures Will about the importance of the team beyond just playing basketball:

"Team gives the boys something to belong to, something they can be proud of. You give the boys confidence, Will. They got respect for you, and we got a good team." (23)

Harlen is talking about more than simply the basketball team; he is talking about the community of Medicine River.

Beyond being simply a community of inter-related people, the people of the town also come together in solidarity to take care of their own. After the suicide of Jake Pretty Weasel, talk was that it was his wife, January, who shot and killed him and then penned a note to make it look like a suicide. Although the talk continued, the people accepted January's scenario, coming in time to believe such a necessary lie. Everyone knew that Jake physically abused January on more than one occasion. Will remembers seeing Jake punch January in the face after a basketball team's loss. And "Betty down at the hospital said that

January was a regular in the emergency ward. Betty told January to file charges, but she never did" (45).

The people who make up the community of Medicine River have a number of choices here: they can request a formal inquest to find out who really did kill Jake, if they disbelieve the logistics of the situation (the suicide note was "seven or eight pages [long]. Written on some fancy stationery. Thelma said it was neat with nice handwriting, all the lines straight" (46)) but that would involve the Canadian police; they can take matters into their own hands with a tribal investigation; or they can accept January's story. The people eventually decide that "Jake probably shot himself maybe because he hated himself for beating on January or because he was angry at the time and didn't have anyone but himself to hit" (51). Rather than ostracize January, who has had a difficult life up to this point with Jake's abuses, the community weighs what has happened—Jake's death—against what has happened in the past and decide that justice has indeed already been served, so the collective memory of Jake's abuses gradually give way to the picture that January would rather present. Will notes that:

We all had Jake stories, and even January was anxious to tell about the times Jake had taken the kids shopping or made a special dinner or brought her home an unexpected and thoughtful present. I wasn't sure how, but she seemed to have forgotten the beatings and the pain, and in the end, all of us began talking about the letter as if Jake had written it. You could see that January wanted it that way, and when you thought about it long enough, I guess it wasn't such a bad thing. (51)

January's storytelling, through King's story-telling, highlights how, as Sarris has said, "stories are used in a number of ways and for a multitude of purposes. Stories can work as cultural indexes for appropriate or inappropriate behavior. They can work to oppress or liberate, to confuse or enlighten" (*Slug Woman* 4). According to "the Law," what January did was wrong, even if it was justified by Jake's abuse. But the stories that evolve from this incident serve to highlight the good that Jake managed to accomplish in his lifetime, leaving a legacy of goodness, rather than the anger and pain that could have remained had

January been forced to serve time for a justified homicide.

The stories that evolve and eventually come to recall Jake's life are used in a positive, liberating way as they free January and her children from the stigma of Jake's abuse and his subsequent "suicide." These stories are part of the many stories that make up *Medicine River*—of Will's father, of Will's past, of Harlen's past, of feuding friends brought together again, of basketball championships, of confused youth and jail time, and of birth and a new generation—that bring the community of Medicine River together.

Medicine River and its people, then, are practitioners of Jace Weaver's ideas of communitist values. To do this, "to promote communitist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them" (xiii). It is obvious that Weaver is speaking of the larger picture; the sense of exile referring to the Native community's marginalization and being forced into the role of the Other by the mainstream culture, and the "pained individuals" not simply a wife suffering from a husband's abuses, but the community as a whole

suffering as the result of the overall effects of colonization. The actions of the community of Medicine River are but a microcosm in the vastness of Weaver's communitistic vision.

Had Will remained in Toronto, his original plan after his mother died, he, much like the nameless narrator of James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, could have presented "a stark image of a contemporary Native American cut off from much of what could sustain and enrich him" (Ruppert 56). Will had been cut off, but due to the ceaseless machinations of Harlen Bigbear, he comes to understand that he is a part of his Indian community, and in the process of understanding finds the sustenance and enrichment that he needs in the community of Medicine River, in the shadow of Ninastiko, and in his relationship with Louise and South Wing. It is there that Will, like the heroes in other Indian novels, is home. William Bevis believes that this occasion in Indian novels is in marked contrast to Euro-American novels in that rather than being "'eccentric,' centrifugal, diverging, [and] expanding," Indian novels are "'incentric,' centripetal, converging, [and] contracting. The hero comes home. In Native American novels, coming home,

staying put, contracting, even what we call 'regressing' to a place, it is a primary mode of knowledge and a primary good" (16). Here, in *Medicine River*, is Will, the "Indian who has been away or could go away [who] comes home and finally finds his identity by staying" (18).

King's own life experiences are brought to bear in much of what he writes. Like Will, King worked as a photojournalist. The time he spent on the Blood Reserve and playing on their basketball team find its way into the sections of *Medicine River* that deal with the Warriors and that team's quest for a basketball championship. King's mother, like Rose Horse Capture, raised two sons by herself after King's father deserted the family when King was five (Weaver 146). Psychoanalysts could argue that Will's imaginary father and his internal struggle to understand him parallel King's own inner questions about his own father.¹⁹ This could indeed be true, but more simply, I

¹⁹ Weaver also notes, in regards to King's childhood, that "The absence of a male parent is dramatized in King's first novel, *Medicine River*, in which Will, the book's lead figure, reflects on childhood memories of a similar life and eventually gets the opportunity to meet and confront the missing man" (146). However, in neither case does this actually happen. Will's father consistently writes letters to Rose in which he claims to want to come by and see Rose and the boys, but something always prevents his journey. He, according to Will, "died in a car accident. He was drunk." (10). According to Weaver, King's father was presumed

believe it is a case of a writer writing what he knows. As for the stories, King has said:

I got to listen to Blackfoot storytellers, and Cree storytellers, for that matter, too, so it [my writing] is just a kind of a culmination of years of just, just *listening*, and having a good time listening to those stories, too. (Gzowski 72)

Telling the Stories

As Sarris does in *Watermelon Nights*, King writes *Medicine River* from a first-person point of view, through the eyes of the protagonist, Will. Sarris did not tell his story in a typical linear fashion, but started with the voice of Johnny Severe, continuing in Part Two with Elba and her story of the past, and finally ending with Iris to fill in the blanks between Elba's and Johnny's stories, each from that particular character's point of view, in a first-person narrative of their lives. One of the aspects of *Watermelon Nights* that makes it so interesting is hearing the different points of view about the same events,

dead four years after he deserted the family, but "in 1995, King was contacted by a private detective and learned that his father

especially with Elba and Iris. What also makes *Watermelon Nights* work as well as it does is the fact that each distinct voice is just that: Johnny's, in a half-educated vernacular that was part street-wise; Elba's, coming through in a language that was not the one she grew up speaking; and Iris's near-intellectual tone and inflection that caught her confusion at being in between two worlds.

Sarris employs the same technique in the stories in *Grand Avenue*. With the exception of one, each story has a different first-person narrator, each telling a different story, sometimes contradicting other narrators' stories, but each in a clear, distinct voice, showing Sarris's skill at story-telling. Unlike some writers who attempt first-person narration in an unfamiliar voice, Sarris does not stumble; his stories are believable--they are *true*--because when his characters speak, the audience hears the characters' voices, not the voice of the writer.

King also chooses to use the first-person narrator in his three novels. *Medicine River*, told in a series of flashbacks, recording incidents that are not necessarily presented in chronological, linear

had not perished but had gone on to raise two more families

order, clearly forefronts Will's concerns and confusions through a series of stories, stories that connect Will's past to Will's present, showing, in effect, that the stories do not end, that "every part of the story has other stories connected to it" (Bruchac *Roots of Survival* 58).

Truth and Bright Water, King's most recent novel, is told from the perspective of Tecumseh, a young boy, who is witnessing the changes around him. Like *Medicine River*, Tecumseh frequently tells past stories to either clarify or emphasize the story in the present.

Green Grass, Running Water is a unique novel in many different ways. A story within a story, there are two different narrators: "I," who, with Coyote, tells the (re)creation stories that frame the novel, and a third-person narrator who tells the stories of Lionel, Eli Stands Alone, Alberta, Latisha, and Babo.

Green Grass, Running Water is a story with a lot of complex parts that can be difficult to understand. King has said of the book that "there are a number of Canadian allusions, and there are a number of U.S. allusions, and not everybody's going to get all of

before recently passing away" (146).

them, but if you get 'em, the book's a lot more fun, and if you don't, I don't think it hurts it at all" (Gzowski 68). While it may be true, that the book is "fun" on a number of levels, understanding the wide variety of cultural references King employs throughout *Green Grass* makes the audience more aware of the subversiveness of King's humor and the points that he is making that much more poignant.

King is not one to lull his audience into a sense of complacency and easy understanding. What he does in *Green Grass* is much like some of the early storytellers to whom Joseph Bruchac referred. "The attention of the listeners had to be focussed on the story. At intervals during the relation of a story the auditors must exclaim 'Hah!' This was the sign that they were listening" (*Roots of Survival* 75-76). King forces his readers' attention to focus on what is unfolding in the novel with his humorous exchanges, his cross-cultural references, and puns on names of historical Canadian and American figures.²⁰ Even the

²⁰ In an effort to help her students understand the myriad of cross-cultural references that King uses throughout *Green Grass*, *Running Water*, Jane Flick has compiled "Reading Notes for Thomas King's *Green Grass*, *Running Water*" that can be found in *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*. Complete bibliographic information on this article is listed in the bibliography at the end of this dissertation. Flick's annotations explain more regarding King's purposeful "plays with expectations

"I" narrator reminds Coyote of the importance of paying attention: "Pay attention," I says, "or we'll have to do this again" (*Green Grass* 112). King's audience, too, needs to pay attention lest some of the more subtle references and humor in the novel get lost in the shuffle of understanding King's ultimate point.²¹

One of the best aspects of both *Medicine River* and *Green Grass, Running Water* concerns one of the ways in which King assumes responsibility for his role as the story-teller, and that is how he uses humor to tell his stories.²² Humor plays an intrinsic and vital role, not only in much of the writing done by Indians, but in their day to day lives as well. Margaret Atwood, in an article about humor in two of King's short stories, points out how, in Euro-American

about naming and gender" (140) than I could do justice to the references at this point. Flick's notes include a list of works by Thomas King, which was provided by Helen Hoy of the University of Guelph in Canada.

²¹ In addition to the variety of Americans and Canadians who appear for lunch in Latisha's Dead Dog Café, and the names of the students in Alberta's art history class, one of my favorite instances of King's use of names in this novel appears when Charlie arrives to check in at the Blossom Lodge: "The desk clerk at the Blossom Lodge was a thin, older man. He had on a dark blue blazer and a gold name tag that said, 'N. Bates, Assistant Manager'" (169). Charlie has come to Blossom try to keep Alberta away from Lionel. If the desk clerk's name is any indication, Charlie does not stand a chance of winning.

²² King's use of humor is also apparent in his short stories, many of which have been published in the collection *One Good Story*,

writing about Indians, "on the whole Natives were treated by almost everyone with the utmost gravity. The Native as presented in non-Native writing was singularly lacking in a sense of humor" (243-244). King's use of humor is one of the ways in which he "lays his finger on the pulse of much of contemporary existence" (Warrior "Flying Solo" 19).

King himself addresses the issue of *Green Grass* as a novel with humor:

I'd argue that *Green Grass, Running Water* is not actually a comic novel. It's a serious novel that tries to make its point with satires and ironies. Things would really be desperate if we couldn't laugh at ourselves and the situations we find ourselves in. And in humor lies great strength.

We need that strength. (Press Release)

Vine Deloria echoes King's sentiments regarding humor. "When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive" (Lincoln 22). To which can also be added Paula Gunn Allen's voice: "Humor is the best and sharpest weapon we've always

That One, especially in "Borders," which has also been widely

had against the ravages of conquest and assimilation" (7).

Humor, then, can "mediate tragedies with a sense of continuance and survival" (55), but it can also serve to make needed and necessary points that could be translated as mere diatribe were they to be made any other way. That is, by pointing out the absurdity of many a situation through use of humor, as King does throughout *Green Grass*, the audience/reader can come to the *right* conclusions regarding the inequity or unfairness of the situation. This enables the reader to come away from the story with a more complete understanding of the situations, especially the non-Indian audience which has become accustomed to Euro-American stereotyping of Indians and their lives. Deloria writes that:

The more desperate the problem, the more humor is directed to describe it. Satirical remarks often circumscribe problems so that possible solutions are drawn from the circumstances that would not make sense if presented in other than a humorous form. (147)

For example, King avoids coming right out and saying "The government is unfair, the people who work for the government are stupid, and they don't understand the first thing about Indians." Rather, through the continual banter between Clifford Sifton, the man in charge of constructing the dam, and Eli Stands Alone, the reader concludes as much on her own, and the situation leaves a deeper and lasting impression as well.

Eli lives in the cabin that his mother built herself, which stands in the spillway of the dam that the government has built against the provincial report's recommendation. It has been easier, although costlier, for the government in the long run to build the dam and displace Indian lands than it would have been to build it in a more auspicious place.²³ Eli holds out against the destruction of his home, filing injunction after injunction against the dam and its owners, and as a result no further progress can be made; the lake stands unused, the lots around the lake remain empty.

²³ Eli points out to Sifton, during one of their daily conversations, that many Canadian dams are built on Indian land, even though "the provincial report recommended three possible sites" and "this site wasn't one of them. None of the recommended sites was on Indian land." (120)

Sifton makes the trek through the woods to Eli's house every day, more for the conversations he will have with Eli and the companionship than for anything else, but he comes under the guise of asking Eli one more time if he will drop his lawsuit and leave the house. The answer is the same every day: "No." King uses Sifton and Eli's ensuing conversation (as only one example) of the misguided thinking that many of non-Indians have regarding twentieth century Indian people, and about the "attitude of colonialism" that King has said he specifically wanted to write about in this novel, the attitude that "whites are superior and Indians are inferior [that] is still very much a part of the American mind ("A Conversation With Thomas King" 8):

"Who'd of guessed that there would still be Indians kicking around in the twentieth century."

