

STORIED VOICES IN NATIVE AMERICAN TEXTS:
HARRY ROBINSON, THOMAS KING, JAMES WELCH
AND LESLIE MARMON SILKO

By

BLANCA SCHORCHT CHESTER

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Department of COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

The University of British Columbia
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Abstract

"*Storied Voices in Native American Texts: Harry Robinson, Thomas King, James Welch and Leslie Marmon Silko*" approaches Native American literatures from within an interdisciplinary framework that complicates traditional notions of literary "origins" and canon. It situates the discussion of Native literatures in a Native American context, suggesting that contemporary Native American writing has its roots in Native oral storytelling traditions. Each of these authors draws on specific stories and histories from his or her Native culture. They also draw on European elements and contexts because these are now part of Native American experience. I suggest that Native oral tradition is already inherently novelistic, and the stories that lie behind contemporary Native American writing explicitly connect past and present as aspects of current Native reality. Contemporary Native American writers are continuing an on-going and vital storytelling tradition through written forms.

A comparison of the texts of a traditional Native storyteller, Robinson, with the highly literate novels of King, Welch and Silko, shows how orally told stories connect with the process of writing. Robinson's storytelling suggests how these stories "theorize" the world as he experiences it; the Native American novel continues to theorize Native experience in contemporary times. Native writers use culturally specific stories to express an on-going Native history. Their novels require readers to examine their assumptions about who is telling whose story, and the traditional distinctions made between fact and fiction, history and story. King's Green Grass, Running Water takes stories from Western European literary traditions and Judeo-Christian mythology and presents them as part of a Native creation story. Welch's novel Fools Crow re-writes a particular episode from history, the Marias River Massacre, from a Blackfeet perspective. Silko's Almanac of the Dead recreates the Mayan creation story of the Popol Vuh in the context of twentieth-century American culture. Each of these authors maintains the dialogic fluidity of oral storytelling performance in written forms and suggests that stories not only reflect the world, but that they create it in the way that Robinson understands storytelling as a form of theory.

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Storied Lives

Harry Robinson is a First Nations storyteller from the Okanagan Nation. He was born in the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia in 1900 and spent most of his life farming and raising cattle with his wife, Matilda. Busy with the demands of ranching, he only began telling stories regularly late in his life, observing, "The older I get, it seems to come back on me. It's like pictures going by. I could see and remember."¹ He was a fluent speaker of Okanagan and told stories in both Okanagan and English, depending on his audience. In the summer of 1977, Robinson began working with ethnographer Wendy Wickwire and the two of them made recordings of more than two hundred of his stories. A selection of these have been transcribed and are published in two collections, Write It On Your Heart (1989) and Nature Power (1992). Throughout his life, Robinson was concerned that the old Okanagan stories be preserved, and that both Native and non-Native people become more conscious of Native ways of viewing the world. As he notes, there is "quite a bit of difference between the white people and the Indians"² Robinson's biggest disappointment with the publication of Write It On Your Heart was that it did not contain all the stories that he had told Wickwire. He did not live to see the publication of his next book, as Robinson died January 25, 1990.

Thomas King is a Native writer of Greek, German and Cherokee descent. He was born in California and finished his doctoral dissertation, on Native American literature, through the University of Utah. He subsequently took a position at the University of Lethbridge,

in Alberta, and currently teaches Native literature and creative writing at the University of Guelph. In addition to his academic writing, King has published a children's book, A Coyote Columbus Tale (1992), a collection of short stories, One Good Story That One (1993), and two novels, Medicine River (1990) and Green Grass, Running Water (1993). Medicine River was subsequently produced as a film starring Graham Greene and Tom Jackson (along with a guest appearance by the author), which enjoyed enormous success south of the border in the United States. King also developed a radio show for the Canadian Broadcasting corporation, The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour, which is situated in the Dead Dog Café of Green Grass, Running Water. King writes as a Native American (United States) author from within a First Nations (Canada) context; both Medicine River and Green Grass, Running Water are situated in Alberta. His writing consequently develops a complex sense of what it means to be a Native person who crosses all kinds of borders.

James Welch was born in Browning, Montana; his father was Blackfeet and his mother Gros Ventre. He graduated from the University of Montana and began a master's program in creative writing there. In addition to his academic background, however, he has worked as a laborer, forest-service employee, Indian firefighter and counselor.³ He has also served on the Montana State Board of Pardons. He considers himself somewhat of an anomaly as a Native scholar, stating that, "I think most people who choose to go into some form of scholarship end up in history, or the social sciences, things like that; not many of them end up in literature."⁴ His first book was a collection of poems, Riding the Earthboy 40 (1971). He has also published four novels, Winter in the Blood (1974),

The Death of Jim Loney (1979), *Fools Crow* (1986) and *Indian Lawyer* (1990). He has also written a historical account, with Paul Stekler, of the events leading up to the Battle at Little Bighorn in *Killing Custer* (1994). *Fools Crow* was named "Book of the Year" by the *Los Angeles Times* and is one of the first historical novels by a Native American author to reclaim the history of late 1800s America, a period in history which many Native peoples would likely rather forget. Welch is concerned with promoting both the reading and writing of Native literature, and with the importance of approaching Native literature from the inside.

Leslie Marmon Silko is of mixed ancestry, Laguna Pueblo, Mexican and Anglo. She grew up at the Pueblo of Laguna, which is located in the Four Corners region of the American Southwest, defined by the junction of southern Utah and Colorado, and northern New Mexico and Arizona. Her childhood years were spent listening to the traditional stories of her grandmother and "Aunt Susie," both of which she writes about in her poetry and stories. Silko has a bachelor's degree in English from the University of New Mexico and subsequently attended law school there. After attending law school for three semesters, she gave it up in favour of a career in writing. She has, however, taught on and off at both the University of New Mexico and at the University of Arizona. Silko currently lives on the outskirts of Tucson. In 1974 she published *Laguna Woman*, a book of poetry, followed by her novel, *Ceremony* (1977) and her book *Storyteller* (1981). Since the publication of *Almanac of the Dead* in 1991, she has written another novel, *Gardens in the Dunes* which was published in early 1999. While both *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* take place in contemporary culture, in her new novel Silko moves back in time.

Gardens in the Dunes explores the development of the indigenous Ghost Dance religion and creates another Native perspective on the history of the American Southwest at the turn of the century.

¹ Write It On Your Heart 13.

² Nature Power 13.

³ In Coltelli 185.

⁴ In Coltelli 194.

INTRODUCTION: Listening to Stories

*Speaking to newcomers in their language is dangerous
for when I speak
history is a dreamer
empowering thought
from which I awaken the imaginings of the past.
Jeannette Armstrong*

*If I change one word, I change history. What did I
say today? Do I even remember one word? Writing is
oral tradition. You have to practice the words on
someone before writing it down.
Annharte*

*I remember the words, but I don't understand.
Captain Jean Luc Picard
"Darmok"
Star Trek: the Next Generation*

Worlds of Story

When Harry Robinson, a traditional storyteller from the Okanagan First Nations, tries to explain the meaning of an Okanagan word, *ha-HA*, to an English-speaking anthropologist, Wendy Wickwire, he tells her a story about the word.¹ *Ha-HA* is a term that English speakers might translate as "supernatural power," but Robinson speaks to Wickwire of tiny little insects whose power lies in their being invisible. Throughout the dialogue, Robinson responds to her questions indirectly, answering them with apparently obscure anecdotes and stories. At the same time, Wickwire constantly tries to translate both the word and the concept of *ha-HA* into terms that exist in her understanding. But the exact meaning of the term is never fully realized and after ten years of listening to

Robinson's stories, Wickwire remains unsure of how to discuss the Okanagan concept in terms that non-Native English speakers might understand.

Robinson's lengthy storytelling performance around the meaning of *ha-HA* clearly results in confusing Wickwire further, as she draws on her knowledge of Boasian anthropological paradigms to try and make sense of what Robinson says. Ten years after the original dialogue, when I interviewed Wickwire about her experiences with Robinson, she says, "That discussion came out of something I was interested in. ...At that stage I'd been reading the ethnographies too, and we got Boas talking about power concepts, and I had read that.... It never got defined really. I don't think I ever really did get it totally clear, from that discussion. And I don't know if we had pursued it further we could have" (qtd. in Chester 20-21). The experience that Wickwire is referring to takes place early in the ten-year relationship that Robinson and Wickwire were to have. When one listens to the stories recorded on tape one is, moreover, struck by the difference in format between the early and the later stories. In the earlier stories, Wickwire asks many questions, and the ensuing dialogues and stories echo the misunderstanding that is evident in Robinson's attempts to elucidate the meaning of *ha-HA*. In the later stories Wickwire is hardly heard as she simply listens to what Robinson has to say.

For Wickwire to understand Robinson's stories she later recognized that, "It doesn't work if you're just bombarding questions and you seem to be taking away something" (qtd. in Chester 25). Paradoxically, to understand, she already needs to understand; she needs to understand something of the role of stories in Okanagan culture. In a similar experience of storytelling, set in a very different place and time, a 1991 episode of Star Trek: the Next Generation ("Darmok") describes how the members of the

Starship Enterprise attempt to communicate with a group of aliens called Tamarians. The parallels between Captain Picard's initiation of contact with "the children of Tama" and other alien groups as he and his crew fulfil their mandate to "explore strange new worlds and civilizations," and the history of early anthropological investigation into Native cultures of North America, are striking. The focus in this particular episode lies in its emphasis on the difficulties of cross-cultural communication, and on how narratives can work to both obscure and reflect particular kinds of knowledge. The crew of the Enterprise are not the first to have contact with the Tamarians, but they are the first to be able to communicate with them, albeit rudimentarily, and only when Captain Picard begins to understand some of the nuances behind the Tamarians' apparently cryptic speech. As one character on the Enterprise observes, even with all their technology and experience, they "can't even say hello to these people." While the Tamarians appear to speak the same language as the members of Picard's group, they speak primarily through metaphors that emphasize proper names and locations. Their speech, therefore, seems incomprehensible.

The Tamarians communicate through narrative images that contain frequent references connected to the myths and history of the culture. "Imagery," as one crew member states, "is everything to the Tamarians. It embodies their thoughts, their thought-processes." While the members of the Enterprise learn to identify and recognize these features, their knowledge does not help them to understand, or to communicate with the Tamarians. In order for them to understand the imagery, they must first learn the narratives of the culture. The representations are likened to evoking an image in Western European culture, of "Juliet on her balcony." The idea that this image evokes is one of romance—but only if one already knows the story of Romeo and Juliet. If we do not

know who Juliet was, then we will not understand the meanings lying behind the image. Likewise, when Robinson tries to explain Okanagan concepts by telling stories, his listener needs a certain matrix of cultural knowledge.

The situation facing the crew members of the Enterprise is similar to what faced early ethnographers in trying to understand the narratives of North American Natives, even once they had deciphered a particular language. They knew the words, and the stories, but what did the stories mean? How are they connected to the cultural experience of a people? With the exception of Picard, the crew of the Enterprise tries to interpret the language and culture of the Tamarians in terms of cultural categories that are familiar to them, as humans. They do not try to understand the Tamarians through their own conceptual categories. They do not try to learn the Tamarian narratives and use that cultural knowledge to interpret current reality. Only Picard, once he realizes that he needs to know the old stories in order to make the associations with current events, is ultimately able to communicate. He realizes that he and Dathon seem to speak the same language, but the contexts, the paradigms of reference, are different. This leads him to recognize that he has to move out from his own conceptualization of reality into another world of experience.

It is this realization, and the question of how comparative literature, and literary studies in general, approach the intersections of language, literature, and culture from their own specific cultural and disciplinary perspectives, that motivates this particular study of Native American and First Nations literatures. Within comparative literature there continues to be a troubling equation, or at least an alliance made between language and culture. This is expressed through the study and comparison of different national

literatures across languages. In the case of literary studies in English, consequently, literature from countries like India, New Zealand, Nigeria, and Australia among others, were first studied as "Commonwealth Literature." They are now often categorized under the rubric of "post-colonial" literatures, remaining situated on the margins of the canon of so-called English literature. The institutionalization of post-colonial literatures thus works to reinforce the canonical and primary status of English literature as somehow culturally "English." The term post-colonial suggests a historical response to colonization and, by implication, implies a kind of literary acculturation and assimilation.

There is a general difficulty in defining the time and space of the post-colonial. In terms of literature, the term carries with it the implicit and imperialist assumption that the colonial is the reference point and history around which indigenous literatures should organize themselves. The term has never quite worked to describe traditional or contemporary Native American or First Nations oral and written literatures and it raises a number of issues around Native peoples and Native literature, as Thomas King points out ("Godzilla" 11). Within the discussion of Native literature, King argues, the term post-colonial has "little to do with the literature itself." It "assumes that the starting point for the discussion is the advent of Europeans in North America and suggests notions of "progress and improvement," cutting Native writers off from their traditions and inserting in the place of those traditions European literary models ("Godzilla" 11-12). King suggests instead that we read Native literature not as post-colonial literature—and by implication not as English, Canadian, or American literatures—but *as* Native literature, a literature where "the pivot around which we move is [not]...colonial" ("Godzilla" 11). This body of writing reflects a context, worldview, and frame of reference that connects

with the Native experience of the world. Its written genre conventions are rooted in the genre conventions of Native oral traditions even when it registers, formally, thematically or linguistically, colonial intrusions. The European elements that are absorbed into Native American literatures, contemporary Native writers suggest, have become part of a Native worldview.

In keeping with Captain Picard's realization that he has to learn to understand Dathon's stories in their own terms, I would like to suggest that we read contemporary Native American literatures in the same manner. There can be no one-to-one correspondence between language and culture. Simon Ortiz emphasizes this in his essay "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism." Ortiz argues that literature written in English by Native authors is, by definition, "Indian," because of culturally creative processes. Native writers, he says, have developed a "character of nationalism" in their writing. While language and culture remain intimately connected in the way that we experience and interpret our world, the complexity of their relationship bring together Native American and First Nations literatures and theory with Western theory in ways that suggest ongoing dialogic interactions between very different traditions. This is the case even when the language spoken is, in both cases, English.

Moreover, just as stories and narratives are always told from a particular individual and (larger) cultural perspective, they are read from a specific perspective. What might be called "subject position" is thus negotiated between writer, text and reader. There are a number of questions that arise from reading contemporary Native literatures cross-culturally. What happens to our reading when Native literatures are read from within the context of ongoing indigenous oral narrative traditions? What happens if we read that

tradition as already inherently novelistic? How do orally told stories connect with the process of writing? How do traditional stories in novels explicitly connect past and present as aspects of contemporary Native reality? And, finally, how do Native authors maintain the dialogic fluidity of oral storytelling performance in written forms like the novel?

In Dialogue with Native Literature

Contemporary Native writing moves beyond the mere imitation or reproduction of a European, or mainstream North American literary style. Native authors translate the genre conventions of Native oral tradition into novels, developing Native perspectives on North American literature and history. I suggest that the Native American and First Nations novel are literary recreations of a familiar Native genre in the context of European colonization, but where the “pivot” is no longer colonial. Novels like Thomas King’s Green Grass, Running Water, James Welch’s Fools Crow, and Leslie Marmon Silko’s Almanac of the Dead reveal the continuity of ancient oral traditions into a presently written space and time, each in slightly different ways. Native American and First Nations oral narratives are inherently novelistic and contemporary Native writers move their narrative traditions into modern (and perhaps post-modern) contexts. A comparison of how King’s, Welch’s and Silko’s novels replicate ongoing and dialogic oral traditions in written forms also suggests how Native storytelling, and now novel-writing, are forms of “theory.” These novels theorize the world of contemporary Native reality. They both reflect and recreate earlier Native narrative forms and are both new and old at the same time, containing within them the entire history of Native oral tradition.²

As a way of connecting the old with the new, Robinson's Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power, collections of Okanagan stories recorded by ethnographer Wendy Wickwire, deserve a special place in the study of Native literatures. This is the first comprehensive body of traditional Native stories where the storyteller has provided his own translations: Robinson, a bilingual speaker, performed the stories for Wickwire in English over a period of ten years. The "fully bilingual" translator has an advantage over other translators, according to Gayatri Spivak, because he or she displaces the hegemony of an (imperialist) English language. Spivak notes, for instance, "If we were thinking of translating Marianne Moore or Emily Dickinson, the standard for the translator could not be 'anyone who can conduct a conversation in the language of the original (in this case English). When applied to a third world language, the position is inherently ethnocentric'" (188). In the case of Robinson's stories, translation is thwarted in the sense that Robinson himself tells us how he wants us to think about Okanagan linguistic categories and cultural experience, choosing his own words and frames of reference from what is available to him through the English language. (There are, however, some instances where Robinson cannot translate particular terms into English.) And, while Robinson's narratives reveal a wide variety of European influences, they paradoxically reinforce and emphasize an Okanagan worldview that is alive and vital.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropologists frequently edited the stories that they collected, carefully removing any apparently "foreign" elements. Ironically, these "purer" versions of traditional stories often reveal their Europeanization in other striking ways: stylistically and formally many of them resemble European folktales more closely than they do the orally performed stories of Native

peoples. In the case of James Teit's story, "The Coyote and the Flood" (20), for example, the entire Okanagan story is reduced to plot paraphrase in a brief paragraph. The distant and impersonal nature of the story contrasts with the version that Robinson tells, where God addresses Coyote directly and the storyteller constructs an intimate relationship between the characters inside the text and those outside it. More importantly, in Robinson's version God and His power are always manifest in everyday life and the inter-relationship between Coyote and God is emphasized and analogous to Coyote and God's relationship with each member of the storytelling audience. The story is both sacred and secular and is integrated into Robinson's experience of day-to-day life.

In another example from Write It On Your Heart, "Prophecy at Lytton," Robinson tells of how a lazy boy and his grandmother are deserted by their community because of the boy's apparent inability or refusal to participate in the work of the community. Through their experience of being "exiled" the boy and his grandmother learn how to fend for themselves and how to interact properly within the group. The predominant image in Robinson's story is one of inter-dependence and relationship, and elements of Coyote trickery reveal themselves throughout the narrative in the way that the old woman and the boy learn from their experience of being isolated. Teit, in contrast, describes his version of the story as "The Tale of the Bad Boy." He says, "Thus being thrown on his resources made a man out of him" (52). Teit's tale of the "bad boy," in contrast to Robinson's "prophecy," is transformed into a short story about the evils of laziness and the virtues of hard work. Through his translation of the traditional Okanagan story, Teit reads into Native life an almost Calvinistic and Puritanical view of morality, despite the story's lack of obvious European elements.³

The European elements in Robinson's stories provide points of connection to his world to those of us from Euro-Canadian and Euro-American backgrounds. Sometimes the synthesis of old and new, Native and white, makes the stories entertaining, but the image of the Okanagan Coyote and Neil Armstrong sharing a storied space on the moon is also integral to understanding Robinson's oral narratives as part of a living and ongoing cultural tradition. Robinson provides readers with an example of what King calls "interfusalional" literature, blending oral and written, Native and non-native, in a way that makes it clear that we cannot understand the world context of the Okanagan without also understanding the historical influences on that world ("Godzilla" 13). Robinson's stories, recorded, transcribed and now preserved in the written form of books, resonate with the ways Native writers blend oral and written characteristics of verbal art into highly literate, and literary, written texts. The collections of Robinson's stories thus deserve their place in the in-between of Native oral and written literary forms.

King, Welch, and Silko use oral tradition and storytelling to anchor their place in Native American myth, ritual, and ceremony while they simultaneously engage with the contemporary reality of a dominant white world. The Plains Vision Quest and the Sun Dance frame both contemporary reality in Green Grass, Running Water, and historical reality in Fools Crow, for example. In Almanac of the Dead, Silko draws on Mayan calendrics and their connection to sacred and prophetic texts to situate the events of the novel. Events in Almanac also centre around the appearance of the giant serpent, *Ma ah shra true ee*, whose appearance signals the beginning of the Fifth World, a world where tradition prophesies that all things European will begin to pass away.⁴ Silko's suggestion is subversive, tricksterish: it points to the strength of Native peoples who have survived five

hundred years of genocide. Silko implies that the strength of Native culture lies in its ability to absorb and transform European elements into itself. Native cultures interact with the European, but do not fully assimilate into them, despite superficial appearances to the contrary.

King's and Silko's novels are both Coyote stories that reflect the ambiguous life force of a trickster as central to day to day experience. But Silko's Almanac refers to a coyote who seems far more sinister than his northern counterparts. Differences between the novels suggest the heterogeneity of Native experience. Since European contact, Native peoples have shared the experience of colonization and forced removal from their lands. Prior to contact they shared the experience of the land; trade routes and the extensive travel of some peoples meant that Native cultures were not culturally isolated. Differences between different cultural groups, however, can be as substantial as their similarities. In developing an awareness of a Native poetics, non-Native readers need to inform themselves about different Native cultures, their cosmologies and spiritual traditions. These are, I will argue, key components in both oral and written Native traditions, whether they are ancient or new.

A Native poetics resists the separation of the artistic mode from the social and spiritual. Robinson, King, Welch, and Silko all see themselves as telling an "Indian" story and establishing a Native history. The process of putting that story into writing requires locating the voices of Native American and First Nations authors on their own terms, situated in their own literary space. And as Robinson says to Wickwire, "It's kinde important words. ...should be on book" (Nature 2).

In the academic study of literature the description and categorization of Native writing as literature has generally come from outside the Native community. Books written by Native authors are usually studied in English departments by academics who frame Native writing within the context of Canadian or American literatures, or so-called post-colonial literatures. Literary criticism usually reflects the perspectives of Western literary theory even when it discusses “other,” literatures and literary critics seem keen to separate literary aspects of their study from “anthropological” aspects—even when the writing itself resists this kind of compartmentalization. Thus, when I taught a course in First Nations Literature at Simon Fraser University in the fall of 1997, several students commented that the course was too “anthropological” in its focus. But as Greg Sarris asks, can we really read Hamlet and Ceremony in the same way? (121). Sarris argues that we should read different texts, different literatures, in different kinds of ways. But he also notes that we rarely do so. Critics cannot read cross-culturally, Sarris says, when they do not account for cultural and linguistic differences between readers and texts. He says:

Critics do not seriously consider or reflect upon how they are making sense of and putting together the writers’ cultural backgrounds and the writers’ texts. They attempt to account for the interaction represented in the texts, but not for their own interaction. ... The result is that they do not see how their practices of reading and interpretation are limiting or opening intercultural communication or understanding (123).

They do not, in short, consider the dialogic nature of the relationship between reader and writer.

As Sarris observes, the practice of reading and writing about Native literature requires more than studying “about” Native cultures and then applying that knowledge template-like onto a literary work. That kind of cultural knowledge is usually learned in a de-contextualized space far removed from the actual people, the land, and their history. Yet the literature itself will be the only way that many of us are exposed to Native cultures, Native peoples. And, despite recent critiques of decontextualized approaches to literary studies and renewed interest in the historical and social conditions of text production, the study of literature often takes us far away from our experience of the world. (Perhaps this is why, in my experience, so few Native students take literature courses in English departments.) The idea of the literary text as isolated and insulated from the real world, as well as the myth of the solitary reader, separates us from and is at odds with the conceptualization of storytelling as communal and social, as well as individually creative. Of course, stylistic and formal features of verbal discourse are meaningful in a broad context. But symbols, themes and metaphors are often still isolated and analyzed as discrete objects of a privileged literary discourse and when “doing” literary criticism. Decontextualizing a text unintentionally—any text, whether a visual image, orally performed story or a novel—is even more likely when we try to read cross-culturally, struggling with how to make sense of otherness in our reading.

The experience of reading other literatures, even if they are written in English, is analogous to learning another language. The initial temptation is to make sense by translating back into one’s mother tongue—a method that quickly reveals its limitations. (Just try translating a joke that way!) The possibility of on-going dialogues can only be entertained when one can think in the new language, albeit rudimentarily. This requires

using its vocabulary, syntax and semantic categories to construct coherent meanings of one's own.

In Conversation with a Native Language

Simon Ortiz describes the development of Native literatures as moving towards a "National Indian Literature" that remains connected to "authentic" Native cultures (64-68). He argues that literature written in English by Native authors remains authentic and observes that the distinctions between American, English, Spanish and Native characteristics of the American Southwest are both arbitrary and interconnected in complex ways. The question of cultural authenticity is always constructed socially through the perspective from which a particular culture is viewed. Ortiz uses the example of indigenous religious practices to make his point, arguing that, "Many Christian religious rituals brought to the Southwest (which in the 16th century was the northern frontier of the Spanish New World) are no longer Spanish. They are now Indian because of the creative development that the native people applied to them" (65). Native peoples also quickly learned to express their lives through newer languages like English and Spanish. Native Americans, Ortiz argues, "have used these languages on their own terms" (66). Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo also write also of "reinventing the enemy's language" and point out that despite the long process of colonization, "What has survived in spite of the disruption of native language is a particular way of perceiving the world" (24). Native ways of perceiving the world, these writers suggest, remain uniquely indigenous despite European contact and influences.

The relationship between language and culture is clearly not straightforward. The notion, however, that language can be equated with culture is one that persists and has its legacy in an objectivist and essentialist view of the world as George Lakoff points out (Women 183). Because language seems to make us who we are, it is easy to see how the culture that is reflected through the language, as we communicate, seems inseparable from it. (And I wonder if, during the latter half of the twentieth century—a world of mass media and global markets—language is an even more important marker of “cultural” difference in a context where material culture is much more homogenous than it was one hundred years ago.) The most extreme position on linguistic relativity, along with a deterministic connection between language and culture, is usually ascribed to Benjamin Whorf and Sapir and the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that the language one speaks completely structures the worldview one has; an individual language is a conceptual system that is completely inescapable.⁵ However, as Lakoff notes, “Our conceptual schemes shape our comprehension of our experience and even our experience itself,” (Women 263) but this does not mean that we cannot find points of understanding between different systems.

Lakoff notes, for instance, that if two languages have very different conceptual systems, it is often assumed that translation between them is impossible (Women 311). He argues that the capacity for understanding is not a question of translation alone; understanding is not merely a question of conceptual systems but of conceptualizing capacities. Thus, even if translation may be difficult, Lakoff argues that it does not necessarily follow that understanding is impossible. In the case of Native authors, moreover, the translation issue becomes one not just of language, since many Native

authors no longer speak a Native language, and even fewer write in one; the issue is one of exploring the connections between land, language and culture. Thus, in Almanac of the Dead Root's capacity to learn makes it possible for him to understand Calabazas and ultimately to see the land through Calabazas' conceptual system—through the English language. In another instance, Welch's metaphoric translations of Blackfeet terms into English in Fools Crow highlights the Blackfeet nature of the world he is describing. He uses expressions like "blackhorn" (buffalo), "skunk bear" (wolverine), and "hoots-in-the-night (owl) to translate the Blackfeet world—not merely its linguistic constructs—into the English language. These same translations, however, are likely to be taken for granted by Blackfeet readers for whom those metaphors, like the "dead" metaphors that permeate the English language, would hardly be noticeable.⁶

Welch's metaphors are striking because they occur in a text written in English. For Silko, language itself becomes part of the story that is Almanac. And in Green Grass, Running Water, the multiplicity of both Native and non-Native language and thought systems that interact within the novel reinforce the sense that Native cultures are vital and dynamic. Ongoing cultural traditions change and adapt to a wide variety of social and linguistic contexts—right down to the Dead Dog Café catering to tourists' tastes in "authentic" Plains Indian cuisine—the cultural specificity of eating Labrador retrievers or Great Danes no doubt a modern Indian invention. Language is part of a broader conceptual system that includes worldview and other, more tangible and material aspects of culture; it is part of a much larger whole. The experiential model of language that Lakoff argues for means that, in terms of cultural categories, the categories are "*made real* by the action or imagination of human beings" (Women 208). Lakoff, along with

Mark Johnson, argues for an “experientialist approach” to meaning where they “attempt to characterize meaning in terms of *the nature and experience of the organisms doing the thinking*” (Women 266). In terms of translating meanings from one culture to another, the “politics of translation” (as Spivak calls it) suggests that whether one is translating culture, or language, or both, the translator/writer/storyteller cannot escape the ideological implications of cross-cultural communication. Spivak translates Mahasweta Devi’s short story as “Breast-Giver”; the alternate and more popularly known version is called “The Wet-Nurse.” As Spivak points out, in the latter translation various themes are “lost even before you enter the story” (183). The question is, however, how much the actual language limits imaginative translation or the creation of new understanding. Are many of our ideas about language and culture still tied to the objectivist paradigm and legacy that Lakoff describes? Do we still somehow believe that, “True knowledge of the external world can only be achieved if the system of symbols we use in thinking can accurately represent the external world”? (Lakoff Women 183).

The extent to which a particular language influences worldview is both arguable and intimately tied to the experiences of the writer. Bird, unlike Ortiz, does not believe that English is a “new native language” and she argues that Native literature produced in English “incorporates a native perception of the world in limited ways” (Harjo and Bird 25). Jeannette Armstrong in an essay titled “Land Speaking” and Silko in Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit, as well as in Ceremony and Storyteller, write of their struggles to translate and express Native experience of the world while writing in English. Silko asks, “What changes would Pueblo writers make to English as a language for literature?” She then answers her own question by telling us the story of Thought Woman. Thought

Woman brings the world into being by thinking it into existence through a story. Silko uses this story to illustrate how Pueblo people are less concerned with a particular language than they are with “story and communication” (Yellow 49). Her comments about Thought Woman show us how Native writers use story to translate their experience of the world into literary texts in ways that require readers to engage with other worldviews—so that readers cannot, in fact, read Ceremony in the same way as Hamlet. What becomes clear in reading texts like Ceremony, as well as other Native literature, is that, as Keith Basso observes, that “grasping other people’s metaphors requires ethnography as much as it does linguistics” (69). Basso goes on to argue, “Unless we pursue the two together, the full extent to which metaphorical structures influence patterns of thought and action is likely to elude us” (69).

Armstrong, Ortiz, Bird, Harjo and Silko argue for a strong and reciprocal connection between language and land, between the world as experienced and the language that is used to describe and internalize that experience. Armstrong describes the process of translating between the Okanagan and the English this way: “I am a listener to the language’s stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns” (181). The different patterns created by transforming language and experience into another English for the English-speaking reader imply a particular kind of cultural translation. The requirement on the part of the reader is no less than what is required of a speaker engaged in dialogue with a language not his or her own. He or she must reinvent the categories through which the world is experienced and perceived.

Works written by Native writers share many thematic concerns including an emphasis on home, community, and place, and the incorporation of trickster figures and

other mythical and legendary figures and culture heroes into otherwise “realistic” novels. It is in how language and oral tradition are used to convey these concerns, however, that this writing reveals an acute sense of the power inherent in language and in words, and of the ability of language to *both* create and reflect reality. The connection between word and thing, between language and the real world, remains close. This characteristic intimately connects Native literature with oral tradition. The power of the word manifests itself in the day-to-day experience of the world, hence Robinson’s observation on how important it is to “get the story right.” In Almanac Calabazas captures the irony and contradiction inherent in white attitudes towards words and things when he thinks, “The tribal people here were all very aware that the whites put great store in names. But once the whites had a name for a thing, they seemed unable ever again to recognize the thing itself” (224). But even the conversation around word and thing manifests itself as a story. Words contain stories in themselves, as Ku’oosh explains in Ceremony. He thinks, “The story behind each word must be told so that there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love” (35-36). The characteristics of oral storytelling tradition, where the audience is part of the performance, here transform these novels into cross-cultural conversations with non-Native readers, constructing dialogues between cultural worldviews.

Native writers and critics have argued for a shift in the points of view from which Native writing is analyzed. Their own literary perspectives usually bring Native traditions into the foreground; they argue that Euro-literary traditions are secondary, rather than primary, influences on Native literature. Paula Gunn Allen asserts, for example, “Yes, Indians do novels. And nowadays some of us write them. Writing them in the phonetic

alphabet is the new part, that and the name. The rest of it, however, is as old as the hills” (Granddaughters 4). Silko connects oral tradition, written literature and theory when she says, “Language is story” (Yellow 50). Silko asks readers “to approach language from a Pueblo perspective, one that embraces the whole of creation and the whole of history and time.” She goes on to connect storytelling with what she describes as “a Pueblo theory of language” (Yellow 49). Armstrong, a bilingual speaker of Okanagan and English, writes about how she changes the English language to reflect Okanagan cultural reality. She says, “I listen to sounds that words make in English and try to find the sounds that will move the image making, whether in poetry or prose, closer to the Okanagan reality” (192). Both Silko and Gunn Allen point out how the structure of Pueblo storytelling is recursive—stories always contain other stories. King, Welch and Silko illustrate how that recursivity functions in their novels to re-create and reflect contemporary worlds of experience. They, and many other Native authors, use literature as a cultural discourse that encompasses oral and written texts, English and traditional Native languages; their stories and novels construct a sense of the peoples and cultures that are “Native” to this place called North America.

Mikhail Bakhtin has suggested that when we speak or write about something, its meaning is brought into existence through dialogue—through the expectation that there will be some kind of response to what we say, whether explicit or implicit. Dialogue presupposes at least two parties engaged in conversation, a speaker and a listener, with each party taking turns at speaking and having his or her voice heard by the other. If there is only one speaker—one party who does all the talking while the other is silenced—then there can be no dialogue, only monologue, which is deaf to the ear of other speakers,

other voices. Bakhtin's emphasis on the polyvocal features of dialogue resonates with Native views of language as storied. His theory of language therefore provides a useful starting point for discussing any literature that takes us into, rather than out of, the real world as experienced by people. It never lets us forget that writing—any kind of writing—is a social practice.

Dialogue, Bakhtin says, “surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of ...particular meanings” in favour of multiplicity (Speech 7). Ideally, it allows for Native and white views of the world without privileging either, in the way that Robinson suggests we need to familiarize ourselves with the differences between Native and white ways of knowing. Bakhtin observes that in a cross-cultural context, the “dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched” (Speech 7). The Okanagan storyteller, Robinson, emphasizes the importance of this kind of dialogue, suggesting that, in the past, communication between whites and Natives has been one-sided and monologic. He argues that many of the problems between Natives and whites have their source in white people not listening to the differences between them, and whites have tried to have it all their own way. But the question of dialogue in the context of literary studies is also one of perspective: just whose voice frames the story that we tell about Native writers and their writing? Who gets to do the talking? And who listens?

Oral Tradition and Storytelling

Questions surrounding the role of Native oral tradition in contemporary written texts invariably come to the foreground whenever Native authors write poetry, plays, short stories and novels. The criteria of the “oral” and “orality” are often used to define and categorize part of what constitutes “authentic” Native literature. But these terms, and the notion of something called “oral tradition” are not unproblematic themselves. And the juncture between oral and written remains a troubling one: in pointing to certain written texts as more or less “oral” and by implication less literate or literary, representations of Native authenticity remain connected to some of the stereotypes of the late nineteenth century.

Walter Ong’s Orality and Literacy perhaps reflects the opposition between oral and written most succinctly in its attempt to describe and interpret what he calls “primary” orality. Ong analyses the oral, ironically enough, through writing. His discussion focuses on the differences between orality and literacy, noting (again) the primacy of the oral, an argument that reaches back into Western philosophical tradition to the treatises of Plato and Socrates. Ong claims that there are essential differences between cultures based on what he calls a primary orality, and those based on a secondary orality. He then sets up those differences as hierarchical oppositions between each other. As Ruth Finnegan observes, the words “oral” and “orality” are often used in such a way that they emphasize distinctions, rather than similarities or any sense of continuity between written and oral forms. The two are often viewed as opposite ends of a verbal spectrum (Finnegan 5-6). This dichotomizing of oral and written forms suggests a hierarchy where, in the history of

European literary tradition, the written is privileged. At the same time the oral, in the context of Native cultures, continues to evoke images of Rousseau's "Noble Savage."⁷

While acknowledging his own dependence on print culture, Ong attempts to capture the essence of oral culture. Not only is this impossible, of course, but his categorizations imply an ideal of the oral that remains entrenched in romanticism and perpetuates the myth of the "vanishing Indian." Thus, in terms of exploring the continuity between oral and written, Ong describes the notion of oral literature as "preposterous." According to Ong, "It reveals our inability to represent to our own minds a heritage of verbally organized materials except as some variant of writing, even when they have nothing to do with writing at all" (11). Overlooking Ong's own apparent ability to read outside the cultural essentialisation that he sets up for other peoples, this view of language and language use seems both reductive and prescriptive. When set alongside the written voices of Ortiz, Silko and Armstrong and read through the lens of contemporary Native literature, such dichotomization of oral and written must be implicated in the domestication of Native narrative traditions. It also perpetuates the construction of new (or perhaps not so new) stereotypes about Native peoples.

The epistemic and essential separation of writing from speech still seems troubling in works like Jan Vansina's Oral Tradition as History and in Jack Goody's The Interface Between the Written and the Oral. Vansina sets out to show the historical veracity inherent in oral tradition but then slips back into the same sorts of essentialized categorizations as Ong. Goody notes that in cultures where the majority of the culture neither reads nor writes, "They often partake indirectly of both 'traditions'" but he then goes on to distinguish these instances from "the structure of tradition in a *purely oral*

society” (Preface xiv). Dennis Tedlock criticizes Goody for what he describes as Goody’s “profoundly Eurocentric view of writing systems despite being an anthropologist” (“Dialogues” 177). Other authors, including Tedlock, have written more extensively on the dialogic contexts of oral tradition and have problematized the categorical distinctions made between subjectivity and objectivity, oral and written in a variety of contexts (See, for example, Ruth Finnegan; Alessandro Portelli; Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson).

Orality and writing do not necessarily exist independently of each other. Just as written texts are often influenced by oral texts, oral tradition is often saturated with written influences. In many Native American worldviews, as Tedlock points out, the world is brought into being through stories (Introduction to The Dialogic Emergence of Culture). This seems to be the case whether the stories are told orally, or written down. The connection between writing and speaking is crucial to Mayan tradition: Tedlock describes the place of books as vital in the pre-Columbian world and notes that the authors of these books wrote as performers. They spoke directly to their readers yet were simultaneously very conscious of themselves as writers, describing the varied circumstances under which they worked and wrote (Tedlock Popol 29). In the case of the Maya, the earth is created through a dialogue between several gods. Their conversation becomes the story of the world coming into being. From their dialogue it becomes impossible to separate the stories from the world that emerges from the narratives. This interconnectedness of word and world is reflected in what Tedlock describes as the “dialectal relationship between writing and pictures” in Maya thought and tradition (Popol 28); the extent of these many dialectal relationships suggests a worldview where the emphasis is on connection and integration, rather than on categorization and segregation.

It is often taken for granted that once an oral text is written down, its essence has somehow changed. A textualized version of an originally oral performance somehow now contains only the essence of written form. In analyzing and interpreting the oral qualities of such texts, discussion often centres around what has been lost in the process of translation. Once again, Bakhtin's description of dialogism makes the most explicit connections between oral and written modes of expression and is the most open to multiple interpretations and perspectives, while remaining simultaneously grounded in a sense of the materiality of language. Bakhtin argues that the idea of dialogue encompasses both oral and written forms. He says that:

Dialogue can also be understood in a broader sense, meaning not only direct, face-to-face, vocalized verbal communication between persons, but also verbal communication of any type whatsoever. A book, i.e. a *verbal performance in print*, is also a verbal communication. It is something discussible in actual, real-life dialogue, but aside from that, it is calculated for active perception, involving attentive reading and inner responsiveness, and for organized, *printed* reaction in the various forms devised by the particular sphere of verbal communication in question" ("Marxism and the Philosophy of Language" 939).

The dialogistic quality of Native American and First Nations literature manifests itself as a kind of syncretism where the texts absorb and transform new elements and forms into new tellings of very old stories.

Storytelling as a kind of literary dialogue, moreover, reflects simultaneously a synchronic *and* diachronic view of language, insisting on both its historicity and its current

presence. Silko describes the syncretism of Native oral traditions as Pueblo “inclusivity” (Yellow 177). This inclusivity is reflected in contemporary Native literature through cross-cultural and intertextual references to sources from literary works, popular culture and from the historical record, as well as traditional Native stories. While contemporary Native authors reframe oral tradition in the contexts of contemporary culture, more importantly they reframe modern culture in the context of ongoing Native traditions. Their writing reveals an oral storytelling tradition that continues to lie at the centre, rather than the margins, of Native literature and theory.

Native Fiction as Theory

Reading Native literature as a form of storytelling emphasizes the dynamic nature of narrative: narratives can move backwards and forwards through space and time, and stories create different realities depending on whose point of view is being expressed in a particular version of the telling. Any narrative is presented to us from a particular point of view or perspective, and any narrative tradition constructs and contains certain lenses through which we view it. In this sense, different narrative traditions form their own kind of theory, highlighting certain aspects of their social construction at the expense of others. Thus, novels written by authors like King, Welch and Silko illustrate, in literary forms, how Native storytelling and oral tradition theorizes the world. These novels construct literal, metaphorical and spiritual storied landscapes. And in doing so, they re-create old genres to make sense of contemporary conflicts and history, and day-to-day Native reality in the twentieth century.

Contemporary Native literature brings Native history up to date when it is situated and read from within its own traditions. Novels like Green Grass, Running Water, Fools Crow and Almanac resist being read as post-colonial literature. These writers are not forced to draw on the literary traditions of European (and Euro-American and Canadian) thought and culture; they are translating from Native categories into other ones, in English. They bring elements from non-Native cultures into their literature because these elements are now also a part of Native experience of the world. In Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said notes that in the colonial world there has always been “a literature of resistance.” But reading Native literature as a “literature of resistance,” as a reaction to imperial kinds of hegemony, as Said suggests, reduces and simplifies responses to the wor(l)ds of cultural experience re-presented to us in the texts. It reinforces the idea of Native literature as hinging on a colonial pivot.

I will argue in the chapters that follow that the storied dialogues that are shared between writers and readers in contemporary Native novels resemble and resonate with the kinds of dialogues that storyteller and audience share in oral storytelling performances. Native storytellers theorize their world by telling stories. Their theory is performative, interactive and dialogic. Moreover, the stories and the literature are meant not just to entertain, but to educate. Fiction, like oral storytelling, can theorize the experienced world. The Native authors that I discuss all use their fiction to construct or re-create the world in particular sorts of ways. They suggest that literature cannot be separated from the spiritual experience of the world or from any other aspects of everyday life.

The chapters focus on several key aspects of how Native authors construct their novelistic re-creations of Native oral tradition and the world. Story, and features from

storytelling tradition, are translated into a variety of literary forms and styles. Form as well as content, I suggest, tells us something about worldview; style and language are always meaningful. Native writers use dialogue and a sense of voice to create complex dialogic relationships between readers and texts. I argue that readers become a part of the stories that are being told in these novels, just as the audience has a role in any storytelling performance. Performance, ritual, and ceremony interconnect in a Native poetics that incorporates cosmology and spiritual tradition in verbal "art." In the context of an interactive and active literary theory, language works to cement the relationships between stories, places, and peoples. The dialogic fluidity that is reflected in these open-ended literary texts resonates with the power of oral tradition and its ability to continually transform itself.

In the first chapter, "Recreating the World Through Story," I examine some of the ways that the Okanagan storyteller, Harry Robinson, theorizes his world through story. These orally performed stories were recorded by Wendy Wickwire and later transcribed⁸ and put in book form. Two collections of Robinson's stories exist in print, Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power, and many more exist in their taped versions. The stories reveal some of the complex and interconnected relationship between oral and written traditions, blending old and new, Native and non-Native, in the way that Armstrong describes is characteristic of Okanagan language and worldview. Armstrong says:

In Okanagan storytelling, the ability to move the audience back and forth between the present reality and the story reality relies heavily on the fluidity of time sense that the language offers. ... There must be no doubt that the

story is about the present and the future and the past, and that the story was going on for a long time and is going on continuously (194).

Earlier in her essay, she states, "Reality is very much like a story: it is easily changeable and transformative with each speaker. Reality in that way becomes very potent with animation and life" (191). The transcribed print versions of Robinson's stories reflect the written continuity of this view of storied reality.

Chapter Two, "Theorizing the World of the Novel," focuses on how one author, Thomas King, draws from oral tradition and incorporates features from various Native storytelling traditions into a highly contextualized and literate novel. I suggest that a substantial source of King's reworking of oral storytelling performance within the context of "high" literature originates in the stories of Robinson, which King has read extensively. King's novel Green Grass, Running Water reveals how oral tradition may be translated into written form to create a kind of Native theory. While Robinson performs his theory, King writes theory by telling/writing stories into an apparently post-modern novel. But, while Green Grass, Running Water may have come out of a post-modern moment in time, the novel does not really reflect a post-modern aesthetic. Its structure and sensibility are circular, cyclical and metonymic. The novel can, paradoxically, be read as a post-modern literary text, but King never lets the reader forget that that he is *telling us* a Native story.

King's novel mirrors Lee Maracle's claim that theory cannot be separated from story. She says that, "There is a story in every line of theory" and argues that:

Academicians waste a great deal of effort deleting character, plot and story from theoretical arguments. By referring to instances and examples, previous human interaction, and social events, academics convince

themselves of their own objectivity and persuade us that the story is no longer a story. However, *our* intellectuals (elders) know that 'E=MC 2' means nothing outside of human interaction (88).

King's apprehension of narrative as theory in Green Grass, Running Water thus emphasizes some of the differences between Native and white ways of knowing the world. He brings together Western theory and Native theory to create a dialogic interaction between the two. King situates the discourses of Western literature, religion, and mythology within the context of a Native oral tradition that reinforces what Margery Fee and Jane Flick describe as "Coyote epistemology" (1). Coyote epistemology, of course, exists as inherent paradox. It is an epistemology based less on essences than on shifting realities and on an understanding of the dynamic and inter-related natures of human, animal and physical worlds.

Chapter Three, "Recovering the World: Western Fictions," discusses some of the complex relationships between Native story, history and language in James Welch's historical novel, Fools Crow. In the western world, history and story are usually regarded as roughly equivalent to the notions of "fact" and "fiction." Historians are becoming more self-conscious about how they situate themselves in the writing of historical narratives. However, those of us who study literature are less likely to make connections between "fiction" and historical events key issues in literary criticism. But history is usually presented to us in the form of narrative and, as Hayden White observes, historical narratives are enactments of fantasy. They satisfy a deep desire for narrative that Roland Barthes in the "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" suggests is universal. White points out that in our conceptualization of history we hold on to the idea that, "*Real*

events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story" ("Narrativity 276). But Welch problematizes the distinction between story and history from a different perspective. He blurs the lines between notions of "fact" and "fiction" and shows us how story is also always a kind of history. The history that his novel re-creates resembles the kind of oral history that Portelli writes about: events are less important than their meanings, their significations, although there is still factual validity attached to those events.

Fools Crow shows how, among other things, language and land together speak the stories of the people. Language use is reflected in people's relationship to the land; as Armstrong says, "The land changed the language because there is special knowledge in each different place" (176). Welch connects the language that both reflects and constructs reality to the individual's experience of the world. In reading Fools Crow the reader is drawn deeply into the Blackfeet world of the 1860's. Like King, Welch gives us a view of a language and literature that connects, rather than separates, story from one's experience of the world. Thought and substance, word and referent, history and story—these sorts of terms reveal themselves as interwoven and continuous, rather than existing as distinct and polarized binary categories.

In Chapter Four, "Propheying the World Through Story," I discuss Leslie Marmon Silko's epic novel Almanac of the Dead. This novel weaves its narrative threads through notions of story, history and prophecy, as well as oral and written traditions. In Almanac I suggest that Silko has re-created the sacred Maya story of the Popol Vuh, taking her readers on an epic journey through the contemporary Underworld of America, moving from Alaska to Mexico and beyond. The novel has been widely panned by the

critics: one reviewer states that there is neither “special insight” nor “novelistic merit” in any of the novel’s 763 pages. Silko situates the appearance of Europeans on the shores of Mexico, and subsequent genocidal history, within a Native story of witchery and prophecy. Native peoples themselves, Almanac suggests, misinterpreted the old prophetic stories.

Like Robinson, and King’s Coyote, who both illustrate and reinforce the importance of getting the story “right,” Silko gets the story right by transforming the narrative into a modern space and time, ostensibly so that there can be no mistaking the story’s message. Silko’s warning to a world about to self-destruct could be described as apocalyptic, except that the devastation that Almanac suggests is coming has already happened. Moreover, the cycle of destruction and creation that Almanac evokes resembles the cosmology of MesoAmerica more than it does any Judeo-Christian thought or belief.

Silko’s extensive use of the Popol Vuh and Maya calendrics and cosmology, as well as Pueblo worldview, opens up many debates surrounding the relationships among literature, language, culture, and authenticity. The novel negotiates texts from Maya languages, Spanish and English that have been multiply translated, transformed and interpreted. Some of them have been used to construct histories and stories to validate European conquest of Native lands. Now they, along with Native stories, have migrated into a literary text that situates them in the context of Native experience: Almanac, like Green Grass, Running Water (but even more so), both contains and resists the essence of the comparative method within its pages. It resists at every turn the critic’s attempt to untangle categories like story, history, prophecy, time and space. It does not allow the reader to separate past from present realities, nor does it permit the reader to read

complacently without thinking critically in new ways. In the end, Almanac suggests to me that the pages that follow this introduction are, ultimately, impossible to separate from the story of my writing them as a white woman and an academic.

A Note on Terminology

In writing about Native peoples and literature, I have had to decide whether to refer to the original inhabitants of North America as *Native*, *aboriginal*, *indigenous*, *Native American*, *American Indian*, *Indian*, and/or *First Nations*. All of these terms have slightly different denotative and connotative meanings associated with them, and the meanings shift depending on where one is located. Thus, in the United States, *American Indian* and *Indian* are still commonly used terms, while in Canada the word *Indian* verges on being politically incorrect. In Canada the term of choice appears to be *First Nations*, especially in British Columbia. In the United States, the term *Native American* is especially common in academic writing, but few Native people would actually refer to themselves this way.

The difficulties are even more complex because the name *First Nations* is not well known in the United States and the distinction between terms suggests a divisiveness between groups that is based on the (white) border between the United States and Canada. This is a distinction that many Native peoples resist. Because I want to preserve the sense of common experience that Native authors reveal in their writing, I have chosen to use the terms *Native American* or *First Nations* sparingly. For the most part I have used the term *Native* with an upper case letter to distinguish the indigenous peoples of North America from non-Native people “native to” either Canada or the United States. I

occasionally use the term *Indian* as well, but only if the author I am discussing uses this term him or herself. *Aboriginal* and *indigenous* are also commonly used words, but *aboriginal*, despite the Constitution Act of 1982, continues to resonate with the original inhabitants of New Zealand and Australia. Because I am limiting my discussion to the American continent, I prefer the term *Native*.

Both King's and Welch's novels are situated in the *Blackfoot* or *Blackfeet* country of southern Alberta and Montana. In general, the term *Blackfoot* is used in Canada, and *Blackfeet* in the United States. The web page for the "Blackfeet Nation" (<http://blackfeet.3rivers.net>) suggests that *Blackfeet* properly describes the "nation," including reservations in northwestern Montana and Canada. In the United States, *Blackfoot* is also used to describe another cultural group, the Sihapsa, a Lakota tribe. Welch himself uses the term *Blackfeet*, and I have followed his example.

Discussing literature, especially when that literature uses conventions that lie outside established (European) literary tradition, immediately brings to mind ideas about *genre*. These ideas are closely associated with categories like *theory* versus *literature*. Like the idea of oral literature, the concept of *genre* in literary studies is a problematic one. It usually suggests how poems, novels, and plays are different from each other in terms of their formal characteristics. This conceptualization constructs genre as "a docile concept, tending traditional ideas" (Janet Giltrow 20). In contrast, contemporary views of genre suggest its connection to contexts of knowledge. In this way, the ideas of genre and literature may be connected to an understanding of Native writing in the way that the following pages suggest. Genre, when it is connected to contexts of knowledge, is

comprised of both form and situation: writing always serves the particular situation for which it is written.

In the context of Native literature, a new understanding of genre seems crucial. Form and situation together construct meaning; they therefore highlight that how we read a text also affects how we categorize and make meaning from it. The question of genre is thus related to Sarris's question of whether we should read Hamlet and Ceremony in the same way. If literature is an open system that has connections to social reality, then Hamlet and Ceremony are still examples of different genres of literature; their differences, however, go far beyond their formal characteristics.

¹ See Chester "Storied Dialogues" where a detailed discussion of this dialogue between Robinson and Wickwire first appears.

² While I use the word "oral" here in a universal sense, it is important to note that not all Native American traditions are exclusively oral. The Maya, for instance, weave together the oral, the written, and the visual. Silko, in her novel Almanac of the Dead, draws heavily on the Mayan Popol Vuh as a source for her writing. Michael Coe (The Maya; Breaking the Maya Code), Dennis Tedlock (Popol Vuh; Breath on the Mirror), David Freidel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker (Maya Cosmos) and Gordon Brotherston (Book of the Fourth World) have all written of the extensive written and oral traditions of the Maya. It would be simplistic to reinforce the oral/literate dichotomy in the contexts of such a complex and varied history.

³ See Chester "Text and Context: Form and Meaning in Native Narratives" for a more detailed discussion and comparison of Robinson's and Teit's versions of these stories.

⁴ See Silko's essay, "Fifth World," in Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit, for a discussion of the giant stone serpent. 124-134.

⁵ For a discussion of some of Whorf's ideas in the context of anthropology, see Robin Ridington, "On the Language of Benjamin Lee Whorf."

⁶ See George Lakoff's Metaphors We Live By for a discussion of dead metaphors. Lakoff constructs a cognitive model of metaphor that takes into account the imaginative dimension of language.

⁷ I am overlooking, for the moment, the idea that anything literary is, by definition, written. Even Beowulf, a classic English literary text, has strong roots in the oral storytelling traditions of Europe, as do the ancient Greek epics and the Old Testament.

⁸ The stories were transcribed by Wickwire, Lynne Jorgesen and Blanca Chester. In Nature Power, the second of the two books, more than half of the transcription was done by me. In addition to these collections, there are hundreds of pages of transcribed stories as yet unpublished, and even more stories that have not been transcribed at all.

CHAPTER ONE: Recreating the World Through Story

STORYTELLING

*You should understand
the way it was
back then,
because it is the same
even now.*

Leslie Marmon Silko

*There, how's that? That's how I can tell
my life for the white people's way. Is that
what you want? It's more, my life. It's not
only the one thing. It's many. You have to listen.
You have to know me to know what I'm talking
about.*

Mabel McKay

The Storied World of Harry Robinson

In reading works written by Native authors, critics often point to characteristics of the written text that reveal its origins in oral tradition. Yet the idea of orality and writing as existing on a time line has been complicated by the development of deconstruction and Jacques Derrida's observation that, because of the underlying grammar of language, anything spoken must always already have been "written." Speaking must be viewed as a form of writing, according to Derrida, because speaking follows convention (a grammar) that pre-exists actualized speech. Displacing the oppositions between oral and written, moreover, allows us to read into the connections between oral and written in novels like King's Green Grass, Running Water. Novels like King's do not "originate" in the oral in the sense that readers might expect, but they do resonate with orality. Links between oral

and written reveal themselves most clearly in orally performed stories and narratives that have been recorded and then translated into written forms. These kinds of stories have usually been translated from a Native language into English, thus adding another layer to the translation process.

Harry Robinson's Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power are perhaps the best North American example of oral stories told by a Native storyteller and then transcribed and published in book form. I make the distinction between writing down the stories, or transcribing them, and then amassing them into a cohesive text—a book—because the editorial process of choosing which stories are or are not included in such a collection also reflects a kind of authority over the stories. The oral characteristics of written collections like Robinson's include features such as his extensive use of dialogue, sentence and word repetitions, paratactic sentence structure, and, at a more general level, the nature and subject matter of the stories themselves. However, while much has been written about how traditional oral forms are translated into written texts, there has been less focus on reading this literature from another perspective: how does oral tradition reveal its continuity as spoken when the words are written down? Current interest in story and storytelling seems to focus on renewing oral tradition through performance and frequently points to limitations of the written text in its ability to express orality. But what if we instead focus on how writing can and does contain and perpetuate the oral, including features of oral performance, from within the written frame? What if we emphasize possible points of connection between oral and written and examine them from Derrida's position that the two are indistinguishable? The artificial oppositions between oral and written are then displaced, I suggest. In fact, writers like Thomas King, James Welch, and

Leslie Marmon Silko, as well as many non-Native writers, often deliberately create a sense of the oral in their writing, both inventing and perpetuating a tradition of “orality in literacy.”¹

Robinson’s stories are unique because, as a bilingual speaker of both his native Okanagan language and English, he began to tell traditional Okanagan stories in English in the later part of his life. Because Robinson composed his stories in English, Wickwire was able to transcribe the stories without translating them, moving from oral performance to written text in a way that remained faithful to Robinson’s renditions. At times, Robinson’s own difficulties in translating Okanagan linguistic forms into English, his struggle to translate certain concepts (especially abstract concepts that are dependent on Okanagan cultural contexts for their meanings) into an English story, tells us something about Okanagan realities. The translation is already done for us. But there are times when Robinson simply cannot translate a particular word or idea into English terms. It is at these points in Robinson’s stories where the inability of the English language to capture Robinson’s thoughts reveals express how much we have yet to learn about the relationship between language and culture. Is the problem one of translating experience, or of translating language? What is the connection between the two? The difficulty non-Native readers may have in understanding some of Robinson’s stories situates these narratives in the gap between Okanagan and English experience of the world. Part, but not all, of that experience is language.

Robinson’s reason for telling stories in English was to reach a wider audience, since many of his listeners and now, his readers, both Native and non-Native, do not speak Okanagan (Nature 9). Wickwire, editor of both collections, has endeavored to present

them in a written form that closely follows Robinson's verbal breath patterns, structuring line breaks and spaces to follow the rhythms of Robinson's speech performance. Many aspects of Robinson's way of speaking, including his use of idiom and what could be called dialect have been retained. In Write It On Your Heart, Wickwire did edit and change pronoun references in the text. Robinson's native Okanagan language makes no distinction between masculine, feminine, and neuter pronoun forms and he uses these forms interchangeably. Wickwire states, "In order to minimize confusion for readers new to these stories, I have edited the pronouns to make them consistent with their antecedents" (Write It 15). In Nature Power, however, Wickwire reconsidered this decision and changed the original pronouns "only when absolutely necessary" (Nature 17). The minimal amount of editing in these collections, Wickwire suggests, presents the reader with "an opportunity for readers to experience storytelling straight from the source" (Nature 17). The idea of "the source," however, connected as it is with that other myth, "origins," only tells us part of the story.

Just as they were in their "original" oral forms, Robinson's stories are constantly being re-created and re-contextualized to fit into new situations; even the publication of more than one version of the same story suggests their dynamic nature. The story, "Go Get Susan, See What She Can Do," in Nature Power is a retelling of "Indian Doctor" in Write It On Your Heart, and "Power Man, Power Woman, They Each Have a Different Way," is a retelling of "A Woman Receives Power from the Deer." As Wickwire observes, the variations in the stories "illustrate how Harry approached a story freshly each time he told it" (Nature 18). Each individual performance re-creates the original story

in a new version. Mieke Bal, in discussing multiple versions of stories, makes the distinction between the "text" and the "story." She states:

The text is not identical to the story. ... What is meant by these two terms can be clearly illustrated by the following example. Everyone in Europe is familiar with the story of Tom Thumb. However, not everyone has read that story in the same text. There are different versions; in other words, there are different texts in which that same story is related. There are noticeable differences among the various texts (5).

Bal also points out that, "Narrator and focalization² together determine what has been called narration" (19) and she argues that, "The fact that 'narration has always implied focalization is related to the notion that language shapes vision and world-view, rather than the other way around" (19).

One can read the stories of Harry Robinson, I suggest, from the point of view of a continuous tradition of Native storytelling. Native authors like Tom King, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko then take stories from their own and other traditions and re-create them yet again, in the context of highly literate texts. But reading Robinson's stories as simple written transcriptions of purely oral forms implies a sense of loss and inadequacy. It reinforces the notion that we have of the inability of any translation to "get at" a "superior" original text. As recently as 1992 Finnegan, for example, asks, "What is left out in translation?...And in *written* translation" (190) and she states that some elements will always be "missing" (191). Rather than focusing on these limitations, she suggests that "loss" (193) is inevitable, and says that, "If a written translation is necessary...it can be helpful to comment on these limitations"(193). Ong, who privileges

not just orality, but “primary” orality, argues that “powerful and beautiful verbal performances” are no longer even possible “once writing has taken possession of the psyche” (14).³ These kinds of attitudes towards traditional Native American stories perpetuate the notion that we “unfortunately” are left with “only” the written forms— inferior representations of a once-powerful reality. It also perpetuates the nineteenth-century myth of a “dead and dying” Native culture. In contrast, reading Robinson’s, and other storytellers’ stories as continuations and transformations of a vital storytelling tradition shows how tradition continues to change. As Cruikshank points out, “Narratives arguably connect analytical constructs with the material conditions of people’s daily lives... I...hear and understand these stories as being told thoughtfully and purposefully, as being grounded in everyday life, and as having political consequences” (*Social* 162). Contemporary Native writers, like oral storytellers, reveal a past history that lives on into the present. Native stories today continue their journey through time and space in written forms.

Anthropologists who sought to preserve the “remnants” of “pure” Native cultural traditions reinforced the oral/literate dichotomy during the nineteenth century. It continues into the twentieth century especially through the theories of writers like Ong and Goody. Both Ong and Goody ironically attempt to understand the oral in terms of the written while they simultaneously try to construct and preserve oppositions between the two; it is as if they are trying to situate themselves outside of the system they are trying to create. The oral/ literate dichotomy has led to the simplistic assumption that real Native American traditions are always and exclusively oral, while European and white traditions are literate. The ethnocentric assumption that this dichotomy reflects comes from a hierarchical view

of these categories where the oral is seen as simplistic or “primitive,” (even while it may be romanticized) while the literate is privileged as a more sophisticated or “civilized” mode of knowledge. Not only is this stereotype inherently ethnocentric, it ignores the highly literate traditions of Native peoples like the Maya. The idea seems to be that “real” Indians continue their traditions orally; Indians who write have been assimilated and co-opted by white ways—they are not “pure.”

King plays with the Indian/oral and white/literate dichotomy in Green Grass Running Water in his Nasty Bumpo list of contrasts. Coyote and Nathaniel Bumpo argue about who is Indian and who is not:

Indians can run fast. Indians can endure pain. Indians have quick reflexes. Indians don't talk much. Indians have good eyesight. Indians have agile bodies. These are all Indian gifts, says Nasty Bumpo. ... Whites are patient. Whites are spiritual. Whites are cognitive. Whites are philosophical. Whites are sophisticated. Whites are sensitive. These are all white gifts, says Nasty Bumpo (327-329).

Alberta Frank and Eli Stands Alone, two of King's Native characters, are, ironically, also English professors. King's novel constantly suggests that things are never as simple as they seem, and the narrative plays with these oppositions and stereotypes, revealing their essential nature and identities as socially constructed even while they are used as tests of some inherent Native authenticity.

Contemporary Native literature, like novels and poetry, are frequently judged exclusively from the point of view of Western European literary criticism. The authors are seen as incorporating thematic interests and aspects of orality from Native tradition into

European-style texts. Critics are quick to dismiss a novel when it does not meet certain literary criteria or even when it does not fulfil expectations of what a Native novel should be “about,” like Silko’s Almanac of the Dead.⁴ Oral tradition, moreover, is not usually read in the same contexts as written literature. Collections of stories like Robinson’s are more frequently read in anthropology courses and courses on “oral tradition” than they are in literature departments where the study of a written kind of “literariness” remains a primary focus.

Critics like Peter Dickinson, however, have shown how the use of oral features as a technique of literary production is a characteristic of much Native writing (320-340). Dickinson states that, “Oral features function as deliberate narrative strategies within...narrative production” (320). He then argues that these kinds of Native texts “transform the usually solitary reading experience into a more cooperative and responsive act of listening” (320). In studies of oral forms of storytelling, Dell Hymes has argued that recourse to the originals (oral) is necessary to provide some control over “slips and changes” in translation from oral to written (38). The question of originals is, however, a problematic one, and the question of authenticity always seems to lie just below the surface of discussions about “original” oral texts, and secondary written ones. Hymes’s concern, moreover, lies more with the linguistic accuracy of the stories than with their literary merit. (In fact, Hymes writes against evaluating Native narratives based on their literary merit in English.) Using a different approach, Tedlock focuses on transcribing oral stories so that their performative aspects are retained in the written texts. He consequently argues for the written translation of spoken stories into “dramatic poetry,” a model that Wickwire follows in her editing of Robinson’s collections.⁵ Tedlock argues that oral

narratives, like poetry, “evoke” emotions rather than describing them directly (Spoken Word 51). As oral narratives, the stories of Robinson evoke not only emotions, but also the worldview and reality of Okanagan life, also without stating those views directly.

- Robinson tells us about his world by giving us stories that are inherently dialogic. It is up to us to try to understand those stories, and thereby to enter into dialogue with Robinson’s world.

Storytelling traditions, of course, exist throughout world history, not just within Native American cultures. But the assumption that the oral story is a universal category with its origins in the Greek epics of Homer is, as Tedlock observes, a problematic one (Introduction to Dialogic Emergence 1-31). Among other things, it overlooks the social aspects and context of the storytelling performance, especially in terms of “emergence” or creation stories. Tedlock argues, along Bakhtinian lines, “That any and all present discourse is already replete with echoes, allusions, paraphrases and outright quotations of prior discourse” (7). As one reads Robinson’s stories, one sees how their dialogic and literary qualities reveal themselves at levels deeper and more complex than that of multiple voices within the text. Moreover, Okanagan symbols and metaphor, embedded in the language and performative aspects of Robinson’s storytelling, reveal far more than a sense of “the other” in “post-colonial” English texts. I will focus on some of the social aspects and contexts of Robinson’s stories, and on how these work like dialogues between cultures, in the pages that follow. Stories like Robinson’s set the stage for the reading of much contemporary Native American literature. They tie together traditional Native American literary forms (and I include here oral storytelling as part of literature and literary discourse) and contemporary Native writing.

Translating Worldviews

Robinson's concern with preserving and recreating the storied traditions of his culture may be read as part of the "living worldview" that Wickwire attributes to oral storytelling (Write It 17), rather than reflecting Robinson's concern with the preservation of a dying tradition. By translating stories from oral into written forms, the stories continue a tradition where current events are incorporated into an older past in meaningful ways. While much changes during the process of any translation, whether across languages, media, or oral and written forms, Robinson clearly felt much could also be gained. By reading the texts of Robinson's narratives as written translations of oral stories, the printed forms suggest themselves as continuous with Native oral tradition. The process is similar to translating literature from Spanish, German, or any other language, into English.

When a work of literature moves from one language into another, or from one medium into another, the process of translation creates something new. But the translation also remains part of the literary tradition from where it originates: Faustus is still German, Don Quixote still retains its Spanish context, even if we read them in English. Likewise, Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power should still be read as part of Okanagan oral tradition even while we now read, rather than listen to, these narratives. Because Robinson composed his stories in English, however, his translations are more like a Spanish or Russian or Hebrew writer composing in English than they are translations of a writer who composes in a language other than English. The issue of how to categorize such writers is never a simple one: is Nabokov, who composed in English, representative

of English literature and culture, or not? Is Joseph Skvorecky, a Canadian immigrant who composes his novels in Czech, a Canadian author or not?⁶ Culture and language interconnect in complex ways, ways that prevent the mapping of national literatures onto lived linguistic experience.

As a Native storyteller Robinson is different from writers writing in a foreign language because he composes and performs his stories orally. He uses a familiar oral medium but composes in English. Many Native people before European contact were multi-lingual, speaking more than one Native language. Translating from oral to written, therefore, seems like more of a leap than simply telling the stories in another language; Robinson did not write down his stories. In contrast, authors like Thomas King, James Welch and Leslie Silko incorporate orality into their written compositions. These authors, however, are not always bilingual; King uses Native stories and an oral style in his writing, but his first language is English, as it is for many contemporary Native writers. But the worldviews that these authors express, regardless of the languages they speak, reflect both the multiplicity of Native experience, and its commonality. They reveal the sense of an on-going Native tradition in relationship with each other, and with European cultures.

Robinson has incorporated European elements and content into his stories in a way that reflects the spirit and worldview of an Okanagan storyteller. While his composition was purely oral, this orality, it has been suggested, loses much of its sense in the translation from oral to written. Yet, in both the oral and written stories of Robinson, a large part of the power of his language continues to lie in the words and narrative structures that signal particularly Okanagan ways of thinking about the world. In one instance Robinson describes a meeting in 1881 between the Indians and a "government

man” where the Indians are asked to describe their “beginnings.” The dialogue that ensues reflects how oral stories constantly change. It reflects how the Okanagan make sense of lived experience from their own perspective, using a storytelling tradition that is always inclusive and constantly incorporates new elements of experience into it. It also, however, illustrates the misunderstandings that arise between this perspective and a white view that sets itself up from outside (and above) Native experience. Robinson tells this story, revealing both sides of the discussion:

“Yeah, our forefather, how we became to be
Indian, that’s from Adam, Adam and Eve.”

“No, no, that’s mine.”

“Yeah,” the one ‘em says,
“Noah, Noah, the one that built that great big...
when the world flood.”

“No,” he says.
“That’s overseas.
That’s my forefather. Not the Indians.
I’m asking you for your forefather.”

(Nature 15)

This story, like many of Robinson’s stories, shows how the Okanagan way of thinking about the world is inclusive, incorporating (new) European ideas into older Okanagan traditions. The oral compositions of Robinson, moreover, recreate Okanagan experience through performance. Their vitality comes out of an orality that is immediate and embodied in the words of a storyteller in dialogue with his audience. Robinson’s performances suggest a dramatic enactment of stories where characters and audiences, along with the storyteller, set the historical record straight.⁷

Contemporary writers like King are inspired by the oral voice re-created in the textualized versions of Robinson's stories. Other writers, like Jeannette Armstrong, also a bilingual speaker of Okanagan and English, also express Native poetics through written compositions; they express a Native worldview using the English language. In her writing, Armstrong self-consciously attempts to make English an Okanagan language. She argues that we cannot under-emphasize the significance of an underlying Native language in Okanagan stories told or written in English. She writes of her own efforts to re-create an Okanagan sense of time and place in her English prose and poetry, and describes the various ways in which she consciously attempts to construct an English that reflects the senses of movement, rhythm, and place that comprise Okanagan language and experience.

"Rez English," according to Armstrong, more closely resembles the structural quality of Okanagan. Armstrong suspects that it reveals "semantic differences reflecting the view of reality embedded in the culture" (193). Likewise, Robinson's efforts to convey Okanagan reality to his audience through English reflect the continuity of the Okanagan way of life. Robinson says, "Just like I think and I could see, like. It just seems to come back. That's the way I remember. But, for a long time, I forget. I didn't remember. But when I get older and nothing I can do but tell stories. And then I begin to see 'em. And people. Remember again" (*Nature* 7). Repeating the stories keeps the memories and the traditions alive, and the changes in each variation of a story (as well as what does not change) point to a conceptualization of tradition itself that is dynamic and fluid, rather than static and dead.

During storytelling sessions, Robinson consistently emphasizes the importance of "getting the story right" and part of his insistence that Wickwire be responsible for their

textualized form was his continued concern that the stories be written down “right” as well. Robinson pointed out to Wickwire that his job was to tell the stories; hers was to write them down (Nature 17). Robinson’s awareness of the importance of writing is reflected in a letter he sends to Wickwire where he asserts that his stories should be compiled into a book for white people, as well as Natives, to read (Nature 2). While Wickwire first suggested that the tape-recorded stories be written down, it was well after many storytelling performances had been recorded by her that Robinson responded to the suggestion by saying, “I think that is a good idea. Do it while I’m alive yet” (Nature 9). He then offers to help Wickwire with the textualizing process in any way that he can, observing, however, that, “I wrote the some of it or I mention on tape and you do the rest of the work. The stories is worked by Both of us you and I” (Nature 10). The collaborative process of putting together collections like Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power thus shares in the dialogic nature of the stories themselves. These remain stories that are shared as dialogues between people, rather than existing as monologues imprinted on a flat white page.

One of the difficulties that Wickwire faced in this textualizing process included determining where individual stories begin and end – because they do not have the discrete beginnings, middles and endings that we have come to expect in written literature. She notes that the three creation stories included in Write It On Your Heart were not told as separate stories by Robinson, and that she separated the stories “for the ease of the reader” (Write It 17). Difficulty in determining where stories begin and end is also reflected in Wickwire’s use of introductory excerpts which describe each story (and which were added at the publisher’s request). But the lack of discrete beginnings and endings,

and Wickwire's difficulty in negotiating them, points to a key characteristic of Native storytelling tradition. The stories run into one another and cannot be separated from each other. They do not move along a linear time line as traditions in the West do; they occur in storied cycles. Despite their translation into written form, this feature of Robinson's stories cannot, and should not, be erased.

The fluidity and continuity of Robinson's stories is particularly evident in the three creation stories that begin Write It On Your Heart. The first story, called "The First People," slides into an earth diver story where the Indian twin dives into the water and picks up a speck of dirt that grows into the earth. This story moves into a detailed account of the two first twins, Indian and white. On tape, one hears how each story moves into the next, how they are interconnected. Separating them, for Wickwire, was a difficult and arbitrary task. She notes, "There is just no single 'origin' story in those early collections. Maybe the tradition has always been 'fluid' and reworked according to changing situations and individual 'interpretation.' Maybe the early ethnographers were constantly battling with an issue that was part of the tradition. For 'us' it is a single linear 'story'; with the Okanagan of a century ago, it may have been something very different. Harry's views certainly support the latter" (Wickwire, personal e-mail communication, May 26, 1998). The lack of linearity in Robinson's stories seems connected to their ability to assimilate and absorb new elements. Unlike discrete, linear narratives with clear beginnings, middles, and endings, the fluidity of the stories that Wickwire describes contributes to their sense of interconnectedness.

It is clear from reading Robinson that each story seems to contain another, and also evokes another. One cannot read the story of the first people without imagining its

connection to the earth diver story, or the story of the twins, or to the story of how Coyote gets his name. The interconnectedness of all of the stories and their resistance to linearity or linear reading reflect a cultural context where the story is both oral history and the transformation of culture itself.⁸ Story, as we will see later, has the power to transform the world. It does not simply reveal or reflect transformations that exist outside—for the world itself exists inside story.

Part of the power of Robinson's stories lies in their emphasis on dialogue and dialogism. The act of storytelling always suggests or implies an interaction with an audience. To tell a story suggests that someone is listening to that story. Traditionally, the listener of a story comes from the same cultural background as the teller, and shares a certain matrix of cultural knowledge. In the case of written texts, or of translations of oral stories such as Robinson's, this was and is frequently not the case. Wickwire notes that her position as a white woman may reflect the nature of some of the stories that Robinson did, and did not, share with her. There is, of course, no way of knowing exactly how Robinson edited and shaped these stories for his audience. What is certain, however, is that Robinson assumed that he *was* telling his stories to an audience other than Wickwire, and that this audience would interact with his stories in different ways—hence his later insistence that Wickwire get the written story down “right” for a reading audience.

The Blending of Oral and Written

Robinson's stories and the way that Wickwire has grappled with their textualizing reflect an intimate connection with their oral origins. When one reads Robinson's stories,

one hears him speaking. Robinson creates an oral voice within written language; his books blend oral and written forms, as King points out. King notes that Robinson's stories make use of "an oral syntax that defeats readers' efforts to read the stories silently" ("Godzilla" 13). He further observes that, "By forcing the reader to read aloud," Robinson's written texts recreate a sense of both storyteller and performance ("Godzilla" 13). The relationship of the written collections of stories to oral storytelling also raises a series of questions about how the stories connect with both oral tradition and written literature—especially since King states explicitly that he has drawn on Robinson's stories for both his own novels and short stories.

In the story, "Coyote Plays a Dirty Trick,"⁹ Robinson says:

And now, it says,
I've got the paper written here,
and it says there on that paper.
It says in 1969 the first man that's on the moon,
that's Armstrong.
He was the first man on the moon.

But they did not know
Coyote's son was the first man on the moon!
And Mr. Armstrong was the second man on the moon.
So the Indians know that,
but the white people do not know what the Indian know.

Not all Indian,
but some.
So, that's the way that goes.

And Mr. Coyote, the Young Coyote,
was up to the moon at that time,
before Armstrong.
See?
Armstrong gets up to the moon in '69.

But Coyote's son,
a long time before Christ.
Then how long Christ, since he was born?
(Write It 92)

This story, like many of Robinson's, blends Christian with Okanagan traditions, mainstream (white) history with Robinson's Native interpretation and his perspective on his own history. As Wickwire notes, "In an oral tradition such as Harry's...nothing is fundamentally new...and creation is not some moment in the past, but remains present as the wellspring of every act and every experience in the world" (Write It 23). Moreover, during the storytelling performance Wickwire is explicitly invited into a dialogue with Robinson's world, to recreate and understand her own experience of this story and Robinson's interpretation of it, when Robinson addresses her (and now us) and asks, rhetorically, "See?"

To "see" what Robinson means one has to think about his stories at the level of cultural meaning, and not just as literary or oral forms. Meaning is always dependent on non-verbal, as well as verbal, contexts. Thus, concepts like "truth" or "reality" are culturally constructed ideas. Wickwire notes that Robinson never fictionalized stories. She observes that the stories are true and says, "The truth and accuracy of Harry's words in Nature Power¹⁰ have made me think anew about what is 'real,' what we 'know,' what is 'true.' In the West we have built a civilization around the 'true' story of a man who died and was resurrected after three days" (Nature 20). Of Robinson's conceptualizations of the stories as true, as reflecting Okanagan reality, Wickwire says, "Stories describe either situations experienced personally or they describe situations passed on by others who similarly experienced them, however long ago. In the case of the latter, Harry simply

explains, ‘this is the way I heard the stories so I tell it that way’” (Write It 16). The truth of stories centres around the nature of their meaning, as Alessandro Portelli notes in his research on storytelling traditions. Portelli states that stories transform material facts into cultural meanings. He says, “What counts is less the event told than the telling of the event” (Battle 42-43). It is thus the storytelling performance, the story’s ability to create an ongoing dialogue with an audience, whether that story is in oral or written form, that gives a sense of truth to the story—not whether it can be categorized formally as either “fact” or “fiction.”

When Robinson gives us his interpretation of Neil Armstrong’s trip to the moon, he gives it to us in the context of an Okanagan worldview. His story does not begin or end with Armstrong’s journey or with the story of NASA’s reach into outer space, or with the story of the birth of Christ. It is instead firmly grounded in an Okanagan Coyote story, in the context of, among other things, a non-linear, cyclical frame of time and space. In this way it suggests the continuity of an Okanagan past and history into the present. It shows how Robinson uses traditional Okanagan narrative to frame or interpret his modern-day life experiences. This aspect of Native storytelling is also the focus of Cruikshank’s book, Life Lived Like a Story. Cruikshank shows how Yukon elders use traditional narrative discourse to make sense of their lives, and she suggests that this criterion, of how the stories connect to life as lived, should be the key issue in the interpretation of stories. The stories of Robinson and other Native storytellers thus show us that stories do more than simply entertain, or even teach simple lessons (as we often think folktales do). Stories are a way of theorizing the world, how it works, and how we should behave in it.

When early anthropologists and folklorists studied stories, they concentrated their energies on the discussion of the formal and structural qualities of narratives, rather than on how those stories functioned in the world. But form and meaning cannot be separated so easily from each other.¹¹ Social context is now beginning to be viewed as part of the narrative quality of stories. Storytelling, how it constitutes a particular form of cultural knowledge, is described by Cruikshank as more like process than product. She describes this knowledge as a "relational concept, more like a verb than a noun" (Social Life 70). Language, form, and culture come together in the stories of Robinson in a way that their meaning lies both inside and outside the narrative structure itself. Their contexts are non-verbal as well as verbal, and even the verbal aspects of the stories reflect Okanagan language and reality, despite their translation into English. Ultimately, Robinson's whole world is a storied one that reflects an Okanagan view of reality. As Armstrong observes, Okanagan reality interconnects story and language with place and culture. Therefore, in a holistic sense, Okanagan stories reflect "the ability to move the audience back and forth between the present reality and the story reality" (194). Robinson takes us back and forth between the realities of seeing Neil Armstrong on the moon and Coyote's son's visit to the moon simultaneously. He does this "by Coyote's power, the old man's power" (Write It 93) and by the power of his oral storytelling performances, which remain as deep traces in the written versions of his stories.

Anthropologists like Edward Bruner have focused on the more experiential aspects of story and narrative, and Bruner notes, "Stories are interpretive devices which give meaning to the present in terms of location in an ordered syntagmatic sequence—the exact opposite of anthropological common sense. ...In my view, we begin with a narrative that

already contains a beginning and an ending, which frame and hence enable us to interpret the present” (143). Bruner argues that the interpretation of stories is usually done in the context of what he calls the dominant story, rather than in the context of lived experience. But Robinson’s narratives do not always contain beginnings, middles, and endings, and deciding where one story begins and another one ends was frequently a matter of editorial decision, the arbitrariness of which seems evident when one reads the collection of stories as a whole. It is also clear that the narrative that frames, or is dominant in, the story of Coyote’s son’s visit to the moon is not the dominant narrative of mainstream North American culture. This dominant narrative is clearly Okanagan. It reveals a universe structured as much by Coyote as by God or by science and technology.

It is Robinson’s lived experience that is integral to what Yukon elder Angela Sidney describes as living her life “like a story” (Cruikshank Life Lived 1). And, while the stories are to be enjoyed, they are also always connected with learning and knowledge. Robinson notes, “And that’s the way we do. That is how you learn, that is, if you enjoy the stories” (Nature 8). Sidney also says that the stories are meant to be shared. She says, “You tell what you know. I tell them, and the way I tell is what I know” (Cruikshank Life Lived 39). The medium is the message. The difference between modes of production in (traditional) oral storytelling and highly literate Native novels remains a crucial distinction in terms of the re-situating of writers and readers into new Native contexts. Contemporary Native writers use an oral voice and recreate it in various ways through writing, but storytellers like Harry Robinson and Angela Sidney continue to perform their stories in oral situations, with live audiences. One could say that they are realizing¹² Native narratives in English.

In a cultural framework where story functions to theorize the world, telling what one knows requires recreating the world through story. It means blending newer European elements into older traditional forms so that the world the storyteller creates is always a new one. It always reflects new contexts of experience. The novel, in this view, is already a Native story form but the way that it is put together is also constantly changing. Stories constantly change and, moreover, the same story can always be told from multiple points of view. Telling what one knows in terms of a living worldview does not mean plugging Native stories into a dominant white narrative. It does not mean editing out European elements to restore an alleged purity or authenticity to Native narratives. It does mean retelling the stories to include new elements of Native experience, even if those experiences come from contact with Judeo-Christian stories of beginnings, or other aspects of what is now a cross-cultural history.

Not to blend the new into the old would suggest stasis, the stories frozen as a (printed) moment in time. It would suggest stories as word museums rather than as vital and living, like language itself. But the recreation of Robinson's stories in written form implies the same vitality, the same "psychological urgency" that their oral tellings do because the printed stories resonate with the oral, performative versions, the oral "source" to which Wickwire refers. The written translations thus reveal the ability of stories to take on new forms as well as new thematic contexts—they suggest that form is part of context. The ability of the stories to continue teaching—of the learning that both Robinson and Sidney say is an integral component of listening to stories—also suggests their continued recursivity and productivity. If storied worldviews remain part of an ongoing and vital Native tradition, it means that they will continue to show up in new times and places.

Interacting with the Language of Stories

Current discussion of storytelling focuses on stories' continuity as social process, rather than their existence as cultural artifacts. Cruikshank says, "Myth provides an allegory of social interaction, interaction that takes place in the *story* of the myth rather than in its underlying structural oppositions" (Life Lived 343). Part of that social interaction lies in the social aspects of language. Whether stories are told in English or in a Native language, they reflect an interaction between both lived experiences and between the experience of the language. In this context, language itself is experienced like a story; it forms the beginnings of a dialogue, as every speech act already assumes some kind of response. Jo-Ann Archibald notes how oral tradition is more than a characteristic of storytelling form. She argues that orality reflects a deeper cultural belief system; it is a mode of thought.

In her discussion of storytelling conventions, Archibald points out that, "Learning how a story fits within a people's belief system requires that one live with or interact with the people for a long time. The communal principle of storytelling implies that a listener is or becomes a member of that community" (34). She goes on to note that using written English to convey Native stories can be problematic because the framework of those stories (principles, values, and format) can be very different from their structure and meaning in the original language (34-36). Cruikshank also writes of her initial reluctance to record English versions of stories that were traditionally learned and told in Native languages because so much is "lost" in translation. She observes, "This inevitable loss in style and form was noted by Boas generations ago, and his observations seem as

appropriate now as they were then" (Life Lived 16). Cruikshank goes on to note, however, that much has changed since the time of Boas, and that Native storytellers today frequently see their role as one of educating younger generations. These younger generations now often speak English as their first language (Life Lived 16). The "loss" that is implied in many of these discussions of oral storytelling tradition, moreover, sometimes creates divisions between Native peoples. It perpetuates the essentialist kind of notion that regardless of other life experiences, if someone does not speak his/her Native language, he/she is somehow "not Native." (And neither is he or she "white" either.) When one Native writer expressed this idea to me, she stated that she felt not speaking the Tsimshian language made her a different kind of Native person. Valerie Dudoward states, "I am a different person from people who grew up with their native language. But I think that makes me a different Indian person. I don't think that makes me not be a 'true' Indian" (qtd. in Chester and Dudoward 164).