"One of life's little embarrassments."

"Besides, you guys aren't really Indians anyway. I mean, you drive cars, watch television, go to hockey games. Look at you. You're a university professor."

"That's my profession. Being Indian isn't a profession."

"And you speak as good English as me."

"Better," said Eli. "And I speak Blackfoot too. My sisters speak Blackfoot. So do my niece and nephew."

"That's what I mean. Latisha runs a restaurant and Lionel sells televisions. Not exactly traditionalists, are they?"

"It's not exactly the nineteenth century, either."

"Damn it. That's my point. You can't live in the past. My dam is part of the twentieth century. Your house is part of the nineteenth."

"Maybe I should look into putting it on the historical register." (155)²⁴

Dr. Joseph Hovaugh and his colleagues, despite many years of close contact with the four old Indians in the hospital, have not yet begun to understand them,

²⁴ Another example of a person with misguided thinking about Indians is Bill Bursum, who owns the appliance store where Lionel works. He thinks, "And you couldn't call them Indians. You had to remember their tribe, as if that made any difference, and when some smart college professor did come up with a really good name like Amerindian, the Indians didn't like it. Even Lionel and Charlie could get testy every so often, and they weren't really Indians anymore" (210). According to Jane Flick, King takes the name Bursum from a man famous for his hostility to Indians. "Holm O. Bursum (1876-1953) was a senator from New Mexico who advocated the exploration and development of New Mexico's mineral resources. With his eye on the map of New Mexico, he proposed the infamous Bursum Bill of 1921, which aimed to divest Pueblos of a large portion of their lands and to give land title and water rights to non-Indians" (148).

either. After their most recent escape, Hovaugh's assistant, Eliot, asks him:

"What I can't understand is how they escape. And where do they go? Have you ever thought about that, Joe? And why, in God's name, would they want to leave?" (50)

What King is addressing here is the Euro-American attitude towards the Indian that asks the question: "If we've given them so much, why aren't they happy?" which does not take into consideration that what the Indians have been "given" is only a small fraction of that which was stolen from them in the first place. The lack of understanding and communication between the white people in *Green Grass, Running Water* and the Indians is clearly on the side of the whites, who choose not to learn anything about the Indians they are closely associated with, as well as a lack of respect for the Indians' culture and heritage. But rather than leaving his readers with a sense of frustration over this continuous lack on the white people's part, King works the conversations and the commentary made by the whites in such a way that the absurdity of their ignorance is what comes through, so that what the reader is left with is something funny

that punctuates the frustrations rather than something that reiterates despair, which would only serve to be self-destructive for those involved in each situation.²⁵

A people who can hold onto their legacy of humor are a people who refuse to give in to pain and deprivation (Lincoln 55). Vine Deloria says that "Indians have found a humorous side of nearly every problem" (*Custer Died* 147), not simply as a defense mechanism against oppression, but also because the use of humor is (and must be, for all people) an integral way of handling the day-to-day of living.²⁶ The Indians about whom King is writing in *Green Grass* are people

²⁵ *Green Grass, Running Water* is full of lightning-quick jokes that, unless the reader is sharp and attentive, can be lost. I could point out many of these instances. One happens when Lionel has been asked to deliver a paper for a sick colleague in Salt Lake City. While there, he is invited to attend an Indian rally and the following conversation ensues: "I'm not sure I'll be able to make it," Lionel says. "I have to fly back. I've got a reservation." The man took Lionel by the shoulders, looked at him hard, and said, "Some of us don't." (61).

²⁶ Humor among different Indian tribes has played an even more important role in terms of the community and the interpersonal relations and standing in the community. Deloria explains that "teasing [which is an integral part of humor] was a method of control of social situations by Indian people. Rather than embarrass members of the tribe publicly, people used to tease individuals they considered out of step with the consensus of tribal opinion. In this way egos were preserved and disputes within the tribe of a personal nature were held to a minimum" (*Custer Died* 147). King "teases" the Euro-American status quo on a variety of levels throughout *Green Grass, Running Water*, a status quo that is certainly more than a little out of step with this "consensus of tribal opinion." Human nature being what it is, it is easier and less painful for any group to be shown its idiosyncrasies, shortcomings, and ignorance through humor than it

who do not give into this pain that Lincoln discusses. They use humor as a way of adapting to the situations brought to them in their daily life experiences. Lionel's mother adapts in her own way, as the reader sees during Lionel's visits to his parents' house. He does not visit often, as his auntie Norma frequently chastises him, but when he does visit, he stays for his mother's dinner. Lionel's mother always tries to cook something new and different. On one visit, she attempts something from the Italian cookbook she received for Christmas. She tells Lionel that it is Tortino de Carciofi with Ribollita.

"What is it?"

"Vegetable soup and an artichoke omelet."

"Where did you get the artichokes?"

"I had to substitute."

"So, what's in it now?"

"Elk."

Even Lionel had to admit it was tasty. (86)

And when Lionel first brings Alberta to his parents' house for dinner, they have "Hawaiian Curdle Surprise." This recipe calls for octopus. Lionel's mother substitutes moose (190). This is King's way of

is to be told point-blank of their failures and misconceptions

pointing out some of the adapting that Indians have had to do with the advent of colonization. Changes to ways of life, rather than being defeating, are rather taken in and adapted to in the same way that Lionel's mother makes her own substitutions for exotic ingredients in her recipes. Rather than throwing out the cookbook because she does not have the exact ingredients, Lionel's mother chooses to make do with what she has, and carry on with her cooking plans anyway.

King uses Lionel's sister, Latisha, as yet another example of perseverance through humor. Latisha's life has not been easy. She made the mistake of marrying a white American, George Morningstar,²⁷ who ridicules her country, does not hold a steady job, and eventually takes to beating her. Shortly after he does this, George leaves. Latisha recounts this in brief conversation with one of her customers at the Dead Dog Café:

regarding reality.

²⁷ King's physical description of George Morningstar is meant to bring to mind George Armstrong Custer. Like his namesake, Latisha's husband is defeated by the Indians as well, when Eli and Lionel confront him at the Sun Dance grounds because he is surreptitiously taking pictures. George Morningstar leaves, not killed, though defeated.

"Did you kill the bastard?" Jeanette shook her head.

Latisha laughed. "No, he's still alive. I threw him away."

"Splendid," said Jeanette, opening the door.

"I love stories with happy endings." (147)

Latisha, like her mother with her adapted recipes, refuses to let things negatively affect her life, choosing to make the best of situations, finding a "humorous side of nearly every problem" (Deloria 147) in a life-affirming way. Not just in this instance, but throughout *Green Grass, Running Water*, King uses humor as a "subversive weapon, as [humor] has often been for people who find themselves in a tight spot without other, most physical, weapons" (Atwood 244).²⁸

²⁸ There are ways other than through humor for those feeling the effects of colonization (or simply victimization by the dominant culture) to be subversive, and King includes one of those stories here. Latisha remembers her father, Amos, who turned into an alcoholic and left the family. But before alcohol and despair wore him down, he played a role in the revenge of his brother-in-law, Milford's, stolen truck. The used car salesman, in whose lot the stolen truck was found, insists that the truck was bought, producing what it obviously a falsified bill of sale, even though Milford's name is spelled wrong. Amos realizes that they could go through the law and file suit against the truck thieves, but they realize that the case would be drawn out for four or five years and nothing in the end would get settled. "About a week later, someone set the truck on fire. The police arrested Milford, but had no proof that he did it. Amos says it was probably vandalism." (344) King writes: "Milford began laughing. 'So I finally told them that it was probably Coyote.'

'What'd they say?' Amos asks.

'They got no sense of humor.'

'Too bad about your truck.'

Latisha's response to the Euro-Americans of both Canada and the United States (although perhaps one would refer to the Canadian counterpart of Euro-Americans as Euro-Canadians), and the way that they "understand" Indians and Indian culture only through their own narrow-minded ideas, is to call her restaurant the "Dead Dog Café." Pandering to the belief that Indians did (and possibly still do) eat dog meat, Latisha and her employees preface every entrée on the menu with "Dog." It had been her Auntie Norma's idea:

"Tell them it's dog meat," Norma had said.

"Tourists love that kind of stuff."

That had been the inspiration. Latisha printed up menus that featured such things as Dog du Jour, Houndburgers, Puppy Potpourri, Hot Dogs, Saint Bernard Swiss Melts, with Doggie Doos and Deep-Fried Puppy Whatnots for appetizers. (117). Depending on what kind of tourists are about to enter the café, Latisha and the employees take on the

Milford took his cup to the sink and rinsed it. 'So what do you figure?'

'About what?'

'How much I owe you for the gas?'

'Had nothing to do with it, Milford.'

'Coyote, right?'

'I guess,' said Amos." (345)

persona of Indians from different locales. "Plains, Southwest, or combination?" Billy asks Latisha. "Do Southwest today," she tells him (116-117). They know that the tourists are ignorant and do not know the difference between tribes. To the tourists from either side of the border, they are simply "Indians."

Latisha's revenge is not to try to educate them, but to make them look stupid because of their ignorance, or even to allow for them to be taken advantage of, to a certain extent.²⁹ She does not break through the façade, either, even when questioned about the use of dog in recipes by the tourists. Yes, they serve dog, she tells them. "Black Labrador," said Latisha, avoiding Nelson's hand. "You get more meat off black Labs" (145).

"It's a treaty right," Latisha explained.

"There's nothing wrong with it. It's one of our traditional foods."

²⁹ The Indians in *Truth and Bright Water* also take advantage of the "New-Age" tourists who come through for Indian Days. They especially hope for Germans and Japanese tourists, who apparently have a real fetish for all things Indian. Monroe Swimmer poked fun at these tourists during Indian Days when he was younger by dressing in *lederhosen* and marching around with a tuba, "pretending to be the Bright Water German Club. He said it was the least he could do, seeing as how Germans were so keen on dressing up like Indians" (*Truth and Bright Water* 25).

"I've never heard of that, either," said Bruce, "and I was a sergeant with the RCMP for twenty-five years."

"We raise them right on the reserve," Latisha explained. "Feed them only horse meat and whole grain. No hormones or preservatives."

"Jesus," said Nelson. "I had a black Lab when I was a kid. He was a great dog." (144)

What Latisha is doing, in essence, is what Margery Fee and Jane Flick comment that King is doing with the entire novel, and that is not pandering to the uninformed preconceptions or producing explanations, but enticing and even tricking the audience--and in this instance, the tourists at the café--into finding out the truth for themselves (132). They write, "in order to really 'get' the joke, one has to learn not only the facts, but also come to terms with a sense of humor that can only be described as subversive" (134). The tourists in the café are not going to 'get' the joke, because they will not bother themselves with "learning the facts," and not only that, but it will most probably never cross their minds that what Latisha is doing is *funny*. One of their preconceived stereotypes regarding Indians goes back to the "stoic

warrior." For them, Indians are not, nor have they ever been, endowed with a sense of humor.³⁰

"Promises Made and Promises Not Kept": *Green Grass, Running Water*

In one of the press notes released with the publication of *Green Grass, Running Water*, King commented on the title that he used it "as a reminder of promises made and promises not kept" (King Press Release). The title "is a reworking of a phrase that appeared in some of the treaties that Indian nations signed with the federal government. [It] was supposed to indicate just how long the treaty was to be in force. This turned out to be a rather cruel joke, since the grass is still green and the waters still run but most of the treaties have been ignored" ("A Conversation with Thomas King"). The broken promises have resulted in not only marginalization and stereotyping of Indians, but also in a blatant disregard for Indians' traditions, cultures, and the basic human rights of the people. Broken promises lead to mistrust and negative constructs for both sides,

³⁰ Daniel Francis addresses many of the misconceptions the dominant culture had or still holds regarding Indians in *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*.

leaving one "victorious" and the other, in a sense, "defeated."

Yet Indian literature is breaking through the stereotype of that Euro-American picture of a defeated people, showing time and again that the resilience of the people is winning out in a slow up-hill fight. King, as well as other Indian writers, not only remembers the past to ensure that history is not repeated, but he breaks ground for changes, showing that true picture of Indians, their lives, problems, struggles, and victories. What King shows is that rather than waiting for a cataclysmic event to occur that will ensure changes, or rather than waiting for outside forces to remove borders and make things better, that his protagonists know that it is only through themselves, through the work of the people, can they make their lives better and see to the continuance of their tribes and cultures.

Many of the characters in all three of King's novels are on a quest of sorts, in direct reaction to those "promises made and promises not kept" to which King has referred. Like the four old Indians in *Green Grass, Running Water*, they are trying to "fix the world," to make things right. Both Harlen and Bertha

in *Medicine River*, but especially Harlen, take on this role. Will says of Harlen that "helping was Harlen's specialty. He was like a spider on a web. Every so often, someone would come along and tear off a piece of the web or poke a hole in it, and Harlen would come scuttling along and throw out filament after filament until the damage was repaired. Bertha over at the Friendship Centre called it meddling. Harlen would have thought of it as general maintenance" (31). When John Yellow Rabbit and Eddie Weaselhead nearly kill each other, Harlen takes it upon himself to try to make the men friends again. Often Harlen's attempts at fixing things goes awry, but he tries. Harlen is always "meddling" in the middle of everything:

He went to all the powwows. He went to all the funerals. He went to all the weddings, the births, and most of the court cases. Any time there was a gathering of two or more Indians in a hundred-mile radius of Medicine River, chances were one of them was Harlen. (89)

Stuck in the middle of everything, Harlen sometimes manages to help a little bit, and often annoys everyone but, as Will points out, "Harlen didn't have much to do with it" (68) when things worked out in the

end. Harlen appropriates the role of the "fixer" and he takes seriously his job as the one to "keep things ordered, focused, and centered" (Peters 69).

The four old Indian women--the Lone Ranger, Robinson Crusoe, Ishmael, and Hawkeye--in *Green Grass, Running Water* are on a mission where they are "trying to fix up the world," as the Lone Ranger tells Norma (*Green Grass* 133). And the world surely needs fixing. Each time they have "escaped" from either Fort Marion in Florida, or from the hospital run by Dr. Joseph Hovaugh, they have tried to fix the world. They, like Harlen, have the best of intentions, and while some small things do get "fixed," other, larger things come apart. Dr. Hovaugh has kept track of the times the old Indians have been missing and notes that terrible disasters seem to follow their disappearance: when Krakatau exploded, the crash of Wall Street, the eruption on Mount Saint Helens, the wildfires in Yellowstone (347). Hovaugh worries that this time, something equally disastrous is going to take place.

The old Indians know it is a lot of work to fix the world, so they, like Harlen, are going to fix the small things that they can. When Lionel and Norma pick up the old Indians, who have been hitch-hiking, the

Indians explain to Lionel that they really aren't going to fix up the entire world because it's "too big a job to fix it all at once. Even with all of us working together we can't do that" (133-134).³¹

"We're going to start small," said Ishmael.

"And once we get the hang of it," said

Hawkeye, "we'll move on to bigger jobs" (137).

The small job they decide on is to help Lionel. They present him with a jacket for his birthday present, a very old leather jacket with leather fringe and a couple of small holes in the back that look like bullet holes. His uncle, Eli, who is there in Bursum's store when the old Indians present Lionel with the gift, tells him, "you know, you look a little like John Wayne" (336), which is ironic, because when Lionel was younger, he wanted to be John Wayne when he grew up:

The John Wayne who cleaned up cattle towns and made them safe for decent folk. The John Wayne who shot guns out of the hands of the outlaws.

The John Wayne who saved stagecoaches and wagon

³¹ This seems to be in direct contrast to a Euro-American approach to fixing things in that the focus for that culture is on the "big picture" while ignoring the minutiae whereas for Indians, at least in this novel, the approach is the opposite. It is only in

trains from Indian attack. When Lionel told his father he wanted to be John Wayne, his father said it might be a good idea, but that he should keep his options open. (265)³²

The old John Wayne western, *The Mysterious Warrior*, is on television the night before Lionel's birthday.

There is nothing else on and everyone, all in their own homes or hotel rooms, are watching the movie:

Latisha, Lionel, Charlie, and Bursum, as well as Babo and Dr. Joe Hovaugh, who are on the way to retrieve "their" old escaped Indians. Latisha's oldest son, Christian asks the question:

"How come the Indians always get killed?"

"It's just a movie."

"But what if they won?"

"Well," Latisha said, watching her son rub his dirty socks up and down the wall, "if the Indians won, it probably wouldn't be a Western."

seeing to the small details that the larger problems can be taken care of.

³² In *Truth and Bright Water*, published six years after *Green Grass, Running Water*, Tecumseh and his father, Elvin, go to Blossom to pick up speakers for the festivities at Indian Days. There, at "Lionel's Entertainment Barn," Elvin "talks to an Indian guy who looks sort of like John Wayne, only not as heavy" (*Truth and Bright Water* 87). This, of course, is the same Lionel from *Green Grass, Running Water*. Like Sarris (as well as Louise Erdrich and other Indian writers, and William Faulkner before them), King's stories overlap and show the continuance of the community and the people who make up the community.

Christian took off one of his socks, smelled it, and threw it in the corner. "Not much point in watching it then." (216)

But the old Indians will show that there is a point in watching it. The next morning, Lionel's birthday, after presenting him with the "John Wayne" jacket, they turn to watch the movie Bursum puts into the VCR which projects from all of the televisions he has used to create the "map" on his display wall--the same movie that Christian declined to watch the night before, because the Indians always get killed at the end.

What the old Indians "fix" is the ending to the movie. While Bursum watches in horror, the others are transfixed because instead of the Indians being massacred by the just-arriving cavalry, the cavalry comes over the last rise, disappears, and what was once a black-and-white movie turns to color:

Without a word, he [Portland, Charlie's father] started his horse forward through the water, and behind him his men rose out of the river, a great

swirl of motion and colors—red, white, black, blue.³³ (357)

Lionel, Charlie, Eli, the old Indians, Bursum, and Coyote watch as both John Wayne and Richard Widmark are shot down, as the Indians win the battle. This is revisionist history at its finest. Not only have the verbal and written histories been adapted to suit the dominant side, but pictorial history, in the form of paintings as well as film, have also performed this function. What King is doing is appropriating one of the ways in which colonizers have been able to write

³³ The colors that King chooses to use here are important in that they are the four sacred Cherokee colors. White, black, blue, and red correspond to the four directions. One starts with white (south) and continues in a clock-wise direction with black (west), blue (north), and ending with red (east). King makes reference to the Cherokee colors at the start of each of the four sections of the novel. Here, as with the colors that appear when the movie is "fixed," King also starts with red. The Bantam Trade Paperback edition of *Green Grass, Running Water* does not translate the Cherokee at the start of each chapter, so most readers would not know to what King is referring with the Cherokee syllabary. The uncorrected copy published by Houghton Mifflin Company in Boston in 1993 includes the translation of the colors at the start of each section. The number four, which corresponds to the four directions, is also important throughout *Green Grass, Running Water*. In addition to the book's division in four parts, there are the four old Indians who are out to "fix things," and Lionel's four-part plan for manageable goals for the remainder of his life. The (re)creation stories with which King frames the book also incorporates four stories: First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman. Alberta, in the history lesson that she is teaching to her art history class, talks about the four tribes that were removed from their homes and interred in Fort Marion in Florida: Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche, and Arapaho. The four parts of the book correspond to four different types of stories, as King points out: "an oral Creation story, a biblical story, a literary story, and a historical story" (Gzowski 71). The action taking place

their own version of history (which includes both myth and creation stories) and gives it a twist. What now to call a Western where the Indians win in the end?

The other instance in which the old Indians believe they are helping Lionel happens out at the Sun Dance grounds, when history repeats itself, with non-Indian outsiders trying to take secret pictures of the Sun Dance. Years before, when Eli was younger, tourists wandered onto the grounds and started taking pictures, which is not allowed. Surrounded and confronted by the Indians and lying that he did not take any pictures, the man from Michigan finally relinquishes the roll of film from his camera.

This time, however, it is not a stranger from Michigan, but Latisha's estranged husband, George Morningstar, who has returned and is surreptitiously taking pictures with a camera hidden in his briefcase. This time, it is Eli, along with Lionel, who confronts him.

Caught with the camera, George pretends to hand over the film, but Eli stops him from leaving and retrieves yet another roll, stripping it out of the camera and dropping it, exposed and useless. George is

throughout is also centered around Lionel's 40th birthday; his

livid. Eli walks away, leaving Lionel with George. Lionel tells George, "There's nothing for you here" (427). While this seems like a small act, it is the first time Lionel has stood with his relations for his culture and beliefs against the Outsider who would defy their rules. He witnesses Eli's act of courageousness and finds his own inner resources of honor and pride in who he is and the kind of people his family are. The young Eli witnessed the attempted invalidation of his culture and went on himself to stop George Morningstar's attempt. Lionel is taking up Eli's position, first by witnessing Eli's act of courage. When it is his turn, he will take Eli's place in upholding his traditions. His small comment, "there's nothing for you here," speaks to more than just George Morningstar's appearance at the Sun Dance; it is a comment to the larger Euro-American society that says there is nothing more available to be appropriated and stolen, Lionel, and by extension, his people will not allow it.

**"There are good ways to live your life
and there are not so good ways"**

life, so far, can be divided into four equal parts.

Auntie Norma, like the elders who draw Will into the picture at Horsehead Coulee in *Medicine River*, is the catalyst who brings Eli and his nephew together, which ultimately helps Lionel to understand that he needs to stay home in order to set his four plans into motion and make something of his life.

Norma made the first connection between Lionel and Eli when she points out the similarities between the two men in a rather derogatory manner. "Your uncle wanted to be a white man. Just like you," (36) she tells Lionel:

"If you weren't my sister's boy, and if I didn't see you born with my own eyes, I would sometimes think you were white. You sound just like those politicians in Edmonton. Always telling us what we can't do." (708)

Norma thinks less of whites than she does of Indians who do not respect their families and fail to take up their positions in their tribes. To tell Eli and Lionel that they are like white men is the ultimate insult for Norma, who holds whites in contempt: "A white man, as if they were something special. As if there weren't enough of them in the world already" (37).

Norma has been so annoyed with Eli's decision to stay away from the reserve and live his life in Toronto that she refuses to call him until a month after his mother has died. After that phone call when Eli does come back, Norma does not hide her contempt for how he has lived his life. They go out to the cabin where he grew up and she points out:

"You were born there before you went off and became white," Norma told him, "so I thought it might be of sentimental value. I hear if you're a famous enough white guy, the government will buy the house where you were born and turn it into one of those tourist things." (122)

Physically being at this house brings back a flood of memories for Eli. Norma quickly takes advantage of what she senses is a weak spot for her brother and tries a little reverse psychology on him in a conversation designed to make him take up his position and stay:

"Don't have to stay home if you don't want to," said Norma.

"I'm not going to stay."

"Probably don't have all the fancy things here you have in Toronto."

"I just came back to see the place."

"Of course, being as you're the oldest, you can stay as long as you like."

"It's just a visit."

"Everybody should have a home."

"Probably stay a month or two."

"Even old fools."

Looking back, Eli could see that he had never made a conscious decision to stay. And looking back, he knew it was the only decision he could have made. (290)

Eli is drawn into the fight with the government over the construction of the Grand Baleen Dam that, once in use, would displace him from the home his mother built herself and would also see to the destruction of the trees used as an integral part of the yearly Sun Dance. Despite the fact that he had chosen to live most of his life away from his tribe, Eli subconsciously understands that here on the outskirts of the reserve is where he belongs, and what he has to do is what little he can to preserve the traditions and legacies of his tribe.

Once he returns and begins to feel connected again is when he realizes that it was "the only

decision he could have made." He remembers growing up, his mother building the house herself, even dragging the trees she needed for its construction. Eli's reconnection is tied directly to the extended family of the tribe:

What Eli remembered were the people. Aunties, uncles, cousins, in-laws, friends. People he hadn't seen in years. People who greeted him as if he had never left. (287)

One of Eli's responsibilities as uncle and eldest man in the family is to help and guide Lionel with his life. "In the old days," Eli remembers, "an uncle was obligated to counsel his sister's son, tell him how to live a good life, show him how to be generous, teach him how to be courageous" (292). This, of course, is something that Eli has neglected to do because he has not physically been part of the family. However, it turns out that this is exactly what Eli does, starting from the day of the Sun Dance and ultimately with his death when the dam collapses and floods the valley below.

Eli finally completes his role as active, participating member of his family and tribe not simply by returning home and taking up the fight

against the government, but by fulfilling his duties as Lionel's uncle. After much prodding by his sister Norma, Eli collects Lionel from Bursum's store (having watched the revision of history when the Old Indians change the ending of the John Wayne movie), and drives with Lionel up to the Sun Dance grounds, slowly so that they will have time to talk. The conversation is confusing to Lionel, who still does not grasp why Eli chose to remain, but as Norma tells him at the end of the story, "always best to figure those things out by yourself" (462). Lionel wants easy answers, and expects that Eli will simply tell him. Both Eli and Lionel have been searching for their place: Eli through his career as a university professor and marriage to his white wife, Karen; and Lionel by simply drifting from one thing to another due to a comic set of circumstances which gave him a direction he would not chosen for himself.³⁴

Lionel asks Eli point-blank why he came home.

"Can't just tell you that straight out. Wouldn't make

³⁴ These life circumstances included his tonsillectomy that nearly turned into heart surgery when he was a child, his being in the wrong place at the wrong time that led to his suspicion of being an AIM member and subsequent arrest, and taking the job at Bill Bursum's Home Entertainment Barn. Lionel frequently muses that he should go to the university, but although he regularly says he is going to, he simply stays at his dead-end job.

any sense. Wouldn't make much of a story," Eli tells him (400). Lionel figures Eli decided to stay after his mother died, but "that wasn't the reason, nephew," said Eli. "That wasn't the reason at all" (402).

Eli stops the truck on the crest of a hill and tells Lionel that his wife, Karen, thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, and asks him what he thinks:

Below in the distance, a great circle of tepees floated on the prairies, looking for all the world like sailing ships adrift on the ocean.

Eli turned sideways in the seat. "What about it, nephew? Where would you want to be?"

Lionel could feel his neck begin to sweat. The jacket was pulling at his arms, and the cuffs were chafing his wrists.

"Anywhere in the world, nephew. Anywhere at all."

Eli sat in the cab. It was much as it had always been. The camp. The land. The sky. (402) Just as Harlen Bigbear does for Will, Eli shows Lionel the land. Unlike Charlie's father, who, being asked where would he go if he could go anywhere in the world

(Charlie's father chooses Hollywood), what Eli is waiting for Lionel to say is "right here: home."