Like Robinson with Wickwire, the Yukon elders who tell Cruikshank their stories want her to understand something from them. In re-evaluating the decision to record stories in English, Cruikshank says, "When they tell me a story, they do so to explain something else to me. The whole rationale for telling them disappears if I cannot understand what they are trying to teach" (Social Life 16-17). Likewise, Robinson instructs Wickwire, telling her, "So, take a listen to these, a few times and think about it, to these stories, and what I tell you now. Compare them. See if you can see something more about it. Kind of plain, but it's pretty hard to tell you for you to know right now. Takes time. And then you will see" (Nature 19). Telling the stories in English is clearly a part of blending the new into the old—of continuing to tell the stories in the way that they

were meant to be told—so that something new can be created from out of the old learning, and so that the old learning continues in new ways.

Sometimes, however, it is nearly impossible to re-create Native meanings using the English language, as Robinson's dialogue with Wickwire on the meaning of the Okanagan words, *ha-HA* and *Shoo-MISH* makes evident. When Wickwire asks what these words mean, Robinson responds by saying, "Is the thing—some of them Indian word—that I can't turn into English. Seems to be they got no mate" (qtd. in Chester "Storied Dialogues" 16). Robinson then launches into a lengthy round of telling stories in an attempt to make Wickwire understand these two Okanagan concepts. After a series of questions by Wickwire, which Robinson responds to patiently, saying of *Shoo-MISH*:

That's one of 'em
See, we didn't get to this yet.
I was going to tell you.
But we going by the number.

Wendy: But Harry, a person who has that—
If a person has that, then is he this?

Harry: *ha-HA*. Yeah.
That would be the *ha-HA*.

Wendy: That's what I wanted to know.

Harry: Yeah, that's the *ha-HA*?
When you have that, then they had 'em.
I don't know what they do.
But they have 'em, you know.
They must alone—in the writing.
No paper, those days, you know.
They might've wrote 'em in,
in something so they could keep 'em.
I think they could sew the buckskin thin,
the thin of the buckskin, you know.
In the edge, like in here.

They really thin, almost like the paper.
They thin.
Then I think they cut them and they make it very small,
kind of narrow, you know, like that.
And they sew that.
They sew that, and then they put the *ha-HA* in
when they just kill 'em, you know.
When they fresh.
Put 'em in and then they sew.

Then they can stay in there and dry 'em
and they turn into powder, like.
But still in there.
And he must've had 'em in his pocket
or sitting somewhere.
So they need 'em,
so they can take 'em out on his hand.

Once they had 'em on his hand,
you can never see 'em.
It just disappearing.
You could see 'em walking from here.
Maybe two, three man is standing and himself make it four.
But the other three, they standing here still.
Then whoever the power man,
they walked a couple hundred yards away from the others.
And these others still want 'em,
still looking at 'em.
Then they get there,
then his hand—don't see no more.
Even in open place.

We didn't get there yet.
(qtd. in Chester "Storied Dialogues" 16-17)

This dialogue continues for more than half an hour, with Robinson telling about how a group of Blackfoot Natives make use of this *Shoo-MISH*, and of how a tiny little insect is *ha-HA*, as well as a "power man." Robinson's dialogue suggests that power objects sewn into a medicine bundle are like words assembled onto paper—they are important like the

stories of Robinson that Wickwire will subsequently present to the world in printed form. If it is still unclear what *ha-HA* means after all this, then perhaps that *is* the point. The stories that Robinson tells in an attempt to elucidate are confusing not only because of linguistic difficulties, the impossibility of translating a word that has “no mate” into English, but because we are not accustomed to hearing stories as answers to our questions. We do not understand stories as dialogues.

Many years after this tape was recorded, Wickwire begins to comprehend the significance of stories as a way to answer questions. In order to communicate with Robinson, she observes that, “You should have all of this back and forth understanding *before you start*” (qtd. in Chester “Storied Dialogues” 26; emphasis mine). Robinson tells Okanagan stories in English to explain words like *ha-HA* and *Shoo-MISH* to Wickwire. The stories serve as instructions on how to interpret the concepts—but one needs a certain amount of background cultural knowledge in order to be able to interpret those meanings. Robinson’s suggestion that Wickwire listen to the stories and think about them a little while also implies that she will understand aspects of the stories when she is ready—when she has learned enough to be able to understand them in their Okanagan context. Thus, words like *ha-HA* and *Shoo-MISH* can never be translated into English; it is the English language that will have to adapt in order to incorporate Okanagan meaning within itself. Robinson’s stories, therefore, consistently retain a certain untranslatable quality as they reflect his Okanagan experience of the world, both culturally and linguistically.

Robinson makes a clear distinction between Indian stories, with an underlying Okanagan context and history, and white stories. The difference is not one of writing alone. Before he tells his story, “Puss in Boots,” Robinson says:

Yeah, I'll tell you "Cat With the Boots On."
Riding boots on.
That's the stories, the first stories.
There was a big ranch, not around here.
That's someplace in European.
Overseas.
That's a long time, shortly after the "imbellable" stories.
But this is part "imbellable" stories.
It's not Indian stories.
This is white people stories,
because I learned this from the white people.
Not the white man.
The white man tell his son,
that's Allison -- John Fall Allison.
His son was a half Indian and a half white,
because his mother was an Indian.
And his father was a white man.
So his father told him these stories.
But he told me -- Bert Allison.
So he told me,
"This is not Indian stories.
White man stories."
You understand that?

(Write It 282)

The differing views of reality that are embedded in narrative are highlighted in Robinson's distinction between Indian and white stories. Moreover, the source of the story, where it comes from, and how it arrived in Robinson's repertoire, are all meaningful aspects of the story. "Imbellable," according to Wickwire, "was the term adopted by Harry during a discussion with a non-native who explained to Harry that these stories were 'unbelievable'" (Write It 282). "Unbelievable," of course, is outside the terms of Robinson's reference, since the stories, as he sees them, are not fictionalized. His separation of white and Indian stories, however, suggests among other things that Robinson is aware that white people view their stories differently. The story itself tells us

of the interconnectedness between animal and human realms in typical Okanagan fashion, of the importance of treating cats and dogs “right” because they share the world with us.

Robinson says, “You treat your dog very good./You can do the same with your cat./There are stories for the dog, too” (Write It 315). The relationship between people and animals, Robinson’s narrative emphasizes, is an intensely personal one and the cat’s experience of the world is no less important than human experience. The message, that harmony between human and animal worlds is crucial, is a subtle one. Robinson says:

‘But if you’re not good to me,
if you kick me,
if you take the broom and chase me out with the broom
or something,
you going to have another bad luck.
And it’s going to be bad for you
for the rest of your time.
But if you treat me right,
you can be all right at all time.’

(Write It 314)

The well-being of the human world is thus directly linked to the animals’ well-being.

In European versions of this story, animal and human worlds are separate, and the message that “Puss in Boots” gives us is subtly changed. Our responsibility for animals in traditional European tellings of the story comes out of human dominion over the creatures of the earth. We are responsible for the cat’s well being, in this kind of a reading, because we are somehow superior to the cat—not because humans and cats exist on the same level. As Wickwire notes, in some versions of the story, the boy cuts off the cat’s head (at the cat’s request) and the cat then turns into a prince. The implication here is clearly that only humans can attain higher levels of consciousness, or “prince” status. In Robinson’s

story, however, the cat can be expected to be treated like a prince, and remain a cat.

Robinson's story reflects, as he says, "The way it's supposed to be" (Write It 314).

Differences: Re-creating the World of the Okanagan

Robinson's concern, when he tells stories to Wickwire and us, is that we understand that Indian and white ways of knowledge and power are different. They not only function differently, but they have different sources and origins. This concern reveals itself throughout the stories in both Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power and it becomes ever more obvious when one listens to or reads the transcripts of many of the unpublished stories and dialogues.¹³ But, despite Robinson's emphasis on the differences and disconnections between Indian and white perceptions of the world, he notes that, "They gets together sometimes" (qtd. in Chester "Storied Dialogues" 34). And, on reading the first stories in Write It On Your Heart, we see that Indians and whites get together even in the process of creation. When Robinson tells us his creation story, he says:

God made the sun.
I said he made the sun,
but he didn't use any hammer or any knife or anything
to make the sun.
Just on his thought.
He just think should be sun so he could see.
He just think and it happened that way.
(Write It 31)

Robinson's God, like the God of Genesis, brings the world into being through dialogue: the God of Genesis says, "Let there be light," and there was light; Robinson's God thinks about things, and they happen. But the God of Genesis exists above and apart from His creation, while Robinson's God remains a part of creation. As God continues to engage in

conversation with His own creation, He stands alongside the five men that He has created, on the leaves of a floating flower.

But God, in Robinson's story, is not infallible. He, like Coyote, makes mistakes. In Robinson's stories it is usually the trickster figure and Okanagan culture hero, Coyote, who causes trouble. Coyote, along with God and other members of the animal world, frequently manifests himself in the world of human people. Not only do Coyote and God engage in dialogue with the human world, however, various inhabitants of both human and non-human worlds continue to communicate with each other in ways that they cannot in the white world.

The first mistake that God makes is that He accidentally creates a set of twins, disrupting the natural harmony that creating a group of four men would have constituted. Robinson's God thinks to create four original people, not two, from the leaves of a flower. The four men, however, end up being five. This is because one of the leaves of the flower is doubled, leading to the set of twins.¹⁴ Wickwire notes that in another telling of this story, "Harry mentions that 'everything should be in only four'" (Write It 34). According to Robinson, then, the trouble between whites and Indians begins at the outset, from the time of creation itself. It has less to do with subsequent historical events than it does with this dis-harmonious beginning, which sets the scene for later difficulties. As in the Biblical creation, God's creatures frequently make trouble for the world in ways that their creator cannot, or does not, control. The differences between the Okanagan and the Biblical creation, however, cannot always be reconciled through an appeal to universal human connections. In Robinson's version, creation is never finished. It is process, not product, and reality, or the world, is constantly being created in its present-day context. Thus, the

world is constantly being re-created through story, as Robinson's incorporation of a Judeo-Christian God and the white twin into an Okanagan creation suggest. Creation is not static.

Robinson gives us subtle clues to let us know how to interpret differences between Okanagan and white history. He implies that an Okanagan history is not the same as white history of the Okanagan. The events of history, Robinson's stories suggest, are less important than their meanings, and what we subsequently should learn from them. Since meaning, moreover, is by and large consensual, one can see how storied meanings create worlds or communities linked together by the experience, and therefore, meaning, of a particular story. But, in order to construct this (consensual) meaning, the storytelling experience has to be contextualized. So, what does Robinson mean when he indicates that, "The white man, they can tell a lie more than the Indian," (Write It 46)?

Robinson examines the familiar stereotype of whites—"white man speak with forked tongue"—to reveal connections between the stereotype and Okanagan experience. He observes that the whites have "the law" and it is their law that both prevents and encourages lying. The various stories that focus on the importance of pieces of paper tell us that whites practice deception through the (printed) manipulation of truth. Robinson says:

But the white man, they got the law.
Then they mention on the law,
and he says not to tell lie.
Lie is bad.
In the court you take the Bible,
You kiss this Bible to say the true,
not to tell a lie.
They know that much because they got the law.
But not him.

But the same white man but the others,
the bunch, that they got a different idea than the other one,
and they can tell a lie.
It's begin to do that from that time until today.
And now, if the white man tell a lie,
it don't seems to be bad.
But if the Indian tells a lie,
that's really bad.
That's what they do.
See?

(Write It 46)

Robinson's own concern that his stories are perpetuated in written, as well as oral, forms, may be linked to what he sees as the power of the printed word—a power that has largely been denied to Native peoples. Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power now work to set the Okanagan record straight.

Clearly, the past links white and Native worlds in complex ways, and events far in the past continue to affect the present. Among others, "Twins: White and Indian," shows how the past continues to exist into the present, and especially how the past interprets the present. The story tells us not only that it appears worse for Indians to tell lies, but it asks us to think about *how* (and not so much *why*) things got to be this way. Robinson's "See?" at the end of his explanation asks his audience to think about what he has just said.

Robinson appears acutely aware that his interpretation of creation, the reasons whites, and not Indians lie—of the differences between Indians and whites is likely to contrast with Wickwire's, or the white reader's, knowledge. His consciousness of this gap is reflected in the rhetorical, "See?" that frames the narrative. One gets the sense in instances like this throughout Robinson's storytelling performances, that he is clearly addressing a non-Native audience, through Wickwire, as well as an Okanagan one. He is asking that audience to interact with his experience of the world, to think about things from an

Okanagan perspective. The little word, "see," thus carries a large semantic load. But just what *do* we see in this story?

The twins are Native and white, but the problem compounded by God's initial mistake is that He has only provided four sets of written instructions for living in the world. The white twin steals the paper intended for both Native and white people to share. (As well as being liars, white people can't share.) He thus effectively removes, or steals, the power of the written word from the realm of Indian knowledge. While the written word is powerful, however, so is the spoken word, and Natives are left with their power. Words, no matter what their form, are always powerful. Robinson also observes that the absence of the written paper made the Indian powerful in other ways, ways that white people cannot comprehend. He says, for example, of *shoo-MISH*, a particular kind of Indian power:

God give this *shoo-MISH* to the Indian.
Not to the *SHA-ma*.¹⁵
And what they give to the *SHA-ma*,
to be a power, like, they don't give that to the Indian.
(Unpublished transcript)

And he notes:

See, the Indians they could see the things
With their power.

.....
The Indians' power in their body.
You could see the difference right there.
(Unpublished transcript)

Throughout Nature Power Robinson focuses on the special powers that Indian people have, concentrating much of his discussion on the special talents of those who become "power persons," persons who have extra-special abilities and knowledge.

Robinson's creation stories, like the stories of power, are structured so that they reveal the continuing connection between Indian and white as partly lying in the differences between them. It is a connection that mirrors what has already happened in the process of creation. European elements (like the existence of an omnipotent God who creates the world and gives his creation the equivalent of the written covenant of the Old Testament) imply relationships that mirror the connectedness between all human, animal, and inanimate worlds of experience. The differences between the twins are finally a matter of experience and of the choices that each makes at the beginning of creation, and over and over again. Ultimately, however, the differences suggest agency on both sides, not essential differences between human beings.

The distinction between experience and essence is important because it continues today in the efforts of many Native people to define who they are. Definitions of Native literature, and how one determines whether an author is Native or not (and who determines this), are coloured by the conflict between experience and essence, and by attempts to measure each of these in some sort of quantifiable way. Problems associated with ideas about what constitutes Native identity, and about what or who is essentially Native, will come up again in the discussion of contemporary Native writers King, Welch, Silko, for this is a difficulty that never quite seems to go away. For Robinson, it is evident that to be Okanagan means having a certain experience and understanding of the world. And white people, Robinson makes clear, have been explicitly instructed to work with Native people, not against them. God tells the white twin:

You have to tell this one about the paper.
You're the one that's got to tell him all what's on there.
You have to tell him.

You have to let him know.

(Write It 50).

But, of course, he doesn't. The rest is history. Robinson's insistence that the stories be written down and preserved emphasizes his understanding of the continued power of the written word, but it is also an insistence that white people share what was always meant to be shared—just as he is sharing his stories.

Much of the motivation for Robinson to tell his stories and to write them into a book was his concern that the stories reach as many people as possible, both Indian and white. This was knowledge that all should learn about. Robinson says to Wickwire, in the introduction to Nature Power, "The Indian, they got a different way" (14). In a letter to Wickwire, he insists the stories, "Is not to be Hidden. ...It is to be showed in all Province in Canada and United States. That is when it comes to be a book"(Nature 15). His concern with differences between the white and the Indian ways asserts itself throughout both his collections of stories, as well as in much of the unpublished material. In many cases he is clearly calling for white listeners and readers to pay attention to those differences, to listen where they have not listened earlier. For example, he says:

But the *SHA-ma*, they could never have this,
This kind of power.
That's not their way.
Not the Indians' way.
So they got to be that way from the time til the end of the
world.
But nowadays, the *SHA-ma* was trying to make the things all in
one.
On his side, on his way.
But it should not.
But the Indians is got to have his own way at all.
That's what God says.
So, finally we can go that way.

(Unpublished transcript)

And, in a discussion of white doctors' inability to cure an injured leg, a leg that doesn't respond to white medicine because its sickness, according to Robinson, was due to another kind of bad medicine, a form of Indian witchcraft or power, he says:

There's a lot of, quite a bit of, difference
Between the white people and the Indians.
Because, the way I was in this leg,
And the doctor, they don't know.
They don't know what's wrong.
They don't know what's the matter.
They think that is the sickness.
It was.
But it's the Indian way.
It wouldn't be that way if it wasn't for the power person.
But the doctor, how can they stop that?
They don't know anything about.

(Wendy: Did you ever try to explain that to the white doctors?)

I did.
But you know, they couldn't listen to me.
They couldn't listen.
(Unpublished transcript)

The way of the Okanagan, according to Robinson, is to listen to the stories, and now we are perhaps beginning to learn to listen—to the writing.

Storied World: Facts and Fictions

When Robinson shares his stories with Wickwire, he is careful to emphasize that these are all true stories. As Wickwire states, "Harry...would never dream of making up a story" (Write It 16). They are true in the sense that they are passed on to Robinson by earlier storytellers. Each storyteller modifies the stories in his or her own ways, and each

telling of the story, its situation, its context, also changes. All of these changes, however, result in stories that remain true to earlier versions, if the storyteller gets it right. Stories are powerful entities that shape reality. The distinction between truth and fiction in stories is perhaps a faulty one, based on Euro-American or Canadian experience of the world. It presupposes, firstly, that language is neutral and thereby neglects to respect the power with which words are imbued. The distinction also reflects a privileging of oppositions and the corresponding calls to hierarchy, constructing pairs of opposites like natural/supernatural, Indian/white, human/animal, and oral/literate. But how does one translate between worlds where one world makes no distinction between these categories of experience, and the other does? How does one translate into a language where a concept, and the word linked to it, does not exist? How can one even discuss words and concepts for which there are no equivalents in English?

When Robinson talks about the various forms of power that a Native person might have, he draws careful distinctions between words like *Plax*, and *Shoo-MISH*, and English words like “witchcraft,” and “power.” Wickwire has translated *Shoo-MISH* in various ways as a “life-sustaining spirituality” or spiritual mentor (Introduction to Nature Power 1-22). Many of the distinctions Robinson draws between various kinds of *Shoo-MISH*, however, reveal themselves only through stories, and he gives the listener/reader little obvious contextual information on how to interpret the story that he tells about *Shoo-MISH*. In an extended storied discussion of the Okanagan concept of *ha-HA*, for example, Wickwire is left realizing, “It never got defined, really. I don’t think I ever really did get it totally clear, from that discussion. ...He sort of would lapse into a story as his way of trying to explain it. And then I would be trying to think: Now what’s the point of this

story? What is this little teeny insect he's talking about, and how does this insect have anything to do with this *ha-HA*?" (qtd. in Chester "Storied Dialogues" 21). What this exchange makes clear is how Robinson expects the listener/reader to actively engage in the process of creating meaning from the story, to engage in dialogue with it.

The storyteller assumes that his or her audience has the tools to make meaning from out of what he or she tells. If the intended audience lacks those tools, then the role of the storyteller is not to explicitly state or assert the meaning of the story,¹⁶ but to guide the reader/listener into making connections between what he or she knows, and what he or she does not know. The storyteller frequently does this by telling another story—theorizing about the subject through narrative.

For someone unaccustomed to storytelling as a way of conveying important cultural knowledge, this could prove frustrating, as it frequently did for Wickwire. Stories intended to clarify would often end up confusing her further. It was not until many years later that a more experienced Wickwire realized that she was asking the wrong questions, attempting to categorize Robinson's stories into paradigms of knowledge which did not work to explain Robinson's world of experience. Likewise, when we read Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power, it is up to us to recognize the voices in the text, and to think about what the stories mean. How do Robinson's stories construct categories like truth and fiction? Are these sorts of categories suitable to describe what happens in the narratives? Reading the stories of Robinson as "pure" literature, for example, suggests moving the texts into a realm where the distinctions between literal and figurative are less problematic. It is thinking of them as literally true that is difficult for a non-Native audience. In literary studies, consequently, one risks succumbing to the lure of analyzing

the stories using only the tools of literary criticism, isolating features like symbolism and metaphor from their cultural matrix. Yet I question whether we can separate the literary qualities of Robinson's narratives from their connection to ideas about oral history and cultural myth making, and day-to-day reality.

As Wickwire points out, Robinson's stories are representative of a creation that constitutes a living worldview. This world cannot be a fictive one because his is a world that is constantly being re-created through story. Thus, when Robinson writes of Neil Armstrong arriving on the moon well after Coyote, and when he writes that whites already existed in the Okanagan creation story, he is not merely incorporating European elements into Native tradition. He is re-creating Native tradition to reflect a new reality, in the same way that Western cultural traditions constantly change. When one reads Robinson's stories as incorporating Christian ideas into Native traditions, therefore, the question of whether this, or any other syncretic Native text, is authentic reveals itself as a false question.

Storytelling and Dialogic Literature

The short passage from "Cat With the Boots On" reveals Robinson's sense that stories, as well as linguistic and cultural concepts (like *ha-HA* and *Shoo-MISH*) need to be contextualized so that we can make sense from them. But in print they also show off their literary qualities, including how represented speech is incorporated into storytelling performance. That Robinson embeds dialogue into his stories does not seem particularly surprising, and he does so in most of his stories. As Ridington notes, Robinson's stories embed direct discourse dialogue within the text of an omniscient third-person narrator"

("Voice" 475). But Robinson also embeds indirect discourse and doubly-oriented discourse into the stories. Doubly-oriented speech refers both to something in the world and to another speech act by another speaker as, for example, when the speech of the third-person-omniscient narrator of Robinson's Write It On Your Heart slips into the point of view of Coyote—or maybe not. There are points in Robinson's stories where one cannot tell who is thinking, who is speaking. In the story, "Coyote Disobeys Fox," Robinson describes Coyote's arrival on the Atlantic coast. He says:

And he walk and he trot.
He trot because the ground was nice and smooth
and level.
He running there.
"By God, that was nice!"
(Write It 76)

And in the story "The Flood," the narrator begins by describing Coyote:

Mr. Coyote was coming along
Right by where Aberdeen is right now.
And he stop and look, and thought to himself,
At one time I went by this place.
And now this is the second time I went through here.
Looks like the water was raising.
At one time, the first time I go by here,
And this rock was kind of a ridge.
A ridge all along.
But now is all covered with water.
But only to the upper end.
He could spot that, the upper end.
(Write It 114)

The inconsistencies in the transcription of voices—the insertion or lack of quotation marks, indentation, sentence endings—make the reader wonder, is Coyote thinking this, or Robinson, or who? They make the reader question just "who" the narrator sometimes is at

a given point in time. Consequently, they also reflect an indeterminacy in the oral text that suggests multiple possibilities, multiple interpretations.

This sort of layered dialogue has usually been associated with the novelistic genres. But, the dialogic character of Robinson's storytelling suggests that we need firstly, to rethink the categorization of such genres. Secondly, it reinforces the claim that it is not such a large literary or cultural leap for Natives to write novels. As Gunn Allen observes, Indians have been "doing" novels in different ways for a long time. Allen argues that the Pueblo stories of Yellow Woman would result in a Western-style novel, if they were collected and placed sequentially in a book, with transitions conforming to Western narrative conventions placed between them (4). The same could be said of Robinson's stories.

After Robinson told Wickwire a story, he expected her to write it down for the world to read. Subsequent to the publication of Write It On Your Heart, Robinson tells Wickwire, "It's all right...except for one thing... You said you would put all my stories on a book, but you've left a lot out" (Nature 1). Robinson seems unaware just how large a book would be required to put "all [his] stories on a book." But his consciousness about telling the stories so that they could be recorded in printed form may have created some kind of organizing principle in their telling. His intention that the stories be recorded could have changed the way that he has told them to Wickwire. He does, at various points in his tellings, remind Wickwire when she asks him for a particular story or interrupts, that he is "going by the number" when he tells the stories to her. His audience, in Wickwire, is different from an audience in other performative oral storytelling situations, and the purpose of his telling may also be different. It is possible that Robinson told these stories

in a particular order, expecting them later to be published in this order. Robinson is not only re-creating the world through story, he is re-creating the storytelling world. He is self-consciously speaking oral texts that he knows will circulate primarily in written form. But the naturally occurring dialogism in Robinson's storytelling, whether one listens to the stories or reads them, is typical of Native storytelling. It is through the kind of dialogic features of storytelling that reveal themselves in these stories that Gunn Allen and others argue that story cycles can be novelistic in character.

In studying oral history, Portelli observes that the notion of oral history is transformed into a written one through the very process of creation. He notes that interviewees tell their stories differently when these stories and narratives are being recorded for the explicit purpose of being written down (Battle 3-23). Portelli says, for instance, that oral histories recorded by historians are usually more cohesive and less fragmented than if those narratives were being told casually, over a lengthy period of time, to family members. When the stories are not expressly being collected, they are frequently fragments that build up over time, rather than one lengthy narrative. Paradoxically, it is through the editing process, and through the constraints on publishing an exhaustive accounting of all of Robinson's stories, that the two collections compiled by Wickwire seem less "written" than the histories Portelli describes. Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power more closely resemble the fragmented nature of storytelling performances told over a period of years to a family member than the lengthy narrative collected by a historian.

The phrase, oral story, like the term oral history, ultimately suggests a "specific form of discourse" that may then be read as a genre in its own right. Portelli argues that

oral history is by nature a form of dialogic discourse that is created not only by what interviewees say, but also by what historians do. Oral history, he says, is a composite genre that should be approached as both a genre of narrative and historical discourse. It is a "cluster" of genres that indicates its nature both as genre, and as containing genres within it (3-23). More fluid and contemporary definitions of genre suggest that genre is comprised of both form and situation. The dialogic nature of Robinson's stories is such that it causes the conversation to shift. We move between layers of stories, narrative voices, and human and animal worlds in a way that is in keeping with interactive, performative oral storytelling traditions. It is the dialogic characteristic of Native American storytelling as literature that makes it a complicated genre. As Bakhtin argues in his description of dialogism and the novel, what distinguishes the novel from other genres of literature is its complexity.

Bakhtin distinguishes the novel from the epic and the poem on the basis of its dialogism, its complexity. But the same sorts of complexity are clearly found in Native storytelling, including the stories of Robinson. In his argument that the novel is a vital and living tradition, Bakhtin's description closely resembles descriptions of a vital oral storytelling tradition. He says, "The novel has no canon of its own, as do other genres; only individual examples of the novel are historically active, not a generic canon as such. Studying other genres is analogous to studying dead languages; studying the novel, on the other hand, is like studying languages that are not only alive, but still young" (Dialogic 3). The ability of Robinson's stories to change, to incorporate new experiences into older ones, implies just the sort of vitality that Bakhtin writes about. It is *especially* the inclusion of newer, European elements into text versions of traditional stories that ensures their

complexity and vitality. When highly literate writers use these stories in newer forms and different places, they are created again as well. Bakhtin says, "Images of language are inseparable from images of various world views and from the living beings who are their agents" (49). Thus, Robinson's stories cannot be separated from Robinson himself, or from the Okanagan worldview that his stories reflect. The stories create reality, or, as Robin Ridington says, "They have brought a world into being through discourse" ("Voice" 468).

There is a sense in which the nature of language itself is dialogical. Moreover, Robinson clearly would like to see his stories create dialogues between Indian and white discourse. Wickwire notes that after "The Age of the White Man" in Write It On Your Heart, Robinson's stories no longer contain *Shoo-MISH*. The absence of Indian power and "magic," Wickwire suggests, means that, "The connection with Creation is broken; there is no hope" (Write It 27). The white presence has taken it all away. Perhaps, in this statement, white people have, once again, given themselves too much credit. For, as I see it, the world is still being created through Native stories, and story cycles return with Coyote-like vengeance in the novels of contemporary Native writers.

¹ This is the title of an article by Peter Dickinson that appeared in the Canadian Journal of Native Studies. It is also a play on the title of Walter Ong's book Orality and Literacy.

² Bal defines focalization as "the relationship between 'who perceives' and what is perceived" and notes that it is this relationship that "colours the story with subjectivity" (8).

³ Ong's romanticization of "primary" orality includes a lengthy critique of the term "oral literature," where he argues that, "Thinking of oral tradition or a heritage of oral performance, genres and styles as 'oral literature' is rather like thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels" (12).

⁴ This is exactly what happened when Silko's Almanac of the Dead was first reviewed, and I discuss some of the responses to her novel in Chapter Four.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of some of the problems connected with the translation of Robinson's stories, and of how to translate the context of oral forms into written ones, see Chester, "Text and Context: Form and Meaning in Native Narratives."

⁶ Skvorecky's The Engineer of Human Souls was the first Canadian novel to win the Governor General's Award in translation. The novel was translated from Czech into English and then subsequently competed with Canadian novels originally written in English to win this award. This is a departure from categorizing a novel as a secondary "translation" and it suggests the blurred boundaries between language and culture, as well as problematizing the demarcation of national and ethnic boundaries through linguistic categories.

⁷ Wickwire notes that this was one of Robinson's intentions in circulating Okanagan stories more widely, on page 15 of Nature Power.

⁸ I have written of this characteristic of Native oral narrative in an essay, titled, "Text and Context: Form and Meaning in Native Narratives," where I note that context and sense move beyond the narrative itself.

⁹ It may be worth mentioning here that not only did Robinson not always separate his stories into discrete units, but he also did not give them titles. These were provided by Wickwire, along with the short introductions to each story, in order to make them more accessible to a reading audience, at the request of her publisher.

¹⁰ The stories in Nature Power all deal with Native power and what white people might call the "supernatural."

¹¹ It may be worth pointing out that theorists like Bakhtin have pointed out that form and meaning are inseparable in the novel as well. Bakhtin argues that the discourse of the novel is "always developed on the boundary line between cultures and languages" (Dialogic 50). Tedlock argues that this is the case in Native storytelling, and oral performance and poetry as well, and I would agree.

¹² I have borrowed this term from audio production, on Robin Ridington's suggestion.

¹³ It is important to note that, despite Robinson's concern that "all" the stories circulate, only a fraction of them have been published. Many of the unpublished narratives concern historically sensitive material, or include variations and repetitions of earlier stories, or form fragments that are difficult to record in a way that will appeal to a reading audience. In fact, many of the stories that Robinson tells are difficult to isolate as they are more fluid than the written texts suggest, with one story running into another. Wickwire has noted that, once started, Robinson could tell stories for hours at a time.

¹⁴ Twins, as Wickwire notes, feature prominently in many traditions of the world. She observes that these stories are common in, among others, the stories of the Iriquois, Kiowa, and Apache, as well as in much South American mythology, where the twins frequently are the most important culture heroes. (WIOYH 22). Later we shall see how Silko incorporates the notion of the twins from the Mayan Popol Vuh as characters in Almanac of the Dead.

¹⁵ *SHA-ma* is the Okanagan word for white people, and Robinson uses the word frequently, not always translating it into the English equivalent, "whites."

¹⁶ It has frequently been noted that question and answer dialogues are not a way of gathering knowledge in Native societies. See, for eg. Chester ("Storied Dialogues"); Ridington (Trail to Heaven); Cruikshank (Life Lived Like a Story) and William Leap (Native American English).

CHAPTER TWO: Theorizing the World of the Novel

*It comes up different every time and has no ending,
no beginning. They get the middle wrong too.*

Louise Erdrich

*When I tell the story,
a lot of times I like to tell something,
then I find that I switch to another one.
And I couldn't help it.*

*I got to tell that.
In that way, it takes longer.
But they important stories anyway.*

Harry Robinson¹

Dialogic Interactions

Thomas King's short story collection One Good Story, That One and his novel Green Grass, Running Water both pay homage to the distinctive voice of the Okanagan storyteller, Harry Robinson. Green Grass, Running Water also provides a thoroughgoing critique of the literary theories of Northrop Frye, literary theories that dominated Canadian and Anglo-American literary criticism between the publication of Anatomy of Criticism in 1957 to Frye's death in 1991. The influence of Robinson's voice is clear in King's own (written) storytelling. But the oral tradition out of which Robinson speaks is both a mode of artistic expression, incorporating principles and aesthetics of Native verbal art, and part of a broader social context. Above all, the stories, as Robinson observes, should be enjoyed. "That is how you learn," he says, "That is, if you enjoy the stories" (Nature Power 8). When Robinson tells stories, he is theorizing the world. His storytelling ultimately moves beyond either written or spoken word to tell us something about life as he has experienced it. The stories reveal knowledge as narrative. Moreover, they show

how Robinson's world is experienced through several language and cultural systems—Okanagan, English, oral, and written, for example. His collections of stories, Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power, are part of the dialogue between those languages and cultural systems. Green Grass, Running Water, a co(s)mic creation narrative told from a First Nations (Coyote) perspective, uses humour to create another sort of dialogue, a dialogue between oral and written, between Native and Christian creation stories, and between literary, and historical discourses.

Like Robinson, King writes theory by telling, or in this case, writing, stories. Robinson's influence on King was, as King himself says, "inspirational."² When one reads King's earlier novel, Medicine River, and compares it with Green Grass, Running Water, evidence of Robinson's impact is obvious. Changes in the style of the dialogue, including the way King's narrator seems to address readers and characters directly (using the first person), in the adaptation of traditional characters and stories from Native cultures (particularly Coyote), and especially in the way that each of the distinct narrative strands, or stories, in the novel contains and interconnects with every other, reflect Robinson's storied impact. The oral influence of Robinson on King's writing, however, paradoxically comes through written texts. (According to Wickwire, King was offered taped recordings of Robinson's stories, but he did not take Wickwire up on her offer.) This irony is perhaps reflected in King's own multi-faceted translations and recreations of various stories and characters from different Native cultural traditions. King connects Robinson's Okanagan Coyote with stories from the Blackfoot of Alberta, and the traditions of Thought Woman (Pueblo), First Woman (Navajo), Old Woman (Blackfoot, Dunne-za), and Changing Woman (Navajo).³ As Ridington observes of these kinds of culture stories and culture

heroes, "The stories function as metonyms...parts that stand for wholes" ("Cannon" 19). The conversation between these parts in Green Grass, Running Water is framed with no real beginning, no middle, and no end—it is a continuous cycle that is always beginning again, as the world itself is constantly being re-created, through story.

King's narrator, the "I" of the text, addresses the reader directly: "you," like Robinson's listening audience, are drawn into the performance, and are ultimately transformed into another character in one of King's stories. The narrative "I" may also be read as the "I" of the reader in his or her role of sharing authority with the writer. The relationship between reading and writing, between readers and writers, is treated as part of a larger whole: as Leslie Silko says, "The storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners" (Yellow Woman 50). Thus, the narrator of Green Grass is both "I" and "you," author and reader. Through the process of reading the novel one becomes part of a storied world. The reader, like Robinson's listening audience, thus becomes an active participant in the process of constructing "the text." The various written dialogues that are created and carried on throughout Green Grass, Running Water suggest a dialogism that reflects oral tradition and First Nations and Native American perspectives of the world. It also brings to mind Bakhtin's notion of the novel as an unfinished, developing genre, a view of the novelistic genre as dialogic process rather than literary product. To really get a dialogue going, however, one needs an intimate relationship between those who speak and those who listen. Dialogue by its nature thus privileges local and regional narratives over universal and global meta-narratives.

As Cruikshank notes, storytelling is always rooted in localized forms of knowledge. So, in a way, is science. While that is another story, its relevance is important

here. Science treats universals as highly conditional achievements, always limited in various kinds of ways. The most useful stories, Cruikshank observes, are “locally grounded, highly particular, and culturally specific” (Social Life Preface xii). The tension between local story and universal “literature” (in the form of the novel) is one that King exploits to reveal how local forms of knowledge can structure and contextualize universal forms of meta-narrative. Meta-narrative discourses are those discourses that seek to quantify and objectify a plurality of experiences under one unifying and universal umbrella. They look for and construct universals. Two of the most well known meta-narratives of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries are the psychological discourse of Freud, and Marxist discourse, for example. The idea of a canon of literature, or of a world literature that is “great,” because it appeals to a universal audience, is also connected to the notion of these kinds of humanistic meta-narratives. Like any kind of theoretical approach, however, meta-narrative theories highlight some things at the expense of others. In Green Grass, Running Water, King’s earthquake shakes up everything. While the all-encompassing discourse of the meta-narrative is a seductive model, it always satisfies large centralized schemes at the expense of the local and specific. The earthquake destabilizes everything. Meta-narratives structure experience to fit into predetermined categories—in this case, perhaps, categories like English literature, the novel, and even the idea of a universal Native American or First Nations” literature. They try to create order out of chaos.

Green Grass, Running Water plays with chaos. It resists externally imposed structures from Western cultural and literary traditions and it bumps Native oral traditions against Western written traditions. Native stories interconnect with the literary works of

American and Canadian authors like Melville, Hawthorne, Cooper, and the ideas of the literary critic, Northrop Frye, among others; they intersect with the Christian creation story, mainstream history, and with a host of storied icons from popular culture, including John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe. By juxtaposing these different narratives, fragmented texts contextualize each other, creating meaning in gaps that cannot be read linearly. Consequently, the Native story/voice speaks to the reader: Native reality intrudes on the carefully constructed realities of Western tradition. By drawing on his or her knowledge of different characters, events, and discourses, the reader is drawn into apparent chaos and confusion to become part of the performance. He or she creates meaning from the text by engaging with it. By playing on the interconnectedness of a wide range of stories, King shows how meaning is always process-driven and consensual—how it is inherently dialogic. But what if, instead of reading Green Grass, Running Water as a literary exercise, one reads it in the context of oral storytelling tradition? What happens if one takes for granted, as Robinson does, that stories are real? What if one assumes that Indians have always been writing novels in one way or another?

Green Grass, Running Water is a Coyote creation story. It is a story shared by a trickster who is not always what he seems to be. Coyote is a wild dog. His stories reveal a character that does not play by the (Christian) rules. He even makes up the rules as he goes along. But Coyote acknowledges the power of story, the power of words to create its own reality. His stories and dreams interfere with other peoples' lives. Coyote's antics create the Christian God of King's narrative; his dreaming starts all the trouble and gets the stories circulating. Part of the problem, however, seems to be that people today have forgotten about the power of Coyote. It is not, for instance, clear to Alberta that Coyote

“helped” her to get pregnant. Although the reader is given this clue in the conversation Milford and Amos have about Milford’s stolen truck, it is not until much later in the novel that the “reality” of Alberta’s circumstances becomes clear. The conversation immediately precedes the description of Alberta standing outside in the rain in the parking lot of the Dead Dog Café, and her subsequent realization that somehow she *is* pregnant. Milford says, “They kept asking me who did it, as if I really knew. ... So I finally told them that it was probably Coyote.” When Milford asks, “Coyote, right?” Amos responds, “I guess” (258). Alberta, who is after all a westernized university professor, keeps insisting that she cannot be pregnant. The very impossibility and reality of her pregnancy, however, point to the continued vitality of Coyote, and Native ways of doing things.

It becomes more and more obvious to the reader as the novel progresses that the Christian God already exists in King’s creation story, just as He does in Robinson’s. Robinson’s God thinks up reality; King’s GOD—a Coyote Dream—dreams up stories. He shares them with the four old Indian women, who have their own storytelling powers, and he shares them with us, as readers of the novel. The four old Indian women, who transform themselves into the characters of the Lone Ranger, Hawkeye, Robinson Crusoe, and Ishmael, also continue telling the story of creation. They re-create Native reality into the present day.

The conversation that King sets up between oral creation story, biblical story, literary story, and historical story resembles the dialogues that Robinson sets up in his storytelling performances. These include the incorporation of modern-day European elements into old stories—telling us how Coyote’s son and Neil Armstrong both traveled to the moon, for example, and how white people were already there at the time of the

Okanagan creation. Ridington notes, "Conversation between the myriad human, animal, natural or mythical persons of a storied world is at the heart of Native American poetics" ("Cannon" 22). The intimate relationship between human and non-human worlds of experience is reflected in King's novel where Coyotes and dogs "commune" with characters like Old Woman, Thought Woman, and Changing Woman. Ridington, however, uses the word poetics to mean more than just the formal properties of the text; he uses it "to mean the ways in which people create meaning through language" ("Cannon" 22). This meaning, as Bakhtin suggests, lies in dialogue. Since Native American poetics, through oral tradition, emphasizes dialogue and dialogism in Bakhtin's broad sense, why wouldn't we expect Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, Northrop Frye, John Wayne and the Lone Ranger to turn up in a novel written by a First Nations or Native American author?

The characters and ideas of authors like Melville, Cooper, Hawthorne (among many others) have become part of Native American literary tradition—and King's novel shows us this process of "becoming." King illustrates how Native oral tradition translates stories from the Bible and canonical literary texts into the context of a Native novel; this is not the same thing as translating Native American and First Nations stories and tradition into the context of a Euro-Canadian novel. The issue of what gets translated into what is particularly complicated because, in this instance, both sides of the translation use the same language—English—but they are not writing out of the same cultural traditions. Moreover, Native texts with highly literate contexts create dialogues with a wide variety of other contexts, just as orally told stories constantly absorb and transform new elements into themselves.

Answering questions by telling stories is a Native convention; the question and answer format, or the interview, is not. Theorizing through narrative suggests a specific conceptualization of time and space, one that is less finite and contained. Narrative knowledge does not have a finite time frame: a piece of information may be picked up at different points in time, in a story told years later. It may reappear as part of a narrative thread in a different context, a different storytelling situation. And usually it remains up to the listener to make the connections, to draw the threads of narrative together to formulate a particular understanding of an idea or a concept.

Dialogue, and dialogic texts, show how oppositions may be displaced without collapsing differences. They give us a way to discuss how Native and white ways are different, as Robinson emphasizes. Native literature reveals that "Alterity is every inch a relationship" (Michael Taussig 130). Taussig notes that there is always an inherent paradox in "absorbing the outside and changing world in order to stay the same" (130-131). Yet it is this kind of change that keeps tradition alive. Staying the same means being frozen in time and space like a museum piece or artifact. When one is discussing literary texts, the notion of relationship through dialogue always implies process or change. The reader who, for example, begins to read a book is not the same reader who finishes it.

The ability of oral tradition to incorporate new elements, and new histories, into old narratives also suggests the element of prophecy. The dialogism in Native texts like King's, Welch's and Silko's constructs conversations that reach backwards and forwards across time and space. This movement is often described as prophetic when it pertains to aspects of Native American cosmology. Many Native cultures tell traditional stories where they predict the arrival of white Europeans, for example. Like the creation story of

Robinson, these prophetic stories interpret, or theorize, an ever-changing world. As Cruikshank notes, prophecy narratives are connected to “how people use oral tradition to make connections between past and present” (“Claiming Legitimacy” 147). She suggests that prophecy narratives may be read as “competing for legitimacy, performed in a way that invokes ethnographic authority” (“Claiming Legitimacy” 163). Prophecy, as Silko suggests in Almanac, is really about here and now; it is more about those who say what they see in the present than it is about future prediction.⁴ In novel form, Green Grass, Running Water also invokes a kind of ethnographic authority. This authority, however, is shared between writer and readers in the construction of a reality that escapes the purely literary. In King’s novel, all of the characters are telling their own stories, creating and prophesying different realities.