And unlike Eli, Lionel has not yet completely understood why he needs to stay home, but he is getting closer to understanding. His auntie Norma knows why, and has said as much to Eli, when she tells Eli he needs to talk to Lionel:

"We need the young people to stay home, Eli.

Figured you could tell him about that."

"The reserve's not the world, Norma."

"There are good ways to live your life and there are not so good ways" (318).

For Norma, living on the reserve with one's family and tribe and taking care of one's responsibilities is a good way to live one's life. She knows that if all the young people leave, the community is in danger of collapsing. The young people are the tribe's future, those who will learn the customs and traditions and hand down their legacy to the following generations.

For Norma, the reason--the *why*--is not as important as the bottom line: that he is where he is supposed to be, doing what he is supposed to do, no longer trying to be a "white man." Despite Lionel's protest that Eli did not come home after the Sun

Dance, as Norma alludes, that Eli only came home because he had retired, Norma points out to him:

"He came home, nephew. That's the important part. He came home." (67)

Lionel's stand against George Morningstar on the side of his customs and his people at the Sun Dance grounds starts his understanding process, one that positions him in the proper direction in order for him to realize who he is, who he needs to be, and what his place is as an integral part of his family and his community. When Eli first approaches George Morningstar with Lionel, he is finally fulfilling the last of his responsibilities to his nephew: teaching him how to be courageous. Lionel's understanding of his people and traditions is an integral part of both his and his family's continuance. Although he has not consciously decided to take his own stand, the way that Eli took his in the fight against the government's dam, Lionel is accepting his place in the unending cycle of what Gerald Vizenor calls "survivance, the new stories of tribal courage" (*Manifest Manners* 4). The family's survival continues.

This "survivance" started, in this story at least, with Eli's mother, Lionel's grandmother,

building the cabin down in what would eventually become the spillway for the Grand Baleen Dam. It continued with Eli returning and making his stand in the cabin. And it comes full circle, only to start again, with the destruction of the cabin after the dam bursts and Lionel will help rebuild it. He says maybe he'll live in it, like Eli, but Norma tells him it is not his turn. "Your turn will come soon enough" (464).

Lionel is slowly beginning to understand his part in the community, an understanding that will continue as he waits his turn to take up where Norma leaves off. He will stay and help "fix things," as the Old Indians, Norma, and Eli "fixed things," first by rebuilding the cabin and then by rebuilding his life, continuing the process begun, for him, by the arrival of the old Indians, the first "fixers." It is not until *Truth and Bright Water* that King reveals that Lionel has, indeed, stayed as Norma hoped, and become a fully integrated member of the community.³⁵

³⁵ When Tecumseh and his father go to Blossom, they go into "Lionel's Home Entertainment Barn." Tecumseh's father says, "Indian guy owns this. White guy went bankrupt a few years back and had to sell it. Now that's funny. Not many times you see that happen." (87). The father and son also have lunch at Latisha's Dead Dog Café, "owned by a woman from the Blood reserve near Fort Mcleod. 'I went to school with her,' my father tells me. 'Probably the only town in America where two Indians own anything.' 'We're in Canada.' 'Hell,' he says. 'I guess that explains it, all right.'" (87). In *Truth and Bright Water*, the

In addition to Norma, Eli, Lionel, and the old Indians, there is all sorts of other "helping" and "fixing" going on here, mostly done inadvertently by Coyote, who is able to juxtapose himself in both the framing (re)creation stories in which King manipulates Christian myths, and in the story centered around Lionel and his family. Coyote, like Harlen, appears innocent when his machinations go awry. All Coyote wants to do, he says, is help, to be a part of what the Old Indians are trying to do. He helps the narrator "I" to tell the frame stories but can't seem to get them right. He makes mistakes. "Everybody makes mistakes," said the Lone Ranger. "Best not to make them with stories" (11). The "mistakes" made with stories, according to King's frame story, is what made the world a mess in the first place. King plays with and convolutes the Christian creation stories and early stories from the Bible (as well as historical and literary stories), forcing the reader to understand the connection between what the colonizers have done to Indian stories and beliefs, by distorting

audience learns that the "fixing" begun in *Green Grass, Running Water* is continuing.

the Christian stories in context with Indian stories rather than the other way around.³⁶

King focuses on Christianity because "within western culture, [it] is one of the aspects of privilege." King says that his concern is not with Christianity itself, "but with the privilege it invokes. It is the basis with which the world is imagined and of how it works" (King Press Release). His intent, then, is to "destroy the privilege that Christianity has enjoyed while not injuring the idea of Christianity unduly" (King Press Release).

King may not unduly injure the idea of Christianity, but what he does do is underline the effects of colonization upon the people whom

³⁶ One instances of this occurs in the first section, where GOD insists that the story does not start with First Woman falling out of the sky, but rather with a void and then with a garden:

"First Woman's garden. That good woman makes a garden and she lives there with Ahdamn. I don't know where he comes from. Things like that happen, you know.

So there is that garden. And there is First Woman and Ahdamn. And everything is perfect. And everything is beautiful. And everything is boring.

So First Woman goes walking around with her head in the clouds, looking in the sky for things that are bent and need fixing. So she doesn't see that tree. So that tree doesn't see her. So they bump into each other.

Pardon me, says that Tree, maybe you would like something to eat.

That would be nice, says First Woman, and all sorts of good things to eat fall out of that Tree. Apples fall out. Melons fall out. Bananas fall out. Hot dogs. Fry bread, corn, potatoes. Pizza. Extra-crispy fried chicken.

Thank you, says First Woman, and she picks up all that food and brings it back to Ahdamn." (40-41)

Christianity purported to save from damnation. All too frequently, "Christian based, Western narratives want Native American characters to assume familiar roles, preconceived roles demanding that Indians be stoic, inferior, and powerless on the tragic path to disappearance" (Peters 74). King, like the old Indians who change the ending of the John Wayne movie, "fixes" this as well, and his Indians of *Green Grass, Running Water* are both humorous and serious as well as powerful in their own right, furiously rejecting any attempts to put them on this "path to disappearance," and more than capable of taking care of their own with pride and with honor. King refuses to "take part in the narratives of the dominant culture" (77), appropriating what he needs in order to take the attention away from the colonizer and put it back into the hands of the colonized.

Ultimately, it is not Coyote or the Old Indians, or a re-adjusting of history or even of Christianity that is going to "fix things." Rather, it is as King points out in the end of the novel: it is up to the people to see to the fixing and to the survivance. The family will rebuild the cabin, Norma will live there until it is Lionel's turn to carry on, Charlie will

make his peace with his father in Hollywood yet will return to the reserve, and the courageousness that Eli taught and handed down to Lionel will be preserved by the family and the tribe.

With writing that "often bows to the interrelatedness of all the creatures of creation" (Weaver 152), in *Green Grass, Running Water*, King has crafted not only one story but many stories: biblical, literary, historic, creation, as well as stories of the people of Blossom, stories that deal very much with the reality of contemporary life. Here, King has told a story of how the community has been able to "gather together those people who have gone away and show them that being together is better than being alone, that life in a community—though not always easy—carries with it benefits that cannot be had living alone" (Warrior "Flying Solo" 19). Eli and Lionel find what Norma, Latisha, and Alberta have always known, and they, with the others, will be able to continually, on a small scale, "fix things" that only they can fix.

"There Are No Truths, Only Stories"

King, as noted previously in this chapter, adds the story itself to the list of responsibilities for the story-teller. One of his main concerns is "with the range of human emotions and experience all people share" (*All My Relations* xvi). King tackles this range of human emotions from yet another angle in his third novel, *Truth and Bright Water*. Where *Medicine River* was Will's story, told in first-person from Will's point of view, *Green Grass, Running Water* chronicled the stories of Lionel, Charlie, Alberta, Eli, and Latisha from a third-person viewpoint, with the overall frame story in first-person, an unknown "I." For *Truth and Bright Water*, King tells his story with yet another first-person narrator, the fifteen-year old Tecumseh³⁷. *Truth and Bright Water* is a story of restoration, of finding home, and of understanding what life is all about.

³⁷ Historically, Tecumseh was a Shawnee Chief, a warrior leader, who sought to put together a confederacy of all tribes in the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes region in the early 1800s to eradicate the white settlers from the continent. Tecumseh, according to John Ehle, "was a traditionalist who feared no one, no ghost or spirit, no shaman, whether sorcerer or witch doctor or medicine man or priest, no warrior, no God, no other Indian, and certainly no white man" (97). Although devoted to his crusade of putting together a confederacy to crush the white settlers, Tecumseh fought with the British against the Americans. According to Mooney, Tecumseh's service to the British cause on the North American continent has been recognized by English historians,

Briefly, *Truth and Bright Water* tells the story of one summer as witnessed by the young son, Tecumseh, of estranged parents, Helen and Elvin. Tecumseh watches as the summer unfolds and the Indians from the towns of Truth (on the American side of the Shield River) and Bright Water (in Canada) prepare for the annual festival, Indian Days. *Truth and Bright Water* is the story of two homecomings: the reserve's most famous resident, Monroe Swimmer, and Cassie, Helen's sister. Monroe returns to "restore" the reserve, and Cassie comes back to make amends for past mistakes. On the verge of young adulthood, Tecumseh attempts to understand the complexities of life and searches for answers to his questions: why have Monroe and Cassie returned; will his father and mother reconcile; why is no one able to help his cousin, Lum, sort through his anger, pain, and confusion over his mother's death and his father's continued physical abuse.

Tecumseh oversees all the events of the summer: the preparation for Indian Days; Lum's intense training for the foot-race he plans to win; his father's struggle to make his carpentry talent pay off and to win back Tecumseh's mother while also sliding

'who say, 'but for them it is probable we should not now have a

further back into alcoholism. He watches Monroe's interaction (or lack thereof) with the Indians on the reserve, and he painfully learns by the end of the story that life is filled with loss, love, tragedy, and continuance.

Most of the events in *Truth and Bright Water* unfold in a linear fashion, with Tecumseh³⁸ providing background information where it is necessary, telling stories of his own, stories from his childhood that parallel the action taking place in present-time, in a similar technique used by King in *Medicine River*. For Tecumseh, the summer stretches in front of him, with nothing much to do and no job prospects in sight. His cousin, Lum, is a cigarette-smoking wiseacre whose false bravado hides a young man in deep psychological pain. The two cousins spend time together, although mostly it is Tecumseh who takes care of Lum.

Canada'." (216). The name means "flying panther" (215).

³⁸ Oddly, with the exception of Monroe Swimmer, King never refers to the other major characters by their full names. Since Franklin is Elvin's brother, and Franklin is mentioned once as Franklin Heavy Runner (96), it might be safe to assume that Heavy Runner is the surname of the others as well. Tecumseh himself is only called by name once, by auntie Cassie, when he and his mother, Helen, go to Bright Water to see her after she has returned home (52). Throughout *Truth and Bright Water*, King refers to Helen's sister as "auntie Cassie" rather than as "Auntie," and for continuity I have continued to refer to her as King has written it.

By using Tecumseh as his narrator, King is able to lay out the story of the life experiences of Tecumseh's immediate family---those who live in the town of Truth, which sits on the American side of the Shield River, and in Bright Water, which is in Canada, across the river on the reserve. Although it seems like a boring summer for Tecumseh, much is actually transpiring, and telling the story from Tecumseh's view point leaves a lot for the reader to piece together. As much as people like to believe that they know everything when they are fifteen, the fact is that they do not. Things are never what they seem filtered through the angle of a fifteen-year-old, and adults are not always forthcoming with answers. King lays out this particular story rather like a jig-saw puzzle, because not only is Tecumseh not given all the facts, but since Tecumseh is the narrator, the reader is also left to puzzle things out for him/herself, grasping the meaning of some things that Tecumseh has yet to understand and come to terms with. Most of the pieces fall together, but other questions remain unanswered.

Right from the beginning, King gives both the reader and Tecumseh an unanswered question when

Tecumseh and Lum see a woman drive up to the Horns³⁹ in a truck, dance around near the edge of the cliffs, throw something off the cliff, and then jump off into the river below. Tecumseh thinks that she must be dead, but Lum points out that she just jumped off the cliff. If she had jumped "off the bridge she'd be dead for sure" Lum says (11), which is a foreshadowing of events that will happen by the end of the story. Neither boy knows who the woman is, and Tecumseh spends most of the novel trying to figure this out. By starting the story this way, King is setting the ground rules for his readers: not everything has an easy explanation and it takes piecing together the clues to better grasp the entire story. King's novel is life, in microcosm.

King starts with a mystery for Tecumseh to unravel, and more is added throughout the course of the story. Tecumseh does not understand why his cousin Lum acts as strangely as he does; nor does he know why

³⁹ King describes the Horns in the book's prologue: "The Horns, like Truth and the old church, are on the American side of the river, twin stone pillars that rise up from the water and meet to form a shaggy rock crescent that hangs over the river like the hooked head of a buffalo. It is an old place, silent and waiting, and from the high curved shelf of the outcrop, you can turn into the wind and feel the earth breathing or watch the Shield [River] glow black and bright, as the evening shadows run out across the land like ribbons in a breeze" (2).

his auntie Cassie⁴⁰ has decided to return to Truth and Bright Water, nor why Monroe Swimmer, "famous Indian artist," has returned home as well.⁴¹ The interpersonal relationships between the adults in Tecumseh's life confound him, and as an adolescent he does not make it the center of his existence to try to understand it all, but rather he slowly watches the summer unwind as some things become more clear to him, and others simply continue to be confusing. The hardest lesson Tecumseh learns during that summer is that reality is not often as it seems, and wanting something badly does not make it happen.

⁴⁰ Throughout *Truth and Bright Water*, King refers to Helen's sister as "auntie Cassie" rather than as "Auntie," and for continuity I have continued to refer to her as King has written it. Neither Elvin nor Helen, nor Tecumseh are ever referred to by their last names. Since Franklin is Elvin's brother, and Franklin is mentioned once as Franklin Heavy Runner (96), it might be safe to assume that Heavy Runner is the surname of the others as well. Tecumseh himself is only called by name once, by auntie Cassie, when Helen and Tecumseh go over to Bright Water to see her after she has returned home (52).

⁴¹ Swimmer is an old and honorable Cherokee name. The name of the Cherokee storyteller from whom James Mooney heard almost all of the Cherokee stories he records in *Myths of the Cherokee*, this Swimmer was born around 1835 and died in 1899 when he was sixty-five years old. Of him, Mooney writes: "A genuine aboriginal antiquarian and patriot, proud of his people and their ancient system, he took delight in recording in his native alphabet the songs and sacred formulas of priests and dancers and the names of medicinal plants and the prescriptions with which they were compounded, while his mind was a storehouse of Indian tradition. [He was] buried like a true Cherokee on the slope of a forest-clad mountain. Peace to his ashes and sorrow for his going, for with him perished half the tradition of a people" (236-237). King's Swimmer wants to restore his people, to bring back the traditions. This Swimmer does not do it through words, but through his painting and his restoration projects.

Adult relationships, seen by children, make less sense than they do to the adults. Tecumseh watches his mother, Helen, and his auntie Cassie, her sister, argue, make reparations, argue again, and bond together as women with a shared heartache by the end of the story, but Tecumseh does not know what has caused the rift between the two, nor how they finally reconcile. He is confused by their relationships with both his father, Elvin, and with Monroe Swimmer, who left Truth and Bright Water to go to Toronto sixteen years before. Most of what Tecumseh learns about these interpersonal relationships is from what he overhears; only the mystery of the woman on the Horns is ever completely clarified, and only because Tecumseh figures it out for himself.

Once Cassie comes home, Helen visits her at their mother's house in Bright Water. The two sisters are very similar in looks and build, and near the end of this scene, King highlights this similarity for the first time when one of them walks out of the house and Tecumseh thinks it is his mother. It isn't until the woman speaks to Tecumseh that he realizes it is auntie Cassie. Later, when the women think that Tecumseh is asleep, he overhears the clothes-swapping story for

the first time. Tecumseh listens as Cassie remembers how they swapped clothing and re-did their hairstyles in the bathroom, rejoining their dates, who did not realize they had been fooled. Tecumseh thinks they are talking about his father, Elvin, and Elvin's brother, Franklin. It isn't until later that he finds out that it wasn't Franklin at all, but Monroe Swimmer.

King uses Tecumseh's viewpoint to tell the story, but Tecumseh is the most peripheral character of all in the events that unfold throughout the course of the summer. Everything that happens swirls around him, drawing him in closer in the circle of family, yet rigidly holding him at arm's length because no one will tell him the complete truth. "Telling the truth is always chancy," (109) Tecumseh realizes early in the story, and it appears as if the adults believe that as well. He realizes that while no one actually lies to him, they are not direct with him, either:

My mother doesn't hold with lying, but sometimes pulling the truth out of her is harder than dragging Soldier away from a telephone pole. Sometimes you can see the answer in her face. Other times you have to guess. (21)

Tecumseh's relationship with his cousin, Lum, is the most complex of all, yet another instance where Tecumseh is not told the truth, but has to guess at what lies behind Lum's actions. Younger than Lum by two years, Tecumseh has not had to weather tragedies as Lum has, but rather is on the outside, watching Lum as he spirals further and further into his depression and pain. Tecumseh makes reference to the fact that Lum's mother is dead, and although Helen mentions "the accident," just how she died or how long before the story starts did her death occur is never clarified. Instead, King shows the effects of her death on both Lum and his father, Franklin.

The death of his mother has affected Lum to the extent that "sometimes [he] remembers that his mother is dead, and sometimes he forgets" (14). He alternates between believing that she will return and finally, painfully, screaming that she is gone forever. He harbors the belief that the woman he and Tecumseh saw that first night on the Horns was his mother come back to him. He feels abandoned, not only by his mother, but by his father, who physically abuses him, in what first appears to be his own anger and sorrow over the

loss of his wife.⁴² But Franklin's abuse of his son goes deeper than that; Franklin, much like Elvin, is searching for ways to make his life better, and each brother concocts different get-rich-quick schemes in attempts to make money and find the security that has eluded them within their families. Franklin's abuse of Lum appears to be his way of holding Lum back from the success at life that has eluded Franklin. Lum is a runner, and although he is not above drinking and smoking from time to time, it is obvious that he has great skill at this. Lum sees his running as a way of making something of himself. While training for the big race held at Indian Days, he tells Tecumseh (who is always made to time how fast Lum is): "If I wanted, I could get one of those running scholarships at a big university" (5). Lum runs everywhere, across the deteriorating bridge that separates Truth and Bright Water, along the train tracks in front of trains, and

⁴² At least, Tecumseh believes it to be that way until he hears a conversation between his father and a few of his friends. He finds out that Lum has been camping out down by the river because Franklin threw him out of the house: 'My father turns and looks at me. 'Kicked the shit out of him while he was at it.' 'Franklin's a real hard ass,' says Wilfred. 'Losing the missus was rough on him,' says Eddie. My father bangs the back of his head against the wire, as if he's trying to move it around and make it more comfortable. 'Franklin was a hard ass long before she died.' (189)

across the prairie and around the Horns, almost daring death to catch him.

But what Tecumseh does not understand is that Lum is running because he is afraid---afraid that his mother really is dead and will not come back to protect him from Franklin, afraid of Franklin and his abuse, and afraid of being alone. When Tecumseh's dog, Soldier, finds the old baby skull the night they saw the woman jump from the Horns, Lum appropriates it and takes care of it, calling it his "baby," just as he wants to be cared for. Tecumseh does not have the same abandonment issues to deal with that Lum has, and because of that, Tecumseh does not understand his cousin's actions.

Tecumseh notes that "sorrow is different from anger" (64), but for Lum the two are so tightly wrapped that he cannot separate them. See-sawing back and forth between acceptance of his mother's death and a belief that she is only gone but will return, and a father's physical abuse, Lum has no one else to reach out to and does not know how to deal with the psychological implications of his pain and anger. Because he is so alone, even the other adults are unaware of how deeply he is hurt. Even Helen tells

Tecumseh that "it's probably best to leave it alone, that in the end, Lum will work it out for himself" (14).

Lum does "work it out for himself." He makes the conscious choice to return home—a choice made by a number of people in King's story—but the only home Lum knows is the one with his mother. He drops a lot of hints to Tecumseh, such as the time he asks him "You ever think about just taking off?" (151) and finally, during Indian Days, when Tecumseh finally finds Lum down by the river, Lum looks terrible: "Lum has cut his hair. It's short and uneven, as if it's been hacked off with a chain saw. And he's painted his face. Red on one side. Black on the other. He looks weird" (225). Lum, it would appear, is finally in mourning for his mother, and he knows that the only way to get her back is to join her.

When Lum runs, with Tecumseh watching with the stop-watch, Tecumseh often thinks, "there's no telling how far he'll go this time before he decides to turn around and come home" (157). This final time, the night after Monroe's giveaway, Lum does not turn around, but he does "come home." When he meets up with Tecumseh and Monroe and finds out that it was Monroe

that first night up at the Horns, Monroe in his long-haired Graham Greene wig throwing rescued Indian bones into the river and dancing on the edge, the last bit of hope that Lum held of his mother's return finally dies. He tells Tecumseh that throwing the bones into the river is a good idea and that they should do the same with the skull they have, too. Up on the bridge between Truth and Bright Water, they can hear Monroe playing his piano on the prairie in the distance.

"That was my mother's favorite song," Lum announces (257) and lets the skull drop off the bridge into the water below. "Nothing to it," Lum says, "All you have to do is let go" (257).

Lum, too, decides to let go. He starts to run, telling Tecumseh that he is going to keep on going until he feels like stopping when he gets to the finish line. Soldier breaks away from Tecumseh and chases after Lum, and Tecumseh calls to them both.

Lum is moving easily now. He glides along the naked girders gracefully, Soldier hard on his heels and closing, until the curve of the bridge begins its descent into Bright Water and Lum and Soldier disappear over the edge. The bridge is empty, and all I see in the distance is the

lights of Bright Water and all I see below me is the fog. And all I hear is the wind and the faint strains of the piano rising out of the land with the sun." (259)

King, in wanting to share a story that deals with that "range of human emotions and experience all people share" writes poignantly of the pain, alienation, and desperation that Lum feels, a tragic young man who cannot see any other alternatives for him than to end his own life because he cannot stand that pain and loneliness. Not all stories have happy conclusions, and Lum's death forces Tecumseh to realize that happiness, or at least maintaining balance in life, is not always possible.

Maintaining Balance

Like the old Indians in *Green Grass, Running Water* who want to fix things, and like Harlen Bigbear in *Medicine River* whose specialty was "helping," in *Truth and Bright Water*, it is Monroe Swimmer, who is "planning on doing restoration work" (48). King has said,

I think there is within Native communities a great desire to maintain a balance, to make

things right if they're wrong---not to make everything good but to maintain a balance.

There's a big difference. Things [go] wrong--as things will--but [we've got to] maintain some kind of a balance. (Weaver 149)

Monroe Swimmer plans to actively do something in order to maintain some sort of balance. Monroe left Truth and Bright Water some sixteen years before the summer of Tecumseh's story, and no one knew why. "Lucille Rain figured it had to have something to do with women or money, because almost everything else that happened in the world did. There was the story that Monroe had gotten someone pregnant, but Lucille said you shouldn't confuse rumors with gossip and that rumors shouldn't be repeated" (26). However, he had always been an artist and was able to parlay those artistic skills into quite a lot of money in Toronto, where he began his restoration work. He tells Tecumseh that he finally ran into difficulties while he was working to restore paintings for museums:

"The new paint wouldn't hold. Almost as soon as I finished, the images began to bleed through again."

"So you had to paint it over."

"You know what they were?" says Monroe.

"What?"

"Indians," says Monroe. "There was an Indian village on the lake, slowly coming up through the layers of paint. Clear as day." (130)

What Monroe finally did was to paint the Indians back into the painting, which cost him his job. He says to Tecumseh, "I don't think they wanted their Indians restored. I think they liked their Indians where they couldn't see them" (247). So Monroe comes home to continue his restoration work. He decides that he is going to do more than just restore Indians to their rightful place in the paintings; he is going to "restore" the country, take it back to the way that it was before colonization, before it started falling apart.

He brings with him over 300 buffalo cast in iron, and he places them strategically around the prairie, with the help of Tecumseh. "I had them made up before I left Toronto. It's my new restoration project. I'm going to save the world. We haven't much time. We'd better get started," (130-131) Monroe tells Tecumseh. Monroe, more than anyone else in King's story, has had enough of the effects of colonization. He is fed up

with arbitrary boundaries, the changing landscape of the prairies and coulees, and the way white society has tried to make the Indians disappear and keep them that way. Monroe stands by the edge of the river:

"There's Canada," he says. Then he turns and spreads his arms. "And this is the United States." He spins around in a full circle, stumbles, and goes down in a heap. "Ridiculous, isn't it?" (131)

Monroe is going to restore the Indians, the buffalo, and the countryside. He moves into the old church, the one that "sits on a rise above Truth, overlooking the river and the bridge" (1), a church that had been built by the Methodists as a mission to the Indians, and was subsequently owned by the Baptists, the Nazarenes, the First Assembly of God, and finally the Sacred Word Gospel. What Monroe is able to do is what the museums wanted him to do to the Indians in the paintings: he paints the church away. Tecumseh realizes what Monroe is doing only gradually:

The entire east side of the church is gone. Or at least it looks gone. I don't know how Monroe has done it, but he's painted this side so that it blends in with the prairies and the sky, and he's

done such a good job that it looks as if part of the church has been chewed off. (43)

Monroe completes his job so thoroughly that by the end, not even he can find the church. All anyone can see is the landscape. "'Look at that,' says Monroe. 'Just like the old days.' I look, but I don't see much of anything. Besides the river, there is only the land and the sky" (134-135). Tecumseh does not yet understand nor appreciate what Monroe is trying to do.

Monroe may outwardly seem eccentric, and there are a number of stories that the community tells about him that corroborate that theory, such as the time when he was younger and he slid all the way across the Shield River when the ice wasn't completely frozen, or "hopping freight cars as they came out of the yards on the fly and riding them all the way to Prairie View and back, or running the rapids below the bridge on an inner tube during spring flood" (25). Other stories trickle back from Toronto as well. Once he returns, he hides out at the church, appearing only to Tecumseh, who ends up working for him. He attends Indian days in disguise, not yet wanting the other Indians to recognize and greet him. Another time, Tecumseh finds him out behind the church, swimming in the grass. He

tells Tecumseh that he needs to include the words "Famous Indian artist" after his name whenever Tecumseh refers to him. He races around the church in a wheelchair and frequently wears a long wig. Tecumseh reports that "his hair is long and black and tied back with a piece of red cloth."⁴³ He's older than I imagined. And aside from the hair, which reminds me of Graham Greene's hair in *Dances With Wolves*, he looks ordinary" (45).

One of the first times Tecumseh meets Monroe outside the church, Monroe has painted a bench green, so that it blends in with the prairie grasses, and he is flying a kite that is so blue it blends in with the sky and all Tecumseh can see is the string leading up to what appears to be nothing. Monroe is "restoring." Monroe calls the kite "Teaching the Sky about Blue," and the bench "Teaching the Grass about Green." He also has plans to do "Teaching the Night about Dark," but says, "thought I'd better start with the easy ones first" (49).