Just as Coyote and God each have their own version of creation, both Babo Jones and Dr. Hovaugh tell parallel stories of how the world began. But none of the storytellers ever seem to know where to begin. The many false starts and different beginning points to what is ostensibly the same story reinforces Ridington’s idea that the stories are always, and simultaneously, both partial and complete. Their meanings are always generated in relationship to each other.

Dr. Hovaugh’s story focuses on how, “In the beginning all this was land. Empty land” (78). His version of the story of the four old Indians alludes to both the archetypal myth making of Genesis and to the popular notion that Europeans conquered an empty land, a “wilderness” uninhabited by human beings. In the Old Testament God creates the earth and all of its inhabitants; He then instructs Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and conquer it, and hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the

heavens and every beast that crawls upon the earth" (Alter 5). Hovaugh's commentary shows how this history of European conquest is constructed on Old World interpretations and biblical instructions, and how these contribute to the myth of the European "discovery" of the Americas. But as one Iroquois chief points out, "You cannot discover an inhabited land. Otherwise I could cross the Atlantic and 'discover' England" (qtd. in Ronald Wright 5). Hovaugh continues his narrative by telling Sergeant Cereno the "long and boring story" of how "our" Indians came to be at the mental institution (78). Canadians, of course, have long considered their history (and literature) as "boring," especially when compared to those of their neighbours to the south. The dialogue between Cereno and Hovaugh emphasizes the differences between "us" and "them," Canadians and Americans. Hovaugh answers Cereno's query about the Indians by saying, "I believe they were all killed by some disease." Cereno responds by saying, "Not those Indians, our Indians" (78). Hovaugh has also just referred to the year when his great-grandfather "bought" the land from the Indians—1876. This is the year of the Battle of Little Bighorn in the United States and, ironically, the same year that Parliament passed the Indian Act in Canada. While the United States exterminated "its" Indians, Hovaugh's account points out that in Canada the (old) Indians are still alive—playing with the popular conceptualization of Canada treating its Native peoples more gently than its southern counterpart. But Hovaugh gets to play God in this version of history, invoking a biblical beginning to his story, saying, "In the beginning, there was nothing. There was just the water" (79).

Babo, in contrast, tells a Native version of the creation story, the narrative of the four old Indians, beginning with how Thought Woman falls from the sky (75-76). This story has its source in storytelling tradition, while Hovaugh's appears to focus on the facts

as he sees them. Babo, like Robinson, the four old Indians, and Coyote, points out the importance of getting the story right. Stories, in Native traditions, are powerful entities, as are European stories such as the one that implies that the inhabitants of North America did not really exist before Europeans arrived. When the story is not quite right, Babo repeats it, noting, "That's not right either. I better start at the beginning again" (76). But just as Babo and the four old Indian storytellers never know where to begin their narratives, they never get to the end of them either. The stories defy teleology as they float from one place in the text to another.

Babo has told Sergeant Cereno earlier that the escaped Indians were women, not men. They are, in fact, Indian goddesses who tell stories and have the power to create realities. Babo's favourite is the creation story. This story, however, like the story of the old Indians themselves, keeps escaping the confines of Western tradition—just as the old Indians slip away from Dr. Hovaugh's cultivated garden. It is the same story that King, or his narrator, is telling us now. But the question of who exactly is narrating the story is a slippery one. The ambiguity that surrounds the narrator reflects the problematic underpinnings of Native identity: who really is speaking and how is s/he situated in the text, the community? The Indians, if they are "real," should have died a long ago, Hovaugh thinks, and he wants John to sign the death certificate. The allusion to John, who might be John the Baptist, could also be a reference to the gospel of John, or to the apocryphal texts of John the Evangelist. The canonical gospel of John was a later inclusion to the Vulgate Bible. Its initial status within Christianity was as non-canonical, extra-textual text. All of the gospels, of course, are different versions of the same story—

just as the four old Indian goddesses in Green Grass, Running Water keep constructing new versions of their own creation story.

John, however, does not sign the death certificate and the myth of the vanishing Indian remains alive. The Indians have managed to survive by disguising their identities to fit in with white expectations. Instead of revealing themselves as Indian goddesses, they have disguised themselves as four old Indian men confined to a mental institution. They appear harmless, but, as Hovaugh realizes, they are not. They pose a threat to “Western civilization” and to the hegemony of a Christian (meta-) narrative. The Indians have not really changed who they are, coming from a tradition where transformations are the norm, not the exception. Consequently, when Babo begins to tell the story of creation, she is careful to tell Cereno, “Now you got to remember that this is their story” (45).⁵

Situating a storytelling performance within the context of who is allowed to tell a story, and who it actually belongs to, also highlights how the story constructs meaning. Bakhtin argues that each and every speech utterance is communicative and, therefore, social. It assumes an addressee. Thus, context is crucial. He says, “Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances” (Speech Genres 69). He also notes, “Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon” (Dialogic 259). Bakhtin thus emphasizes the semantic and social components of constructing meaning.⁶ He says, “The text is not a thing, and therefore the second consciousness, the consciousness of the perceiver, can in no way be eliminated or neutralized” (SG 107). Green Grass, Running Water emphasizes the central role of the “perceiver,” in dialogue with the reader as part of the writing process. King situates himself carefully as a storyteller. He tells an Indian story within the context of what he

knows (academic discourse, literature, history, popular culture, and so on) and is careful *not* to tell about certain things. The Sundance, for example, is alluded to but not described, and it is pointed out that recording and photography are forbidden. These small pieces of information reveal themselves throughout the narrative in storied forms, but it is left to the reader to connect them with King's role as a member of the Native community.

Monologues and Dialogues

Events and stories in Green Grass, Running Water repeat in a cyclical fourfold pattern.⁷ Everything is interconnected and in pairs—oral and written, Indians and whites, thought and substance. They are connected through their stories. To theorize from the stories assumes that the reader is already part of the conversation, and has the kind of cultural knowledge that is required to make meaning from the text. It requires one to think about the stories a little while. It also continues to echo Robinson's insistence that Indian and white ways are different, and part of the problem in trying to communicate between worldviews has been that white ways have been imposed on everyone. Robinson's critique, as well as King's interconnection of stories in Green Grass, Running Water, suggests that white ways have been inherently monologic. Whites have not engaged in conversation with an Indian other, they have tried to assimilate Indians into the white world. Ridington observes that the language of most theory remains "culturally monologic" rather than dialogic. He says, "It almost invariably replicates the genre conventions of Western academic expression rather than those of Native Americans. ...It is more like one side of an argument than it is like a story" ("Cannon" 21).

Coyote shows us what happens when one side of an argument tries to take over. King's Coyote dream reveals the trouble with a monologic creation of the world. Coyote asks, "Who is making all that noise and waking me up?" and the narrator's "I" responds by saying, "It's that noisy dream of yours. ...It *thinks* it is in charge of the world" (Green Grass 1; emphasis mine). But this is a Native American story, not a white story. When that Coyote Dream is transformed into a dog dream it gets everything backward. As King's character is transformed into a contrary dog—a god who then insists on being a "big god," on being the only god—he becomes a GOD, whose thoughts and ideas are monologic creations. Ridington points out that, "Playing God can lead to a monologue that attempts to manage without the other. Playing God can lead to parts who think they are wholes" ("Canon" 26). Playing God can lead to chaos.

Balance is disrupted when one character wants to control the narrative for himself. Dialogue is impossible when one speaker monopolizes the floor; catastrophe results whenever a character, or a story (the two are not always fully separable), escapes the confines of Christian monologue in Green Grass, Running Water. Stories, Coyote suggests, are like dreams. They are multiple and multiply contexted⁸; they defy attempts to categorize them into closed systems of thought. They have the power to change the world.

The material world—reality—is transformed through the dialogues between the four Indian goddesses, and by Coyote, who literally dances in and out of stories (Green Grass 244). Thought and substance are connected. Each time a story gets too mixed up, Coyote tries to set things right. After the third try, he apologizes, saying:

"I'm sorry," says Coyote.

"Too late for being sorry," I says.

"I got a little carried away," says Coyote. "But I've got

it straight now.”
“Are you sure?” I says.
“You bet,” says Coyote. “But just to make sure, could we
go through it one more time?”
(Green Grass 270)

Each retelling of a story functions as a memory marker. Just as Robinson launches into a new story whenever something reminds him of something else he considers important, King uses the canonical texts of Western literature, including the Bible, The Anatomy of Criticism, The Great Code, Moby Dick, The Last of the Mohicans, Robinson Crusoe and The Lone Ranger, among others, as cultural markers in a Native Indian history. This history required Indians to transform themselves as the four old women did, in order to survive. But, while they all disguised their identities, they did not become white, although they were good at acting white. Likewise, Green Grass, Running Water may replicate Western, post-modern,⁹ metafictional writing, but the narrative itself suggests that it is not Western, it is not a white story.

As the four old Indian women tell their different stories, their narratives affect the lives of the characters in the neighbouring story. So, First Woman, whose words create the world in Navajo tradition, falls into the Christian creation story, and leaves the Garden of Eden with Ahdamn after refusing to play by Christian rules. She transforms herself into the Lone Ranger while Ahdamn becomes Tonto, and together they go to Florida where they create Plains Indian Ledger Art in Fort Marion. Changing Woman falls out of the sky and lands on Noah's Ark and, after being chased around by Noah for a month, is kicked out of the Ark for refusing to abide by Christian rules again: she communicates with animals. Her experiences on the ark also evoke Timothy Findley's novel Not Wanted on the Voyage, which portrays the drunken Noah as a dirty old man and potential rapist.

Thought Woman, whose words begin the invocation in Silko's novel, Ceremony, floats in and out of stories in typical oral style: "I'm just floating through," she says (245). At the same time, the water that permeates everything in Coyote's dream seeps into another version of this creation story, the story of the four old Indians who have escaped the mental institution. Then Babo Jones's car drifts away in a puddle of water. The earthquake that Coyote dreams up in one narrative causes the dam to burst in another, and Eli Stands Alone disappears. Ultimately, the water imagery throughout the text does more than connect with the theme of creation, or oral tradition, it points to the fluidity of the written text. These are a few examples of how each of the stories is connected to every other. We, the story tells us, are connected to the stories too, and the narratives of religion, literature, and history affect our lives. We live theory.

Circling the Bush Garden

As one reads the different stories within Green Grass, Running Water, and comes up with different interpretations for each of the stories, it becomes more and more clear how interconnected all the stories are, and how difficult it is to separate one from another. Their web-like interconnectedness, and their ability to absorb new elements, implies a system of thought that is inclusive rather than exclusive. This is an open system of literature, rather than a closed one. It requires participants or audiences to interact with it. The reader moves between the world of the novel and the world as experienced. This open-ended and dialogic quality of the text contrasts with the literary theory of one of King's central characters, Dr. Joe Hovaugh, or Northrop Frye.

Hovaugh/Frye's unease with the Canadian literary landscape leads, King's narrative suggests, to Hovaugh's compulsion to search out "occurrences, probabilities, directions, deviations" (39). Green Grass, Running Water alludes in a variety of ways to Frye's extensive schematization of literature in books such as The Anatomy of Criticism (1957), The Bush Garden (1971), and The Great Code (1981). The narrator notes that Hovaugh felt that, "Things in Canada seemed slightly wild, more out of hand, disorderly, even chaotic. There was an openness to the sky and a wideness to the land that made him uncomfortable" (260).¹⁰ Frye has written extensively of a "garrison mentality" that permeates Canadian literature. He argues:

Small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological "frontier," separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources; communities that proved all that their members have in the way of great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting—such communities are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality (Bush Garden 225).

The wild physical environment (or nature, of which Indians are seen as a part and settlers are not) clearly seems ominous seen from a "civilized" perspective. In an attempt to create order from out of potential literary chaos, out of wildness, Frye creates an elaborate schematization and classification of literature. Frye's literary theory is structuralist: it is a closed system where meaning arises from relationships between elements within the system, and is based on oppositions. The literary text has less to say about the outside world than it does about some thing called literariness, which is reserved to discuss

“literature” and figurative language. Structuralism, with its emphasis on the structural components of a literary text, as well as its unity may be thought of as another meta-narrative discourse of the twentieth century. Frye’s attitude towards all kinds of structural unities is perhaps best expressed in his distinction between unity and uniformity in the development of a Canadian national identity. He says, “What one owes one’s loyalty to is an idea of unity, and a distrust of such a loyalty is rooted in the distrust of life itself” (Bush Garden Preface vi).

Frye’s emphasis on the structural and synchronic elements of a text, and his emphasis on the importance of archetypes and myths rather than history, suggest, among other things, that historical progression has ended. In Green Grass, Running Water, Hovaugh, like Frye, spends his time schematizing things. He develops maps and charts, and correlates natural catastrophes to the old Indians’ various escapes from his institution. The events of history are important only because they function to reveal the system as a whole. Nothing carries meaning in and of itself; a thing has meaning only in relationship to some other element within the system. “It’s a pattern,” he says of the Indians’ disappearance (40). The possibility that Hovaugh has contributed to these catastrophes because of his inability to see the Indians for who they really are never enters his mind. But the Indians “fix” things because they need to restore some balance to a world where Indians and their ways no longer seem to exist—where white monologues have taken over.

Hovaugh’s mystical and reclusive retreat to his mythical garden when the Indians do escape also suggests his own escape into timelessness, into a world of his own mythic making. Ironically, the four Indians who reside in Hovaugh’s mental institution also

manage to slip away from the confines of a linear, Western style history, to create their own histories, their own versions of reality.

Dr. Joe Hovaugh, is, of course, also Jehovah, able to describe (from above) a mythical Biblical creation and divination (The Great Code). He cultivates his garden of literary theory carefully in Canada, lest wildness take over (The Bush Garden), and then charts his course towards Parliament Hill using the “literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogic” (Green Grass 324) modes of literary expression that Frye develops throughout the The Anatomy of Criticism. Frye is interested in pinning down meaning and making sense out of chaos. He states, “The conclusion that a work of literary art contains a variety or sequence of meanings seems inescapable. It has seldom, however, been squarely faced in criticism since the Middle Ages, when a precise scheme of literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic meanings was taken over from theology and applied to literature” (Anatomy 72). In Green Grass, Hovaugh, like Frye, has created a carefully manicured garden in the place of a wild and chaotic land. Here we have a literary garden where tropes and conventions behave as they should. The problem is that the Native keeps going wild. And just as the four old Indians keep escaping the confines of Western institutionalization, King’s text self-consciously defies categorization in Frye’s terms.

When Coyote dances in and out of creation stories (244) anything is possible. But satire, Frye says, is structural. And the lack of realism in a Coyote story, read structurally, suggests myth. Myth, according to Frye, is, “A narrative in which some characters who are superhuman beings do things that ‘happen only in stories’; hence a conventionalized or stylized narrative not fully adapted to plausibility or ‘realism’” (Anatomy 366). But when Coyote thinks or dreams up something, anything can happen: reality *is* changed. For Frye,

however, form is more important than (real) content. And satire requires humour and “an object of attack” (Frye Anatomy 223-225). Native American satire, however, appears to be something different. According to Gerald Vizenor, it is connected to the trickster. Native American satire has an attitude that Vizenor describes as comic, and it is based on what he describes as chance, rather than system. When Vizenor says that the trickster is based on chance, he connects it with post-modernist notions of fragmentation, de-privileging unity in favour of the locally and regionally specific, working out of chaos rather than ordered system. Chance, like the trickster, is connected to chaos.

Vizenor argues that Native American satire is not structural in the way that Frye might describe it. Moreover, Vizenor says, “You can’t act in a comic way in isolation. You have to be included. There has to be a collective of some kind” (“Beyond the Novel” 295). For Frye, myth is the model for literature. It is a universal, rather than collective mode. The mythical mode operates out of the grammar of mythical archetypes. This mode then aligns itself with the language of literature. Collectivity, history, and culture are not parts of this discourse; reality lies outside of Frye’s and other structural systems of thought. In fact, Frye’s schematization suggests that literary history has ended, and all of literary expression has been done. It remains a closed system. But, in Green Grass, Running Water floating imagery replaces mythic archetypes, and the reader experiences history, not as a progression with the possibility of ending, but as a series of cycles. The distinctions between myth and story, and between myth and reality, collapse as Coyote dreams stories into reality.

Coyote’s dance constantly requires the “I” of the narrator to participate in the collective performance of storytelling. King’s recreation of myth and the idea of mythic

archetypes to include stories and icons from popular culture, and the stories of the Bible, and of canonical literary works (whose status has, in some cases, reached the “epic” proportions of myth, as in Melville’s Moby Dick) reconceptualizes myth as part of a changing and vital tradition. Myths now take on storied lives of their own. They slip away from meta-narrative systems of discourse as they play with the possibility of chaos—with the narrative chance that Vizenor argues also “lessens the power of social science and humanism” (Narrative Chance 192). Thus, King’s kind of mythic literature runs counter to a Western literary tradition that is built on “occurrences and probabilities and deviations” of “literal, allegorical, tropological, anagogic” modes of expression.

In The Great Code Frye describes myth as, “plot, narrative, or in general the sequential ordering of words” (31). Shape, or form, is what counts. Myths, or stories, are seen as roughly equivalent, and both are “not true.” Frye says, “A myth is designed not to describe a specific situation but to contain it in a way that does not restrict its significance to that one situation. Its truth is inside its structure, not outside” (Great Code 46). The significance of Coyote discourse is also not restricted to one situation. But Frye goes on to say, “There are and remain two aspects of myth: one is its story-structure, which attaches it to literature, the other is its social function as concerned knowledge, what it is important for society to know” (Great Code 47). The social function of story, for King, however, is not separable from either literature or “concerned knowledge.” For Frye the relationship between literature and myth is not one of cause and effect, but of different functional roles; for King, story is knowledge that “is important for society to know,” and it is art as well. Frye says literature is a “contamination of myth” (Great Code 34). But the relationship between literature and myth in Green Grass, Running Water, is one of cause

and effect. Coyote's dance causes real pregnancies and real earthquakes. When First Woman falls into the Christian creation story, she and Ahdamn change history.

Even symbols, which Frye describes as "any unit of any literary structure that can be *isolated for critical attention*" (*Anatomy* 71; emphasis mine) mean something different in *Green Grass, Running Water*. When questioned about the meaning of the floating imagery, the "I" of the narrator simply says, "That's the way it happens in oral stories" (293). Archetypal figures like God, and Adam and Eve are transformed to fit their new situations. They consequently engage in dialogue with a Native creation. This kind of dialogic creation contrasts with Frye's structuralist approach of disregarding situation or context (locally specific Native literature, history, and culture, for example) in favour of the universal archetype. Frye compares similarities between myths and archetypes in such a way that he is able to ignore differences. Literature refers (only) to itself. Frye says, "In all literary verbal structures the final direction of meaning is inward. In literature the standards of outward meaning are secondary" (*Anatomy* 74). In such a closed system, myths and archetypes are universalized categories, just as the Indian becomes a kind of universal archetype for Hovaugh. He is unable to describe the Indians who have lived with him for year, and he cannot even guess at how old they are.

The differences between the four old Indians, however, are as substantial as their similarities. For one thing, they all come from different Native cultures. But the differences among them, like the differences between white and Indian, are set up in such a way—through chance—that oppositions refuse to reconstitute themselves. Meaning, according to structuralist theory, resides in oppositions—distinctions between Indian and white, thought and substance, and so on. In *Green Grass, Running Water* all kinds of differences

show themselves as interconnected, rather than opposed. And it is through story that they are interconnected. Dialogue focuses on process, not product. Thus, meaning arises from dialogues between differences, not through their categorization as opposites.

In Hovaugh's carefully constructed world, meaning lies in circular and closed systems. Hovaugh draws a "deliberate circle around Parliament Lake." He then draws another, and another (324). Meaning, in this system, is always relational to another element within the system. Thus we have descriptions of Indian gifts and white gifts—the essentialized identities of Natives and whites—defining each other in a play on paradigmatic opposites (327). In this kind of a system, however, the meaning of a term can only refer to another term within the system. The referent, the actual thing being referred to, lies outside this linguistic categorization. Real Indians, then, can't exist. Structuralist systems finally form themselves as self-fulfilling prophecies, reinforcing the text through their own circularity. But the re-creation of various myths in Green Grass, Running Water defies the analysis of literature as displaced mythology. Coyote continues to dance in and out of stories. Ultimately, Hovaugh's organization of the world reveals itself as petrified and static. His is a world where circles are no longer cycles—where circles construct borders around knowledge. It exhibits a garrison mentality.

Frye plays God with literature just as Hovaugh plays God with the lives of the Indians. In Anatomy of Criticism, Frye argues that the context of literature is not the world. But the stories that the old Indians tell keep slipping into the world as experienced, into reality. Literature, in Frye's system, never reveals new content or experience, but merely new ways of perception. The inward movement is related to the aesthetic: Frye states, "The reason for producing the literary structure is apparently that the inward

meaning, the self-contained verbal pattern, is the field of responses connected with pleasure, beauty, and interest" (Anatomy 74). And he goes on, "In literature...the reality-principle is subordinate to the pleasure-principle" (Anatomy 75). The illusion of reality, for Frye, is created through the construction of universal, and psychologically real archetypes. The old Indians, according to Hovaugh, are, therefore, "really" dead. But in King's narrative, stories create reality; words have the power to affect the world in ways that go beyond "pleasure, beauty, and interest."

While Frye works to uncover what he calls universal, similar, and elemental patterns, Hovaugh, however hard he tries, cannot make any real sense out of the patterns that the old Indians make—although he does predict another natural catastrophe when the old Indians escape. Part of the confusion lies in Hovaugh's apparent unwillingness to acknowledge that the old Indian archetypes might be real; the old Indians create storied patterns of their own that intersect with the archetypal myths connected to the Christian creation story. In oral tradition, the old Indians keep turning up in new forms and new guises, re-creating reality as they go along. In distinguishing between oral and literate modes of discourse, Frye separates literary (figurative) and "ordinary" uses of language.¹¹ Literally, the old Indians should no longer exist. But Green Grass, Running Water dismantles this opposition. Western theorists since Plato have distinguished between literal and figurative uses of language, and structuralism, in particular, has assigned to literal language a normative function. This "function" of literal language can encourage and deceive one into believing in the transparency and objectivity of language as a form of neutral communication. Within a metaphoric worldview such as Robinson's and King's, no division between the literal and figurative (or between subject and object, perhaps)

seems to exist. Coyote is here and now. The story that one tells can have unexpected repercussions somewhere else. Linguistic objectivity is, therefore, not taken for granted. Language is always subjective, always contexted, and always material.

The doubly-oriented speech that Bakhtin suggests is a feature of literary discourse, especially in novels, means that a text can refer to speech acts outside the text itself. That is, the text can and does refer to reality, and reality, in Native American tradition, is created through story.

In the search for universals, the particularity of myth remains in its own culture, even for Frye. But the differences between myths and worldviews are circumvented by the use of the psychological, through Jungian-style universal archetypes. Hovavh tries to confine the old Indians, ironically in a mental institution. In applying myth to psychology, Frye implies a God-like ability to psychoanalyze/exorcise otherness. King's characters, however, are running wild through Frye's carefully manicured garden of literary theory.

In Green Grass, Running Water, the literary world and the real world are inseparable, just as in Robinson's stories human and animal worlds and story and reality are interconnected. As King's characters fall into other stories, other realities, they move between stories, and between media: Alberta, Charlie, and Lionel are watching the same movie Western that Eli is reading. The four Indians from the mental institution are in the televised movie story too. The four Goddesses have fixed the movie, fixed things for the benefit of the Indians, but they have to fix things again because the cavalry keeps returning (186). Whites keep having things their way. The story has to change so that reality changes.

Despite slippages between different worlds and realities, and their ability to transform each other to create new stories and realities, Green Grass, Running Water is not magic realism. The term magic realism suggests that the reader does not need to connect the artifice of the narrative with the real world; it is a purely literary term. Patricia Waugh states that in magic realism, the reader is not offered a “rational” explanation for shifts between contexts, and is not “provided with any means of relating one context to another” (36). King, in contrast, provides his readers with plenty of means to relate one context to another. Coyote’s antics retain the ability to change things in the “real” world; the stories that Coyote dreams up and makes real resemble the “true” stories of Harry Robinson. Here the experience of humans and animals, of dreaming and non-dreaming worlds, story and history are inseparable. Green Grass, Running Water is the kind of realism that Harry Robinson tells, a realism that slips outside the confines of a literary system and makes itself felt in the realm of lived experience. It is a realism that theorizes the world through storytelling.

Oral stories, literature, film, and reality contaminate each other’s narratives. As the author/narrator/reader inserts him or her self into the story (the “I” of Green Grass), he or she also moves between narrative events and what appear to be narrativized storytelling performances. In the outer frame, there is the Coyote story where Hawkeye, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and the Lone Ranger interact in an apparent storytelling circle. This story ends, only to begin again. The story bumps against the narrative where Alberta, Charlie, and Lionel are trying to get on with their lives in Blossom, Alberta. King creates a dialogue between cultural stories that includes the other, and asks us to think about who the other is. He shows us that the question of the other is a question of perspective. What

we think of as otherness is always relational; characters, stories, and theories bump into and contextualize each other in the real world in meaningful ways. King's play with Frye's unitary tropes, moreover, provides dialogue as an alternative way of thinking about notions of an otherwise universal and unitary (English) literature. The idea that literature written in English is, somehow, English, or Canadian, or American literature, becomes problematic in a world where all kinds of discourses interact with each other in culturally specific ways.

Ultimately, King's text shows how Native storytelling continues to theorize the world through what is now a Native literature written in English. Ridington notes that, "Native American writers are doing more than challenging what may be included in the canon of English literature. They challenge the very language in which the canon may be described" ("Cannon" 21-22). King's response to Frye's highly intellectualized literary theory is to write Frye into a novel—to tell stories about him. King, a trained academic, could have written a traditional academic analysis of Frye's work. But, through telling stories within a highly literate framework, King simultaneously develops his novel along the continuum of Native oral tradition and causes Frye's tidy system to implode. But just as we are not accustomed to hearing stories as answers to questions, we are not accustomed to reading stories as theory.

Of Tricksters and Transformations: More Language Games¹²

King maintains the dialogic fluidity of oral storytelling performance in a written text, playing with stories that have no clearly defined beginnings, middles and endings. He derives this fluidity from oral genres as well as written ones, playing with the notions of

postmodern magic realism and literary conventions that slip outside the confines of the literary text. Moreover, while Coyote's dream forms the beginning of the story that is Green Grass, Running Water, one gets the clear sense that Coyote was there long before this particular version of the story was written. The narrator tells us explicitly, "In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water. ... Coyote was there, but Coyote was asleep" (1). King reveals the influence of Native oral literature in a variety of ways. In addition to the storied recursivity of the narrative as a whole, several aspects of the translation of oral performance into writing reveal the complexity of the relationship between the English language and Native cultures. Contemporary Native reality is frequently a reality based in English. But the way that authors like King use the language often suggests its status as a translation of Native worldview. English, these authors suggest, has become a Native language.¹³ Language is, moreover, a kind of spatial construct. Written language separates and contains the world in specific sorts of ways, and translating between the oral and the written suggests the same kind of meaningful displacements that occur in the translation between different languages.

King, for example, manipulates the sound of certain names in a way that requires the reader to read the text out loud. He emphasizes the sound of the names as puns so that only through their auralty does the reader understand the reference. In order to "get" the reference, one has to speak the words out loud, and only then do "Louis, Ray, and Al," for example, reveal themselves as "Louis Riel"—thereby suggesting connections to yet another narrative thread. Other names that function the same way in Green Grass, Running Water include Joe Hovaugh (Jehovah), Sally-Jo Weyha (Sacajawea), and the Nissan, Pinto, and Karmann-Ghia (Columbus's Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria). King's

emphasis on the orality of Native storytelling performance in a written text makes us read the text differently. In conjunction with the focus on the narratorial "I," and implied "you," of the text, such features maintain their oral resonances in the process of writing. They resemble, in a highly literate context, the "interfusal" spirit of Harry Robinson's writing where, as King has observed, the stories resist being read silently.

The names, however, do more than insist on simple oral pronunciation. In each case, as soon as the reader enunciates the words out loud, there is the suggestion of an assumed addressee or audience. No one usually speaks to him or herself. Embedded into the importance of names, therefore, is the dialogic aspect of storytelling performance—a performance that requires a speaker and a listener. In creating a dialogue, or conversation, with the text the speaker/reader/listener enters into a highly contexted discourse where every name suggests a story, and every story suggests yet another story. As Ridington says, "Native stories are more than about the world. They actually create it. They are parts and they are wholes in conversation with each other" ("Cannon" 22). And Tedlock notes, "Storytellers can talk *about* stories, but their observations and speculations come from accumulated experience at hearing and telling stories" (Spoken Word 15). Thus, their observations and speculations are often implied and carry with them an element of presupposition. The storyteller does not tell all he or she knows, or explain the meanings of names, places, and things. There is an assumption of a common matrix of cultural knowledge, and invoking words—names and places—suggests that shared epistemology. In King's novel, that sharing covers a broad spectrum of cultural knowledge.

Thus, Joe Hovaugh's name/story resonates with the biblical senses of Jehovah, and with the literary analogies of Northrop Frye at the same time. (Of course, part of that

resonance also lies in the fact that Frye worked extensively with the Bible.) The story of Louis, Ray, and Al connects with the narrative of Louis Riel, and also resonates with the place of Nietzschean theory in an Indian theory/story—the Dead Dog Café bringing to mind Nietzsche’s famous words that “God is dead,” or at least contrary in Blackfoot country.¹⁴ It brings to mind the nihilism inherent in the myth of the vanishing Indian and simultaneously resonates with the title of Vine Deloria’s book God is Red, as Margery Fee and Jane Flick point out (137). None of these stories is separable from another, and the names themselves conjure up the stories. Sometimes the stories range far apart in place and time. Their multiple interconnections imply the kind of syncretic and transformative abilities of oral stories. They are interpreting an ever-changing world by integrating new elements into old narratives.

As the names themselves invoke the stories, they resemble place and landscape. Names contain the stories and are not separable from the connected narratives. One of the effects of these names is to point out to the reader that the stories that lie between the pages of the written book are parts of a constantly changing whole. They also imply a collectivity through the act of reading. These are culturally shared stories. They lead to thinking about experience in terms of dialogues and narratives that lie both inside and outside the text. They suggest a world where everything, not just literature or oral tradition, is storied experience.

I have referred earlier to one of Robinson’s stories where Coyote, who is not Coyote yet, has a conversation with God and chooses his name. Before he chooses his name, as Ridington points out, “Coyote embodies paradox. His name is not a name that means something. How can he have a name that is not a name and still be Coyote before

he has been given it as a name?" ("Cannon" 23). The name that Coyote chooses determines his role in the world. Since he has arrived late to the "name-giving place" (Write It 53), he has to choose between the name KWEELSH-tin, the name for Sweathouse, and the name Shin-KLEEP, the name for Coyote (Write It 60). The power that he gets when he chooses to be Shin-KLEEP is the power of Coyote; the essence of Coyote's being cannot be separated from the word, or the name, itself. As Ridington explains it, "No matter what his name and job description, Coyote retains his essential nature" ("Cannon" 24). But, Coyote's nature is one that repudiates essentialism: he has the power to change things around, to transform reality and himself, in ways that are limited only by his imaginative abilities to conjure up stories. Even his choice of a name moves away from ideas of essence, given the spiritual associations of the name for Sweathouse, the name and identity that Coyote rejects. Coyote's essential nature, it could be said, is a storied one. Stories that feature Coyote, or stories that are created by Coyote, make him who he is.

In King's story, the trouble starts with Coyote Dream's choice of a name, and his identity as an upper case GOD that goes along with that name. The discussion over names and identity at the beginning of the book resembles Robinson's story about how Coyote chooses his name and gets to be Coyote. The similarity between the two stories is so striking that it is possible King may have been inspired to write this passage by Robinson's Coyote story. One's identity, both of these narratives imply, comes out of the dialogue between words and their essences, as well as through the relationship between different words and worlds of experience. In Robinson's story, Coyote only has two choices left to him. The chief tells him:

“There’s only two left,
but you not going to have them both.
You can have only one of them.”

So Shim-ee-OW didn’t know what to say.
He don’t know what to do and what to say.
So the Chief told ‘em,
“All right, I can explain how you’re going to be
if you’re KWEELSH-tin,
that is, if you’re Sweathouse.
And I can explain how you’re going to do,
How you’re going to be if you’re shin-KLEEP.”
That’s Coyote.

(Write It 60)

In King’s novel, Coyote and his dream argue about names and identity as well:

Who are you? Says that Dream. Are you someone important?
“I’m Coyote,” says Coyote. “And I am very smart.”
I am very smart, too, says that Dream. I must be Coyote.
“No,” says Coyote. “You can’t be Coyote. But you can be a dog.”

(1-2)

Coyote, culture hero and trickster, reveals that language and words are as deceptive and tricky as he is.

Stories are not always what they appear to be on the surface. Their form can even disguise meanings. The stories constructed through Coyote’s dog dream, as they float in and out of their written contexts, play with language in a way that resembles what Vizenor describe as “trickster discourse” in his book Narrative Chance. But unlike Vizenor’s conceptualization of a post-modernist trickster discourse, which, like Frye’s literary theory, remains grounded in the separation between language and reality, language has material aspects for King. Moreover, Coyote creates not only the stories, but also his audience. King observes, “As Native storytellers have become bilingual—telling and writing their stories in English, French, Spanish—they have created both a more pan-

Native as well as a non-Native audience (My Relations Introduction ix). Armstrong, in her discussion of traces of Okanagan language and worldview in her own writing, observes, "Reality is very much like a story: it is easily changeable and transformative with each speaker" (191). The development of a Native English that reflects Okanagan rhythms and worldview, Armstrong suggests, is found in colloquial and "Rez English." Rez English and the idea of trickster discourse are connected, at least in part, through a collective worldview. Trickster discourse is, by nature, communal, as Vizenor points out. Vizenor emphasizes that the sign of the trickster is the site of meaning because it is held in common by a community of people. But, as non-Natives as well as Natives read books like Green Grass, Running Water, meaning is created not so much through the sign itself, as it is in the dialogue between Native and non-Native, history and story, thought and substance, and so on. It thus remains performative.

As a communal sign, the trickster is a sign shared, as Vizenor says, between listeners and readers. In emphasizing the communality of the trickster as a Native sign, Vizenor also points out the importance of dialogue. He says, "The emphasis here is...semiotics, the reader, the listener or audience, and the consciousness of signs in literature (signs, myths, and metaphors)...semiotics...locates *being* in discourse" (Narrative Chance 189). King's narrator says, "There are no truths, Coyote... Only stories" (Green Grass 326). This comment, of course, is as much a reflection on the nature of truth as it is of stories.¹⁵ The stories, while they may not be "true" in the western conceptualization of the idea of truth, are real in their ability to construct realities and to interpret experience on a continuing basis. They are transformational. There is no doubt that if Ahdamn and the Christian God had not turned up in a Native creation story, history

would be different today. For King, and for Vizenor, the power of these kinds of stories lies in their humour, in the language of the trickster as well as in his (her?) characterization.

The power of humour lies in its ability to transform reality through the comic. Vizenor argues that trickster discourse is, by definition, comic, and he describes comedy as liberating. He says, "In trickster narratives the listeners and readers imagine their liberation; the trickster is a sign and the world is 'deconstructed' in a discourse" (Narrative Chance 194). The difference between Vizenor's conceptualization of trickster discourse, and King's Coyote, however, is that King's listeners and readers do not merely "imagine" their liberation, they become part of the experience. Language is not simply a signifying discourse, it is intimately connected with the material world.

In this kind of a conceptualization of language, the referent no longer exists outside the system, but is a part of it. The signifier, signified, and referent are interconnected in a way that they are not in structuralist and post-structuralist views of language. This idea of language as real, I suggest, is closer to Native American conceptualizations of the power of words, than the idea of language as a simple "medium" of communication. Rather than mediating between different conceptualizations of reality, language in this view retains the power to influence and construct multiple realities. In contrast, Vizenor discusses the trickster in terms of a semiotic sign that is not, according to him, cultural material (Narrative Chance 188) or material culture.

King's Coyote provides a clear example of a trickster who *is* simultaneously cultural material and language game. His character escapes all systems of classification through his ability to shape shift, changing his identity as s/he enters into new dialogues

and creates new stories and realities. In this case the stories are told in a highly contextualized written English. Coyote slips between Native and non-Native language (note the Cherokee section headings, and the language the Lone Ranger, Hawkeye, Robinson Crusoe, and Ishmael speak near the beginning of the book), Blackfoot culture (anchored in the Sun Dance and situated in southern Alberta), mainstream Canadian and American literature (all of it written in English), and the Bible (which, in all its forms, has been heavily translated). Using a common English language, King argues, allows Native writers, “to reinforce many of the beliefs that tribes have held individually, beliefs that tribes are now discovering they share mutually” (My Relations Introduction x).¹⁶ Vizenor argues that, “The trickster is never the same in oral and translated narratives; however, these differences are resolved in comic holotropes and discourse in modern literature.” He says, “The trickster is real in those who imagine the narrative, in the narrative voices” (Narrative Chance 190). King makes the trickster real by drawing us into the world of the text and then directing us back out into the world of the “real.”

Robinson’s and King’s Coyote shows us how language constructs multiple realities rather than simply mediating between two or more worldviews. In contrast, Vizenor constructs a notion of the trickster as “unreal” in the sense that signs, while they point to the real world, are themselves not material. Vizenor states, “The trickster is real in those who *imagine* the narrative, in the narrative voices” (Narrative Chance 190; emphasis mine). His conceptualization of the trickster as a comic holotrope insists on the anti-essentialist identity of Coyote. As a trope, the trickster is a figure of speech; as a comic “holotrope” he is comprised of “signifiers, the signified, and signs” (Vizenor Narrative Chance 190). The trickster is like a hologram where each story contains and evokes every

other. Coyote, in both Robinson's and King's stories, however, is also cultural material. His power to materialize events in the real world is not dis-connected from his existence as Coyote. Vizenor argues that the trickster is real only in the realm of the imagination; he separates the realm of the literary from the material experience of the world in order to resist the essentialization of identity. Robinson and King resist that same essentialization through constructing multiple realities.

Just as Coyote is instructed to "Stick around. This is how it happens," (Green Grass 89), the reader has to stick around, to make sense of the text after thinking about the stories a little while. As Ridington notes, Coyote epistemology challenges us to think about signs and signification ("Cannon" 23). The storyteller is in conversation with Coyote and with the reader, and the storytelling "I" of King's text suggests the kind of doubly-oriented speech that Bakhtin argues is characteristic of the novelistic genre. Bakhtin divides doubly-oriented discourse into several categories, one of which is dialogue—a "discourse which alludes to an *absent* speech act" (Lodge 33). The speech act that has historically been absent in the discourse of North America is a Native speech act—an Indian voice—a presence that is very likely to reveal itself as a story, in narrative form, rather than as a simple speech utterance.

The dialogue between "I" and Coyote always refers to the act of storytelling itself. For example, King's narrator says:

'We are going to have to do this again. We are going to have to get it right.'
'Okay,' says Coyote. 'I can do that.'
'All right,' I says, 'pay attention. In the beginning there was nothing. Just the water'" (Green Grass 83).

And:

'Oh, oh,' says Coyote. 'Changing Woman is stuck on the island all by herself. Is that the end of the story?'

'Silly Coyote,' I says. 'This story is just beginning' (Green Grass 125)

And:

'That's right again,' I says.

'Am I missing something?' says Coyote.

'Think about it, Coyote,' I says. 'Just think about it.' (Green Grass 349).

Some of these dialogues between the "I" of the narrator and Coyote are quite lengthy. In the last example, moreover, the narrator's suggestion that Coyote think about things again echoes Robinson's instructions to Wickwire that one should think about his stories a little while (Nature Power 21). Coyote and "I" always discuss the stories, self-consciously drawing attention to their narrativized status. They discuss how a story should be told, and whether a story is turning out "right," or if a story is the same story or a new one. Their concern with the process of telling stories resembles Robinson's concern about "getting the story right." Perhaps most importantly, however, the explicit references to storytelling in the body of King's narrative resemble the kind of theorizing of Robinson and other Native storytellers do.

Stories are to be enjoyed, but they do more than provide entertainment. The dialogues between Coyote and "I" also resemble a self-reflexivity of the text that is frequently found in Western academic discourse in non-dialogic formats. As Coyote and the narrator discuss storytelling, or theorizing, they construct messages about an argument—a theoretical point of view. In this case part of their argument seems to be that one should read stories as theory and as aspects of social process,¹⁷ rather than as literary play alone.

Playing Indian

The idea of stories as social process is closely connected with the conceptualization of language as material. In addition, the invocation of ideas about what constitutes history in this context is closely linked to our ideas about what constitutes truth, reality, and story. As Cruikshank notes, "The writing of history has always involved collecting, analyzing, and retelling stories about the past, yet the very act of collection means that some stories are enshrined in books while others remain marginalized." She goes on to observe that any kind of history is based on "a selective reading of the past, especially when they [stories] are retold to make meaningful connections in the present" (Social Life 4). Literary history is, obviously, also a kind of history, and the narratives that this history preserves remain implicated in how stories are connected as both past and present in a contemporary Native reality. King's use of western literature and theory to recreate a Native story is the kind of social process that bases itself on the experience, rather than the essence, of a Native worldview.¹⁸

One of the most common western narratives used to construct Native identity is the pairing of white cowboys with Indian partners. King takes this convention and gives us four pairings of white and non-white characters: the Lone Ranger and Tonto, Ishmael and Queequeg (Moby Dick), Hawkeye and Chingachgook (The Last of the Mohicans), and Robinson Crusoe and Friday. These literary pairings have the effect of evoking other, historical pairings of characters like Sacajawea with Louis and Clark, Malinche and Cortes, Pocahontas and John Smith. (Some of these characters, like Sally Jo Weyha, Henry Cortez, and Polly Hantos also show up as minor characters in Green Grass,

Running Water.) In all of these pairings, the Native characters make it possible for the white characters to survive and to tell *their* stories—stories which usually leave the Native guides out completely, like Cortes's accounts of the Mexican conquest. The stories themselves, of course, have become part of another myth—the myth of North America as a white history, a white story. By beginning with these pairings, King shows us how white and Native stories intersect. He shows us how there is every possibility that we are part of an Indian story, an Indian history, where white elements and Indian experience of white culture are a part of the story, but not the dominant narrative.