⁴³ Not only is Monroe's hair tied with a red cloth, but the ribbon that Rebecca Neugin gives to Tecumseh is red, and Tecumseh notices that his mother has begun to add a red bird to one corner of the quilt she has been working on for years. For the Cherokee, the color red is symbolic of war, strength, success, and spirit protection (Mooney 455). It is the Cherokees' holiest color, too.

Part of Monroe's restoration project involves old Indian bones. While working in various museums, Monroe searches through the forgotten archives where the staff has stored bones taken from archeological digs. He steals as many of the bones as he can, stores them in his chest, and returns with them to Truth and Bright Water, where he has been throwing them into the river, returning them to the land, where he believes they belong. Tecumseh asks why Monroe brought them back here. Monroe tells him:

"Look around. This is the center of the universe.

Where else would they want to be?" (251)⁴⁴

For Monroe, this is home. Home is the center of the universe. Earlier, Lum had said to Tecumseh that the only reason anyone comes back to Truth and Bright Water is if "they're crazy or dying" (67). But Tecumseh thinks differently. During Indian Days, standing in the wind, facing the mountains, Tecumseh thinks Lum is wrong:

⁴⁴ John Ehle reports in *Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation* that for the Cherokee, "their lands were the center of the Earth. All else radiated outward from there" (1). King, as will be discussed below, combines Cherokee stories and beliefs throughout *Truth and Bright Water* even though the Indians in the story are Blackfoot. In light of that, and also in light of the deep connection between Indian people and the land, Monroe's comment makes a lot of sense.

Maybe Monroe and auntie Cassie didn't come home because they had no place else to go or because they were crazy, but because there was no place else in the world they wanted to be. (232)

King focuses on this same point in *Green Grass, Running Water* when Eli asks Lionel if he could be anywhere in the world he wanted, where would it be? Eli wants Lionel to realize that he would want to be home, "the center of the universe" as Monroe calls it. Tecumseh's mother asks him the same question when she is thinking about moving from Bright Water after Elvin has left the family. Tecumseh, although not as vocal about it as Monroe, eventually answers the same thing: right there, in Truth and Bright Water---home.

Even after the giveaway Monroe has after Indian Days, he makes it clear to Tecumseh that he is not going to leave the reserve. He has "restored" the church, and brought the buffalo back, but he still needs to continue his restoration work. Tecumseh asks him where he is going to live and what he is going to do now that he has given everything away.

"There's an old residential school for sale over near Medicine River."

"You going to paint it?"

"That's about all anyone can do." (248)

Monroe is "starting with the small stuff" in his attempt to save the world. He, like the four old Indians in *Green Grass, Running Water*, knows the world can only be saved one little bit at a time.

Monroe's restoration work is not limited to painting churches and residential schools, nor is it limited to staking iron buffalo out in the prairie, or returning stolen Indian bones to the land. Monroe's return has also "restored" Helen, Tecumseh's mother.

King drops hints of this piece of restoration work throughout this story, and because of the fifteen-year-old narrator, who also happens to be Helen's son, what King is doing is "entice[ing] even trick[ing] his audience into finding out for themselves" (Fee 132). The audience receives its information in much the same way that Tecumseh does, and must piece the bits together and come to conclusions on its own, because the adults, even when asked questions point-blank, evade the answers.

The complications involved in the interpersonal relationships between the adults in Tecumseh's life never appear to be completely resolved. King is trying to show through his story that not only is life

confusing for young people on the verge of adulthood, but for adults as well. Once Tecumseh learns that both auntie Cassie and Monroe Swimmer have returned to Truth and Bright Water, most of the events throughout the rest of the story become those pieces of King's jigsaw puzzle that I mentioned earlier, pieces that do not necessarily fit together smoothly.

Something happened sixteen years before that caused Monroe to leave Truth and Bright Water, something that tore the sisterly bond shared so closely between Helen and Cassie. Inseparable as children, doing everything together even to the point of attending the same community college and training in the same field, Helen and Cassie are physically very much alike, which explains their ability to change clothes and hairstyles in the restaurant without their dates noticing the change. But then Monroe left town for Toronto, Cassie left to wander around the world, and Helen married Elvin and gave birth to Tecumseh.

Tecumseh is privy to many clipped conversations that make no sense to him, but all refer to either Cassie's secret (a child named Mia), Monroe Swimmer, and the mistake that caused the breach between Helen

and Cassie. First there is the rumor that Monroe left town because he had gotten someone pregnant (26). Then Tecumseh's grandmother comments "I suppose this is about Mia" when Cassie is talking about how long she is going to stay in Bright Water this visit (54). When Helen and Cassie recount the time they switched clothes, Tecumseh knows that one of the men with them that night was his father, Elvin. He says,

I figured that the other guy was Franklin, and that after the switch, auntie Cassie wound up with my father and my mother wound up with Franklin. The best part was while they were waiting for dessert. Franklin took my mother's hand and announced that this was the woman he was going to marry. I wondered how long it took them to figure out the switch and what they said when they discovered that they were with the wrong women. (95)

Tecumseh hears a lot of cryptic commentary that night he overhears the story of the switch. "I know it wasn't your fault," Helen says (114). And she asks Cassie:

"You going to say anything to him?"

"Like what?" says auntie Cassie.

"Maybe he'll want to help." (112)

Cassie tells Helen that what she needs is a man.

"Had one."

"I didn't mean Elvin," says auntie Cassie.

"Neither did I," says my mother. (114)

When Tecumseh finds out that the man with his mother the night she and auntie Cassie switched clothes in the restaurant was not his uncle Franklin, but Monroe Swimmer, parts of this overheard conversation begin to make sense, maybe not to Tecumseh, but to the reader/audience. By the time Tecumseh's grandmother suggests that Monroe Swimmer play the role of "Prince Charming" in the local production of "Snow White" that Helen wants to be in, even though she is mixing up her fairy tales, it is becoming more clear that Monroe is the man Helen should have married, and is the man that she is still in love with.

This raises more questions than it answers, lending credence to the belief that what King is showing with his story is that interpersonal relationships are confusing and that everyone is connected or related in some way. Even Lucy Rabbit, the woman who thinks Marilyn Monroe was really an

Indian and wants to look exactly like her, know this. She tells Tecumseh:

"It's a small world. It's a lot smaller than you think. Everybody's related," Lucy told us. "The trouble with this world is that you wouldn't know it from the way we behave." (202)

All Helen will tell her son is that it was "another life, another time" (207). But the connection between Helen and Monroe becomes clearer. She goes off for a few days and although she brings back a souvenir for Tecumseh, it appears that she spent the time with Monroe. First, Lum peeks into the church late at night and tells Tecumseh that Monroe has a woman in there with him. Then when Helen does come home, she is playing the music from *Oklahoma!*, which is the same music that Monroe insisted that he and Tecumseh sing for his ceremony before they start to plant the iron buffalo on the prairie. Tecumseh is not very quick to make this connection, but comes close to some conclusions after his mother's trip when he goes back to work for Monroe and finds fresh flowers all over the church. Helen always has fresh flowers in her shop, rescuing flowers from the local trash each day, pulling off the dead ones and arranging what is left

as best she can. When Tecumseh sees the flowers in the church he takes note of them, thinking that his mother would be proud. Monroe attends the production of Snow White that Helen is in, and fresh freesias show up at the shop the next day. They are from Monroe, although it is only implied when Helen says they are not from Elvin or auntie Cassie

How deep does the connection between Helen and Monroe actually go? Perhaps further than even Tecumseh is able to imagine because King hints that it is Monroe who is Tecumseh's father, and not Elvin at all. When Tecumseh wanders up to the church and meets Monroe for the first time, Monroe says to him cryptically, "I've been waiting for you, did you know that?" (48). Elvin himself acts rather distantly towards Tecumseh, even more so when he is drinking. He uses Tecumseh constantly in order to find out information about Helen, such as what she is doing and who she is with, especially checking to find out if she has a boyfriend or not. When Elvin is reminded that it was Tecumseh's birthday the previous week, and that he is now fifteen, Elvin runs out and buys him a box of condoms.

" 'Use these,' he says, and he presses the box into my hand. 'Happy birthday, son. Don't worry. There're instructions in the box'" (37).

Elvin knows so little of his son that when Skee asks him what Tecumseh is going to do when he grows up, all Elvin can say is "beats me. Better ask his mother" (34).

Even when Elvin finally moved out and left Bright Water for Truth, Helen does not react. That is, the relationship between the two has never seemed very close from the stories that Tecumseh tells. For someone whose husband has just abandoned the family, she appears very calm. Tecumseh notes:

My mother didn't yell and throw things the way you see women do in the movies. She stayed in the house and worked on the quilt. I was pretty sure she was angry, but maybe she was sad at the same time. (65)

Tecumseh sees the world as someone on the brink of young adulthood, and as far as reliability goes, he is incapable of processing information without having the life experience to go with it. Tecumseh may see his mother as a combination of sad and angry at Elvin's abandonment, but taken in context with the hints that

King has interspersed throughout regarding her feelings for Monroe, Helen's reaction appears to be more resigned relief than anything else. Even when Elvin abandons the both of them during the vacation Helen meticulously planned for the family, Helen remains calm. After waiting a day for Elvin to return, they pack everything up and simply wait for a bus to take them back to Bright Water.

Monroe's return is liberating for Helen, and her reconnection with him gives her the added belief in herself that she needs to both forgive Cassie her indiscretion, forgive Elvin his, and also to forgive herself. The precarious balance that Helen has been maintaining, although shaken with Lum's death, is finally back on solid ground. Everything has not been "made good," as King notes, but the balance has returned to an equilibrium that can be maintained.

One of the facets of King as a novelist is his ability to portray women with sensitivity and accuracy, not only in *Truth and Bright Water* in the characters of Helen and Cassie, but also in *Green Grass, Running Water* with Latisha and Alberta, as well as Louise Heavyman and Martha Oldcrow in *Medicine River*. Most male writers have difficulty capturing the

essence in their women characters, most especially those authors who take on the female persona and write from that first-person viewpoint.⁴⁵ All of the women in King's stories are strong women, which may be the result of King's upbringing in a women-centered household, where he was raised in "a woman's world" (Weaver 146).⁴⁶ The women in these stories are not perfect, but they are smart, no-nonsense women who are "centered on continuance" (Allen 98). Part of their concern with continuance also revolves around maintaining balance.

Paula Gunn Allen has written that:

⁴⁵ Michael Dorris is one author, in my opinion, who comes to mind in this regard. His female characters in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* sound like how men think women speak and act. Although it is a massive generalization, I do believe that Indian writers are capable of portraying realistic women more so than Euro-American writers and could probably make a valid case for this in another, very lengthy, thesis.

⁴⁶ Weaver's description of King's formative years echoes the description that King uses in writing about Helen and the house where she and Tecumseh live: "King's mother raised two sons, supporting herself as a hairdresser. Her beauty shop was in the front of a warehouse, in which the family also lived. The back portion of the building was still used for storage. Their home had no windows; the only light came from whatever electric lights they turned on" (146). Helen owns a beauty parlor in Truth, and the back section where they live, is vividly described by Tecumseh much the same as King's boyhood home: "The building my mother rents was once a hardware store and warehouse. It is a long narrow affair that smells vaguely of paint thinner and oil. At the front, where my mother has her shop, the ceiling has been lowered, so when we first moved into the building, it felt as though we were moving into a cave. . . The back area is cooler, and everything beyond the shop is dark grey. But there aren't any windows in this part of the building. And even with all the lights on and the television going, you feel as if you're sitting at the bottom of a well" (66-67).

Most of the Indian women [I know] are in the same bind: we vacillate between being dependent and strong, self-reliant and powerless, strongly motivated and hopelessly insecure. (48)

Allen's description fits the four women of these two novels. To the list of King's vibrant portraits of women I would also add Tecumseh's grandmother and Lionel's auntie Norma; but they, more than these other four, are more centered on the idea of balance and hold more strongly onto their ability to be dependent, self-reliant, and secure rather than vacillating between the two opposites.

Helen, Tecumseh's mother, has always been forthright and became more independent after her break with Cassie. Before that time, the two were inseparable, with Helen, as the younger, following everything that Cassie did. Although King does not allow Tecumseh to say specifically what has happened (because Tecumseh does not know), the night of the switched clothes and boyfriends changed all of their lives. There is sufficient reason to believe that it is Monroe who is Tecumseh's father, just as it becomes clearer that it is Elvin who fathered the child, Mia, who Cassie gave away. Helen keeps her secrets from her

son, but after Elvin leaves, she is not shaken. She owns her own business, the beauty shop. She and Tecumseh do not have a car⁴⁷, but as Elvin is quick to point out to the boy when he thinks Elvin is going to give them money, "You ever been hungry? And she's got the shop, right?" (36). Helen does not need anything from Elvin, she is self-sufficient in her own right, although she is lonely.

One of the things that Helen has done throughout her marriage to Elvin is to work on a quilt. What starts out as a simple design of "patterns with names like Harvest Star, and Sunshine and Shadow, and Sunburst" (61) becomes a statement about Helen's life. She adds all sorts of things one would not expect to find on a quilt "such as the heavy metal washers that

⁴⁷ Elvin, in a burst of desperation at one point, gets hold of an old car that he plans to fix up and give to Helen. That plan, along with many other of his get-rich-quick-off-white-tourists schemes, takes a long time coming to fruition. However, in the case of the car there are two things to point out: one, is that Elvin does eventually fix it and give it to Helen. And two, the car was a white Karmann Ghia. Elvin "got it off a guy in Blossom. Almost stole it" (142) and Tecumseh noticed that the carpet was "all matted down and there was a long tear in the passenger's seat" (142). It smells wet. King uses this instance to make connections between the people in *Truth and Bright Water* to the people in *Green Grass, Running Water* who live on or near the same reserve. The car is Dr. Hovaugh's Karmann Ghia that, along with the blue Pinto and the red Nissan, were floating on Parliament Lake after the arrival of the old Indians and before the dam burst. King makes mention of Parliament Lake as well as Lionel's business—the old "Bursum's Entertainment Barn" that he bought when Bursum went bankrupt—and Latisha's Dead Dog Café, where Elvin and Tecumseh eat lunch while off doing errands one day.

run along the outside edges and the clusters of needles that she has worked into the stitching just below the fish hooks and the chicken's feathers" (61). Parts of the quilt look like the towns of Truth and Bright Water with the river flowing between them. In other sections, Tecumseh thinks he can make out forms of people that he thinks are Elvin and himself. He also sees "towards one side, away from everything else, a piece of rose terry cloth that reminded me of a sleeping child" (62) which could be Mia, Cassie's child.

Helen works on the quilt as a record of her life and when she feels that her balance is coming back, with the return of Monroe and her decision to act in the play, "Snow White," Tecumseh notices an addition to the quilt:

Towards one of the corners, near the feathers and the squares of woven quilts, I can see where my mother has begun work on a purple and red Flying Bird. I'm guessing that this is probably auntie Cassie come home, but I know it's too soon to tell⁴⁸. (145)

⁴⁸ The redbird, called *tatsu'hwa* by the Cherokee, is "believed to have been originally the daughter of the Sun" (Mooney 285). The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is similar to the Cherokee story of

Helen's depiction of the redbird on her quilt can be seen not as Cassie come back, but as Helen herself, signifying that her life has changed and that which is in the past can never be brought back to be the way that it was. For Helen, then, this would be an acceptance of what has happened in her life, and a way of her signifying that she has forgiven Cassie and Monroe, and is ready to regain balance and continue on.

Helen does not need Monroe to help her to regain her balance, only what Monroe represents to her--the past and what could have been as opposed to the present and where she is now. Monroe's return both opens up old wounds and also heals them for Helen. Like the old Indians helped Lionel to stand on his own feet as a member of his family, Monroe "restores" Helen to the independent and strong woman that she has been all along.

the Daughter of the Sun in that the Sun's daughter died and the men of the village who tried to bring her back from the Ghost country failed to fully follow instructions they received from the Little Men not to open the box that held the girl until they were home again. Fearful that she was dying in the box, they opened it a bit to let some air in for her and by opening the box, "something flew past them into the thicket and they heard a redbird cry" (254). Mooney's report of the story ends: "If the men had kept the box closed, as the Little Men told them to do, they would have brought her home safely, and we could bring back our other friends also from the Ghost country, but now when they die we can never bring them back" (254).

At Monroe's giveaway, held the evening that Indian Days ends, Cassie and Helen arrive together, in the white Karmann Ghia Elvin finally fixed. Drawn to the prairie around the church by the enormous bonfire Monroe and Tecumseh built, they stand to the side while Monroe picks specific things to give to different individuals. Tecumseh helps Monroe disburse his belongings.

Monroe chooses an Inuit sculpture of a woman with a child on her back and says to Tecumseh, "We'll give her this" (244). Cassie accepts the gift, although she does not look pleased about it and tells her nephew, "Be careful what you give away. There are some things you want to keep" (244).

Cassie has been haunted for the past sixteen years by thoughts of the daughter, Mia, that she gave away. Cassie's ghost from the past is one of the things that confuses Tecumseh when Cassie returns because no one will directly tell him anything about Mia. The closest he comes is when he finally shows Cassie a picture he stole from his mother's photograph collection on the night of the giveaway and asks if it is Mia.

"Is she someone I know?"

"No." Auntie Cassie puts the photograph in her coat. "You never knew her."

I wait to see if auntie Cassie is going to finish the story, but I can see that she's gone as far as she wants to go.

"Another life," she says, "Another time."

(245)

If *Truth and Bright Water* is about finding home, Cassie is one of the people who finally accomplishes this. Rather than face her problems and the pain she has caused people, Cassie has spent the past sixteen years roaming around the world with a vast assortment of lovers, searching for the love and acceptance she thought was lost to her back in Bright Water. When Tecumseh tells her that Monroe is making the church disappear, she says:

"They do that all the time."

"Who?"

"Men."

"Do what?"

"Disappear." (164)

But it is Cassie who has done the disappearing, sending a strange assortment of birthday presents to Tecumseh, never on his birthday, but in the middle of

the summer; one time a doll, another time a small chest with drawers, and another time the book *Anne of Green Gables*. Tecumseh does not understand this, and it rather annoys him, but Cassie is not celebrating Tecumseh's birthday with the presents; rather she is marking Mia's birthday and she sends presents to Tecumseh in lieu of sending them to her daughter.

By the end of Indian Days, it is obvious that it is not Monroe who left town because he got Cassie pregnant; rather, it is Elvin who is the father of Cassie's child. King allows Tecumseh to hear and report those bits of conversations, again, which mean little to Tecumseh, but taken as a whole put the puzzle pieces together. Another part of the talk that Helen and Cassie have the night they think Tecumseh is sleeping means nothing then, but in light of what happens at Indian Days, points to Elvin being Mia's father.

"So," says my mother, "you going to say anything to him?"

"Like what?" says auntie Cassie.

"Maybe he'll want to help." (112)

At Indian Days, Tecumseh, who has been looking for Helen because Elvin wants to give her the Karmann Ghia

that he's finally fixed, thinks he finds her talking to Elvin in the parking lot, and hides behind the cars to hear what they are saying.

"So what do you want me to do?" I can hear my father's voice and it doesn't sound happy.

My mother doesn't say anything. I get down on my hands and knees and look under the truck, but all I can see is their feet, and it doesn't look as if they're going to get back together right away.

"If you want to chase ghosts," says my father, "go right ahead."

"Even if you do find her," I hear my father say, "you think she's going to be happy to see you?" (222)

Tecumseh thinks that the woman is his mother; not until she walks away without having said anything does he see that it is his auntie Cassie.

Cassie has come home, then, in order to find Mia. She has a tattoo on her knuckles that say "AIM," and Tecumseh thinks that she joined the American Indian Movement during her travels, but she tells him that she did it herself, in a mirror. He understands that it wasn't "AIM" that Cassie was tattooing on herself,

but "MIA," a constant reminder of that which she gave up. But when Elvin refuses to help her, she finally lets go of that part of her life. At Monroe's giveaway, she sits close to the bonfire, hugging herself as if cold, and then slowly takes out the baby clothes Helen saved for Cassie:

Auntie Cassie opens the suitcase, takes out a small shirt, and holds it up to the light. Against the heat of the fire, the shirt looks soft and golden, and even though I'm watching, I almost miss it, the motion is so quick and casual. In the end, all I really do see is the shirt spread out and floating, bright against the night. It settles onto the embers, lies there in the fire for the longest time, and then slowly curls up at the edges, glows briefly, and is gone. (246)

Helen wraps Cassie in the quilt she has been working on for years, and she watches, too, as Cassie slowly and deliberately tosses each piece of baby clothing into the fire.

Wrapping Cassie in her quilt is Helen's way of letting Cassie know that all is forgiven. For Cassie, burning the baby clothes is the gesture she makes to

sever her ties to the past she can never regain. She burns the clothes because she is letting go of Mia finally, and is also letting go of the idea of trying to find the girl, who would be Tecumseh's age by this time. Cassie, like Helen, is making her peace with the past, and has come home, finally, to stay. Cassie has made a 16-year pretense at being strong, self-reliant, and secure, but all she has been doing is avoiding the pain of her mistakes. When Tecumseh asks her if she is going to stay, she does not answer him, but her actions the night of the giveaway and Helen's reaction to Cassie are the clues King drops that Cassie is where she needs to be, and that her balance, like Helen's has been restored. She has been searching for something, and finally finds it where it has always been: at home.

Searching For Home

In this story, King has been deftly writing about restoration (Monroe's project and Helen's reawakening), understanding what life is all about (Tecumseh's painful coming-of-age dealing with the death of both Lum and Soldier), and finding home (Lum through his intentional death, and Cassie and Monroe's

deliberate choice to return to the "center of the universe"). In one of the more unusual aspects of the story, King includes yet another group of people who are trying to find home.

Throughout all his writing, King "draws eclectically on a range of tribal traditions" (Wyile 108), which is readily apparent in *Green Grass, Running Water*. In *Truth and Bright Water*, although the people about whom King is writing are Blackfoot, King integrates more direct Cherokee stories and influence than he has before. Instead of making Cherokee stories part of the frame story, here it actually is part of Tecumseh's story.

Lum first alerts Tecumseh to the Cherokee family from Georgia who are staying at the Happy Trails RV Park that Franklin runs. Lum says they're "on their way to Oklahoma," and Tecumseh points out that "they're going in the wrong direction" (14). But many of the people in this story have been "going in the wrong direction," and still manage to find what they have been looking for by the story's end.

Tecumseh's encounters with the young Cherokee girl from Georgia are always a bit odd, almost ethereal in nature. The girl makes unusual comments

about her traveling companions and the nature of their visit to Indian Days. She never stands in direct sunlight and when Tecumseh sees her out of the shadows, "she looks strange, pale and transparent" (102). Another time, Tecumseh says "she steps forward into the wind and the light, and she seems to shimmer for a moment and fade" (148). She tells Tecumseh her name is Rebecca Neugin⁴⁹. Tecumseh describes her:

The girl is younger than me and thin, with dark eyes and long thick hair tied back with a red ribbon. She reminds me of the Tailfeather twins. Or a bird. (101)

⁴⁹ A picture of Mrs. Rebecca Neugin appears in Grant Foreman's *Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians*, a photo showing her "at the age of ninety-six years (1931), a member of the Cherokee nation" (215). When the Georgia Cherokee were forced to relocate to Oklahoma along the "Trail of Tears," Rebecca Neugin was five years old. In a footnote to Foreman's book, he records information obtained from the *New York Observer* dated November 10, 1938 (p. 3, col 4): "Mrs. Rebecca Neugin, a half-blood Cherokee now living near Hulbert, Oklahoma, was three years old when she departed with her parents on the removal; from information given by her mother she told the author: 'When the soldiers came to our house my father wanted to fight, but my mother told him that the soldiers would kill him if he did and we surrendered without a fight. They drove us out of our house to join other prisoners in a stockade. After they took us away my mother begged them to let her go back and get some bedding. So they let her go back and she brought what bedding and few cooking utensils she could carry and had to leave behind all of our other household possessions. My father had a wagon pulled by two spans of oxen to haul us in. Eight of my brothers and sisters and two or three widow women and children rode with us. My brother Dick who was a good deal older than I was walked along with a long whip which he popped over the backs of the oxen and drove them all the way. My father and mother walked all the way also. Camp was usually made at some place where water was to be had. . . there was much sickness among the emigrants and a great many little children died of whooping cough" (302-303).

Rebecca points out her companions to Tecumseh, identifying one of them as Mr. John Ross, with the big red trailer, and Mr. George Guess, who reads books.⁵⁰ One of the first things Rebecca tells Tecumseh is that she has lost her duck and is searching for him. She says,

"Some people think a duck is a silly thing, but it was a duck who helped to create the world. When the world was new and the woman fell out of the sky, it was a duck who dove down to the bottom of the ocean and brought up the mud for the dry land. Some people think it was a muskrat or an otter. But it wasn't." (102)

King plays around with the creation story here in much the same way that he did in *Green Grass, Running Water*. In James Mooney's collection of Cherokee myths, in "How the World Was Made," he records that it was "Beaver's Grandchild," the little Water-beetle, who

⁵⁰ King's references to these traveling companions are, as is the case of Rebecca Neugin, of real people. John Ross (1790-1866) was the Principal Chief of the Cherokees. Ross fought with Andrew Jackson against the Creeks prior to the forced relocation of the Cherokee. The Republican Constitution, modeled after the United States Constitution, written by Ross, was adopted by the Cherokee in 1927. Ross was one of the many Cherokee who were forcibly removed to Oklahoma in the winter of 1838-39. His first wife, Quantie, died during the march, and is buried in Little Rock, Arkansas. George Guess (or George Gist) is the English name of Sequoyah, the man who developed the Cherokee alphabet. Guess died in 1843.

"dived to the bottom and came up with some soft mud, which began to grow and spread on every side until it became the island which we call the earth" (239). In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King tells two different versions of the creation story, each one involving ducks. In the frame story:

First Woman is falling out of the sky.

"So that one starts falling.

Oh, oh, First Woman says, looks like a new adventure. And she is right.

Down below in that Water World, those water animals look up and they see that big, strong woman falling out of the sky. Those Ducks shout, look out, look out. And they fly up and catch that woman and bring her to the water.

What's all that noise? Says grandmother Turtle, and when grandmother comes up to see what all the fuss is about, those Ducks put First Woman on her back.

Ho, says grandmother Turtle when she sees that woman on he back. You are on my back.