An aspect of white fascination with Indians as a part of “our own” narrative is perhaps mirrored by Native interest in cowboys in Green Grass, Running Water. Whites are fascinated with Native culture; they want to play Indian and take pictures of Indians, but the Native identity that they want to construct is more Indian than the Natives themselves are. Thus, Portland Looking Bear only becomes a Hollywood movie star after he changes his name to Iron Eyes Screeching Eagle and wears a false nose, a nose that “made him look even more Indian” (Green Grass 130). Other Native writers like Sherman Alexie (The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Indian Killer) and Adrien Louis (Skins), have also written on cowboy and Indian themes. Emma Lee Warrior, in a short story called “Compatriots,” writes about a German tourist visiting a Blackfoot reserve in southern Alberta. Hilda cannot understand the Natives' apparent reluctance to attend a local Sun-Dance. She exuberantly states, “I can't wait to go to the sun-dance!” and she asks Lucy, a Blackfoot woman, “Do you go to them often?” (180). When Lucy responds in the negative, Hilda is shocked, and asks, “But why? Don't you believe in it? It's your culture!” (180). Real Blackfoot Indians go to sun-dances, and Lucy is clearly not Indian

enough for Hilda, just as Portland is not Indian enough to play an Indian chief convincingly for a white audience without his false nose. Hilda later finds the person apparently most involved in the Sun-Dance, and he speaks fluent Blackfoot. But Helmut Walking Eagle turns out to be a German immigrant, who plays Indian to the extent of denying his own German heritage.

Adolf Hungry Wolf, the real-life model for Helmut Walking Eagle, has children who speak fluent Blackfoot and who attend university.¹⁹ Are his children Native or not? The question of Native identity is one that permeates the discussion of Native literature; it is also a question of "knowing where the borders are" and of how those borders get constructed (Fee and Flick 131). Greg Sarris writes of the insider/outsider dilemma that permeates the Native community in this way:

Families bickering. Families arguing amongst themselves, drawing lines, maintaining old boundaries. Who is in. who is not. Gossip. Jealousy. Drinking. Love. The ties that bind. The very human need to belong, to be worthy and valued. Families. Who is Indian. Who is not. Families bound by history and blood. This is the stuff, the fabric of my Indian community (117).

Sarris goes on to point out similarities between what he finds in the novels of the Chippewa author, Louise Erdrich, and his own family. He notes, however, the importance of being wary of focusing on similarities at the expense of differences. The question of who or what is Native, he suggests, is finally one that cannot be answered in general terms.

The irony in Natives playing cowboy to the white wannabe Indians is that, in terms of horse handling and ranching many of the best cowboys *were* Indians. Robinson, for example, relates many stories about Native people attending and participating in rodeos. He also describes the ranching lifestyle that he and his wife, Matilda, shared in the Okanagan. Native writers' and artists' recent recreations of the idea of the cowboy has now, however, become an ironic re-interpretation of a romanticized, and white, perspective of past history. When Portland's son, Charlie, watches the T.V. movie he thinks, "He was sure he had seen the Western before. ...The plot was boring, the acting dull" (Green Grass 152). Yet C.B. tells Charlie, "Nobody played an Indian like Portland. I mean, he is Indian, but that's different. Just because you are an Indian doesn't mean that you can act like an Indian for the movies" (Green Grass 155). Reality and representation shift to accommodate white perceptions of what an Indian should look like—and the actors all play the same dull, boring stereotype.

Allan Ryan's The Trickster Shift examines the fascination of Gerald McMaster and Carl Beam with the image of the cowboy. Ryan's description of McMaster's painting, Cowboy Anthropology can equally well be used to describe King's ironic use of the cowboy image, particularly the John Wayne stereotype, in Green Grass, Running Water. Ryan says of the painting that it, "Suggest[s] the practice of anthropology as it might be applied to the culture of cowboys, as it might be practiced by an *Indian* anthropologist... The word "cowboy" is not posited as a potential *object* of anthropological enquiry, but as an accurate description of the *inquiry itself*" (134). Likewise, King's storied theorizing also resembles a move towards an "Indian anthropology," a writing where the object of study is really the subject of study. The question of Portland's Indianness, and Lionel's

desire to become John Wayne converge as two storied versions of an Indian reality, revealing an experience, a history, of cowboys and Indians that is, finally, Native. The mythology that surrounds the representations of cowboys and Indians shows itself as seeped in both folklore and history—and history takes a very different view of reality when related in storied form from a Native perspective, as we shall see in the discussion of James Welch's Fools Crow.

King's novel reveals that closure, or stasis, is not an inherent or essential feature of the written mode. Just as openness and interconnectedness are characteristic of Native American and First Nations oral storytelling traditions, they seem to be key features in Native literary production. While not all novels seem to be interconnected and open, the intertextuality and literary referencing which critics like Northrop Frye suggest is typical of literature, is an intertextuality that King emphasizes in multiple contexts in his novel. It suggests, moreover, that novels, in general, do necessarily contain their own closure, that closure is more closely related to the experience of reading than it is to some inherent quality of the text. The question then becomes one of discussing *how* a particular novel is open and interconnected and multiply referenced—and of what kinds of contexts we, as readers and critics, allow into the discussion of literary art forms. The difference between King's theorizing and Frye's is ultimately a difference of context and perspective—of the perception of a reality that shifts depending on how we look at it. When Frye states that the literary text points inward towards itself, rather than outwards, towards the real world, one reflects on how a Native person might separate the real world from the literary world differently from a white person. In a world where Coyote has the power to transform the

world, and where human and non-human persons share stories with each other, things might be different.

¹ From an unpublished tape transcription. (Tape NMM#5-Jan.28, 1982)

² From an interview with Peter Gzowski on CBC radio, "Morningside," April 5, 1993. This interview has recently been published in Canadian Literature 161/162. Summer/Autumn 1999. 65-76.

³ Thanks to Robin Ridington for pointing these out to me. The characters of the four women also turn up in slightly different forms and guises in other Native traditions.

⁴ I discuss the conceptualization of prophecy in more detail in the chapter that focuses on Silko's Almanac of the Dead.

⁵ This comment also seems to echo Robinson's comments in his description of the Puss in Boots story, which he carefully notes is not an Indian story, but a white one.

⁶ Bakhtin emphasises, "The dialogic relationship among texts and within the text. Their special (not linguistic) nature. Dialogue and dialectics" (Speech Genres 105).

⁷ The hardcover edition of Green Grass, Running Water also ends on page number 360 – as the story is getting ready to begin again – perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not.

⁸ "Contexted" is a word that Robin Ridington uses to describe the convergence of different sorts of contexts. It is thus not quite the same thing as saying, "contextualized."

⁹ The issue of the relationship between post-modernism and Native American texts is a complex one. While post-modernism denies one the simplicity of arguing a particular political/social position as singularly "true," it can also tread dangerously close to ignoring historical facts as it favours a multiplicity of "truths." Post-modernism can thus be used to negate the validity of Native experience within a larger context, rather than allowing Native experience to exist in its own right. In a hedge against such conservatism, a hierarchy of differences could be created. But this again raises the questions: whose truth? Whose knowledge? Whose decision? Whose hierarchy? Reading Native American novels in the context of post-modernist literature thus raises numerous, and problematic, issues.

¹⁰ There are interesting echoes of this white conceptualization of the landscape in James Welch's Fools Crow.

¹¹ This separation of literal and figurative is, of course, characteristic of most structuralist literary criticism and has its source in structural linguistics (see, for example Ferdinand Saussure's Course in General Linguistics and Roman Jakobson's "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles") and Russian formalism (for example, Victor Shklovsky's "Art as Technique").

¹² The phrase "language games" comes from the title of one of Gerald Vizenor's chapters in the book Narrative Chance. The chapter is called "Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games."

¹³ In many Native cultures it was not uncommon for a person to speak more than one Native language, just as is the case in Europe today. The place of English in contemporary Native American literatures is analogous to the situation in India today, where English has become another "Indian" language on a continent with sixteen major indigenous languages.

¹⁴ In general, Nietzsche's theorizing carries with it elements of a kind of tricksterism. His approach to philosophy is often described as nihilistic because it upset the conventions of the nineteenth century and left nothing in their place. The resulting ambiguity in his texts has resulted in multiple and conflicted readings of his theories.

¹⁵ The Western concept of "true" is neither straightforward nor obvious. According to The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought truth is, "The property implicitly ascribed to a proposition by belief in or assertion of it; the property implicitly ascribed to a proposition by disbelief in or negation of it is falsity. There have been many theories of the nature of truth. The most common sees it as a correspondence between a proposition and the fact, situation, or state of affairs that verifies it."

¹⁶ King, like many contemporary Native writers (and readers), moreover, does not speak a Native language.

¹⁷ Cruikshank examines the role of traditional Yukon storytelling in the context of social process in her most recent book, The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory.

¹⁸ As Ridington put it, King's writing is based on "his experience of hanging out with Indians." He goes on to say that, "It is perfectly okay for him to bring his other experiences as an academic into that Indian experience. If you don't grant that, you are left with the essentialist argument of the Pizza test. Real Indians don't eat pizza; real FN writers don't put Melville into their books" (Personal e-mail communication June 30, 1998).

¹⁹ Thanks to Margery Fee for pointing this out to me.

CHAPTER THREE: Recovering the World: Western Fictions

*There is so much more than just the story
and what was said that is the story.*

Greg Sarris

*The words of the story poured out of his mouth
as if they had substance.*

Leslie Marmon Silko

Writing Novel Histories

In his short story, "How I Spent My Summer Vacation: History, Story, and the Cant of Authenticity," King recounts the experiences of an academically trained historian attempting to come to terms with the "history" told by a Blackfoot storyteller named Bella. Bella tells her story over and over again, each time changing the details slightly while she simultaneously insists, "This is history."¹ King's narrator keeps thinking to himself, "This is story." While the characters King's earlier Green Grass, Running Water run wild through the canon of western literature and Biblical myth, Bella's difficulty in getting across her point is also reflected in Welch's novel Fools Crow, but in a much different way.

Fools Crow is written as a historical novel. It is the coming-of-age story of the central character, White Man's Dog, as well as a personal and narrative history of the Blackfeet people near the end of the 1800's. The novel chronicles the lives and experiences of the Blackfeet who were part of the massacre on the Marias River in 1870. Their story is not preserved in American history books; here it is told in the context of a work of fiction. Fools Crow reflects the same problematic juncture of history and

literature, history and story, that is foregrounded in Green Grass, Running Water, and in the story of Bella. The question of where story ends and when history begins is written into the context of a novel that re-presents our understanding of the events of the past.

Rather than using humour, however, to engage the reader with many of the misrepresentations and stereotypes about Native life, Welch draws us in to a Blackfeet world where past and present are explicitly connected as part of contemporary Blackfeet reality. While Fools Crow is a fictionalized account of nineteenth century Blackfeet life, Welch anchors his storied narrative in the real events of history. Moreover, many of the characters in Fools Crow are, or were, real people; they were thus actors in the historical events his fictional narrative recounts. Welch's novel thus constructs a highly contexted and multiply layered narrative as it moves between the telling of traditional stories, dream visions, and the historical account of events leading up to a little-known massacre on the Marias River—all from a Blackfeet perspective. In contrast to King's self-conscious play on reality in Green Grass, Running Water, there are no Coyote tricks in Fools Crow. Historical facts bleed into fiction as the novel ends with the slaughter of 173 Blackfeet men, women and children on the Marias River.²

Welch is of Gros Ventre and Blackfeet ancestry. Following his example, I use the term "Blackfeet" rather than "Blackfoot." Welch himself considers the word "Blackfoot" archaic and freighted with negative connotations. In an interview with Laura Coltelli, he says, "Blackfeet, always Blackfeet. The old anthropologists say Blackfoot" (Coltelli 189).³ In this interview Welch also argues that that his novels are written in "the Western, European-American tradition," rather than in the storytelling tradition of the Blackfeet (Coltelli 186). Yet the way that Welch incorporates the language and worldview of the

Blackfeet and their traditional oral stories into a historical novel suggests a connection to, and continuity between, older storytelling traditions and newer literary forms.

Like King's Coyote epistemology, Welch's literary transformation of the vision quest and his integration of traditional oral stories into a novel point to a powerful syncretism at the heart of Blackfeet (literary) cosmology. Although Welch does not consider himself a traditional storyteller, it has been pointed out that much of his writing uses traditional paradigms of Blackfeet experience. Welch's use of the "crying for pity ritual," and the vision quest, for instance, translate concrete Blackfeet tradition into what he describes as more contemporary "metaphysical" or "abstract" concepts (Coltelli 187). These paradigms of experience suggest a Blackfeet epistemology where stories and visions remain real. They are, however, connected to the facts or events of history that are other than we (non-Blackfeet) know them. Like Robinson's and King's texts, Welch's novelistic storytelling challenges our conceptualization of reality and requires us to consider the possibility of an alternative, and equally real, view of the world.

Just as Coyote's Dream in Green Grass, Running Water has the power to change reality, White Man's Dog's vision of Wolverine changes his experience of the world. In his dream, Wolverine gives White Man's Dog a white stone, a stone that he finds still exists when he wakes up. The distinction between dream world and reality is blurred. The connection between visions, and dreams, and real (historical) events, moreover, reveals itself to be a storied one. White Man's Dog interprets his dream, and connects it to the waking world, by telling the story of the dream. While the impulse to narrativize events in this way may be, as Hayden White observes, universal ("The Value of Narrativity" 276), the way in which the events are narrativized, the way Fools Crow connects the

relationships between stories, dreams, and events, is culturally (and perhaps linguistically) specific. Moreover, in terms of history, as White observes, the notion that events can be represented as “telling” their own story only becomes problematic *after* the distinction between real and imaginary events are imposed on the storyteller (“The Value of Narrativity” 276). Meaning, the historian’s narrative suggests, lies in the “facts.” But what happens to meaning in a world where experience is not structured in terms of oppositions, where the distinction between natural and supernatural worlds does not hold, and where, consequently, “real” and “imaginary” ideas are constructed in ways unfamiliar to us?

Historical narratives are presented as stories in Blackfeet tradition. The sense of relationship and interconnectedness between the individual, the community, the story, and the event, thus extends to the relationships that exist between storyteller and audience. They are all part of the story that is now being told. Writers and readers share in the story as well. This interconnectedness is reflected in the sense of responsibility and relationship that each individual feels in the connection with the group as a whole. But Blackfeet storytellers, like other historians, always include some events and exclude others as they construct their narratives about the past. Welch explicitly links the personal to the historical and the fictional in his novel, Fools Crow, and his history, Killing Custer. In Fools Crow many of the novel’s central characters are revealed through the historical narrative to have been actual historical figures, many of whom were related to Welch.

By presenting us with a Blackfeet version of history in both fictional and non-fictional forms, Welch sets up a dialogic model for history where Blackfeet reality and mainstream American reality contextualize each other. Both ultimately reveal themselves as written from a particular perspective, or point of view. In Killing Custer Welch explores

how popular myths surrounding historical events come to be commonly accepted as factual by a dominant white society. He observes of the difference between the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the massacre on the Marias River:

The fact that Custer *died* mattered. His death was proof that the Indians were savages and should be dealt with just as the whites dealt with all the savages they encountered around the world. Ironically, Baker, who was successful in killing a lot of Indians, never became a hero and died an obscure drunk. Custer, in being killed, was elevated to mythical status by the press and the poets (Killing Custer 46).

The rhetorical re-construction of history through such culturally situated myths suggests the kind of re-visioning of history through Blackfeet story that Welch creates in Fools Crow.

Welch, like King, embeds stories from oral tradition into the novelistic form, but he has had to grapple with the problem of history in a way that King, using conventions acceptable within the context of contemporary “postmodernism” has not. Welch has found a new way to write American history as he tells a Blackfeet story. He writes of the events of the past in a way that transcends stereotypical constructions of Native identity and experience in an Americanized nineteenth century. But to tell nineteenth-century history from the point of view of the Blackfeet requires reconceptualizing Western notions of what constitutes history itself—especially which events are perceived as meaningful, or functional, and which are not. As King observes, most Native writers avoid setting their works in the nineteenth century. He says:

The literary stereotypes and cliches for which the period is famous have been, I think, a deterrent to many of us. ...Rather than try to unravel the complex relationship between the nineteenth-century Indian and the white mind, or to craft a new set of images that still reflects the time but avoids the flat, static depiction of the Native and the two-dimensional quality of the culture, most of us have consciously set our literature in the present (Introduction to All My Relations xi-xii).

The difference of history highlights how narrative and story, including narrativized history, always reflects the perspective of the one doing the telling. Thus, as Welch argues, "I'm telling it from their point of view, from the inside of their cultural point of view. ...never from the white point of view; it's always from the Indian's" (Coltelli 198). To tell the story from a Blackfeet point of view requires conceptualizing storied reality as part of lived reality. It means connecting Blackfeet stories to a world that is now experienced novelistically, among other things.

The idea that stories are their own kind of history lies at the heart of much Native literature. Silko suggests in Ceremony, for instance, that once a story is thought of, or articulated—once it is conceptualized—it becomes real. Story, in these contexts, is embodied history. The idea that history is not objective or true in the sense that it represents, through writing, how things "really happened," is, of course, the central premise of what has been called the "New Historicism." In Western European (literary) theory, the idea that both literature and history are equally textual has led to a blurring of the boundaries between the literary and the historical. Hayden White, in particular, has demonstrated how the rhetoric of history relies on the same kinds of tropes or figures of

speech that underlie poetic discourse. He asks, in Metahistory, what does it mean to *think historically*? (1) and he suggests that the primary difference between historical narratives and fictional narratives is that the former still purport to represent reality. In his awareness of how words have the power to construct different kinds of realities, White moves close to an understanding of story, and of narrative forms in general, as a way of theorizing the world.

White suggests that the problem of historical representation is intimately connected with our notions of narrative and our desire to narrativize reality. But he points out that the historian's desire for meaning, and to create meaning from out of sequences of events, necessarily eliminates the possibility of objectivity. The problem of objectivity, however, is not a problem if one sees less importance in the actual events, or in their sequence, than in their possible and potential meanings across both space and time. It is not a problem if one is conscious of always being situated in both space and time. Once meaning is spatialized, of course, it becomes relational rather than absolute; the awareness that significance changes depending on the position from which one views an object is then foregrounded. The interpretation of events as ongoing process is highlighted in a storytelling discourse where the distinctions between fact and fiction are less fixed.

White also describes history as a narrativizing discourse where there is no speaker. But in storytelling there is always a speaker. Events no longer appear to "tell themselves" (White "Narrativity" 276). The distinction between real and imaginary events continues to lie at the heart of contemporary conceptualizations of both history and fiction. White observes that this separation "presupposes a notion of reality in which 'the true' is identified with 'the real' only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of

narrativity" ("Narrativity" 278). The chronological narrativity that White points out is characteristic of historical narrative is not, however, necessarily characteristic of a particular instance of a story.

Traditional storytelling implies a history that is simultaneously linear and not linear. The chronology of a storied history is encapsulated in the sense of a particular story never being complete, never finished, unlike the closure that is typically demanded in historical accounts. Stories reveal their continuity in new and sometimes-unfamiliar contexts, as we have seen in Write It On Your Heart, Nature Power, and Green Grass, Running Water. Telling stories about history highlights a central problem inherent in narrative knowledge, the problem of *how* to translate knowing into telling, as White observes ("Narrativity" 274). He notes that, "To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture" ("Narrativity" 274). Fools Crow, through its use of familiar literary conventions in unfamiliar contexts, invites us to do just this.

Who Tells: Story, History, and Anthropology

The world of the Blackfeet is one where names, places, and stories continue to act as mnemonic devices to recall a larger story and another history. A large part of the stories' meanings, therefore, lies in their audience, in the listeners and readers. As Silko explains, "A great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener; the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners" (Yellow Woman 50). One story thus evokes another, and is connected to every other. Welch draws on this web-like structure that is characteristic of oral storytelling; his narrative reflects the continued connections between thought and substance, history and story, past and present. Thus Fast Horse's dream of

Cold Maker and his daughters, which “so filled [him] with fear that [he] fell down and trembled” (13) resonates with Fools Crow’s horror at the end of the novel, when he views the massacre site and thinks, “Even revenge had been slaughtered” (385). Each of the stories evokes another, and names of people and places all evoke more stories of the Pikuni experience of the world. White Man’s Dog tells the story of how he got his name by following around an old storyteller, Victory Robe Whiteman, whose own name evokes another story about an event in *his* life. As Ridington points out, “There are stories within stories within these names” White Man’s Dog gets his later name, Fools Crow, through an inaccurate telling (by others) of his killing of the Crow warrior, Bull Shield. As Ridington observes, while he knows that the version of the story is not accurate, White Man’s Dog has an obligation to the storyteller to accept the name (“Lecture Notes.”) As the reader is drawn more deeply into the novel, he or she is drawn into the Blackfeet experience of the world as a consistently narrativized experience of people, places and things. Like Harry Robinson’s oral performances, when Welch writes the stories that make up the novel that is Fools Crow there are no clear demarcations of where individual stories begin and end. The various narratives are all interconnected in some way or another and it is left to the reader to make sense of their relationship.⁴

The interconnectedness of story and place, and the dynamic connection between language and the world, resemble Silko’s description of words as thought processes, rather than products, in Ceremony. Here the narrator observes, “The word...was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web” (35). The dialogue of Fools Crow shifts between

individual voices as well as between larger written and oral traditions. The web-like connections between the individual, the community, and the land are reinforced through story. Words retain their power to create the world, and a word cannot, finally, be separated from its referent, which exists within a holistic system.

Stories, visions, and dreams also suggest a cross-cultural dialogue where the oral seeps into the written and the written text recontextualizes oral tradition. The effect is one of continuity, rather than opposition between the two. The written form, the novel that is Fools Crow, resembles a web that also connects Blackfeet thought and American novel, with aspects of each constantly re-contextualizing the other. Thinking of the novel as a web of stories also evokes the invocation of Silko's novel, Ceremony:

Thought-Woman, the spider,
Named things and
As she named them
They appeared.

She is sitting in her room
Thinking of a story now.

I'm telling you the story
She is thinking.

Later in Ceremony the narrator also lets us know that, "No word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story" (55). The substantive relationship between words and things is mediated through story in this kind of a view of language. But the structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argues that the relationship between word and thing is arbitrary, and that the meaning of individual words arises from their relationship to other words within the system, and not through any kind of substantive reference to the real world. He says, "The bond between signifier and signified

is arbitrary. ... The linguistic sign is arbitrary" (67). This view of language is analogous to Frye's view of literature as a closed system. While King dismantles the literary theory of Frye, Welch refuses to separate words from people, places and things.

As Robert Scholes points out, in Saussure's view, "Reference is arbitrary or accidental, and in any case outside the province of semiotics" (146). He notes that, "Saussure, as amplified by Roland Barthes and others, has taught us to recognize an unbridgeable gap between words and things, signs and referents" (24). Scholes also points out that in this model:

Signs do not refer to things, they signify concepts, and concepts are aspects of thought, not of reality. This elegant and persuasive formulation has certainly provided a useful critique of naïve realism, vulgar materialism, and various other -isms that can be qualified with crippling adjectives. But it hasn't exactly caused the world to turn into a concept. Even semioticians eat and perform their other bodily functions just as if the world existed solidly around them (24).

In terms of Native literature, the question is not so much one of making a new scientific argument—is language referential or not?—as it is to highlight a different attitude or view towards language. This view assumes that there is *some kind* of relationship between word and thing, even if the exact nature of that relationship cannot be determined, even if it is arbitrary.⁵ Silko's observation that once white people name something, they forget about the thing itself (Almanac 224) suggests this crucial difference in worldview. Over-emphasizing the sign at the expense of the referent leads to "one of the most dangerous qualities of the Europeans: Europeans suffered a sort of blindness to the world" (Almanac

224). By taking language out of the real world, we run the risk of alienating ourselves ever further from that world. In the stories of Robinson, King, Welch and Silko, language takes us into, rather than out of, the “real” world. Words and stories create realities.

The dialogism inherent in this storied view of language creates multiple contexts of communication. While Fools Crow is the story of White Man’s Dog’s coming of age in the context of late 1800s Blackfeet history, it is also the story of Star Woman and Feather Boy, and of Mikapi. It is the story of the creation of the world by Old Man and Old Woman. The novel also, however, foreshadows the larger narrative structure that displaces these Native stories, most obviously by its connections to the mythology surrounding General George Custer and the Battle at Little Bighorn. Like King, Welch embeds traditional cultural stories within the story of fictional characters. But Blackfeet stories also have connections with anthropology, as well as history, through George Bird Grinnell’s original publication of Blackfoot Lodge Tales and J.W. Schultz’s My Life as an Indian (1907), in particular.

While Welch does not mention Grinnell and Schultz specifically as sources for Fools Crow, he does note that, “The books that I have studied about the Blackfeet people have had some influence, importance” (Coltelli 198). Grinnell’s and Schultz’s works are perhaps the oldest and most popularized writings about Blackfeet culture and stories, and it is likely that Welch would be familiar with them. Grinnell worked as an anthropologist, although he had a varied background. Schultz supported himself through ranching, hunting, and guiding. Schultz spoke Blackfoot fluently, and spent years recording observations and stories about Blackfeet life. My Life as an Indian, his first book, appeared in serialized form and was an instant success. Grinnell and Schultz were close

friends, as Hugh Dempsey points out in the Dover edition of My Life as an Indian and, in the introduction to Blackfoot Lodge Tales, Grinnell acknowledges that a portion of his material comes from Schultz's work. Fools Crow reclaims these stories recorded by a white anthropologist and author to create a new Blackfeet story.

Many of the translations that Welch uses for Blackfeet terms are the same as Grinnell's. Moreover, the Blackfeet words and phrases, the rhythm of the narration and the syntactic style of the traditional stories in Fools Crow resemble the patterns found in Blackfoot Lodge Tales. The stories resemble Grinnell's both thematically and stylistically. In fact, the effect of reading a series of such stories embedded into the novelistic form is one of reading an extended Blackfoot Lodge Tale. Grinnell, however, was not a typical anthropologist; he was well known as a sportsman and was publisher of Field and Stream magazine during the early 1900's (Hugh Dempsey in My Life viii). His interest in spending time with the Blackfeet and, earlier, the Pawnee, lay in hearing their stories—stories about their way of life, their customs and religion, and old-time culture stories. The dialogic quality of Grinnell's collection of stories likely has its source in his experience of sharing and listening to stories with the Natives themselves.

Moving from oral to written texts, the migration of stories from oral tradition into anthropology into literature, from Blackfeet storytellers through Schultz and Grinnell to Welch, exhibits the same sort of movement and circulation common to narratives in oral tradition. The stories continue to be shared. But the challenge that the contemporary novel presents to the circulation of oral stories is how to keep them vital and alive in written form—how to maintain Blackfeet tradition in the face of contemporary reality. This is the same challenge, ultimately, that Fast Horse and Fools Crow face in the Pikuni world of the

1860's. What does it mean to be Pikuni, or Blackfeet, at the end of the nineteenth century, when times are changing rapidly? How are we now, as readers in another time and place, connected to the old stories? And, as both Native and non-Native, how do readers engage in dialogue with the text of Fools Crow?

Grinnell, in the introduction to Blackfoot Lodge Tales, states that Schultz was "the discoverer of the literature of the Blackfeet" (xvi). His observation was made near the turn of the century, but Grinnell already recognized that traditional Blackfeet stories are literary, and that they draw on the figurative and metaphorical expressions of a Native culture. The leap from story to novel is one where, in Fools Crow, the ghosts of anthropology and history have become the characters of Blackfeet literature. Once collected as "pure" specimens of an "authentic" Native culture, the stories now both contextualize and are recontextualized by a dynamic and contemporary Native reality. Purity and authenticity have been transformed into ongoing dialogic terms—and dialogue, as Bakhtin suggests, is never pure. The traditional stories function not only as literary spectacle, moreover, but they represent another reality. They are rem(a)inders of history and continue to connect the past to contemporary Blackfeet experience in literary form.

When one reads Welch's Winter in the Blood, The Death of Jim Loney, and Indian Lawyer, novels set in contemporary time, it seems that Welch makes the links between past and present explicit.⁶ The novels, and the stories within them, are all interconnected, and each novel, like each story, evokes another. For example, the mother of Jim Loney's dream vision resembles Feather Woman, and the canyon that Loney chooses to die in is a mirror image of the one, which Fools Crow, is led into by his dog. (A dog also follows Loney into the canyon.) Loney also has a vision of a black bird; this vision is reminiscent

of Fools Crow's vision of the raven. One can read these novels as a storied cycle where each one contains every other. Ridington describes such storied cultural knowledge as "holographic." He says:

Indian stories are like holographic images—break them apart, and each piece still expresses the whole of which it is a part; walk around one and you will see how it appears to change but actually remains the same. You may learn from such an experience. It is you who have changed, not the object you saw from different points of view. Like a moment of experience within the story of a person's life, a story in the life of an Indian people is constantly taking on new meanings, as the context within which you understand it widens. The stories Indian people learn as children take on new and different meanings as they experience them in the wider context of vision quests and ceremonies. It may take a lifetime to put all the stories together. There is no beginning and there is no end, but there is a common center (Introduction to Blessing For a Long Time xvii-xviii).

Just as the listener at one of Robinson's storytelling performances cannot tell where one story ends and another begins, the effect of these connections is to reinforce the inseparability of one narrative from another, and to create dialogues between their experience of the world.

The explicit recuperation of traditional culture stories in Fools Crow, unlike Welch's other novels, however, suggests how the text is deeply implicated in the history of disciplines such as anthropology. Grinnell and Schultz sought, like many others of their time, to preserve what remained of a "dying" culture. In the early 1900's Grinnell laments what he

sees of the change in Blackfeet culture, observing that, "It is the meeting of the past and the present, of savagery and civilization. The issue cannot be doubtful. Old methods must pass away" (180). Yet he is determined to record the old stories. In his transcriptions, Grinnell attempted to stay as faithful to his original sources as possible, editing them little. He was clearly concerned that the Blackfeet present themselves from their own point of view, noting that, "The white person who gives his idea of a story of Indian life inevitably looks at things from the civilized point of view" (xii). He states:

I give the Blackfoot stories as they have been told to me by the Indians themselves, not elaborating nor adding to them. In all cases except one they were written down as they fell from the lips of the storyteller. ... The stories as here given are told in the words of the original narrators as nearly as it is possible to render those words into the simplest every-day English. These are Indians' stories, pictures of Indian life drawn by Indian artists, and showing this life from the Indian's point of view (xiii).

Traditional Blackfeet characters from Grinnell's Blackfoot Lodge Tales, characters like Mik-api, Red Old Man, Feather Woman and Star Boy, inhabit Welch's novel along with historical and fictive figures. Their different worlds engage in dialogues with each other as they converge with the real world of the contemporary reader. Welch's Mik-api, for example, assists Fools Crow both spiritually and mentally. Like the legendary chief, Mik-api, whose story is recorded in by Grinnell, Fools Crow is clearly "helped by the ghosts, for no one can do such things without help from those fearful and unknown persons" (Grinnell 69). Grinnell's consciousness of Blackfeet worldview and of the interconnectedness of all things reveals itself in the way that he acknowledges the

Blackfeet interpretation of “ghosts” as people. The characters that speak to Fools Crow in his visions are as real as the people of his village. They speak to him directly, and he interacts with the people of both the spirit and animal worlds, with Nitsokan, his “dream helper” (323) guiding him through the world of the unconscious, the sleep-world. Waking and sleeping worlds function on a continuum; the narrative reinforces this sense of their continuity by itself slipping between these realms of experience. At times the reader is left wondering in which realm Fool’s Crow’s experiences are occurring, and it takes a moment for the reader, like Fools Crow himself, to re-orient him or her self to the context in the text.

Grinnell also notes of white interpretations of Native religion and worldview that, “The statement that Old Man was merely light personified would be beyond [Blackfeet] comprehension, and if he did understand what was meant, he would laugh at it, and aver that *Na’pi* was a real man, a flesh and blood person like himself” (257). The differences between real and imagined worlds of experience, between flesh and blood human and ghost are less than their similarities. However naïve Grinnell and others may have thought the Blackfeet, we should remember that in Christian tradition also, the son of God manifests Himself as flesh and blood—and a large part of Western “civilization” continues to be constructed around the belief that He died and rose from the dead three days later.

While Fools Crow has access to traditional Blackfeet sources of power, Mik-api’s powers are not available to Fast Horse. Fast Horse says, “This magic is no good for me”. Mik-api also says, “I can’t heal a man who doesn’t have the heart for it” (*Fools Crow* 202). Fast Horse’s alienation from the people of his village reflects, among other things, his dis-association with the past, and from the ghosts of the Blackfeet. He is no longer

connected to the stories. Welch, when asked about the “surrealism” in many of his novels, observes:

When you are immersed in the Indian culture, notions of reality just necessarily change because there is this tradition, which isn't far in the past. ... So, if you can see that and somehow translate it into contemporary experience I think you are being part of that notion of reality, which to today's rational thinkers, I suppose, would be considered a form of surrealism (Coltelli 188).

The connection of material reality with oral tradition reveals itself in a variety of ways. Here it is reflected in storied dialogues and narrative where the negotiation of cultural artifice moves smoothly between story as anthropological artifact and story as vital Blackfeet tradition.

To see how widely such stories migrate,⁷ one can look at the story of the two brothers in Fools Crow. In this story one brother, on the urging of his wife, deceives his brother and deserts him, ostensibly leaving him to die on an uninhabited island (195-9). Through a series of deceptions, events do not turn out as planned, and the deceived brother lives while his treacherous sibling is ultimately exiled and dies. Akaiyan, the “good” brother, becomes keeper of the Beaver Medicine bundle. This bundle originates in ancient stories whose source reaches as far back as Blackfeet oral tradition itself. The same story, recorded by Grinnell, reveals a narrator who tells us that the Blackfeet notion of war, and of counting coup on the enemy, have their source in this Beaver Medicine. Grinnell's narrator/storyteller says that the victorious warrior both counted coup on and scalped his victim, starting a new tradition based on the Beaver Medicine (122). Prior to

this warriors did not kill each other. Grinnell describes this earlier style of war; he states, "It was more a friendly than a hostile ceremony" (117). Fools Crow reveals the Blackfeet struggle for survival in a world of encroaching white people, however, as a distinctly hostile battle. During the events recounted in the novel, the Blackfeet fight with their lives. They need all the help they can get to annihilate their enemy.

In Welch's story of the Beaver Medicine, the bundle has been handed down since ancient times through Boss Ribs' family. Boss Ribs tells the story of the Medicine to Fools Crow. He then announces that he will educate Fast Horse; he says, "I will instruct him in the ways of the Beaver Medicine. He will learn that it is his destiny as well as his duty" (202). But the medicine bundle only works within the context of the larger community. It is a shared power, part of a lengthy cultural tradition, just as the stories themselves are. Fast Horse no longer shares stories with his friends and family; he has alienated himself from his people. He is no longer a traditional Pikuni warrior and the Beaver Medicine no longer holds any power for him. As the narrator observes, "The more he [Fast Horse] stared at the Beaver Medicine, the more it lost meaning for him" (70). While the Blackfeet appear to be fighting a losing battle, Fools Crow's ability to take on the power of the Beaver Medicine is a source of strength, however, not just for him, but for the community as a whole. The story of the Beaver Medicine reflects how oral stories continue to work their power in new contexts, and in new ways. The Beaver Medicine accommodates and interprets new realities, preserving its traditional power through all kinds of changes. Just as the power objects assembled into a medicine bundle that Robinson has described resemble words assembled onto paper, the power of the Beaver Medicine lies in its storied reality.

As printed text, Fools Crow preserves one version of old Blackfeet stories and historical events. But there are many ways of telling a story and ultimately the novel suggests that the stories remain embedded in the oral history of the Blackfeet. The novel is a continuation of that history. As both Schultz's and Grinnell's books reveal, the insertion of the stories into new contexts recreates both the old stories and the new realities associated with them. Blackfoot Lodge Tales and My Life as an Indian are part of the nineteenth-century relationship between Blackfeet and whites; Fools Crow is now part of a newer discourse of the Native American novel. The continuation of these stories show how they are not the remains of a dying race carefully preserved in a museum of words, but fluid and multiple narrative possibilities. They are new versions of the same old stories now translated into written, rather than oral, texts.

Oral Stories, Written Texts

The choice of rendering one version of a story, one text, or another in print is always an arbitrary one. It is a choice riddled with ideological difficulties, particularly because the version that ends up preserved through the writing often gets connected with notions of authenticity and originality. The story leading up to the Marias River Massacre that Welch relates has, up until now, been told as a white (his)story, narrativized and presented from a white point of view, when it is told at all. But is the white story of the Marias River Massacre the same story as the Blackfeet version? If the perspective from which a story is recounted shifts, how does the story itself change? And if the stories are different at the most abstract levels, how is the history embedded in them also different? To what extent does history operate at the level of a singular narrative text, and to what

extent does it work at the more abstract and multiple level of the story? Unlike a single narrative text, whether written or oral, which exists as one instance in the telling or writing of a story, there are multiple possibilities at work in a story, multiple ways that each story can be told.

Native authors like Welch and King translate oral storytelling performance into written forms like the novel by making a series of choices. These choices are negotiated through both formal and semantic structures in the writing. For example, in Green Grass, Running Water Coyote's story is explicitly recursive, and its recursivity arises partly through the structure of the text.⁸ A story is told, and then told again, as the narrator tries to get it right, beginnings and endings merging in a series of cyclical loops of narrativizing. The story, like the novel, ends only to begin again. This creates a written text that becomes as fluid as the individual stories contained within it. But storytelling cycles in Fools Crow are not so explicitly and formally recursive as they are in Green Grass, Running Water. Welch embeds stories in the written text to recontextualize the events of history. The self-conscious text of Green Grass, Running Water gives way to a more overtly historical approach. The stories then function as interpretive guides to history. Thus, to think about how the stories circulate, the reader must draw on specific knowledge of Blackfeet worldview and cosmology. Where once Native stories were the object of Western anthropological investigation, they have been transformed and recreated as the subject of a Blackfeet narrative discourse.

The reader of Fools Crow, perhaps more than the reader of Green Grass, Running Water, is assumed to be part of an insider community. The surprise, that a white audience doesn't always understand the meaningful effects of storied repetitions, is perhaps best

summed up by a character in King's Medicine River, who says, "It's a crazy world... They all got up and clapped, Will, just stood there and clapped. Like they had never heard that story before" (175). Since the story of Fools Crow is narrated from a Blackfeet perspective, Welch assumes that readers have already heard the traditional culture stories. The construction of the reader as knowledgeable means that the unknowing reader is suddenly confronted with his or her lack of knowledge about events that he or she thought were "known." The specific stories embedded in the larger narrative can confuse rather than clarify the situation for the reader, just as Robinson's stories sometimes worked to confuse Wickwire. In addition, like their oral counterparts, the stories in Fools Crow seem incomplete. They are, however, simultaneously both partial and whole. As Fast Horse thinks, "He had heard this story before and knew there was no end to it. The story would remain incomplete"(7). An incomplete and ongoing story, of course, suggests history in process. This dialogic component of oral storytelling reflects a vital and living tradition—tradition, ironically, is always changing. Resistance to closure also implies multiple meanings and ways of understanding, rather than singular "facts." It is through the tellings, the dialogic process, that the gaps in the stories pick up meaning and become, temporarily, complete wholes. But their meanings always shift slightly to reflect their new context.

As Ridington observes in his reading of Fools Crow:

Every story contains a model of every other story. Even though many of the characters remain little more than names within the novel, the reader comes to understand that these names evoke complete and complex stories in Pikuni experience. Welch has placed them in the novel because they

represent the storied life of the Pikuni world. Each name is a little hologram of that world” (“Lecture Notes”).

Fools Crow evokes stories as a series of interconnected metonyms, with each part standing for the whole. It therefore suggests reading the web of stories in the way that Paula Gunn Allen argues: when the stories are connected to each other in conformance with Western-style narrative conventions, she says, the result is a novel (Granddaughters 4). While the novel seems to end chronologically with the Marias River Massacre, Fools Crow’s subsequent vision, with everything once again “as it should be” implies that the story, like the history of the Blackfeet, is as yet unfinished. While the printed text that contains the story lies within the covers of the book, the story itself lies both between its covers and outside it.

The plot structure of Fools Crow, in contrast to that of Green Grass, Running Water, is traditionally novelistic, with a conventional beginning, middle, and end. But the story of the Blackfeet people, like King’s Coyote Dream, is not finished; it is in process. The conjunction of fictive and historical events and characters in the novel, many of whom are related to Welch himself, also foregrounds the continuity between past and present, and real and ostensibly fictive worlds of experience. The power of storied repetitions, oral or written, lies partly in their ability to invoke both story and the specific history of the telling of the story. The stories tell us stories about other stories—all kinds of stories. Novels based on oral storytelling experience tell us, among other things, about the cultural shift from oral to written forms. They embed that history into their telling as well. As a constantly changing history is incorporated into tradition, knowledge of the stories themselves is assumed. They comprise a cultural knowledge as old as the hills themselves.

The issue of representation, and representation as a form of translation, is central to the way that one reads Fools Crow. Traditional Blackfeet stories, embedded in the novel, highlight that what we know about Blackfeet history is comprised of subjective assessments from outside of the culture. The shifts between Native and white worlds of experience reveal slippages between cultures, languages, and oral and written genres of expression. Among other things, the primacy of visions, dreams, and stories in constructing reality suggests a worldview where reality is viewed figuratively—a phenomenology and cosmology where there may not be a distinction between literal and figurative language or between storied reality and the world as experienced. But how does one translate this into the English language, English thought systems?

Each Wor(l)d Tells a Story

As the reader is drawn into the Blackfeet world of Fools Crow he or she is drawn into a dialogue with another world of experience. And it is the story—the narrative—of Fools Crow that recreates this Blackfeet world. The power inherent in a vital and storied wor(l)d is directly linked to oral narrative tradition. This orality is well summarized by N. Scott Momaday, who says, “My words exist at the level of my voice. If I do not speak with care, my words are wasted. If I do not listen with care, words are lost. If I do not remember carefully, the very purpose of words is frustrated” (160). The dialogic relationship between speaking and listening is reflected in Fools Crow’s relationship with language and his own awareness of the power of words. The connection between traditional story, visionary experience, and history is made explicit to Fools Crow when Feather Woman tells him, “They will know the way it was. The stories will be handed

down" (359). In another instance he is ashamed when he speaks out without thinking, noting that, "He was there to listen, not speak, not speak so violently against one who had chosen another way. He had spoken out of place" (309). The place from which Fools Crow speaks is one where words, stories, and the people and places are connected through webs of meaning. It is a place where the Blackfeet voice has been silenced until now.