That's right, says First Woman. I guess we better make some land. So they do. First Woman and grandmother Turtle. They get some mud and

they put that mud on grandmother Turtle's back
and pretty soon that mud starts to grow." (39)

Babo tells the second version of the creation story to one of the policemen who is interviewing her about the disappearance of the old Indians. When the man tells Babo to just start the story at the beginning, she takes him at his word and starts with creation:

"Now there were some animals, but they didn't live on the water. They lived in the sky. This other place was getting crowded, and the animals had this meeting and decided to see if they could do something about all the water. . . .These four ducks volunteered to go down and see what could be done. So they swam around for a while, I don't know, couple of months, maybe a year, just swimming around and looking things over. Well, those ducks swam and swam all over the place, just like swimming laps, and finally they had it with swimming and one of them says, 'Let's make some dry land.' [First Woman, who is sitting on the back of the giant turtle says they could create some dry land.] The ducks, who are tired of swimming laps, say, 'Sure, let's do that.' One of the ducks dives down to the bottom, and she's

gone for a long time. But pretty soon she bobs back up looking half dead, and the rest of the ducks crowd around and ask her if she found any land." (98-99)

King may well be taking liberties with creation stories still in *Truth and Bright Water* but the connection seems to be the fact that Rebecca is looking for her duck (who may or may not have created the Earth), which parallels the Cherokee looking for a new homeland, as well as Cassie, Monroe, and Lum's own search for home. It could be argued that the inclusion of the Cherokees in a story about the Blackfoot is King's insertion of himself and his own heritage more assertively than in past writing. Even bringing what appear to be ghosts into this story should not be considered unusual for an Indian writer to do. Joy Harjo has said that "for us [Indians], there is not just *this* world, there's also a layering of others" (Moyers 161). By including the layering of worlds in his story, King is, yet again, stressing the interconnectedness of all things. By including the past with the present, King is noting that "sense of a continuum and a connection which can only be represented by the circle," (Bruchac "The Continuing

Circle" 105) and is rejecting yet another Euro-American construct that sees time only in a linear fashion. What King does is "connect those who have spoken in the past with those whose voices are still carried on and those who are yet to come" (105), combining not only the past with the present, but the Cherokee with the Blackfoot.

He is able to show this combining of cultures when Tecumseh finds Rebecca in his grandmother's tipi, where she is "sitting in the shadows, out of the light" (219). All the women gathered in the tipi for lunch ask Rebecca to tell them her story, and the grandmother specifically requests that she tell it in Cherokee. Tecumseh points out that the women do not speak Cherokee, but his grandmother tells him, "more to a story than just the words" (219). By requesting a story from Rebecca, the Blackfoot women are welcoming her, and are bringing her into "the narrative tradition [that] enables individuals to realize that the significance of their own lives stems in large part from their interlocking connections with the lives of all the others who share a particular tradition. It lets people realize that individual experience is not isolate but is part of a coherent

and timeless whole" (Allen 100). Rebecca begins her story in English, "before the soldiers came, we used to live near Dahlonega⁵¹ in a really nice house" (200), and then continues, telling a creation story in Cherokee.

Rebecca Neugin, although she may be traveling with Mr. John Ross in his "red trailer," appears to be from a different time, simply due to the comments that she makes to Tecumseh. "We heard they were killing buffalo for their hides and leaving the meat on the ground to rot," Rebecca says. "But we didn't believe it" (148). She could be referring to the buffalo that Franklin has imported for the tourists to shoot at with paint pellets, but her reference to leaving the meat on the ground belies that theory. And when Tecumseh runs into her on the powwow grounds at Indian Days, she still has not yet found her duck. She tells Tecumseh, that if the duck does not come back by the time they have to leave, "Mr. Ross says we'll have to go without her. He says the soldiers won't wait for a duck" (197).

What lends strength to the belief that Rebecca is a ghost among the Blackfoot is the fact that Soldier,

⁵¹ Gold was found in Georgia near the Dahlonega that Rebecca

Tecumseh's dog, reacts badly whenever he is confronted with Rebecca. His hair stands up, he growls low in his throat, and frequently urinates in fright, but he positions himself between Tecumseh and Rebecca.

Tecumseh's grandmother told him that "in the old days, dogs helped to guard the camp."

"Against soldiers?"

"Other things, too."

"Like what?"

"Ghosts," said my grandmother. "They watched out for ghosts." (39)

By the time King concludes this particular story, by the time the restorations have been completed, by the time those who have been searching for home have found it, the Cherokee, too, have left Bright Water, but Tecumseh does not know if Rebecca has found her duck. He thinks that he wants to comfort Rebecca on her loss, because he, too, "knows what it's like to lose things" (265). Tecumseh has lost not only Soldier, but his cousin, Lum, and part of his innocence as well.

In all three of the novels discussed here, King has "effectively express[ed] traditional and contemporary concerns about the world and the

refers to, between 1815 and 1820, according to James Mooney.

condition of living things" (*All My Relations* ix-x). With humor and with writing that is "steeped in oral conventions and forms of storytelling" (Wyle 108), King has continued along the road of other Indian writers in helping to destroy negative stereotypes of Indian people, combining different cultural information with a healthy amount of disrespect for the Euro-American canon, while at the same time remaining true to his responsibility to the truly intricate story.

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Chapter Five

" . . . And They All Lived Happily Ever After"

The storyteller is the figure in which the
righteous man encounters himself.
Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*

That's the purpose of storytelling: teaching
people who they are so they can become all
they were meant to be.
Terry Tafoya [Skokomish-Pueblo]
*All My Relations: Sharing Native Values Through
the Arts*

The art of story-telling, whether it be oral or written in form, is one of the most important legacies a people can hand to the generations yet to come. Were it not for the original story-tellers, wherever they may have been from, many of the stories now considered to be classics, such as *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* or the epic *Gilgamesh*, would have been lost long ago. The advent of the printing press did not signify the beginning of the end for story-telling; rather, it has ensured its continuance.

If we don't have the stories, Leslie Marmon Silko has written, we don't have anything. Without stories

we have no sense of the past, no sense of who we are, no way of understanding others, no means of helping others to understand us, no way of ensuring a continuance of tradition, and no way to counter-act misinformation. When we understand what Silko means, we also find an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this dissertation: "why do we need to tell stories?" We need to tell stories because we need to know we are not alone. We need to tell stories because we need to remember. We need to share experiences, histories, customs, spiritual legacies--- we need to leave a mark that says we have been here, not just ourselves, but our people, our families, our societies. If it is true that "the worst destroyers come from within the dark recesses of our own minds" (Niatum 136), then it is to prevent people from staying within that dark recess that people need to tell stories, to come out from that solitude and feel connected. To be a part of anything, people need to share who they are and what they know. People do want to share their lives with others in a number of different ways. Telling and listening to stories, and reading and writing them, is also a way people have of sharing. Joseph Bruchac says:

This desire to share, even at the risk of sharing with those who may not understand what a powerful gift they have been given, is at the heart of [everything]. More now than ever before, we need the gift of stories which instruct and delight, explain and sustain. Such stories lead us to an understanding of who we are and what our place is in the natural world. They help us find respect for ourselves and respect for the earth. They lead us toward understanding the sacred nature of the greatest story of all, that story which is told by the rising sun each dawn, the story of the gift of life. (*Roots of Survival* 81)

If we don't have the stories, we are alone; there is no history, no past, no present, no future. The stories we share come from the past and look towards the future. The stories explain who we are today as well as who we were in the past, and they can also bring us hope and help us to remember. Bruchac believes that:

There is a great hunger in American culture for meaningful stories. We need new stories. Many of the old ones which were imported from Europe have taught us all the wrong things. Defeat your

enemies, defend your property, slay all the monsters, make lots of wealth, marry the princess or the prince and live happily ever after. Those are very scary messages to me, especially when we realize just how few of us survive to live happily ever after when we are trapped at the edge of such tales. (Roots of Survival 124)

The stories that Sarris and King write fall into this category that Bruchac refers to: the meaningful, new stories. The primary message that comes from *Watermelon Nights* belies the messages of the old stories. Spread kindness and get along sounds far more realistic and attainable, more grounded in reality than "slay the monsters, win the princess, and live happily every after." Sarris tells his stories about the Pomo--their history and their lives--in such a way that it is obvious that these people are also trying to do what King talks about when he says that within Native communities there is a great desire to maintain a balance. The people in both *Watermelon Nights* and *Grand Avenue* understand that they cannot make everything good, but they can try to maintain that balance. Elba, Johnny, and Nellie understand the importance of the community in this process of balance

as well, and what Sarris does with these stories is to show how they struggle to achieve that balance.

King's focus in his stories lies primarily with the concerns and emotions all people share. At the same time, he shatters preconceived Euro-American notions of Indian people, sometimes by appropriating Others' stories and [re]writing them to show how negatively the usurpers' presence has affected Indian peoples' lives. King accomplishes this not through pedantic lecturing or by the monotonous underscoring of all the wrongs perpetuated by the colonizers since the arrival of the first Europeans, but through both humor and a sensitivity to the people and the situations about which he is writing. Focussing on the intricate stories that he is telling, he is not only teaching "Native history, but [is doing so] in the Native way—we [the audience] are not just acquiring information, but [are] learning how to process it differently" (Fee 138). King's stories also point out the existing borders that keep different peoples apart. Through his stories he works on dismantling those borders, and in the process also does what Sarris has said he tries to do in his writing as well: he shows "that we are people who happen to be Indian."

Both authors draw upon their traditions of oral literature in writing their stories, both through use of first-person narrators and, in Sarris's case, through a very close inter-twining of the Pomo history with the stories of modern-day Pomo. The stories of both writers are stories that King has called ones that deal with "the range of human emotions and experience that all people share" (*All My Relations* xvi) that I discussed in a previous chapter. Although Sarris writes about the Pomo and King about the Blackfoot, the divisiveness, self-hatred, confusion, lost love, and attempts at finding a place in a community and a returning to home are all topics that all people, Indian and non-Indian, share. By continuing to write the stories, by continuing to share is a way of bringing about that inter-cultural communication that Sarris expressed concern about in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*. King may not be concerned with his non-Indian audience, believing that it does not care to know about or understand the intricacies of Indian life, but by writing about those emotions and experiences that can be seen as universal, he is speaking not only to his Indian audience, but to any

audience willing to accept its responsibility as story-listeners, or story-readers.

There are many ways to end a story. In some stories, the heroine gets the boy (or the hero gets the girl). In tragedies, everyone (or nearly everyone) dies. Some stories have neat and tidy endings where all the dangling strings are tied up in a neat little bow. In others, there are no resolutions and the audience/ listener is left to decide: the lady or the tiger? "And they all lived happily ever after," is one signifier to the ending of a story; Kiowa storytellers traditionally end their stories by saying *hau jonyi*, which means "you must say yes," to which the audience would respond, *hau* (Palmer). Momaday ends *House Made of Dawn* with the traditional Jemez story ending: *Qtsedaba*. Some Cherokee would end their stories by saying, "That's all I know about that" (Kilpatrick 134). There are other Indian oral traditions that also end with a variation of the words, "and that's all I have to say."

But are the stories really over? Vizenor says that "last words are never the end" (*Narrative Chance* xiii). Bruchac speaks of the stories having "a sense

of a continuum and a connection which can only be represented by the circle. It connects those who have spoken in the past with those of us whose voices are still carried on the winds of breath and those who are yet to come. It is a circle which is growing stronger" ("The Continuing Circle" 105). Just as a circle has no end, the stories people hear and the stories they tell (or write) have no end, either. Simon Ortiz puts it this way:

Because the world continued, the stories went on, constantly in the making, changing, reaffirming the belief that there would always be the stories. ("Always the Stories" 57)

The stories do go on, despite claims to the contrary, and they go on because people want to hear stories. Robert Fulford believes that "we thirst after stories of all kinds—epics, tragedies, comedies, anecdotes, parables. We are insatiable. Many of us are so enchanted we go back to the story again and again, searching for fresh meaning" (80). Such is the case even in family stories, such as the one told at the start of Chapter 2. This was not the first time this girl heard the story, nor will it probably be the last. And with each retelling the story becomes more

permanently etched in her memory, and she understands something different about her father and about her culture. Perhaps children understand this concept better than adults, although they could not possibly begin to articulate it. Children, given the opportunity, will watch the same video or same television program, or request the same book be read, or ask for that favorite story over and over. What they are doing is impressing the story—and the story's message—to memory, thinking about it from all angles, taking the meaning to heart, and incorporating what they have learned into themselves, which ultimately leaves a lasting impression on their minds and upon their outlook on their lives.

The stories do not end. Societies, countries, tribes all have events the people need to remember and stories that they need to share. People have life experiences to sort out and understand, specific details of lives lived and lessons learned that need to be preserved for future generations to be able to understand. Even though a book may conclude or a story may stop at the end of the page, or the storyteller says "and that is all I know about that," the stories

go on, because they live continuously in the minds of those who hear and read them.

I started this conclusion by remarking that telling stories is one of the most important legacies a people can hand to the generations yet to come. To that, Joseph Bruchac adds one of the most important things that we can do as humans:

That thing is to keep our ears open. Listen for the songs still held by that unbroken circle, the life of the world all around us. Listen for the stories that teach us. Listen for the stories of respect and peace. (Roots of Survival 60)

If people are ready to listen or to read, we will meet someone who is ready to talk or to write the stories down. And as long as we continue to do that, the art of story-telling will not die. *Askwa atlokawagan paiamuk*. "My story is still traveling on" (206).

The Storyteller's Escape

The storyteller keeps the stories

all the escape stories

she says "With these stories of ours
we can escape almost anything

with these stories we will survive."

The old teller has been on every journey
and she knows all the escape stories

even stories told before she was born.

She keeps the stories for those who return

but more important

for the dear ones who do not come back

so that we may remember them

and cry for them with the stories.

"In this way

we hold them

and keep them with us forever

and in this way

we continue."

Leslie Marmon Silko

Storyteller

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