From the opening scene, Fools Crow suggests connections and disconnections between "us" and "them" in terms of literary conventions, as well as in terms of ethnographic differences. Fools Crow may be read as an ethnographic novel in the way that it explores the land, the history, and the culture of the Blackfeet. It is, however, the way that the novel foregrounds the experience of the Blackfeet in the context of the translation of history, story, and worldview that distinguishes it from mainstream American writing, as well as much Native literature. Welch, like Armstrong, "construct[s] bridges" between two realities (Armstrong 192). Welch constructs his bridges between two cultural realities through the self-conscious use of the same language to reflect cultural difference. He captures a sense of the experience of the Blackfeet language by translating names for people, animals, places, and things literally, rather than figuratively, into English. In this way Welch paradoxically preserves the metaphoric sense that these words invoke in the original Blackfeet. The unfamiliar metaphors ironically invoke "foreignness" in English, however, while they would not in their Native language, much as expressions like the "leg" of a table or the "face" of a watch are ordinary expressions in the English language.⁹ As the English-speaking reader is drawn in the world of Fools Crow, therefore, he or she is drawn into the kind of metaphoric world view that is

characteristic of the Blackfeet; the reader thus begins to sense and appreciate a worldview that is conceptually structured in a way different from his or her own.

In using these literally metaphoric translations, Welch points to yet another paradox in the relationship between culture and language. By translating the conceptual expressiveness of a Blackfeet word or phrase into idiosyncratic English, he suggests that, to some extent at least worldview remains structured by language. The word remains connected to the thing, to both material and conceptual reality in some way. He implies that someone who thinks of a *hoots-in-the-night* is conceptualizing this bird differently from an English speaker who thinks of the word owl for the same bird. Like the Okanagan language, Blackfeet seems to prioritize the verb, and the sense of movement and action that a being expresses, rather than its nominalized (and static) status as an entity. Armstrong, for example, points out the difference between how Okanagan constructs an image, or experience, of the word “dog.” She says, “When you say the Okanagan word for ‘dog,’ you don’t ‘see’ a dog image, you summon an experience of a little furred life, the exactness of which is known only by its interaction with you or something” (190). The narrator of Fools Crow similarly describes a chilly autumn dusk where it is *almost night*. The evening is marked by the presence of *the moon of the falling leaves*, “furious” black clouds that “dance a slow deliberate fury,” and warm cooking fires. Where one would expect a group of cowboys sitting around a campfire, the language signals something other than this convention of the American West. Most strikingly, perhaps, the name of White Man’s Dog signals that this is a “Western” story populated with Indians. Indeed, white characters are absent for the most part from Fools Crow. Ironically, however, white language—English—is used to draw the reader into the world of the Blackfeet.

In the introduction to Robert Alter's translation of Genesis, he notes that translation always re-presents the original in particular kinds of ways. He argues that the kind of language used in Biblical translations has often had the effect of "disambiguating" Hebrew texts at the expense of their multiplicity of meaning. The general result of such clarity in the translation of literary texts, he argues, is to "reduce, simplify, and denature" (Introduction xi). Such translation, then, does not reflect the worldview of the text in the original language. It becomes, as Alter says, "a vehicle for *explaining*...instead of representing...in another language." In particular, Alter insists that translators need to pay closer attention to the roles of imagery and metaphor—to the figurative use of language—and then to translate these metaphors literally. Such translations are not necessarily "truer" than other translations, but they highlight different aspects of the text. As Alter points out, most translations of the Hebrew Bible have had clarity as their goal; Alter's goal is, instead, to focus on "how the text intimates its meanings" (xii). He observes that even dead metaphors are a "persuasive instance of the resurrection of the dead—for at least the ghosts of the old concrete meanings float over the supposedly abstract acceptations of the terms" (xiii). These ghosts represent the world of another experience. As the metaphoric translations of Blackfeet terms into English draw the reader into the Blackfeet world, the reader becomes aware of how the world is mediated through language. The metaphors gesture towards the power of words to construct the reality language appears initially only to reflect.

Untranslated, the Blackfeet *nitsokan*, for instance, reinforces the idea that the land and people surrounding Chief Mountain are not of the Western frontier imagination. Without *nitsokan*, the dream helper, Mik-api's dreams seem incomplete (249); later it is

nitsokan who instructs Fools Crow “to make a journey” (315). *Nitsokan*, like the Okanagan word *ha-HA*, is not easily translatable into English; English speakers have no conceptual category within which to frame an understanding of an entity that guides the “real” interpretation of dreams. Just as Robinson finds it difficult to express his understanding of a kind of “supernatural” power (in English terms) to Wickwire, and launches into a series of stories meant to illustrate the meaning of the term, Welch’s narrator lets the word *nitsokan* express its meaning through the storied actions of characters. Mik-api and Fools Crow follow their dream helpers’ instructions and live out their storied lives, and it is left to the reader to make sense out of their experiences through the story that is being told.

Blackfeet names also re-vision the physical environment of Montana. A Blackfeet reader would recognize the familiar landscape of his or her cultural imagination within the context of a written novel; the novel creates an ongoing dialogue with traditional oral storytelling performances. Moreover, *Fools Crow*, like *Green Grass, Running Water*, insists on storied realities that combine animate and inanimate worlds, natural and supernatural¹⁰ experiences, and on the power of stories to influence and create our perceptions of reality. The defamiliarization of the landscape, combined with its invocation as a source of cultural meaning, ultimately transforms the lay of the land into something beyond mere physical presence. Multiply storied and contexted interpretations of the landscape in *Fools Crow* again echo Silko’s emphasis on the possibilities of the land in *Ceremony*. In *Ceremony*, the source of the drought in New Mexico has various possibilities attached to its interpretation. The potential of each interpretation remains equally valid and the various explanations work together as a dialogic utterance, to

borrow Bakhtin's term, a completed expression of cultural meaning where the most crucial point is the *interaction* between people and land in constructing that meaning.

Translations of Blackfeet language into a markedly metaphoric English—as figurative and, therefore, opaque—highlight the cultural and linguistic gulf between Blackfeet and white experience. Metaphor tells us something about the nature of (our) reality. The kind of image a metaphor creates is both conceptual and cognitive and arises from a particular view of the world. Translations like *almost night*, the *Backbone of the World*, the *Star-that-stands-still*, *hoots-in-the-night*, and *Night-red-light* are more than romanticized versions of a Native-style English. They signal a shift in the way of looking at the world. These English words are centred in Native, Blackfeet reality and experience. They are manifestations of a metaphoric and storied ontology where human and non-human beings, animate and inanimate entities engage in dialogue with each other. The translations, most of which could be replaced with one word in English, suggest the complexity and interconnectedness of the Blackfeet world. Their focus on action and process suggest community through terms that are “made familiar only by a connective experience” (Armstrong 190).¹¹ Even the hyphens in each phrase emphasize a kind of dynamic connection between words and things.

This kind of translation simultaneously prevents the exoticization of Native American identity while it emphasizes differences in experience. If the numerous translations were rendered in Blackfeet by the narrator, rather than translated, literally, into English, the Blackfeet point of view could be dismissed or relegated to the unknowable and exotic experience of the other. The opposition between self and other, white and Native, would then be reinstated hierarchically. *Napikwan*, the word for white

people, is one of the words that Welch's narrator does not translate. This word stands out in the text. The effect of the varied kinds of translations, and non-translations, is ultimately to other white experience through the English language itself. Ironically, English translations reflect Blackfeet perspective while *napikwan* reflects back at whites their distance from the language, land, and peoples that surround them. As Louis Owens notes, Welch makes English "bear the burden of an 'Other' experience" (157). By translating a familiar English language into something unfamiliar, Welch requires the reader to examine his or her presuppositions about the world.

Hoots-in-the-nights are owls, but are they the same owls that a non-Blackfeet reader imagines? In the Blackfeet world *hoots-in-the-nights* are the ghosts of medicine men (Grinnell 275). This cultural knowledge makes one question how language links the experience of the world to reality: does language create or reflect the world—or does it do both? The idea that language constructs thought in cognitive and social ways—culturally—connects with the notion of linguistic relativism and, specifically, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Paul Friedrich points out that Edward Sapir's and Benjamin Lee Whorf's hypothesis "is contextualized in a relatively explicit idea of culture, seen as a historically derived, shared gestalt of patterns; language is always a part of culture, always the most formal and structured part, and usually the most important (11). Whorf postulated that abstract thinking is always based in language, and that the language one uses influences the way in which one understands the world. One's worldview, therefore, shifts depending on the language one speaks.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been criticized for both its determinism and its extremely relativistic view of language.¹² Yet, as George Lakoff notes, "Our conceptual

schemes shape our comprehension of our experience and even our experience itself” (Women 263). In Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things (Lakoff), Metaphors We Live By (Lakoff and Mark Johnson) and More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor (Lakoff and Mark Turner) the authors argue for cognitive models of metaphor that take into account the role of the human imagination. They also suggest an intimate relationship between language and culture where language (form) is imprinted by its situational context (culture) in complex ways. In terms of cultural categories of experience, Lakoff argues that such categories are “real,” but that they are made real by the action or imagination of human beings (Women 208). In another approach to the theories of Whorf, Ridington points out that Whorf’s ideas can be read productively through the lens of anthropological poetics, rather than from the perspective of linguistics.

While Whorf’s theories cannot be tested empirically or cognitively, Ridington argues that, “Whorf used his own language to make powerful and suggestive statements about language and thought,” generating “new concepts and abstractions” (“On the Language of Benjamin Lee Whorf” 241). Ridington shows how Whorf’s essays are organized around philosophical questions about language and thought, and suggests that the point of Whorf’s writing was to highlight “the importance of language in formulating thought,” (243) rather than constructing a deterministic model of language and worldview in linguistic terms. He states, “Whorf seems to be saying that relativistic physics has produced a metaphysics—a model of the universe—analogous to and in some respects convergent with Hopi metaphysics” (Ridington “On the Language” 245). Native writers like James Welch have created “distinctive native literatures,” using English to express a Native model of the universe (Ridington “On the Language” 260). Welch’s translations

emphasize how worldview can shift language, as well as vice versa. Language simultaneously both reflects and constructs particular views of reality. There, consequently cannot be a one-to-one correspondence between culture and language. Welch's traditional words and stories connect with a contemporary Blackfeet reality that is largely English speaking but that is, nevertheless, Blackfeet. The translations also resonate with Welch's own mixed background, and a cross-cultural heritage that points to the continued syncretic quality of contemporary Native American experience.

By using metaphor in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic contexts, Welch shifts the semantic fields that create paradigms of cultural knowledge. Western (European) knowledge of Native culture and history, the novel makes clear, is neither objective nor empirically accessible through so-called "facts." The story that has been told up until now has been a white story; Fools Crow is the continuation of a long Blackfeet story that theorizes its own history. As Eva Kittay observes in her analysis of the cognitive power of metaphor, "Truth is relative to an accepted system of concepts and beliefs which reflects a given set of relations a language community has to the world it occupies" (324). Metaphor is always heavily dependent on context for its meaning(s).

The impossibility of comfortable cultural and linguistic translations—one-to-one correspondences between languages and cultures also foregrounds the impossibility of setting up neat dichotomies between "us" and "them," "white" and "Indian." An awareness of the space between white and Blackfeet experiences of the world in Fools Crow extends to the Blackfeet understanding of the power inherent in representation. The Natives are clearly conscious of the image of themselves that they (re)present to the white world and white interpretation. Heavy Runner, meeting with the white "chiefs," notes the

importance that appearances can have. He describes the Kainah band chief, Sun Calf, as “a large man with close-set eyes above a large nose. Heavy brass hoops hung from his long earlobes and a white bone breastplate covered his chest. He was not an important chief, but many of the Napikwans took him to be so because of his impressive appearance” (268). It is this stereotypical representation of the Indian chief, right down to his “large nose,” that is powerful to the whites. Any other characteristics that he might have had, qualities that may have been crucial to his place in Blackfeet society, appear to disappear when his image is placed in the context of white interpretation.

The gap between white expectations and Blackfeet reality suggests a slippage between cultural meanings, a slippage where one term slides into the other, and where dusk is never quite the same as *almost night*. The gap implies, among other things, translation as a kind of transition; it highlights the movement from one language or culture to another as a passage between worlds of experience. Even the individual text in this way remains fluid and dialogic, rather than static and monologic.

When a term or phrase in a work of literature is left untranslated, or when it is translated literally and used in a way that seems foreign to English speakers’ thoughts and experiences, a sense of difference is preserved in the writing. According to Reed Way Dasenbrock, the meaningfulness of un-translations lies in their sense of unintelligibility, rather than in their intelligibility (315).¹³ The reader needs to comprehend (if not understand) the cultural importance of *hoots-in-the-nights*, or of Fools Crow’s dreams and visions, for example, as integral to a Blackfeet understanding of plains life. He or she needs to understand what it is that is not understood—the “disconnections” as Wickwire says. If one overlooks the real power of the traditional names and stories that Welch

incorporates so smoothly into his contemporary narrative, one loses a thick layer of both cultural knowledge and narrative understanding. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin point out, "To name the world is to 'understand' it, to know it and to have control over it" (Post-Colonial Studies 283). Stories are one way of "naming the world" and they remain interconnected in space and time through past and present history, oral and written forms. Thus Fast Horse's dream at the beginning of the novel remains a part of the disaster at the end. His fate extends beyond the individual and into the community, directly affecting the lives of Yellow Kidney, Fools Crow and the other members of the Pikuni tribe. This sort of "meaningful unintelligibility" (Dasenbrock 309) both reinforces the sense of reading as process and creates an ongoing sense of dialogue between printed text and reader. It links the substance of names, stories and dreams to lived experience.

The Storied Landscape

Much of the meaning in the story of Fools Crow lies in the landscape, in the physical space of the story.¹⁴ The landscape reveals an image of the land that, in the latter half of the twentieth century (the setting of Welch's first novel, Winter in the Blood) Owens describes as a bleak wasteland (128). Owens goes on to describe this landscape as "dislocated" as its Native peoples (128). But in Fools Crow this desolate space transforms itself into the place of Chief Mountain. Here the names of places personify the space of a mythic Blackfeet history. Reading the conceptual space of the Montana landscape into the 1990's through the sequence of Welch's novels, however, moves it beyond any specific time to embody past, present, and future. Moreover, in Fools Crow the bleak Montana landscape of a (white) twentieth century imagination is now embedded in a vital nineteenth

century culture. It is part of a people and the stories that they tell. It is alive. Dreams and stories work themselves out of the land to touch the lives of people directly.

Dreams, like stories, remain intimately connected with the land and the well being of those living in it. Dreams are transformed into stories; events in a dream become meaningful signs that may be interpreted in storied form.¹⁵ Yellow Kidney is consequently disturbed by the implications of Fast Horse's dream because the dream story has implications for the real world—just as Coyote's dreaming and dancing in Green Grass, Running Water creates repercussions for Alberta, Lionel, Charlie, Eli and the other inhabitants of Blossom, Alberta. Yellow Kidney's interpretation of Fast Horse's dream is immediate and local; it contains the potential to complicate the success of the Pikuni mission to steal Crow horses. But the dream also becomes more generalized. It is a foreshadowing of the general disaster and tragedy played out at the end of the novel. Dreams and visions frame the story that is Fools Crow and highlight the inseparability of conscious and unconscious realms of experience. They also, however, link the visual experience of the landscape with verbally articulated and storied experience. Yellow Kidney asks himself: What if they cannot remove the rock Fast Horse dreams about? What if they cannot find it? What if they cannot find the precise ice spring along the side of Woman Don't Walk Butte? (14). Yellow Kidney's concerns tie people and place together. His concerns recognize the power of dreams to construct social and cultural reality.

The central role of dreams in Fools Crow suggests a reading of the book in terms of a Native phenomenology where dreams and visions are "real" and provide a framework for the interpretation of narrative knowledge about the world. In addition to Fast Horse's dream, some of the other dreams and visions that become storied realities include the

dream story of Seco-mo-muckon, keeper of the fire, who has a dream of butterflies and lets the fire go out. He then invents a story about being captured by the Underwater People and "mischievous Otter." He blames these events on Awunna for neglecting to pray to Underwater Chief during the Medicine Pipe ceremony. Awunna is disgraced and leaves, after he "placed the Sacred Pipe bundle over the entrance to Seco-mo-muckon's lodge." A lightning bolt sent down by Thunder Chief (239-240) later kills Seco-mo-muckon. This story parallels the story of the two brothers (195-198) and is the one later recalled by Yellow Kidney, who dreams of Seco-mo-muckon shortly before he is shot in the war lodge by a white man intent on revenge against the Indians. Mik-api later dreams of Yellow Kidney in the war lodge and Raven tells him in a dream of Fools Crow's mission to find Fast Horse. Dreams and vision scenes continually intersect with other day-to-day experiences of the Blackfeet characters in the novel, in much the same way that Coyote's dreams and antics in Green Grass, Running Water conjure up day-to-day reality for the inhabitants of present-day Blossom, Alberta.

In one of the last chapters of the novel, Chapter 29, Red Paint Woman wakes up to Fools Crow kneeling over her. The narrator tells us, "As she studied the man above her, she felt a shiver go through her bones and knew she was looking into the face of death" (315). This entire chapter is written as a dream that Fools Crow experiences; he lives the dream, drifting in and out of visionary experience as he follows Nitsokan's directions, until Red Paint Woman "was far away" (320) and it seems that he exists in the dream world alone. During this lengthy dream-like state, Fools Crow meets up with his spirit helper, Wolverine, who becomes a source of power. He has a vision of Skunk Bear chasing a dog in a dream canyon and follows the dog into a tunnel. The description of Wolverine as

Fools Crow's spirit helper echoes Robinson's Okanagan understanding of power-helpers, or *shoo-MISH*:

*Wolverine is my brother,
From Wolverine I take my courage
Wolverine is my brother,
From Wolverine I take my strength* (Fools Crow 326)

Robinson says: You got to have power. ... He's supposed to meet animal or bird, or anything, you know. And this animal, whoever they meet, got to talk to 'em and tell 'em what they should do. Later on, not right away. And that is his power" (Nature 10).

Wickwire describes Robinson's stories about "nature power"—the power of dreams and visions—as a "life-sustaining spirituality that guided Harry throughout his life" (Nature 10). Both Green Grass, Running Water and Fools Crow are predicated on a phenomenology based on dreams and visions as a kind of lived experience of the world.

Dreams imply a connection between time and place where, as Lee Irwin states, "There is no distinct separation between the world as dreamed and the world as lived" (18). But the duality of dreams and reality is taken for granted by most non-Natives of North America. For most Americans dreams are unintelligible symbols, existing in a realm apart from the everyday. They may even seem meaningless, and remain categorized as part of an unconscious reality where their meaning remains disguised and largely irrelevant to the conscious mind. Welch uses the visionary tradition as a conceptual space to translate, yet again, between Blackfeet and white ways. Traditionally, he says, one actually "use[d] the power that the vision represented" (Coltelli 187). Just as King's novel explodes the idea of the Native novel, or even literature as a whole, as existing within a closed system, Fools Crow insists on foregrounding the interactive nature between "the world as dreamed

and the world as lived,” between history and story, and between land and people. None of these exist as closed systems; they are always interactive. The displacement of such series of oppositions contributes to a sense of Green Grass, Running Water and Fools Crow as continuous within the framework of an indigenous storytelling tradition.

Blackfeet story and land are interconnected. Many Native authors have written of the connections between land and people. Simon Ortiz, for example, writes of a relationship that he describes as “inextricable.” He says, “Land and people are interdependent. In fact, they are one and the same matter of existence” (Introduction to Speaking for the Generations xii). This interdependence and substantive similarity between land and people is reflected in the way that the landscape functions like a character in Fools Crow; its function as a living entity has always been manifest in the Blackfeet world. Irwin describes the nature of this connection as a “wholeness” with the earth at its centre (31). He observes, “Many geographic features of the topology are experienced as living beings of all types.... The landscape of the real, lived world is also the landscape of the dream world” (31). The conceptualization of the landscape thus lies in the in-between, both connecting and transcending dreamed and storied worlds of experience. If the connection between them is severed, the community as a whole runs the risk of becoming as dis-located as Owl Child and Fast Horse.

Blackfeet notions of the land are among the things that Owl Child rejects. Like the stories, the landscape functions ontologically in the Blackfeet world, as it does in much American Indian literature, according to Robert Nelson. Nelson states that, “The land has a life of its own” (277). He goes on to observe, “A vision of the land, alive, empowers the protagonists of these novels and poems” (277). It is this living vision of the conceptual

space of the land that Owl Child and Fast Horse have lost, and Fast Horse ultimately senses that, as a result, their days—Owl Child's in particular—are numbered. "Something," Fast Horse felt, "was drawing him closer to the end" (299). Their dislocated senses of self distinguish Fast Horse and Owl Child with Fools Crow. Fools Crow identifies closely with both his people and the land in which they live. But he is ambivalent about how to deal with the encroachment of whites on Indian land. While listening to Mountain Chief, who says, "If the other chiefs had hearts like mine, we would take to the war road" (215), he felt the speech as it "went to his heart" (215). The narrator then goes on to note, "It troubled him that his own father and Three Bears, and most of the Lone Eaters, counseled peace with the whites" (215). In the final analysis, the difference between Fools Crow and Owl Child lies not in how differently they manifest their mutual antipathy towards encroaching whites, but in their dis-connection with each other. Fools Crow's ambivalence, and the on-going dialogue the novel creates around how to address white dis-placement of the Blackfeet from their lands, resonates with the continuing difficulty the Blackfeet have in reconciling American place and Native American space.

The interplay between a living physical environment, and its changing human inhabitants, is, moreover, shaped by both cultural and literary, or storied, experience. As Silko notes, the very term, "landscape" to describe the physical space of the land is misleading. She points out that (our) Euro-American notions of landscape do not adequately describe the relationship between a person and the physical environment around them. She argues that the idea of landscape assumes that, "The viewer is somehow *outside or separate from* the territory she or he surveys." In contrast, Silko insists that, "Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on" (Yellow

Woman 27). In literary representations of Native reality set in the 1800's, the figure of the Indian is typically viewed as part of that externalized and alienated landscape. Both this landscape and the figure of the Indian usually form the backdrop to white stories and histories—stories of cowboys, of pioneers—of a rugged American frontier where the Native exists only to be killed off or relegated to the attic of romantic stereotype. The land, in this model, remains secondary to the white “civilized” people living on it, riding over it, and “taming” it as they create their dominion over this new world.

The land of Fools Crow acts as a character in the novel that is Fools Crow. Here Chief Mountain speaks to the Blackfeet people. And Morning Star and Star Boy continue to return to earth each morning to see Feather Woman (350-2). Here, “Storytellers say that Spider Man let [Feather Woman] down and [she] became a bright fire in the sky. The people thought it was a falling star, and when they found the spot it landed, there were [Feather Woman] and Star Boy” (352). As the land speaks to the peoples living in it, the reader of the novel comes to interpret the land as a living embodiment of stories that are still being told. Moreover, the linear act of reading is defamiliarized and chronologically dis-placed as the temporal sequencing of the narrative gives way to a spatialized construction of meaning.

Traditional names of places in Fools Crow's world resonate with storied experience and specific tribal histories—places like Backbone of the World, Woman Don't Walk Butte, Red Old Man's Butte, and Always Summer Land have stories associated with them. This connection between place and story in Native tradition is expressed by an Apache listener who says to Keith Basso, “Your mind can travel to that place and really see it” (86). Basso observes, “Unless Apache listeners are able to picture a physical setting

for narrated events...the events themselves will be difficult to imagine (86). The most important landmarks in Fools Crow, like Chief Mountain, have more than one story associated with them, and the evocation of place conjures all the different culture stories for the listener, just as the dreams constantly connect with other dreams and storied realities. The multiple stories evoke a cultural environment where all of the stories, and the characters in the stories, are engaged in dialogic relationships with each other; these relationships transcend the limits of a white experience of the world. White man's Dog has conversations with Skunk Bear, Wolf, Raven, and with characters from the dream world, as well as with the voices of history and the stories as collected by a white anthropologist. The names of people, places, and animals all contribute to a sense of the landscape as living and interacting with the people that remain a part of it. They also highlight an intimacy and interrelationship with the land that is starkly absent from white accounts of the same country.

Meaning, in the dreams and stories, is constructed through the Blackfeet experience of the world—through physical place and imagined space. Temporal and diachronic dimensions of the novel are absorbed in a synchronicity where past, present, and future all exist simultaneously. As Nelson observes, "The discovery or invention of the relationship between land and human beings (that is, the process of human identification) drives the 'plot' and becomes the main 'theme' in these works" (271). The perception of a personified Blackfeet landscape thus constructs another level of dialogue between multi-dimensional worlds of experience. The separation and opposition of natural and supernatural worlds, of inanimate physical and animate human and animal worlds, of place and space, of all sorts of dualities, are complementary but not binary. Here is a space

where mountains and bears can, and do, speak to people. It is a place where mountains, rivers, canyons, and other features of the physical landscape are “more than landmarks” to the Blackfeet, where “Eagle Head and Iron Breast had dreamed their visions in the long-ago, and the animal helpers had made them strong in spirit and fortunate in war (Fools Crow 3). In this kind of holistic view of animal, human, and physical worlds, human relationships and interactions with the land are part of the foreground of cultural experience; the landscape is no longer a background against which events take place.

Lawrence Evers observes that, “Cultural landscapes are created by the imaginative interaction of societies of men and particular geographies” (244). He states, “By imagining who and what they are in relation to particular landscapes, cultures and individual members of cultures form a close relation with those landscapes” (243). Oral storytelling contributes to the imagination and organization of social relationships, including those between people and land. When Harry Robinson tells a story, for example, he is careful to situate both the relationships between characters and also where the story takes place. He tells how the place is situated in relationship to the people who are characters in the story. Thus, while the Okanagan Coyote, read in a twentieth century context, travels to places like Mexico and Panama and Australia, he simultaneously remains firmly ensconced in the landscape of the Okanagan. Robinson frames his stories in place, as does Welch, frequently situating the importance of the land at the beginning of a new narrative.¹⁶

References to place are numerous in both texts and they situate the narrative in a way that is distinct from many European folktales (many of which also have their basis in orality).

In European versions of stories like “Puss-in-Boots,” one of the stories that Robinson tells, place is generalized. In other instances, for example the stories of King

Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, one gets a sense of where events take place, but the notion of place does not immediately evoke the sense of the story. Coyote, and all the real and mythic characters in Fools Crow, however, are both anchored in real and specific places, and the Blackfeet names of places in Fools Crow have what Basso describes as “evocative power.” Basso describes the power of Apache place-names in a way that resonates with the kind of narrative images of place that intersect with the stories and traditions of the Blackfeet people in Fools Crow. He observes:

A single place-name may accomplish the communicative work of an entire saga or historical tale, and sometimes, depending on the immediate social circumstances, it may accomplish even more. For when place-names are employed in this isolated and autonomous fashion—when, in other words, Apache people practice ‘speaking with names’—their actions are interpreted as a recommendation to recall ancestral stories and apply them directly to matters of pressing personal concern (89-90).

Basso’s description of the role of place-names in communicating Native culture and story to the listeners has its analogue in how the Tamarians in Star Trek use imagery to embody their thoughts and thought-processes. In order for readers to understand the imagery that is being communicated through the Blackfeet place-names, the reader must first learn something about the narratives of the culture.

But landscape as the device of fiction is also prevalent in the formula Western and in the folktales of the American West. Location figures prominently in the tales of Paul Bunyan, Calamity Jane, and the stories of mythologized cultural figures like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, for instance. In these stories, however, the land appears as universal

archetype; it is a meta-landscape, rather than a regionally specific one, despite the appearance of something that can be recognized as “the West.” Here landmarks resemble absent physical spaces. The hills, the rocks, the desolate plains, even the treed forests of Paul Bunyan—all of these can exist almost anywhere in the apparently uninhabited wilds of the frontier American imagination. The landscape of Fools Crow also reveals this sense of space, where the names of places suggest, as Jane Tompkins notes, “field[s] of action and... fund[s] of sensation” that “lend historicity and romance” to the story (79). The historicity and romance of this novel, however, is a Blackfeet one, and the names of the places suggest a connection to the past that most Americans would find unfamiliar. The action, too, is all Indian. The consistency of the landscape thus functions as part of the conceptual space of Blackfeet culture, and it ties fiction and fact together to create cultural meaning.

The contrast between white attitudes towards the land and those of its Native inhabitants, the Blackfeet, are reflected in the perceptions of the wagoneer in Fools Crow. The narrator describes the wagoneer’s sense of the land as an empty space. The sense of the land as empty and wild echoes with Joe Hovaugh’s perception of Canada as empty in Green Grass, Running Water. It remains part of the construction of something still thought of as untouched and uninhabited “wilderness” areas in North America today. But it is the wagoneer’s own spiritual emptiness that causes his feelings of isolation and alienation. The narrator observes, “The rolling prairies were as vast and empty as a pale ocean, and the sky stretched forever.... The few small groups of mountains...only seemed to emphasize its vastness. In the winter...the man was filled with foreboding dreams of an even larger isolation” (289-90). As another white rider puts it, “What a hell of a country” (Fools Crow

242). The whites see the land as empty in contrast, perhaps, to the populated and storied landscapes of their homelands; but they also *need* to see it as empty in order to get on with the process of colonizing both land and people. Welch constructs the white characters as anonymous and nameless in the way that Native peoples have often been perceived by whites. Their invisibility reflects back at them the perceived anonymity of a harsh physical environment as well as their fear of the barbaric “savages” that live in this environment. The whites’ descriptions of the land contrast vividly with Fools Crow’s experiences, but they are what one would expect in a pre-“Western”¹⁷ where, as Tompkins states, the message is, “Come, and suffer” (72). For whites, the experience of the physical environment bleeds into the landscape of the horizon—this is a land that is distant and detached from the experience of (white) humanity. Isolated and alienated from the larger world around them, white explorers and settlers are drawn, or dragged into, a physical environment where, as Tompkins argues, they have no choice but to blend into a landscape which threatens to swallow them up.

It is in this landscape that Raven leads White Man’s Dog through the Mountains of the Backbone, giving him the magic of Skunk Bear. Later Fools Crow has a vision of a desolate future where, “It was as if the earth had swallowed up the animals. Where once there were rivers of dark blackhorns, now there were none. To see such a vast, empty prairie made [him] uneasy” (356). Fools Crow’s new unease, in fact, mirrors white experience of the land as empty, absent of life. It is as if this white dis-ease with an alien and apparently empty physical environment is being projected onto Fools Crow and his people through a history that is not theirs. The intimate relationship between people and land provides the individual with knowledge of how to live in his or her community, as

well as situating him or her within the place of the larger world. This kind of cultural knowledge, as Basso observes, "Focus[es] as much on *where* events occurred as on the nature and consequences of the events themselves... Narrated events are *spatially anchored*," (26). The absence of an anchored white perspective in Fools Crow becomes an insistent presence as the novel moves along. By engaging with white perceptions of the landscape, but simultaneously insisting on the primacy of Blackfeet experience, the hegemony of white history and narrative are finally dis-placed.

The Natives remain both part of the landscape, and they are consequently also perceived as a threat against white people—an ironic threat, since it is whites who encroach and squat on Native land. White settlers' struggle to maintain dominion over "their" particular piece of earth, to own it, and to create a hierarchy of human, animal, and physical worlds, sets them apart from the original inhabitants. The Blackfeet themselves, however, Welch's novel suggests, as they become psychically separated from their experience of the land—as Owl Child and Fast Horse do—risk losing everything. They really risk becoming as empty as the land that the wagoner perceives.

The Hi/story of Memory

In the twentieth century, the sacred hills of the Blackfeet remain home to, as Welch aptly describes it, "all kinds of silliness" (Killing Custer 78). They have been transformed and re-constructed as white representations of American popular culture, reified through their Disneyfication like the popular image of the Indian Pocahontas. In contrast to the popularization of American Indian culture, Fools Crow reveals place as memory, story, and history. Reading Fools Crow suggests the novel as a genre that reveals its, "state of

being in culture while looking at culture.” This, of course, is the broad definition of ethnography that James Clifford uses to discuss the conjoining of “Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art.”¹⁸ Clifford argues against the view of “endangered” cultural authenticities (literary or otherwise) that either “resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it,” in favour of a historical vision of “the pure products going crazy” (5). And Arnold Davidson claims that much Native literature shares “a borderlands model of the West as a wavering and elusive site of hybridity, cross-fertilization, complication, and ideological contestation and transformation (as opposed to manifest certainty)” (36). In Fools Crow, Welch recreates the history leading up to the battle at Little Bighorn, emphasizing the events and meanings inherent in the earlier Marias River Massacre. Later, in Killing Custer, Welch shares with his readers the difficulty he had in determining the exact location at which these events took place. As Welch searches for the location, it becomes clear how place in the present remains tied to both story and history in the past.

Both Fools Crow and Killing Custer, reveal how the Battle at Little Bighorn, which has captivated the American imagination, is less pivotal in an understanding of Blackfeet history than the events at the Marias, which have largely been ignored by white historians. In addition, the location of the Marias River massacre, “lost” to history and only “found” by Welch with great difficulty—dis-placed and then re-placed—shows how the significance of place may not have been entirely lost on white settlers either. Welch has constructed a text where “the West” is no longer a historicized fiction or a fictionalized history. The gap left through the attempted erasure of history always seems to leave its mark. Fools Crow presents us with a way of understanding disconnections, as well as connections, between worldviews. Just as Heavy Shield Woman listens to the story of Star

Woman, and connects her own experience of the world back to the origins of the sacred Sun ceremony, the reader becomes immersed in the Blackfeet world. The reader is now part of the story too.

¹ Thanks to Robin Ridington for pointing out to me that this story is also a re-telling of a story by Canadian author W.O. Mitchell. Mitchell's story is a novel called Summer Vacation.

² See James Welch's book, Killing Custer, for a detailed discussion of the events leading up to this massacre, as well as its connection to the Battle at Little Bighorn. In J. W. Schultz's My Life as an Indian there is also chapter titled "The Tragedy of the Marias," where the narrator describes the tragic events on the Marias, as well as some of the history behind it. He describes seeing the "skulls and bones of those who had been so ruthlessly slaughtered" (27) and asks, "What manner of men were those soldiers who deliberately shot down defenseless women and children? ... Think it over yourself and try to find a fit name for men who did this" (28).

³ See George Bird Grinnell's Blackfoot Lodge Tales for a discussion of the social organization of the Blackfeet.

⁴ The sense of stories categorically beginning and ending in Robinson's written collections is, as I have pointed out earlier, largely the result of transcribing and putting into print the oral versions. In the oral performances the stories often move into other stories without warning, weaving a tangled web of narrative connections that the listener must sort out for him or herself.

⁵ The point that I make here is that this argument is not a scientific one; the ability to "prove" empirically whether there is a substantive relationship between signs and referents is not the issue. The *observation* that in oral tradition and in Native literature words are assumed to have "real" kinds of power connected to the real world, is.

⁶ While Welch's novels are not directly connected, as in Louise Erdrich's series of novels, he has written them in the same order that she published The Beet Queen, Love Medicine, and Tracks, moving further back into history with each novel—from the present into the past, rather than the other way around.

⁷ Robin Ridington pointed out this feature of oral stories to me, using the term, "migration" to describe their movement. (Personal communication March 1997).

⁸ While the story of Alberta is not recursive, one gets the sense that their narrative is one of lived experiences that could be repeated by other characters throughout past, present and future time—the details changing but the essential relationships remaining the same, as King suggests in his short story "How I Spent My Summer Vacation."

⁹ See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's Metaphors We Live By for a detailed discussion of the metaphorical "concepts we live by" in the English language. Lakoff and Johnson state that t, "Our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of" (3) and they argue that "human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical" (6). The metaphoric processes through which we understand our world, they point out, are both conceptual and systemic.

¹⁰ I place this word in quotation marks because, of course, no such division between these as dualities exists in Blackfeet, and many other Native cultures.

¹¹ While English has words like "woodchuck," "whippoorwill" and "whiskeyjack," words that are in some instances onomatopoeic and sometimes adaptations of Native terms, they are less likely to contain verbs and to reflect the sense of process that seems common to many Native languages.

¹² See, for instance, George Lakoff's Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things for a discussion of linguistic relativism and a critique of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (304-337). Lakoff makes the distinction between the objectivist critique of Whorf's ideas, which comes from the idea that, "True knowledge of the external world can only be achieved if the system of symbols we use in thinking can accurately represent the external world" (Women 183), and his own more relativistic views, which are based on what he and Mark Johnson describe as an "experientialist approach" to meaning (Women 266). Lakoff states that, "Like Whorf, I believe that differences in conceptual systems affect behaviour in a significant way" (Women

337). His views depart from Whorf's however, in that he moves away from the determinism of Whorf's position, arguing that, "It is simply a fact that it is possible for an individual to understand the same domain of experience in different and inconsistent ways" –that it is possible, in fact, to have some kind of understanding even where translation is not possible (Women 335).

¹³ For other discussions of translation in cross-cultural literary contexts, see David Murray (Forked Tongues), Gayatri Spivak (Outside in the Teaching Machine), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (The Empire Writes Back) as well as the series of essays on language in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, edited by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin.

¹⁴ By "landscape" I am referring to the particular way one perceives and constructs and thereby "sees" the land. The land itself, of course, is more than the sum of its parts, and the notion of the landscape encompasses aspects of both localized place and conceptual (worldviews) of space.

¹⁵ I have borrowed and adapted this idea from Mieke Bal, who recognises three distinct layers in a narrative, the text, the story, and the fabula. She argues that the fabula, as the most abstract layer of narrative, "is really the result of the interpretation by the reader, an interpretation influenced both by the initial encounter with the text and by the manipulations of the story" (9). She also states, "A narrative text is a story that is 'told' in a medium; that is, it is converted into signs" (8). Thus, the dream can be thought of as a kind of narrative text whose story can always be told.

¹⁶ He notes for example, "Mr. Coyote was coming along/right by where Aberdeen is right now" (114). And when Robinson does not specify the exact place, he still notes its importance: "At this time Coyote/he was around at a certain place/just by himself" (53). In another story he observes, "And they come from Merritt, that's Thompson people... That's way up almost the head of/Similkameen River... And that's over in Osoyoos Lake,/in the upper end of Osoyoos Lake" (115). All examples here are from Write It On Your Heart.

¹⁷ I suggest the notion of the "pre-Western" here because the time frame of Fools Crow is set prior to the advent of the cowboys that take over the "wild" West, but it is clear that Welch is drawing on and re-writing such conventionalized images of the "Western" landscape.

¹⁸ Note that this phrase is actually the subtitle of his book, The Predicament of Culture.

CHAPTER FOUR: Propheying the World Through Story

There were so many places to go... He silently read his way across the whole state. Missoula, Harlem, Crow Agency. Little Bighorn, Yellowstone, Glacier Park. He tried not to think of his son, who could be dead, or lost, without a map, a legend. (Indian Killer)

Distances and days existed in themselves then; they all had a story. (Ceremony)

Nothing happens by accident here. (Almanac)

Almanac of the Dead: The Living Book

When Leslie Marmon Silko's novel Almanac of the Dead was first published in 1991, it provoked unfavourable and even hostile reviews from readers familiar with her bestselling novel Ceremony. Steve Brock began his on-line review by describing the book as "one of the most complicated and depressing books I've read in some time" ("Leslie Marmon Silko's Cermony, Almanac." <http://nativenet>. June 6, 1999); in Entertainment Weekly an anonymous reviewer notes that Larry McMurtry described the novel as "tinted with genius" and he then goes on to state, "In contemporary literary usage...the term 'genius' usually translates: 'For academic use only. Do not attempt to read for pleasure.'" The reviewer ends his critique by saying, "What's objectionable about Almanac isn't its politics... Silko...writes in an angry, inflexible monotone. Aiming at bitter satire, she delivers only sarcasm" ("Settling Scores: Almanac of the Dead." <http://www.elibrary>. June

6, 1999.). Alan Ryan, in U.S.A Today entitled his review “An Inept Almanac of the Dead” and described the novel as lacking “that special insight into the lives and minds of Native Americans that we have come to expect from books like Ceremony and Storyteller.” In fact, Ryan argues that Almanac lacks both “special insight” and “novelistic merit” (qtd. in Clarke 95). The overall sense (as well as tone) of these reviews suggests that the readers have missed Silko’s point: they can’t see through the text to the larger underlying story that provides the framework of the novel.

Joni Adamson Clarke, in a Ph.D. dissertation titled, “A Place to See: Ecological Literary Theory and Practice,” shows some of the ways that Silko uses the Popol Vuh and the Book of Chilam Balam, sacred texts of Maya creation and cosmology, to construct her intricately woven novel. Clarke’s thesis emphasizes the interdisciplinarity of Silko’s book and Clarke suggests that Silko is writing “ecological literary theory” through the form of the novel. The form of the novel, Clarke states, acts as a vehicle of theoretical expression: it speaks to its readers in an accessible way and complements indigenous understanding of the connections between land, stories and people.

Clarke notes that Silko spent years studying the Maya, both before and during the writing of Almanac; she says of Silko, “Her study led her to root her novel in the history of what happened to the Mayans and their great libraries of books after the colonization of the Americas” (122-123; see also Coltelli 151). The old notebook that Lecha discovers resembles the old Mayan “almanacs” that survived the bonfires of the Spanish missionaries. These almanacs chronicled the Mayan 260-day calendar, providing astrological information for religious ceremonies and planting, as well as the framework for priests to prophesy about the future (Clarke 123-124; see also Coltelli 151). Clarke

argues that by framing her novel as an almanac, Silko roots her Almanac “in an ancient, Pre-Columbian genre and, in a sense, ‘bookends’ the 500 year period of conquest which Silko is analyzing” (Clarke 124). Despite situating her discussion of Almanac within the framework of ancient Mayan codices, however, Clarke still places Silko’s novel largely within European literary tradition. She frames her analysis of Almanac by constructing it as a hybrid literary text—a kind of ecological literary theory—that brings multiple sources into play within the novel form, rather than envisioning Silko as telling us a new version of a very old story.

In Almanac, I suggest, Silko tells us her version of the Popol Vuh. As Bal points out, “A narrative text is one in which a story is related,” but, “the text is not identical to the story” (5).¹ Silko tells her story the way that Robinson tells us his story of Coyote on the moon, where Neil Armstrong shows up in a traditional Okanagan narrative. She tells it in the same way that King pulls characters from Canadian and American literature and theory, and Judeo-Christian tradition, through a highly literate rendering of a Blackfeet Coyote story. While Welch in Fools Crow draws the reader into the world of the nineteenth-century Blackfeet through literal translations of descriptive names, re-creating a Native phenomenology predicated on dreams and visions, King and Silko use more subtle re-tellings of the old stories in a contemporary context. By using current references to situate the old stories, they re-tell the stories in original ways and highlight the continued vitality of the old stories in current times and places. All four authors, however, Robinson, King, Welch and Silko re-tell the old stories in original ways and take authorial responsibility for them; their stories are both old and new, original and authentic at the same time. But the “current” experience of time in Fools Crow stops in the late 1800’s

because the novel is situated historically in that time frame. (In his later novels, Winter in the Blood, The Death of Jim Loney and Indian Lawyer, Welch, like Robinson, Silko and King, picks up the old stories and reframes them in terms of more contemporary Native experience.) What is clear in each of these instances is that the stories shape reality in all sorts of ways.

For Silko that reality is a kind of “truth” as it is to Robinson, who makes it clear that he does not “make up” stories; the stories instead are true to personal experience and cultural history. Silko expresses the connection between her lived experience and the writing of Almanac throughout her interview with Thomas Irmer. In one instance she says, “More and more appeared as I was writing my novel. After I had written...part of the novel, Jeffrey Dahmer was discovered. He was eating his victims and I was writing my novel” (qtd. in Irmer 3). She also observed, as she began her research into the history of Tucson, “This is not simple what is going on. I began to lose control of the novel and to feel that all of the old stories came in and I felt the presence of spirits. It was taken over” (qtd. in Irmer 5). Just as the old Indian narratives keep slipping into the contemporary reality of the Native residents of Blossom, Alberta in Green Grass, Running Water, the different stories in Almanac intersect and connect with each other, each story affecting every other in complex ways. Silko states her own belief that, “We will have these complex convergences. The earthquake in Japan brings down a bank in England. I see the synergy, the interrelation that all things could coalesce in a hopeful way. The people will take care of themselves locally” (qtd. in Irmer 3). In re-creating the epic exploits of the Hero Twins as they journey through the Maya Underworld of Xibalba, Silko creates a

continuous and on-going dialogue between the worlds of the Maya, traditional Native American storytelling and the contemporary Native American novel.

In Almanac of the Dead, as in Ceremony, Silko's narrative shows how it is impossible to separate story from the world that emerges from those stories. Theory and practice merge in the dialogic interaction of storytelling: the story of Ck'o'yo magic that Silko first writes into Storyteller shows up again in Ceremony, albeit in fragmented form. Here the old story is situated in-between the story of Tayo, the story of how Hummingbird and Fly fix the world after the bad magic of the Ck'o'yo connecting with Tayo's own healing process after the "bad magic" of the Vietnam War. In Almanac the reference to Mosca ("fly" in Spanish) may also contain some of this potential: Mosca is usually in the company of Calabazas, who retains an indigenous understanding of the world around them. Mosca hears "voices" and is interested in the work of spirits and how they connect to the world of outward physical appearances. He says, "Dead souls are always near us" (603). The interconnectedness of the experiences and stories reflected in the different narrative texts—Storyteller, Ceremony and Almanac—resonates with a view of the world as shifting between the realm of lived experience and (other) storied realities.

Almanac gestures towards the interconnectedness of time and space, the inseparability of the written and the oral, and of the relationships between history, story and prophecy in a Native American context. Silko's novel does more than draw extensively on Mayan cosmology; it re-creates the events and experiences of the Popol Vuh to construct a representation, rather than a clear "explanation," of Native worldview. The Mayans seemed to believe that every soul had to make its journey through the Underworld; in the story of the Popol Vuh death precedes life. Read in this way, Almanac

suggests potential: the journey through the Underworld makes it possible to re-create the world of the living. The representation of the Maya Underworld in a contemporary twentieth-century literary context functions in the way that Alter argues literal translations across languages preserve the imagery, metaphor and complexity of the original—but it does so at the level of the narrative as a whole. Moreover, the consequence of Silko's textual translation and recreation is that Almanac, like the Popol Vuh, is a "place to see"² things.

Silko's states that her novel needs to be read like an "almanac."³ The Oxford English Dictionary describes an almanac as, "An annual table or (more usually) a book of tables, containing a calendar of months and days, with astronomical data and calculations, ecclesiastical and other anniversaries, besides other useful information, and, in former days, astrological and astrometeorological forecasts." Almanacs, of course, are used to predict events. Farmers' Almanacs tell farmers when to plant their crops, when to harvest and what to expect in terms of weather, among other things. The fragmented form of an almanac, with its curious mixture of pictures, anecdotes, stories, weather and the movements of the stars, de-privileges large and global meta-narrative structures in favour of regionally specific information. An almanac is by definition potentially subversive. The novel form, which usually moves chronologically through time in some way or another, is at odds with the form of an almanac—thus the notion of a novel called Almanac of the Dead is a paradox. While the fly leaf of Silko's book announces that this is a novel, the author from the beginning instructs her readers to read it like an almanac. She suggests that this book can be used to predict events; the various stories that comprise the whole of

the book “theorize the world” in complex ways, just as Harry Robinson’s storytelling makes sense of a contemporary world in Okanagan terms and context.

Like Ceremony, Almanac is constructed through a series of experienced events.⁴ It does not have a linear plot structure and the wide cast of characters and events initially appear unconnected and random, just as Robinson’s story about tiny little invisible insects seems disconnected from what his discussion with Wickwire is “about”—ostensibly a conversation about “supernatural power” or, in Okanagan terms, *ha-HA*. The map at the beginning of Almanac reveals only that all of the stories converge in Tucson, a place that is, according to the map’s legend, “Home to an assortment of speculators, confidence men, embezzlers, lawyers, judges, police and other criminals, as well as addicts and pushers, since the 1880’s and the Apache Wars.” But, as Elaine Jahner points out, this prioritizing of event structure over temporal structure is a feature of oral tradition (244): event and experience are connected. The almanac form of the novel and the epic scale of Silko’s narrative, the connection the novel makes between event and experience, combine to create a web-like text where the literal, the figurative and the “real”⁵ are not easily separable. This web-like aspect of Silko’s writing has its roots in Native oral tradition and theory. Alana Brown writes how her understanding of Native storytelling shifted when she realized that the meaning embedded in the stories is not linear and hierarchical but web-like. She also describes how difficult it is to grasp the nature of that web-like structure “in a culture that does not like spiders, and where webs are to be swept away” (Brown 1). Perhaps the complexity of Silko’s storied web is one of the reasons that reviewers have been so hostile in their reviews.

In her journey through the Underworld of an imagined reality that is no longer imagined but real, Silko recreates the Xibalba of current history and experience. The title of the book should already make it clear that we are reading an account of a journey into the world of the dead. Silko uses the Popol Vuh to re-create Maya and Mesoamerican worldview, constructing a cosmology that sees space and time as interconnected in the lives and stories of a people. The novel's prophetic sensibility, moreover, is tied to physical places and conceptual spaces whose invocation comes from the many names and subtle storied references that Silko embeds in the narrative. Like King, Silko uses names, and the process of naming, as a way to reclaim different kinds of "unwanted" knowledge. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, humans are told to "fill the earth and conquer it, and hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and every beast that crawls upon the earth (Genesis 1:26 in Alter 5). Naming becomes a key part of this colonizing process; Adam is instructed to name all of the creatures of the earth however his wishes: "and whatever the human called a living creature, that was its name" (Genesis 2:18 in Alter 9). In addition to names as storied references, Silko's use of single names for many of her characters such as Sterling, Seese, Lecha, Zeta, Calabazas, Mosca and Root, to name a few, resists the kind of ownership and domination that is reflected in the biblical passages. Silko acknowledges Irmer's reading of Almanac as "a novel about the collapse of the Christian-capitalist society" (Irmer 5) and she sees publication of her book itself as a "cultural terrorist act" (Irmer 3). In European traditions of the proper names of people, the first name of a person is the one given to an individual; the last name describes the family through its patrilineal genealogy and remains firmly entrenched in notions of ownership, capitalism and patriarchy. By giving her characters singular names, Silko

refuses to allow her readers to construct these sorts of “Christian-capitalist” genealogies for them. The singular names are more reminiscent of the kinds of Blackfeet names that Welch’s characters have—like Fools Crow, Red Paint Woman, Yellow Kidney and so on. These names, like Lecha, Zeta, Calabazas and the others, reflect certain characteristics of the person and are given to a person based on certain events and experiences in his or her life, rather than manifesting the linguistic realization of humans as “property.”

The many names in Almanac have an encyclopedic quality to them, and obscure references that suggest their stories as a kind of unwanted or hidden knowledge. While readers of Green Grass, Running Water may approach the unpacking of names as an “entertaining search for the answers to little puzzles” (Flick 140), readers of Almanac will find less entertainment in their search, and ever more puzzles. The sense of prophecy that permeates Almanac is reflected in the communal notebook of old Yoeme, whose name in Yaqui, as Clarke notes, means “the people” (162). It is also reflected in the seeing eyes of the psychic Lecha and her sister Zeta, who talks to snakes. Sources for these names seem more obscure than the sources of the names in King’s novel, but are nevertheless striking. “Lech-Lecha” is a phrase used frequently in Rabbinical studies; “Lech-Lecha Me’Artzecha” are the first words spoken to the Jews in the Torah and they translate as, “Go, get out of your land” (Yaakov Menken 1). Not only have Native Americans in general been forcibly moved from their lands, but Lecha is a dis-located Yaqui Indian. She is also the twin of Zeta, whose name evokes the famous and now New-Agey “Zeta Reticuli Incident” of 1961⁶ where a middle-aged couple are said to have seen aliens whose “home base” is a pair of stars known as Zeta 1 and Zeta 2 Reticuli (Terence Dickinson 1). While far-fetched, Zeta has a close connection with the snakes of Mesoamerican

cosmology, and the two stars, Zeta 1 and Zeta 2 are not visible to observers north of Mexico City (Terence Dickinson 1). The stories and prophecies are also revealed in the dreams of the Mayan twins, Tacho and El Feo, whose names seem more obvious; they translate as “garbage can” and “the ugly one” in Spanish—the knowledge they have, Silko seems to be suggesting, is clearly unwanted, relegated to the rubbish bin of history. But it is their journey north that Sterling realizes he is waiting for. Almanac ends with Sterling’s awareness that, “The snake was looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come” (763); what we cannot see in the stories of the names, Almanac suggests, could in the end return to destroy us.

While some of the names in Almanac are particularly difficult to unravel, others are more obvious and refer to historical events and characters who show up in new and unexpected ways, just as they do in King’s Green Grass, Running Water. A few of the more obvious connections that Silko makes include the Mafia family of Max Blue with the war hero Blue Max. Bartolomeo’s “Freedom School” is an obvious reference to Father Bartolomeo de las Casas, originally a slave-owner who later transformed himself into the so-called “Defender of the Indians” during the 1500’s. Angelita, as Clarke points out, may be modeled on the Guatemalan activist and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Rigoberta Menchu. While Almanac is peopled with names from history like De Guzman, Geronimo and the Dillingers, and names that evoke Native American tradition like Yoeme and Calabazas (whose name, in Spanish, means pumpkin or gourd, an object central to many Southwestern Native sacred cultures), other names, like that of Ferro, are drawn from the streets of Tucson. The curious mixture of profane and sacred, historical and invented story in Almanac, creates a book of encyclopedic dimensions where the reader is left to make

meaningful connections and to construct new stories for him or herself from out of the filaments of knowledge presented in the narrative.

Blood Prophecies

The word prophet comes from the Greek word *prophetes*, “one who speaks before others,” and, as John Mackenzie notes, the prophet is also often described as a seer (694). The notion of the prophet as someone who sees has a long history in Western tradition, beginning with the story of the blind prophet Tiresias in Greek mythology and canonized through the image of the blind John Milton who writes in Paradise Lost of “making darkness visible.” The popular idea that the prophet sees into and predicts the future, however, is misleading. In the popular folk story “The Emperor and his New Clothes” the emperor in fact wears no clothes, but only a young boy has the vision to say so. The boy tells the emperor what he sees, that he is naked. The boy in this story is a prophet, and like many of the prophets in biblical tradition, his words reveal a political dimension in the construction of a (prophetic) knowledge that is actually situated in present time and space.⁷

Cruikshank observes that classic definitions portray the prophet as an outsider. Prophets are “charismatic but marginal individuals who challenge authority yet fail to transform the political and social order” (Cruikshank Social Life 118). Within a sociological framework, this definition, she suggests, privileges interpretation around prophecy as a response to external events and sets up the perceived failure of the prophets’ visions. Cruikshank argues that these classic understandings of prophecy “contrast sharply” with the views of Northern aboriginal storytellers, “who regard stories

about prophecy as evidence not of failure but of successful engagement with change and detailed foreknowledge of events" (Social Life 118-119). This understanding of prophecy resonates with an understanding of the Maya Popol Vuh as a "place to see" and with the roles of Yoeme and Lecha and how they reconstruct the people's almanac. The almanac functions as a guide for interpreting the current events of history, connecting past experience with contemporary reality through multiple kinds of dialogues.

But both Almanac and the Popol Vuh are highly syncretic and problematic texts. The various elements and translations in each book record the history of how it came to be and, how it will continue to be written throughout time. The histories of each book form parts of the story, rather than existing apart from it. Tedlock points out that many Americanists consider the Popol Vuh to be "the most important single native-language text in all the New World" and that much emphasis has been placed on its pre-Columbian content (Spoken Word 261). But the European elements in the Popol Vuh have often had a negative value associated with them, as with many texts collected by anthropologists (Tedlock Spoken Word 262). Just as with Robinson's stories, it is paradoxically the insertion of European elements and how these are contextualized within an indigenous storytelling tradition that highlights their Native origins and worldview. That is, the newer elements in each text, rather than implying the further assimilation of Native storytelling to Western forms and subject matter, emphasize more succinctly the absorption of the European *into* the Native worldview.

In some of James Teit's collected Okanagan stories, for example, there appear to be no obviously non-Native influences. But the stories nevertheless read far more like European folktales in terms of their written form and their semantic content, sounding

more like Aesop's fables than feeling like an oral storytelling performance. Robinson's "interfusional" versions of the same stories, which include Neil Armstrong and the story of "Puss in Boots," frame them within an Okanagan cosmology and experience of the world. The European elements ironically foreground the difference between Okanagan and white cosmologies while Teit's "pure" versions evoke a sense of similarity and universality. These kinds of interfusional texts beg the question: just who is doing the telling here, and which is the originating text? Where does the difference between "original" and "authentic" lie? Like the Popol Vuh, Almanac of the Dead is an Underworld epic filled with stories of twin deities, sacred macaws and blood ritual. The Popol Vuh combines visual images with words and as Linda Schele (The Blood of Kings) and Michael Coe (The Maya) point out, the largest body of Maya art centres around funerary expression and scenes from the Underworld. The Popol Vuh itself resembles an almanac and is a fragment of a much larger text that Coe describes as analogous to the Egyptian Book of the Dead (Maya 179). Yoeme's old notebook is filled with anecdotes, stories and, especially important, drawings of snakes. Yoeme describes the images of the snakes as the key to understanding the whole of the almanac; both Yoeme and Zeta talk to snakes, and, of course, the appearance of the giant stone snake at Laguna heralds the beginning of all sorts of change for Sterling.

The Spirit Snake in Almanac resonates with connection to Maya Vision Serpents. These serpents seem to exist in a limbic space between worlds and act as the channel through which individuals move from one world to another. In Pueblo tradition, snakes are associated with rain and fertility; the disappearance of the big old rattlesnake at Grandma Fleet's garden in Silko's most recent novel, Gardens in the Dunes signals the

beginning of a period of physical and psychic drought. The Vision Serpents are “the means of communication along the path of the tree between the realms of the living and the dead” (Schele Blood 268). The return of the snakes in both Almanac and Gardens seems to indicate a return to wholeness and creates of sense of re-connection between different realms of experience. Schele describes the role of Maya Vision Serpents as the “dynamic and palpable manifestation of communication with the Otherworld” (Freidel, Schele & Parker 208). She says, moreover, “When the Vision Serpents open their jaws, they convey the gods and the ancestors into the land of the living” (Freidel, Schele & Parker 206).

Zeta’s ability to commune with snakes corresponds to Lecha’s psychic abilities to locate bodies of murder victims. Both women seem to exist in dual worlds, inhabiting a space between times, in a time between worlds. The connection between the giant stone snake at Laguna and the snakes in the old notebook, as well as the Vision Serpents themselves, thus seems to be a message of deliverance and communication. They suggest that the book and the experience of Almanac is not all death and nihilism and that the destruction of one world is always implicated in the creation of a new, and perhaps better, one. They also suggest the connection of the stories with lived experience. Not only do these images and stories show up in the various writings of Silko, as she continually re-creates new versions of old stories to fit new contexts, but they are part of her lived experience as well. In the case of the snake, Silko says, “One morning I went there and thought what is going to happen with my novel and I looked at the wall and saw a giant snake. ...I worked for about six months and the snake came and a message came and it was in Spanish: The people are cold, the people are hungry, the rich have stolen the land, the rich have stolen freedom. The people cry out for justice, otherwise revolution” (qtd. in

Irmer 5-6). The story of the snake, all of the stories of the snakes that Silko tells, seem to be true to both her personal experience and to the cultural history in which that experience is situated. Silko's experience of the snake is a storied one. After painting the mural, she realizes the relationship between the mural and the latter part of Almanac. She observes, "The snake in my mural is a messenger" (Yellow Woman 143-144). It was not until later, however, that Silko recognized that, "The giant snake had been a catalyst for the novel from the start." The writing of Almanac helped her to construct meaning from out of the giant stone snake that had appeared at the uranium mine at Laguna in 1979 (Yellow Woman 144). The personal experiences of Silko form part of the story that is Almanac and all of the stories, everywhere, are ultimately inseparable from each other. As we read Almanac, just as when we read the stories of Robinson, King and Welch, we become part of storied world. All of these stories, the authors suggest, will continue to influence the narratives of our experience.

By the end of Almanac, the giant stone snake encourages Sterling's return to Laguna. Things everywhere are changing. The connection that Sterling now feels with the snake—which was originally the cause of his exile—is now also his point of disconnection with Tucson and European things. As Sterling faces southward towards Mexico, like the snake, it becomes clear that the sudden appearance of the stone snake reflects the close ties between the Mesoamerican cultures of Mexico and Pueblo culture. Its representation at Laguna reinforces an ancient relationship between the cultures. The story of the giant stone snake also has sources in the Popol Vuh: in the Mayan text the final event in the lives of the gods is the rising of the sun. The sun's heat turns three patron deities to stone, along with some pumas, jaguars and snakes. A small god called White Sparkstriker who

escapes the heat becomes the keeper of the stone animals (Tedlock Popol Vuh 47). White Sparkstriker was neither “only male” nor “only female” and never belonged to any particular nation. He did, however, make a crucial prediction for a prince who ruled the Quiche kingdom in 1524. As Tedlock describes it, “Spaniards were coming his way from Mexico, and he wanted to know what would happen when they got there” (Breath 38-39). In Spanish, moreover, Tedlock notes that White Sparkstriker is called *El Brujo*, “The sorcerer” (Breath 39). It is easy to see how old Yoeme, Lecha and Zeta might be thought of as sorcerers—their psychic power is in conflict with a European world that now worships and understands only science and technology. The prophecy that Tedlock describes in the story of White Sparkstriker also resonates with the prophecy that begins the five-hundred-year history of the Almanac. This has its source in the arrival of Cortes on the shores of Mexico, and the subsequent mis-interpretation of the meaning of that event by Mexico’s Native peoples—ultimately leading to the kind of contemporary events that Silko describes in Almanac.

In order for a new world order to begin, the old one must be destroyed. The message in Yoeme’s old notebook is a communication from the Spirit Snake, who tells them that “*This world is about to end*” (135). Coe writes about the cyclical creations and destructions of the world that are characteristic of Mesoamerican cosmology, observing that the Aztecs, for example, thought of the world as having gone through four such cycles and that we are now in the fifth cycle. According to the Maya calendar our present world was created in 3114 B.C. and will be annihilated December 23, 2012 A.D. “when the Great Cycle of the Long Count reaches completion” (Coe Maya 174). This date is not too far off in the future. But as Lecha and Zeta work on reconstructing the old notebook,

Lecha realizes that they will have to “figure out how to use the old almanac”(137). Their difficulty is not so much one of recognizing the errors of the past, but of how to locate and use some of the knowledge that has been lost in the fragments of the old notebooks. They have to re-educate themselves in the old ways, non-European ways, and they do this, paradoxically, by using new information to re-construct earlier versions of past knowledge and history.

The story of the mysterious notebook in Almanac makes the reader think of the mystery surrounding the story of the Maya themselves, and of the history of the fragmented Popol Vuh. It is only in the latter half of the twentieth century that scholars are even beginning to understand Maya tradition and cosmology, an understanding made possible as scholars de-cipher—learn to read—Mayan hieroglyphs and calendrics, and are able to connect the old stories with the movement of the sun and the stars, as Tedlock and Schele have shown. We still do not know what caused the decline of the Maya empire, although it seems clear in Silko’s books that “the destroyers” who feed insatiably on blood and destruction might have something to do with the devastation of earlier places and times as well. As a whole, Almanac mirrors the mystery that surrounds the interpretation of Maya history and culture. The obscure references and names, the complex and apparently random narratives that are connected between the pages of the book, imply that readers will need to “de-cipher” a new kind of text in order to connect the stories to the experience and reality of Native peoples in the Americas today. The encyclopedic obscurity of some of Silko’s sources—the sheer volume of a knowledge that is not “common” to most residents of the United States or Canada—insists on a reading of the book in new kinds of ways.

Like the Popol Vuh, Almanac records the adventures of two sets of twins, Zeta and Lecha, Tacho and El Feo. In Almanac the first two are Yaqui while the second two appear to be Mayan. The first twins in the Popol Vuh, Coe notes, “are forced to endure various houses of torture, and are finally defeated in a ball game, to suffer death by decapitation” (Maya 178). The second set of twins, the “Hero Twins,” are also called to the Underworld to play ball with the Xibalbans, the Lords of the Underworld. They manage to defeat the Lords by outwitting them in typical trickster fashion, eventually moving from the earth’s surface to the sky where they are transformed into the sun and the moon (Coe Maya 178-179). Like the Hero Twins, Tacho and El Feo have special powers that are connected to different realms of human experience. They both speak to sacred macaws, have the power to interpret dreams and the charisma to mobilize the people. They, along with Lecha and Zeta, are the contemporary living embodiment of the old prophecies, just as white people are the embodiment of the old witch’s story in Ceremony. Lecha and Zeta are connected to Tacho and El Feo through their understanding and intimacy with otherworldly experience, as well as their ability to speak to the sacred snakes. The two sets of twins in Almanac, one male and one female, suggest a return to a more holistic world view where dualities are complementary rather oppositional, and where gendered hierarchies no longer exist. Their number is now perfect: as Robinson says, “Everything should be in only four” (Write It 34).

In Maya tradition it takes several tries before humans are made successfully. Through the text of the Popol Vuh, we see that the gods “recover[ed] the vision of the first four humans” (Popol Vuh 29). It is through the storied knowledge recorded in the Popol Vuh that, “Everything they see will be clear to them” (Popol Vuh 29) and Yoeme

implies that the old notebook will have the same kind of visionary and prophetic power for Native peoples today. The ancient Quiche lords concern themselves with what it means to be “human” and Yoeme uses the same kind of language when she returns to visit her twin granddaughters. She states that she waited all these years to see if any of her grandchildren “turned out human” (118). Yoeme’s comments imply that Lecha and Zeta, whom she acknowledges as “human,” have the same potential as the first humans of the Popol Vuh, who “saw everything under the sky perfectly” (Popol Vuh 29). It is this sense of seeing, and of representing accurately what one “sees” that situates the sense of prophecy in Almanac in the space of present time. Prophetic time is linked explicitly with sacred space, and as the words in the old notebook say, “Sacred time is always in the present” (136). The appearance of the stone snake makes Laguna a kind of spiritual centre. Laguna is connected to the Pueblo experience of the sacred in terms of both the old prophecies and the snake’s connections to the Native cultures of Mexico. And Laguna, of course, both frames the beginning and end of Almanac through the character of Sterling, as well as lying at the centre of Silko’s personal experience.⁸

Among other things, the old notebook suggests that errors in prophetic judgement have been the result of misinterpreting the times. Yoeme’s notebook reveals an apparently insignificant and minor miscalculation in the translation of dates. According to Yoeme, sorcery caused the mistranslation. This sorcery caused people to respond to events in a manner that was inappropriate to the times they lived in; they interpreted and interacted incorrectly with the narrative they were a part of. The notebook states, “11 AHU was the return of the fair Quetzalcoatl. But the mention of the artificial white circle in the sky could only have meant the return of Death Dog and his eight brothers: plague, earthquake,

drought, famine, incest, insanity, war, and betrayal” (572). This apparently simply error in translation explains five hundred years of genocidal history. It points yet again to the importance of accuracy, of getting a story right and situating it carefully in both time and space. The notion of this kind of accuracy, of the importance that lies in telling a story in a particular way that fits with the time and place that it is being told—and of seeing through time to other places and other histories—echoes the cyclical repetition of stories in Green Grass, Running Water. The story changes each time that it is told and each time it is both the same and different. In Almanac, as in Green Grass, Running Water and Fools Crow, the story, the prophecy, is never complete, never finished. Had the calendar been read and translated accurately, Yoeme implies, the Native peoples that greeted Cortes on the shores of Mexico would not have misunderstood the true nature of the European conquistadors. They like the “blood-worshippers” of Mexico, were sorcerers and “Destroyers” (Almanac 760).

The story of the error in translating the date of 11 AHU as the return of Quetzalcoatl instead of “the return of Death Dog” in Almanac, moreover, corresponds to historical conflicts surrounding the translation of the Mayan calendar. Coe writes that after years of disagreement, scholars now agree on the exact correspondence between the Maya and Christian calendars. The information and controversy surrounding various interpretations of dates and calendrics were resolved through an analysis of correspondences surrounding the time of the Spanish Conquest (Maya 188). This is exactly the period of time that the old notebook says was mistranslated. At the end of Almanac Sterling remembers the “old story” about the witchcraft and sorcery and he realizes, “No wonder Cortes and Montezuma had hit it off together when they met; both

had been members of the same secret clan" (760). His recognition mirrors Yoeme's and corresponds to her interest in having her people interpret time, and the narratives associated with the times, correctly. The European story of Cortes and his followers was the same story of blood and destruction that the Mexican sorcerers told, although it originated in a different place.

Among other things, Silko's narrative resists the essentialization of identity, whether Native or European, through her insistence that experience is what counts. Not all of the Mexican Indians were destroyers, and Almanac suggests that not all white people today can be lumped into one category either. Seese and Root begin to see things differently from their European ancestors, Seese resisting notions of causality that often pass for knowledge in white society, and Root beginning to understand the nature of all kinds of differences. Ferro seems no more likeable than many of the white characters in the novel and, in fact, there are no characters in the novel with which the reader is likely to want to identify. Almanac thus resists easy compartmentalization of Native and white views of the world while it simultaneously and paradoxically critiques "all things European." The holistic view of the world that Silko's narrative constructs is one where Native peoples are agents of their own history.

Yoeme's reference to the witchcraft of the destroyers echoes narrative threads in both Storyteller and Ceremony. At a conference of sorcerers, the witches have a contest, and one witch tells the others to listen, saying of his/her sorcery, "What I have is a story" (Storyteller 132). The witch's narrative prophesizes the coming of the white man and the subsequent genocide associated with his advent in the Americas. The other witches laugh, until they realize that the story is really one that is underway already:

*They will take this world from ocean to ocean
they will turn on each other
they will destroy each other
Up here
in these hills
they will find the rocks,
rocks with veins of green and yellow and black.
They will lay the final pattern with these rocks
they will lay it across the world
and explode everything.*

...
So the other witches said
“Okay you win; you take the prize,
but what you said just now—
it isn’t so funny
It doesn’t sound so good.
We are doing okay without it
we can get along without that kind of thing.
Take it back.
Call that story back.

But the witch just shook its head
at the others in their stinking animal skins, fur
and feathers.
*It’s already turned loose.
It’s already coming.
It can’t be called back.*
(Storyteller 136-137)

Yoeme’s reference to how the blood worshippers of Europe met the blood worshippers of the Americas through Native witchcraft, and Sterling’s realization of this connection again links Almanac with Storyteller and Ceremony—with other stories situated in different times and places. Once alive in the imagination, a story has the power to create reality. Each narrative connects to all the other stories. Since European contact the stories contain both Native and European elements because they reflect cross-cultural experiences and contact as part of a lived Native American experience.

Stories like the one about the witches' conference, the adventures of Yellow Woman, the shape-shifting of Geronimo and the storyteller in Alaska weave their web of narrative through the space and time of Silko's writing. Just as they once showed up in different times and places, in different versions, through oral storytelling performances, they now exist in different written versions and are framed by different textual forms. The stories are connected to all the stories that come before them, including the story of the Popol Vuh. The chapters in Almanac called "Reign of Death-Eye Dog" and the "Reign of Fire-Eye Macaw" are steeped in the bloodletting ritual and cosmology of the Maya. Fire-Eye Macaw is a reference to the god Seven Macaw in the Popol Vuh. The twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, shoot Seven Macaw out of the sky because he is a "pretender to lordly powers over the affairs of the earth," claiming to be both the sun and the moon (Popol Vuh 34). Earthly macaws, like the ones that communicate with El Feo and Tacho, are the earthly descendants of Seven Macaw (Popol Vuh 34) and, as sacred birds, they seem to share in some of the power that Seven Macaw once held.

When Tacho speaks with the sacred macaws, he observes that the birds are not always easy to understand. But he knows one thing, "The macaws said the battle would be won or lost in the realm of dreams, not with airplanes or weapons" (475). Tacho also realizes that white people will disappear all by themselves, as, "The disappearance had already begun at the spiritual level"—the prophetic level (511). In one translation of Seven Macaw's name, his identity resonates with notions of shamanism. He is the sacred bird "that sits atop the World Tree of the Center" and his name may be translated as "Wizard Giver" according to David Freidel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker (412). There is thus a double nature to the "Reign of Fire-Eye Macaw" in Almanac. Contemporary times, like

the original bird himself, may be described as beautiful, vain and self-aggrandizing—with humans acting as if they were gods, taking on roles too big for them. But the association of Tacho and El Feo with the earthly macaws also suggests the potential return to a world where human beings regain their vision and are once again able to “see” worlds beyond this physical one.

In order to experience directly the vision(s) of the gods and ancestors, Schele writes, the Maya practiced ritual bloodletting (Blood 177). She says, “Blood was the mortar of ancient Maya life” (Blood 14). In one description of the great Vision Serpent Schele states, “The great rearing serpent—the physical manifestation from blood loss and shock—was the contact between the supernatural realm and the world of human beings” (Blood 177). The power of blood, especially high ranking blood, lay in its vitality as “sustenance for the gods” (Schele Blood 176). Humans re-enact the sacrifice of the gods through bloodletting and sacrifice; sacrificial blood releasing its life force. But if blood is looked at as powerful potential, with the ability to connect to different realms of experience, its excess creates a very different reading of the violence in Almanac. In the book, which is filled with acts of violence and depravity of all sorts, the most notable deaths are bloody, ritualistic and sacrificial in tone.

Both Iliana and Menardo unconsciously orchestrate their own deaths in ways that suggest the ritualistic bloodletting and sacrifice of the Maya. Iliana, for example, designs a high marble stairway for her house. The stairway is reminiscent of the ceremonial architecture of the Mexican pyramids at places like Palenque and Uxmal; here the stairs lead to plazas and altars that were central to Maya ritual activities. Freidel, Schele and Parker observe, “The Olmec and Maya defined sacred space in fundamentally similar

ways: plazas shimmered with the hidden currents of the Primordial Sea, stairways descending from the summits of Creation mountains shaped paths between worlds. Threshold buildings and ballcourt alleyways marked out the liminal space for dance, ritual sport and...sacrifice" (143). Iliana's staircase—in fact, the manner in which the entire house has been carefully designed—reflects the precision that is characteristic of Mayan architecture. The peculiar corners and measurements of the staircase, and the way that it has been designed so that the light flows through it in particular ways, reminds one of a sacrificial altar. It seems as though the house itself betrays her, its design making it seem part of the physical environment of the jungle itself, right down to the "veiled sunlight" flowing in through the rooms. She cannot, it seems, escape her roots, and her dramatic fall down the staircase, resembles a sacrifice—after her death Menardo is free to marry Angelita, the architect who has designed most of the house.

Iliana's family, a founding family of Mexico, had been unhappy with her marriage to the Indian-looking Menardo. Menardo is keenly aware that he lacks *sangre limpia* and he tries to assimilate into white culture through his success as an entrepreneur and his choice in wives. While he was growing up his grandfather told him stories about the "old man" who was interested in what Europeans thought only because it accorded with Native experience of the world (258). But Menardo spends the rest of his life trying to be white, and his death is even more dramatic than Iliana's. He insists on gathering together a small group to watch a demonstration of his bulletproof vest, and his own invincibility. He is the head of Universal Insurance, after all, who can take care of all kinds of catastrophes. Unfortunately for Menardo, this scene will play out as the "Work of the Spirits" and the entire staging of his death resembles the story of the Hero Twins in the Popol Vuh, where

Hunahpu and Xabalanque sacrifice One and Seven Death. The twins are instructed by the Lords of the Underworld to, "Make a sacrifice without death!" (Popol Vuh 135). In the Maya story, Xbalanque stages his brother's death, playing with the head of his decapitated brother, rolling it the door, and then removing his heart. Hunahpu then comes back to life. When the Xibalban Lords One and Seven Death clamour to play this game themselves, however, their deaths are final.

In another scene, the Xibalbans play ball with Hunahpu's head, while he wears a squash on his shoulders. The squash or pumpkin suggests the role of Calabazas in Almanac; the Spanish *calabazas*, or pumpkin, is a sacred ritual gourd in Southwestern and Mesoamerican culture. The character of Calabazas remains connected to traditional Native knowledge while Menardo identifies with European ways, playing a game, which he cannot win. At one point in the Popol Vuh, the Xibalbans clamour, "Sacrifice yet again, even do it to yourselves! ... At heart, that's the dance we want from you" (136). The question that surrounds Menardo's and Iliana's deaths, and perhaps many of the other deaths in Almanac, is whether their deaths, their blood, will appease the gods.

Through bloodletting, the ancient Maya "conjured...the companion spirits and the gods." Sustaining the gods by feeding their images "allowed the lightning to flow...and establish the path of communication, manifested in the image of the serpent-footed god K'awil" (Freidel, Schele and Parker 202). Freidel, Schele and Parker also note that the "linking of means and end in sacrifice was fundamental to Maya thought" (202). Thus, sacrifice actually re-creates life. The deaths of Iliana and Menardo contrast with the image of Trigg's "biomaterials" business, where Trigg constantly fantasizes of draining his donors of their blood. Trigg's donors do not make sacrifices; instead, Trigg takes the

blood of poor and desperate people—the kind of blood no self-respecting Maya noble would consider worthy for bloodletting rituals. If Iliana's and Menardo's deaths are really sacrificial, the people and their culture will be reborn, stronger. Alternatively, like the deaths of the Lords One and Seven Death, their "sacrifice" may have been "performed only for the purpose of destroying them" (Popol Vuh 138). There is the sense in Almanac that Menardo is a traitor to his own people both through his business tactics and his disavowal of his identity. He may be a particular kind of Destroyer. According to Schele, "The role of bloodletting, the nature of the visions produced, the necessity of sacrifice, the inevitability of death and the possibility of renewal" are integral to Maya cosmology and imagery (Blood 304). The difficulty lies in trying to understand the difference between necessary bloodletting that leads to potential renewal, and the kind that smacks of the Destroyers' excesses—and final destruction.

Storied Spaces: The Time-Space Continuum

Almanac connects past and present as part of contemporary Native experience by situating that experience in a storied worldview that displaces the oppositions between the temporal narrative and the space where events take place, as well as between words and pictures. Story as a way of theorizing the world, Almanac suggests, encompasses all of these. Silko describes how she wrote the book in sections because:

I could not think of the story of the Almanac as a single line. ... I knew that I wanted to shape time inside my Almanac. I wanted to use narrative to shift the reader's experience of time and the meaning of history as stories that mark certain points in time... I had to figure out how to do this and

still tell stories people could understand. Myths alter our experience of time and reality without disappointing our desire for a story. I knew Almanac of the Dead must be made of myths—all sorts of myths from the Americas, including the modern myths (Yellow Woman 140).

Of course, the distinction between space and time is an illusory distinction, as neither can exist without the other. Any event is always experienced in both space and time. Since the advent of quantum physics, moreover, the model of the universe includes not just ordered and orderly structures but chaos.

Silko's interest in the relationship between time and space, and the temporality of narrative myths, is reflected in the complex ways that she uses tense. Silko uses the present tense extensively in Almanac, moving back and forth between a historical present and past tense. The opening of the book begins, for example, with a description of Zeta cooking, "The old woman stands at the stove... Occasionally Zeta smiles.... She glances up" (19). Some chapters are written primarily in past tense, using the preterite to indicate the time and world of the book in ways that are conventional to the novel form. Other chapters, like the opening chapter and "Bulletproof Vest," are written extensively in present tense. Most often, however, the narrator moves quickly between tenses, using a variety of verb forms in the same story: "Menardo laughs as he holds up the bulletproof vest... Menardo sits with the sun at his back... The gardeners are swimming" (317). As Alegria reflects on her conversations with Bartolomeo, tense shifts again: "She laughed nervously... She loved making the drawings... She wanted the gardens to penetrate the rooms" (320). And then it shifts again: "She does not tell him the human figures she draws spoil everything" (320). And again: "She cleverly drew little dogs on the stairway" (320)

and, "In the backseat of the Mercedes, Menardo pats Alegria's hand...ahead of them are two bodyguards" (320). The use of tense in these passages in some instances relates the time of the situation referred to with some other time, but often when Silko uses the present tense, it could easily be replaced with the past tense.

Conventionally, the present tense is frequently used in oral narrative⁹ and in literary forms like the novel it is then used to imitate an oral style. But it has other rhetorical and semantic effects as well. Tense is both transparent and opaque; form is not a problem, but its function and meaning in particular contexts are more problematic. When the present tense is used in a written form like the novel, events seem to be told as they occur. There is consequently an emotional or psychological quality to it. In a storytelling situation the storyteller is emotionally involved in a performance, and he or she is interacting with the audience, expecting to get a response from the listeners. When Silko switches into present tense, the shift is frequently sudden and therefore causes the reader to take notice as well to respond to the storytelling situation. It is as if the reader is suddenly drawn back into the story. He or she is never allowed to slide complacently into the time and space of the novel. The world of Almanac is true to Silko's world of personal experience. The abrupt shifts in tense remind the reader of the differences between a world which "theorizes the world through story" and his or her own world of experience. They also simultaneously draw the reader into Silko's storied reality.

Moreover, in addition to the sense of "psychological urgency" that Silko's constant tense shifting creates, it has the effect of creating an ambiguous, rhetorical quality that allows Silko to play with the time and space of the narrative. The present tense focuses on present states rather than past events. It suggests that events are in progress

and that the reader is a part of those events. The sense of presence manifest in sentences like, “‘The story I like best,’ Calabazas says as if he and Root have been exchanging stories all morning” (189) and, “Mosca hears and remembers so many voices and so many places he forgets where they all came from” (602) contributes to a sense of universal time. It is as if time is expanding spatially rather than being limited to the past or a particular point on a static time line. In other instances, such as when Silko describes Lecha’s actions standing at the stove, or Menardo’s behaviours surrounding his acquisition of the bulletproof vest, events are presented to the reader in a non-causal framework: the exact cause of Menardo’s death is not known. Thus, the tense switching of Almanac contributes to a sense of the stories’ movement within a web, rather than as progressions along a linear time-line. The non-linearity of Almanac, both in terms of its many and multiply-contexted characters and its stories, requires the reader to interact dialogically with the narrative, and it resists the kind of closure that is common in novels. While linear progression implies and encourages single and totalizing interpretation, in a web-like structure every interpretation—every story—suggests another one.

Patterns of tense distribution or tense switching are usually not random in novels. The interchange between present and past tense that Silko uses in Almanac, however, is not that common. Silko uses the past tense, the conventional tense of the novel, mostly to situate events at particular points in time, and within sections of text that are told largely in the present tense, as well as to frame larger historical events. The story of Geronimo in “Mistaken Identity,” for example, is narrated almost entirely in the conventional preterite tense of the novel. While present tense is often used in the narration of dreams to highlight the difference between the world of the dream and the world of the fictional story, Silko

uses it much more frequently and with similar effect. Dreams are visual; they have the quality of seeing without knowing. Welch, however, does not present his dream sequences to his readers in the present tense. While Silko uses tense to signal both difference and relationship between oral and written modes of expression, and between the time of the past and of the present, Welch resists the separation of dreaming and waking states.

Chapter 20 of Fools Crow is almost entirely a dream, but there are points in this dream where it becomes difficult for the reader to sort out which parts of Fools Crow's experiences are "real" and which ones are visionary. It is not possible to use the present tense in conjunction with retrospection; to talk or write about the dream after the fact requires using the past tense. Silko also uses the past tense whenever the narrative moves into a reflective mode, such as when El Feo and Wacah think about how they had to obey the spirit macaws: "Wacah believed the spirits would protect them" (711), and when Clinton thinks about the ancient prophecies: "This was the last chance the people had against the Destroyers" (747). Paradoxically, however, the final effect of Silko's tense switching, and of Welch's merging of the time and space of dreams with other realities, is to collapse ontological worlds of experience. Dreams, fictional worlds and "real" worlds of experience are no longer fully separable. Although the authors' strategies are different, the effect, in both Fools Crow and Almanac.

If Silko uses the present tense as a way of spatializing time in Almanac, in her interview with Irmer she makes it clear that she intentionally does so to replicate Native conceptualizations of both time and space. She says, "The Pueblo people and the indigenous people of the Americas see time as round, not as a long linear string. If time is round, if time is an ocean, then something that happened 500 years ago may be quite

immediate and real... Think of time as an ocean always moving. What is interesting to me about Einstein and post-Einsteinian physics and some of the discoveries in particle physics is what they have discovered about the nature of time. The curvature of time in space” (qtd. in Irmer 6). Even prophetic time sometimes happens in the past: when Rose causes television disturbances, airplanes crash. But the television snow that is the sign of the airplane crashes (and Lecha is one of the few that seems to understand this connection) is, of course, cosmic background radiation. It is part of the fallout from the Big Bang that created the universe. The television static reminds us that we are still experiencing the Big Bang now, even though it happened long ago—and the airplane crashes that the insurance adjuster at first thinks are random coincidences are anything but random. Just as time can be read in space, however, space can be read through time and it can be disseminated as narrative kinds of knowledge. Thus Irmer, in his interview of Silko, observes that Almanac is filled with theory, but the theory is always embedded in the stories. As he says, the novel “maps the history of the Americas” (1). Time and space are one.

Miguel Portilla notes the Maya were aware that, “Isolated from time, space becomes inconceivable” (86). As in Maya tradition, the cosmology of space and time that is reflected in Almanac is one where epistemology is grounded in storytelling. The first clue that Silko’s book negotiates time and space differently lies, not in words, but in the map at the beginning of the book. The map foregrounds the visual distortion of space through cartography while it simultaneously emphasizes the movement of people throughout both time and space. The visual representation of the space of North America is compressed and generalized so that the viewer gets only a general sense of the shape of things to come. The borders that outline the shape of the United States and Mexico are

vague curvatures that reach out past the page of the book; the border between the United States and Mexico is a straight, bold black line. The name of the United States does not appear on the map, and the expanse of space seems taken over by the large lettered name of Mexico. The map is not drawn to scale, and the distance between Tucson and San Diego seems much farther than the distance between Tucson and New Jersey. Criss-crossing the places on the map, the travels of the various characters in almanac appear as straight dotted lines—trajectories of movement that seem linear, but later turn out not to be. The map shows how the temporally based narratives that form the many stories of Almanac stretch backwards and forwards in time, but the stories converge as a whole at one centre-point. That centre is a spatial anchor on the map—the city of Tucson. Space and place thus frame the novel and tie together land, story, and history through a visual image that holds the narrative firmly in place.

The map with Tucson at its centre is a representation that is situated in both space and time as a map of narrative, of story. The map does not resemble a conventional map where one looks down on the image of contained space from above. Its legend includes “arcane symbols” which we, as readers, need to interpret the time and space of the narrative. The lack of narrative linearity in the story that follows the map also indicates what the map shows visually, how the stories, the old notebooks, assimilate and absorb new elements in complex ways, and how all of these elements are related. Past, present and future all “mark certain points in time” by virtue of their ontological significance in Almanac, rather than their historical chronology. As Clarke points out, contemporary keepers of the almanac, “must understand the contradictory standpoints of both Native American *and* European worldviews” (201).

As I wrote the preliminary notes for this chapter, I realized that the process of examining the map at the beginning of Almanac formed part of my understanding of the novel itself. I had to ask myself: why did I pause at my entry into the novel, with the map? Why did it continue to fascinate me, drawing me in to examine it again and again? I had found myself doing the same thing with Silko's earlier novel Ceremony. Only there it was the star map in the middle of the novel that drew my attention and kept me wondering as to its placement at the heart of the narrative. Because so many of Silko's references turn up in different ways in each of her novels, I also wondered if the two "maps" were related. And, in retrospect, I wondered about the significance of viewing a map of stars, an image that we see in time light years after the stars themselves let off their light, in conjunction with Silko's map at the beginning of Almanac. The conceptualization of time, and the connection between the space of the visual and the time in which we "see" that image, seem interrelated in both books.

I searched the map both during and after reading the novel to find clues to the meaning of the text as a whole. I tried to uncover "the secret" of the story being told. Was the story of the lost notebooks *the* story? What was the significance of the "complicated and depressing" story of Almanac? If I could not read the book "for pleasure" then why "should" I read it? The non-linearity of the plot structure and the book's numerous characters frustrated my attempts to map out the narrative in any orderly kind of way. The map thus seduced me, drew me into the story—tempting me with its promise to make an obscure web of narrative visible to my mind's eye. And it then resisted my efforts to sort out and clarify the confusion caused by the many interconnected webs of story. Neither the map nor the Almanac that follows allowed me to create a sense of order from out of

chaos, or to construct any kind of linear plot line. The place of the map, therefore, seems inseparable from the book as a whole and from how the story of the text is situated, or placed before the reader.

The simultaneous quality of the characters' movements through space create the sense of Almanac's story existing both inside and outside of time, throughout a cyclical time and space. This sense of the simultaneity of all of the stories resonates with how European elements are inserted into oral stories like Robinson's, and the syncretism of written texts like the Popol Vuh. Movement between places on the map reveals how all the characters' lives and stories are interconnected, web-like, and how the relationships are sometimes paradoxical, and always fragile, living things. In Ceremony, the medicine man. As Ku'oosh thinks, "The world is fragile." But the Laguna word that Ku'oosh uses expresses a sense of continuing process. It evokes not just fragility but the sense of "strength inherent in spider webs." No word, moreover, as Ku'oosh thinks, exists alone (35).

In English we have no way of expressing or understanding this Laguna sense of a fragile "thing" as invested with a sense of process, of time. The slippage between these wor(l)ds of experience is like Armstrong's Okanagan comprehension of a dog as a "little furred life," an understanding not easily accessible to an English speaker's idea of what a dog "is." In the English language, the noun contains the sense of a person, place or thing; in Okanagan the verb seems primary, and the sense of process connected with the verb extends to persons, places and things. In both the Okanagan and Laguna experience of the world, the thing and the experience of the thing, the state of existing and the process of living, are parts of one complementary whole. Identity is not essentialized, it is

experientialized. Viewing the Okanagan or the Laguna experience of the world from the outside can result in an inability to recognize differences that continue to exist as a new indigenous language, English, merges with Native worldviews. Constructing other cultures through Western paradigms, using the cultural and linguistic references of, for example, English, has caused entire cultures to be re-constructed as dead—their present-day rem(a)inders seen as impure relics left-over from a distant past. But authors like Silko, Welch and King, among others, show how it is possible to “reinvent the enemy’s language.”¹⁰

The “pure” culture of the Maya, like those of other Native Americans, has often been thought of as “dead,” and any remnants of its culture viewed as inauthentic or watered down versions of a once-glorious “original.” In the search for the remains of “pure” cultures Mayan culture, like many others, has been extensively romanticized. But, as Portilla observes, scholars are starting to think differently about the demise of the Maya. Portilla, Coe, Tedlock, Freidel, Schele and Parker argue that Mayan culture did not disappear. According to them, the Maya absorbed European culture. Maya culture, they suggest, has transformed and recreated itself in contemporary contexts. The European content in the Popol Vuh, for instance, reflects new experience that is interpreted using the old traditional ways—in much the same way that Robinson uses old stores to theorize new experiences. As the opening words of the Popol Vuh assert:

This is the beginning of the Ancient Word, here in this place called Quiche.

Here we shall inscribe, we shall implant the Ancient Word, the potential and source for everything... They accounted for everything—and did it, too—as

enlightened beings, in enlightened words. We shall write about this now amid the preaching of God, in Christendom, now" (63).

Tedlock notes how these European elements inserted into the Popol Vuh have often been regarded as an embarrassment by scholars, but he points out that they can also be read syncretically as a form of resistance as well. He states, "Not only 'accommodation' but 'conflict and resistance' ...were indeed significant reactions to the superimposition of Christianity" (Word 270). Tedlock argues that by focusing on the differences rather than the similarities between the Judeo-Christian Genesis and the creation story of the Maya, we may recognize the "canyon" that separates these cosmologies (Spoken Word 269). In doing so, he implies, we also acknowledge the continued existence of a distinct Maya culture. The question then becomes one of situating the canyon in space and time. While the times may have changed, the progress of a culture, just like a story, is not necessarily linear.

Portilla describes the Mayans as "masters in the art of measuring time" (xvii). And it is the stories that connect past and present realities. In his discussion of Maya cosmology Portilla writes of "the significance of time in the ambit of spatial reality" (77). He observes, "In the absence of time-cycles, there is no life, nothing happens, not even death. ... Time, on the contrary, is the life and origin of all things" (86). It is an "attribute of the Gods" (35). Coe, Tedlock, Freidel, Schele and Parker all note how the role of day-keepers among the Maya persists into the twentieth century. Day-keepers "keep track of the round of days and...conduct rituals for individuals and the whole community in accord with its dictates" (Coe Maya 205). Similarly, the Mayan scribes whose job it was to preserve the stories in the Popol Vuh and the Chilam Balam had a community role to play

as keepers of ancient knowledge. In Almanac Yoeme, Lecha and Zeta perform this function; as daykeepers part of their function is to connect storied time with real time. Thus Yoeme points out the seriousness in the mistranslation of a single date. Silko connects storied time with real time, and prophecy with past, present and future, by playing with oral and written modes of expression; her mixing of genres and tenses, moreover, resembles the syncretism of the Popol Vuh. By the time one has finished reading Almanac, one gets the sense that perhaps Silko's role is also one of a kind of daykeeper.

Silko is the storyteller but her role is, as she says herself, to pull the stories out of us, the readers. Almanac records the cycle of days and events as things are happening now, and connects them to the old stories. The eerily prophetic quality of what Silko writes about—the connection between the murders of Mexican heads of state in Almanac and the subsequent turn of events in Chiapas, Mexico; the buying and selling of body parts; the drug-smuggling and gun-running that permeates southern U.S. border towns; the potential collapse of computers and banking systems as the new millennium approaches—reinforce the sense of Almanac being much more than a fictional or literary “work of art.” As the cycle of time moves towards the “Reign of the Death-Eye Dog” and the “Reign of the Fire-Eye Macaw,” the pace of the changes that Almanac chronicles starts to accelerate: the familiar begins to become unfamiliar. Each cycle of time, when it returns, is both always and paradoxically the same and simultaneously different; the cycles, in Mayan cosmology, are so long that it is difficult to recognize time as cyclical—hence the need for daykeepers.

As the map moves to imagine a narrative past, it exists simultaneously in the present, and it moves into the future. The narrative of Almanac is a five-hundred-year map, revealing a half millennium of history, although all of its events take place in contemporary time. Intersecting time and space, the map constructs a time that is not linear but cyclical; it also constructs an understanding of space that is inseparable from the temporal. Almanac runs on indigenous (Maya) narrative time. The language, cycles of narratives, chapter headings and references foreground Native expressions of knowledge and absorb the European into the Native. In one of her essays, Silko describes time as alive in the same way that the old notebook is alive. The notebook continues to inform the storied lives of the individuals that look after it as part of a dialogic interaction between past, present and future. In her essay, Silko says, "Time was a living being that had a personality, a sort of identity. Time was alive and might pass, but time did not die; moreover, the days and weeks eventually would return" (Yellow Woman 136). In Almanac, El Feo's thoughts echo this idea; when he dreams about the past, he thinks of the days and months as alive (313). He also knows people "must reckon with the past because within it lay this present moment and also the future moment" (311). Time in this worldview is always connected to knowledge, and that knowledge evokes a sense of "knowing all at once," a kind of simultaneous knowing that shows an awareness of connections between parts and wholes "in conversation with each other." This kind of cultural knowledge has been described by Ridington as holographic, each piece of knowledge a small whole in and of itself, partial and complete at the same time (Ridington and Dennis Hasting xvii-xviii). Silko says, "All times go on existing side by side for all eternity. No moment is lost or destroyed. There are no future times or past times; there

are *always all* the times” (Yellow Woman 137). The way that scholars describe the time of the Maya also suggests the simultaneity of past, present and future and Almanac resonates with ideas of prophecy and story that transcend time/space structures as (we) know them. In Almanac, as in Fools Crow and Green Grass, Running Water, narrative and historical progression is no longer linear or progressive but fills a cyclical space.

In Tedlock’s description of the Popol Vuh and the Maya understanding of the relationship between words and pictures, he states, “Nearly every page of the ancient books (original version) combined writing (including signs meant to be read phonetically) and pictures” (Popol Vuh 27). In Mayan languages the terms used for painting and writing are the same, the same artisans practiced both skills, and the patron deities of these skills were twin monkey gods (Popol Vuh 27). Tedlock continues, “In the books made under the patronage of these twin gods there is a dialectical relationship between the writing and the pictures: the writing not only records words but sometimes offers pictorial clues to its meaning. As for the pictures, they not only depict what they mean but have elements that can be read as words” (Popol Vuh 28). The words and pictures together thus signal a holistic worldview where stories, and other forms of what we call “art,” are both sacred and secular. They entertain and educate at the same time, in the way that Robinson says one learns from the stories if one enjoys them.

According to Tedlock, the storytellers of the Maya create “word pictures.” While these word pictures do not require counterparts in the real, physical world, Tedlock suggests that they are often associated with the physical world. The physical counterparts to word pictures in contemporary Native literature, I suggest, are the land and its physical features as well as plants, animals, humans and beings from the spirit world. The entire

web of life is evoked and embodied in the land to which the narratives are tied. Keith Basso also writes about how places and their names evoke particular stories, noting that in Apache tradition, "The location of an event is an integral aspect of the event itself, and identifying the event's location is...essential to properly depicting—and effectively picturing—the event's occurrence" (86-87). The land is both thematically and structurally central to Silko's novel, as it is to Welch's, King's and Robinson's writings and tellings. Tying together land and story through "word pictures" connects the thematic with oral tradition and storytelling. It shows us how oral storytelling traditions comprise a worldview that moves beyond formal and symbolic structure to include meaningful elements from other cosmologies. Basso states:

For Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in features of the earth—in canyons and lakes, mountains and arroyos, rocks and vacant fields—which together endow their lands with multiple forms of significance that reach into their lives and shape the way they think.

Knowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one's position in the larger scheme of things, including one's own community, and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person (34).

The old stories thus do not simply evoke reality in different ways, but they structure it differently, and they continue to influence the construction of our experiences.

It is partly her realization around the power of storied reality that causes Yoeme to insert part of her own life story where the old manuscript is incomplete. The description of Yoeme's "deliverance" (579-580) is filled with margin notes that she has written, and we

are told explicitly in the subsequent chapter of the intimate connection between stories and reality:

Yoeme had believed power resides within certain stories; this power ensures the story to be retold, and with each retelling a slight but permanent shift took place. Yoeme's story of her deliverance changed forever the odds against all captives; each time a revolutionist escaped death in one century, two revolutionists escaped certain death in the following century, even if they had never heard an escape story. Where such escape stories are greatly prized and rapidly circulated, miraculous escapes from death gradually increase (581).

The ancient prophecies and stories also foretell the disappearance of European things; *this story* is already part of the legend on the map that begins Almanac. But with the disappearance of European ways (and it is important to note that Silko does not prophesy the disappearance of European *people*, but rather their hegemonic culture) there exists a need for a new map and a new legend that has its source in Native rather than European traditions.

Sterling, who almost accidentally seems to travel to Tucson after his exile from Laguna, becomes fascinated with the place because of the history and legends that have their source there. Tucson, as the map shows, lies at the centre of all of the stories that form Almanac, but Laguna lies at the heart of Sterling's (and Silko's) identity. Almanac begins and ends with the giant stone snake and Sterling's exile from and return to Laguna. Tucson, a relatively small and unimportant city in Arizona, lies at the heart of both past and present European reality in the New World. The characters of Almanac converge in

Tucson but it is in the Four Corners region of the Southwest, where Laguna is located, that life begins and ends (Almanac 761). At the end of the book Sterling thinks, "Tucson had only been a bad dream" (762); with a return to Native ways, Laguna is restored as both Sterling's, and all Native peoples', centre. This small Pueblo town is like the "earth navel" or *sipapu*¹¹ of the storied world of the old notebook. Alfonso Ortiz describes the "mother earth navel" as open to all four directions, with the village existing all around it (21). Laguna's apparent insignificance on the map is deceptive; this small place has central role in the creation of a new Native "Fifth World."

Freidel, Schele and Parker write about how the centre of the world, in Maya tradition, often appears strikingly small and insignificant. Freidel says of his first encounter with the sacred world of the Maya, "I could not understand why, with all the elaborate forms that the sacred geography of Zinacantan could take, that the navel of the universe was a little non-descript bump outside the town, truly an earthen belly button" (124). Laguna, like this earthen belly button, anchors the story of Almanac and acts as the conduit through which the characters in the story pass into different realms of experience, and new versions of Native stories—while the European world of Tucson simultaneously seems to self-destruct.

Everything in Almanac only appears to begin and end in Tucson. Famous Indian wars take place here—first the Apache wars and now this new/old Indian war. When Sterling returns to his home in Laguna he thinks, "Tucson was too close to Mexico. Tucson *was* Mexico, only no one in the United States had realized it yet" (759). Sterling's perspective again places Almanac in the context of the indigenous traditions of Mexico, of the Yaqui and the Maya, rather than the European history of Tucson's "Wild West."

Sterling's awareness of the close relationship between Mexico and the United States gestures towards how the borders between these two countries and their cultures have been arbitrarily imposed on them by outside forces. This boundary between the United States of America and Mexico has been like a white picket fence cordoning off parts of the Fifth World that Silko describes in Almanac.

But Tucson is still more than just a place on the map of Almanac. The city provides the narrative perspective, or point of view, on Almanac as a whole. Tucson is a sign whose signified is European history in the Americas; the city acts as a mirror of non-Native (European) readings of Almanac. All many white people see in Almanac is their culture reflected back at them in a city filled with debauched, corrupt misfits—and they cringe. But, as the threads of narrative converge throughout the book, spatialized place “focalizes” the events of the narrative in multiple ways. Bal describes focalization as, “A choice....made from various ‘points of view’ from which the elements can be presented.” She goes on to say, “The resulting *focalization*, the relation between ‘who perceives’ and what is perceived, ‘colours the story with subjectivity’ (8). As memory and history become spatialized through the restoration of Yoeme’s notebook, Native perspectives—through their connection with the land—begin to subvert Tucson’s hegemonic space. Focalized space in narrative, Bal argues, shows how mapping can become an act of narrative focalization where one can go back “to the time in which the place was a different kind of space”(146). Silko is thus, in a sense, re-mapping the space of narrative knowledge.

The mapping of narrative recuperates cultural knowledge as well as the physical space of the landscape. To the extent that an individual map is a system, actual space is

consistently denied by the visual image. In highly systematized cartographic representations, real physical space ultimately becomes surreal and finally disappears altogether. Maps in this way colonize real space as they dominate through the visual image. But Silko's map—both the visual representation and the narrative one—generates storied knowledge that is based on personal experience and shared cultural history. By reshaping the conventional form of the map, Silko subverts the ideology of the mapping process. Rather than subordinating history and geography into a limited spatial construct—into the legend that defines an us (whoever that “us” may be)—she flips the map on its head. By visualizing the world differently, she suggests, the world will *be* different.

Through the stories, Sterling is especially drawn to the outlaws of Tucson's history, many of whom were Native or part Native, like the old Apache chief, Geronimo, or the gun-slinging John Dillinger. This outlaw past of Tucson, however, is still clearly a part of its present, and this is made immediately clear through Sterling's relationship with the gun and drug-running Zeta and Lecha and their cohorts. The Congress Hotel where Dillinger and his cohorts caroused is still a seedy hotel in downtown Tucson. Outlaws of various types are still vying for control of the city, its waterworks, and its border access to Mexico. The places where historical events took place capture Sterling's imagination; they ground the stories that he tells about the past in the present. Sterling likes other stories besides those of Dillinger and Geronimo, but he conceptualizes these Indian and white outlaw stories separately from the others. He thinks, “These were special because they were the ones in which Tucson played a special role” (74). As he visualizes them, Sterling relives the old stories. He recreates the old stories, the old history of Tucson, as he tells

Seese the way he imagines the events of the past as happening. But Sterling also seems aware that as he tells the old stories he is creating new realities as well.

Near the beginning of Sterling's and Seese's friendship he takes her on a tour of Tucson showing her the places that correspond to old historical photographs. In one instance, even the trash can in the old photograph appears to be the same trash can that they see in present time, along with the suspicious man and the blond woman, who "were making a spectacle of themselves, which was exactly what Dillinger's gang had done" (77). This scene occurs at the beginning of Almanac and it is as if Silko's narrator, right from the start, is giving the reader clues about how to read the whole of the Almanac: we are, she suggests, re-living the past in the present. Telling the old stories again revitalizes them, and it also recreates the reality that they represent(ed).

As the narrative progresses Seese begins to comprehend that she is a small part of a much bigger story, and perhaps even senses that she is a character in a kind of story—leading a storied life in the way that Cruikshank describes life as realized through narrative realities. People's lives, according to Lecha, are "stories in progress" (143). The kind of storied progress that Lecha's comment suggests, however, is not linear; it is a web-like progression where each story builds on another, creating an ever-larger web of thought with the narratives interconnecting in complex ways. Lecha also thinks of her dreams as "narratives in code" and she recognizes that her dreams create reality. Dreams and stories are inseparable for Lecha, like words and images. The stories that she constructs or dreams up are, like Robinson's stories, King's Coyote narratives and the visions and dreams of Fools Crow, "real" stories. Stories, once dreamed up and set loose, have real-life consequences. But the connection between dreams, stories and reality is not always

apparent. Seese, for example, talks about dreaming the pages of the old manuscript, and she says, "When I sit back down at the keyboard, the real manuscript page reads completely differently than in my dreams" (452). The connections between prophecy and story, story and reality, are intermingled and enmeshed with each other. Each sets off complex "chain reactions" (144) in ways that are difficult to predict and usually only understood in retrospect. Nothing, as several of Silko's Almanac characters realize, is ever random. Events widely separated across space and time remain part of each other.

For Sterling where and how certain events take place are more important than exactly when they take place. Sterling goes to great lengths to reproduce details from historical events accurately, but unlike Yoeme, he never mentions exact dates. The history that Seese learns from the places that Sterling takes her is a history that she has not known before. She recognizes it as an outlaw history, a marginal history, a substantial part of which is an Indian story like the story of Geronimo as a shape-shifter, a transformer. Seese says to Sterling, "I even went to college for a while and I don't know the things you do" (80). Her awareness that there is much that she does not know is another clue about how the reader should approach Almanac. The information that Silko makes available to us as a guide to our reading lies in the stories of her characters. Just as Robinson tells Wickwire stories to explain something of Okanagan thought and reality, Silko's book uses stories to explain her view of the world. And just like Wickwire, the reader of Almanac is likely to become confused and miss the point that is being made. To the non-Native reader stories that are meant to clarify are likely to obscure; for the Native reader it is possible that the role of the stories is transparently obvious.

To make sense of stories requires that we situate them culturally in both space and time. Mayan stories reflect a worldview where the conceptualization of space and reality lies inside of time, where the universe is spatialized (Portilla 55-56). Or, as Tedlock observes, where the stories take place in space is more important than when they take place in time (Popol Vuh 33-34). Place also anchors the stories of Robinson, King and Welch in ways that suggest the spatialization of time. But it is in Silko's Almanac that the intersections between the specific and the universal are most fully realized in the juncture between space and time. Her map of narrative space is filled with alphabetic words and with visual images, like that of the giant stone snake. Here we have words that evoke images and images that evoke words. Thought and substance are directly connected through the power of words, emphasizing a crucial difference between Laguna and European worlds. As Calabazas observes, once white people had a word for something, they forgot about the thing itself. This European "blindness to the world," the Native elders recognized, was a dangerous quality (Almanac 224). This blindness, Silko suggests, lies in not recognizing that words *are* things; it is in this context that Silko hinges post-conquest history on a mistranslation. The challenge that translation presents to the Native author is one that the Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong also struggles with as she tries to "construct bridges between...two realities" (191); she perceives linguistic "differences that have great influence on my worldview, my philosophy, my creative process, and subsequently my writing" (187).

Both Silko and Armstrong imply that the transformative power of words and stories lies in the conceptualization of words as things. The view of language that is presented in their writing is one where the referent seems to lie inside, rather than outside

of, language itself. The consequence of this view of language is that, as Armstrong states, "Perception of the way reality occurs is very different from that solicited by the English language. Reality is very much like a story: it is easily changeable and transformative with each speaker" (191). Silko says, "The squash blossom itself *is one thing*: itself. ... Even in the most sophisticated abstract form, a squash flower or a cloud or a lightning bolt became intricately connected with a complex system of relationships that the ancient people maintained with each other and with the populous natural world they lived within. A bolt of lightning is itself, but at the same time it may mean much more" (Yellow Woman 28). The arbitrariness of the sign, in this system, seems connected to storied referents hence "it may mean much more." Each word, each sign, is connected to numerous other signs within a complex storied and web-like structure.

One of the effects of this storied view of language is to amplify our notions of causality. Cause and effect no longer operate in a linear fashion. Through her association with the Yaqui twins, Lecha and Zeta, and the Laguna Sterling, Seese's comprehension of events shifts from one of personal cause and effect to an understanding of her place in a much larger (Native) history. In the white world the only hope for Seese is to lie on the analyst's couch. But in that world she is constructed as a victim rather than actively constructing herself as a survivor. The analyst might use Freudian paradigms to make sense of her hysteria and self-destructive nature (perhaps focusing on her apparent "death drive") and would pronounce her dis-ease as incurable—essentializing her identity in particular sorts of ways. In the European world of mainstream America Seese remains an outsider, her marginalized status reinforcing various normalized centres, for instance, the world of middle-class white suburbia where, clearly, Seese can never belong. Seese

realizes early on that, "She had to get rid of the feeling that Monte had been lost because of anything she had done,"(80) but it is not until much later in Almanac that she becomes cognizant that Monte is no longer alive. But the story is much larger than Seese's personal tragedy, and the narrative suggests that there is not much Seese could have done to prevent the sequence of events that ends in Monte's disappearance—a larger story connected to the Destroyers has been unleashed. This story has touched Seese's life and consequently her own lived narrative. By the end of Almanac, Lecha, Zeta and Calabazas prepare for another storied-cycle to begin; they reduce their use of drugs, organize their lives, and prepare for all hell to break loose, as Zeta says. The witch's story, which remains loose in the world, is about to come to an end.

By the end of Almanac, Sterling's exile from Laguna also comes to a close; his exile from the reservation has implied the displacement of both his physical self from the land of his youth, as well as a psychic separation from the stories and history of his people. Sterling, however, resists his displacement through both remembering the old stories at Laguna and learning about the history of Tucson. Sterling re-tells the stories of old Tucson to Seese and as he tells them, it seems as though those stories are still alive. He and Seese resemble the old Dillinger gang, and even the trash can in the old photo seems the same as the one that is there now (77). Sterling, like Silko, is re-telling old stories. He tries to draw word pictures of the Dillinger gang and of Geronimo as accurately as he can for Seese, his audience. By the end of their visit to the heart of Tucson, Seese feels uncomfortable and says, "I don't want to be anywhere near this place" (79); Sterling thinks precautions are a good idea "around people who had got rich off the suffering of Geronimo and his people" (81). Sterling's re-telling of Tucson history from the

perspective of a Native person is also a foreshadowing of the end of Almanac when the old Laguna stories come back to him. It is as though his experiences in Tucson make it possible for him to understand how the old ways continue to frame contemporary reality; this recognition makes it possible for him to return to Laguna.

The strongest characters in Almanac, among them Lecha, Zeta, Yoeme, Sterling and Calabazas, reclaim their identities through reconnecting with the land and the old stories. Calabazas, for instance, thinks about how most white people are afraid of the land and observes, "It was the land itself that protected people" (222). Just as the map at the beginning of the book records history, the image of memory that is evoked in Silko's passage about how narrative as analogue exists as a kind of map of memory. She says:

Narrative as analogue for the actual experience, which no longer exists; a mosaic of memory and imagination. An experience termed past may actually return if the influences have the same balances or proportions as before. Details may vary, but the essence does not change. The day would have the same feeling, the same character, as that day has been described having had before. The image of a memory exists in the present moment (Almanac 575).

Words and images are part of the same continuous web of thought. Time and space, fact and fiction, are interconnected. Yoeme, Lecha and Zeta, three Yaqui women, have come into possession of the ancient Maya almanac through their shared history, as Clarke observes (133). The children's flight north with the sacred almanac alludes to historical contact between the Maya and the Yaqui. Alice Kehoe notes that most American Yaquis are descendants of refugees who fled north from the Mexican Sonora between 1900 and

1935. She also observes that the Yaqui were “the most fiercely antagonistic” of Mexico’s Native peoples and that their militia was known as a “Coyote Society” (143-144). (Silko may have had this Coyote society in mind when she has Lecha and Zeta refer to their gun-running days as their “Coyote years”; the word continues to refer to someone who makes his or her living smuggling goods across the border, although now these “goods” are usually human beings like Alegria of Almanac.) Through the interpretation of the events of history as experienced continuously into the present, the connection between the old and the new is reinforced in ways that the Europeans do not seem to understand.

Almanac is centred around the problem of mistranslation of the pre-Columbian date of 11 AHU. The tension between the problem of mistranslation and authorial license in the re-telling of stories generates, in Almanac, a dialogic narrative where Native stories and history intersect with European ones. Like Robinson and King, Silko focuses on “getting the story right,” as King suggests in Green Grass, Running Water, it’s best not to make mistakes with stories or carpets. The “truth” of stories makes getting them wrong dangerous; it is a kind of blindness to the world, as Silko suggests (Almanac 224). But getting the story “wrong,” Silko suggests, is more likely through translation than through re-telling. Re-telling an old story recreates a new version of it within current frames of reference; each time a story is told, the story changes slightly to fit its new context and its “truth” remains alive. Storied recreations therefore focus on narratives as part of ongoing and living experience while translations run the risk of obliterating the sense of the original as they view the original through the lens of another language and another worldview. Alter points this out succinctly, observing that to “disambiguate” the biblical Genesis, translators ignored and reduced the complexity of the original (ix-xliii). He argues,

“Conventional biblical scholarship has been trigger-happy in using the arsenal of text critical categories, proclaiming contradiction wherever there is the slightest internal tension in the text, seeing every repetition as evidence of a duplication of sources, everywhere tuning in to the static of transmission, not to the complex music of the redacted story” (xlii-xliii). The complex nature of the stories preserved in the old almanac, Silko suggests, requires their re-telling—their recreation—in ways that represent contemporary Native worldview and history.

Tedlock points out that by focusing on the differences rather than on the similarities between the Judeo-Christian Genesis and the creation story of the Maya, we may recognize the “canyon” that separates these cosmologies (Spoken Word 269). These differences are reflected in how Yoeme writes a replacement story for a missing section of the old notebook. Yoeme says, “The problem has been the meaning of the lost section and for me to find a way of replacing it... Nothing must be added that was not already there” (129). The difficulty of her task is not one of reconstructing the veracity or authenticity of each single past event, employing empirical methods to determine what is fact and what is fiction, and thereby deciding what belongs in the notebook and what does not. Nor is her problem one of recovering the “original” or “authentic” text, the version that is “pure” and that somehow pre-exists all cross-cultural contact and experience. Her difficulty is one of how to accurately *represent* the meaning of the part of the notebook that is lost. The story that is lost, of course, is Yoeme’s own story—the voice of the Yaqui people themselves. The written almanac, like the old oral stories, is constantly changing and transforming. Almanac in this way provides us with an on going “place to see”—the book is a way of theorizing the world, how it works, and how we should behave in it.

Although Clarke argues that the non-linear and fragmented form of the “novel” reinforces the sense of loss and cultural rupture that occurred as the result of European conquest of the Americas, I suggest that Silko does something quite different and far more powerful. Rather than suggesting a fragmented and disrupted story, a dis-located kind of Almanac, Silko locates her book in a kind of discourse where we already need to know something before we can understand the book; as Louis Owens says of Ceremony, “Effective understanding of Silko’s novel requires at least minimal familiarity with the Pueblo world” (172). Like the Popol Vuh, which situates itself “in Christendom now” Almanac still needs to be read for its differences from, rather than its similarities to European-style literary texts, to explore the “canyon” that separates it from the those texts. In Almanac, as in Robinson’s storytelling performances, stories provide answers to questions. But to the outsider the context of those stories may not be transparent or self-evident. Just as Robinson’s lengthy and storied responses to Wickwire’s questions are misunderstood by her and cause further confusion, readers of Almanac, if the reviewers’ responses are any indication, often miss the points that Silko makes in her novel. Just as Wickwire needs to already understand something about Okanagan culture in order to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Robinson, the reader of Almanac already needs to know something about Pueblo and Maya culture and history.

Identity and Difference

In Almanac Silko maps out the space of the Americas in a way that it can no longer be controlled and dominated by white people. In both Storyteller and Ceremony she makes it clear that the creation of white people, and of all things European, is an act of

Native witchery. In Almanac the Destroyers are also viewed as indigenous, moving into the north from the south, and then later allying themselves with the Europeans. The differences between the Native destroyers and their European counterparts are less significant than their similarities. Calabazas thinks that the explorers and conquistadors had, in fact, conquered nothing when they arrived on the shores of Mexico. He observes, "The so-called conquerors merely aligned themselves with forces already in power" (220). The world is paradoxical: difference and similarity always exist together at the same moment.

Root, whose motorcycle accident and subsequent physical disability make him "different" from his family and (normal) white society, is marginalized from mainstream American life because of his difference. It is his personal history that has made him different, and consequently Root tries not to forget his accident. His family, however, would rather not remember, and Root's very survival is an uncomfortable reminder of the difference that history makes. But the difference between Native and white attitudes towards history is reflected in Root's urge to keep his mangled Harley: Native people understand why Root keeps the motorcycle, but whites, including Roots' mother, do not. She wants to forget what happened, and the only way she can do this is by forgetting about Root himself. Because of his disability, his difference, moreover, she regards Root as somehow mentally deficient, even though doctors have told her that Root's mental functioning has not been affected by his accident. To be different in white America means to be marginalized, to be regarded as less than "normal." The story of Root, for his family, ends when he is in their estimation handicapped by his disability.

But in reality Root's story does not end here and history cannot, in the end, be erased. Just as Root's Native friends understand the place of the past in his life, Native peoples' identification with Marx, Angelita realizes, has to do with Marx's instructions to remember history, instead of forgetting it. And one way to remember history is to recognize its existence into the present: the mangled motorcycle serves as a constant reminder of the events of the past, just as the landscape connects with the old stories and just as Yoeme's notebook explicitly preserves the understandings from an earlier time. The motorcycle, the land and the old stories, whether written or oral, may all be read as narrative texts that "tell" their own histories. Ridington has written that the Sacred Pole of the Omaha may be viewed as a text ("A Sacred Object as Text") and Cruikshank brings together oral tradition and material culture in her discussion of "ethnographic" objects as "translations" of culture (Social Life 98-115). Cruikshank states that in the indigenous discourse of the Subarctic, "Spoken words are primary and...material objects provide the essential illustrations for particularly meaningful stories" (Social Life 104) Words and things, like story and history, are ultimately inseparable in this schema.

In terms of historical representation Hayden White points out that the "*artificiality* of the notion that *real* events could speak themselves" was not a problem until the distinction between the real and the imaginary was imposed on the storyteller ("Narrativity" 276). The nature of the "real" and the "imaginary," however, is at least somewhat culturally constructed; the real and the imaginary in the texts of Robinson, King, Welch and Silko is not constructed in the same way that it is in most (Western) European literary texts. When the narrator of King's short story describes himself as "a writer, a novelist, a storyteller" and not a historian, the storyteller, Bella, says, "Same

thing” (249). In cultures where stories continue to “theorize the world,” it seems clear that events, motorcycles and landforms, among other things, can still speak themselves and they do so in authentic ways that reflect the experience of “being Indian.”

But to experientialism identity instead of essentializing it requires articulating difference and keeping the differences at play. Silko does this by subverting our expectations about what Native culture *is*, by who we think Native people *are*, as we read Almanac. We should perhaps remember here that the way a book is shaped affects how we read it: the title of Almanac already suggests how the book will subvert the linearity that the section and chapter headings appear to construct for the “novel.” Silko herself writes about how she works by “intuition and instinct” (Yellow Woman 135). In the interview with Thomas Irmer she discusses how the book originally had no chapter headings or headings of any sort; Silko says, “It was like a mountain and my editor couldn’t bear it... Then I remembered almanacs...” (qtd. in Irmer 1). The descriptor “novel” that was added to the cover of Silko’s book, no doubt, by the publisher adds to the irony of reading Almanac. Formally and thematically, Silko keeps the differences at play. The text consequently extends the limits of the novel and clashes the limits of native and white identities up against each other.

All of Silko’s characters, like Welch’s and King’s, defy easy categorization in terms of their identities as Native peoples. The cultural and individual differences between characters like Sterling, Yoeme, Lecha, Zeta, Calabazas, Mosca, Tacho, El Feo, Menardo and Iliana are as great as any similarities between them. “Survival,” thinks Calabazas, “depended on differences” (202). He tells Root, “I get mad when I hear the word *identical*. There is no such thing. Nowhere. At no time. All you have to do is stop and

think. Stop and take a look” (201). Calabazas instructs Root and Mosca to pay attention to differences in the physical features of the landscape; even the rocks are not static. The land is constantly changing, transforming itself in subtle sorts of ways. Silko’s focus on differences resonates with Robinson’s emphasis on the difference between Indian and white ways, and also where, as Robinson says, “They gets together sometimes” (qtd. in Chester 34). As Wickwire then later says, “The only way we can come together is to make the connections. Or understand the disconnections” (29). These differences also resonate with King’s play on oppositions in the Nasty Bumpo list of Indian and white characteristics. The differences between Natives and whites, these writers seem to be saying, are not easily compartmentalized in terms of essential characteristics.

Lecha, a Yaqui Indian, writes sections of the old notebook into English; other sections are in Spanish and there is the suggestion that some of the older, missing sections may have been written in an indigenous language. Yoeme, Lecha and Zeta reconstruct the old manuscript in a manner similar to the way that scribes recorded the Popol Vuh. Just as they use a variety of languages and forms in the re-creation of the missing sections of the old notebook, the Popol Vuh went through a series of translations and transformations, the changes in its form likely also shaping how it would be read. The text of the Popol Vuh, originally represented using Quiche hieroglyphs, was translated using Roman orthography, first into Quiche and later into Spanish, French and English. Tedlock notes, moreover, that:

The ancient scribes who only read and wrote characters of the New World kind, proceeding by word and syllable, added comments and noted recent events. So did the later scribes who read the ancient characters but rewrote

them as the consonants and vowels of Old World letters, creating the version of the Book we've been reading here. We seem to be entering a world where there is no reproduction, where every act of representation is also an act of interpretation" (Breath 8).

Every act of representation, of interpretation, also tells us another version of an old story, the interpretation itself becoming a part of the narrative in its new context.

The women's approach to re-creating the old almanac contains its own kind of methodology. It implies that what is important in the writing is the meaning that lies in the experience being represented. Moreover, the transformation of the text from oral into written, through Native languages into Spanish and English "re-replaces language"¹² as a part of Native culture. It recreates English as one more Native language in the late twentieth century experience of Native reality. Silko's, Robinson's, King's and Welch's use of the English language to convey Native worldview resists our reading of Native cultures through "an essentialist view of language or of some 'authentic' cultural experience" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 41). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out that while any one language constitutes reality in certain ways, "The worlds constituted in this way do not become fixed composites in the speaker's mind, a set of images which differs, by definition, from the set in the mind of the speakers of a different language" (44). Authenticity, Robinson, King, Welch and Silko's texts suggest, lies in experience.

Each telling and each writing of a story changes certain elements and creating a new text, but the story is always the same. The story will be told again and again. Almanac is like the story of Fools Crow in Welch's novel, a story that remains incomplete even while it gestures towards the whole of Blackfeet, and Native American, history. It is like

King's circular Coyote tale that ends only to begin again, with characters from Native tradition transformed through historical contact with the European into the guises of the Lone Ranger, Hawkeye, Robinson Crusoe and Ishmael. It is like Robinson's story of Coyote on the moon. When King writes his short story about attending a Sun Dance in southern Alberta he tells of meeting Bella, who tells him the Blackfeet creation story. She begins the story by mentioning that she had told this story before to a white university student who had not understood the story's meaning. The story, she says, is history. She then tells it again and again, changing the story slightly each time in the attempt to get her audience to understand the point she is making. King's narrator admits that he never does quite understand just what Bella is trying to tell him about history and story, but he does note that, "While the supporting facts changed in each telling of the story, the essential relationships—the relationship of humans to death and the relationship of balance to chaos—remained intact. Bella had begun here and crafted a set of facts to support these relationships, to create a story, to create history" ("Summer Vacation" 252). In *Almanac* Silko has crafted the same kind of history as she shows us how the Mayan Lords of the Underworld continue to play ball with the humans of the earth world.

¹ Bal illustrates this point by noting that most people in Europe are familiar with the story of Tom Thumb, but not everyone will have read the same text. She states, "There are different versions; in other words, there are different text in which that same story is related" (5).

² Tedlock notes in his introduction to the *Popol Vuh* that this sacred text is described by the Mayans as a "place to see" (21).

³ According to Joni Adamson Clarke, Silko made this comment at a "Brown Bag Lunch with Leslie Silko" at the Native American Graduate Student Office, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, on the 6th of April 1992. (Clarke 162).

⁴ Robin Ridington pointed out this feature of *Ceremony* in a course lecture at U.B.C. in the fall of 1992, as well as noting the points that Elaine Jahner makes about event structure in the novel.

⁵ I am using the word real here not in any psychoanalytic sense, but to express the idea of an everyday reality, the physical world as experienced.

⁶ A movie and at least one book has been written about the story of Betty and Barney Hill and their experiences with extra-terrestrials, and a discussion of events and the star maps that the Hills subsequently constructed, is available in the December 1974 issue of *Astronomy*. It is also available on-

line.

⁷ I want to thank Don Grayston, who teaches Religious Studies at Simon Fraser University for this understanding of prophecy, and for the storied anecdote that I use here.

⁸ As Robin Ridingont points out, Silko is both part of a matrilineal Pueblo culture and from an Anglo patriline. Gender shifting would be an obvious transformation for her, and there are many ways in which she resembles her character, Sterling (Personal email communication, August 28, 1999).

⁹ In Robinson's storytelling, for instance, he often uses the present tense: "But they keep going. And when they get to the edge of the rive, there was a little bank, you know, they get to the river to the water. And they swing 'em. And he sing a song, that man is on the canvas. And these others, they sing the song too. And they swing him a few times. At last they throw 'em. They tip the canvas over..." (Nature Power 88).

¹⁰ "Reinventing the enemy's language" is a phrase used by Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird, and forms the title of their book Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America.

¹¹ See Kehoe for a discussion of the importance of the *sipapu* as the place of emergence or creation for Pueblo peoples (131).

¹² This phrase forms part of the title of a chapter in The Empire Strikes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin.

CONCLUSION: Emerging Stories

*When a white writer, a black writer, and Indian writer sits down to write a book, they are all engaged in a form of the oral tradition.
(Sherman Alexie)*

These lands and waters and all elements of creation are a part of you, and you are a part of them; you have a reciprocal relationship with them. This belief is expressed time and time again in traditional song, ritual, prayer, and story, and in contemporary writing. Verbalizing, articulating, and practicing it in social and religious activities today is simply carrying on a traditional way of life that the oral narrative has expressed since the dawn of indigenous Native humankind and its culture. Today's novelists, poets, playwrights, essayists, songwriters, filmwriters, and others are simply continuing a tradition. (Simon Ortiz)

We are still here, still telling stories, still singing whether it be in our native languages or in the "enemy" tongue. (Joy Harjo)

Embodying a Storied World

The story of Almanac, like Fools Crow, Green Grass, Running Water, Write It On Your Heart and Nature Power, emphasizes how old stories and traditions are preserved through transformation and recreation. The notion of tradition carries with it the sense of age; traditions are "old" and generally viewed as being handed down through the generations in some kind of "natural" way. Traditions, moreover, belong to a community rather than an individual in the way that we often think of a novel as belonging to an individual author. Robinson, King, Welch and Silko share stories with their readers in ways that show the continued vitality of Native oral traditions. The old stories of the Pueblo and Maya peoples provide the key to understanding the novel that we read as Almanac of the Dead, just as the traditional culture stories of the Blackfeet situate Fools

Crow in Blackfeet reality, and other Native stories frame our understanding of Green Grass, Running Water.

Culture stories act as interpretive devices or explanatory systems in Green Grass, Running Water, Fools Crow and Almanac. The reader uses these stories to create meaning from out of the written texts. Ideally the reader constructs his or her own stories about the stories in a never-ending process, an exchange of meanings. This cycle of storied recursivity reflects Silko's comment that the role of the storyteller is to draw the stories out of the listeners. Readers need to use the knowledge that they have to create their own stories about the world. Knowledge, in this thought system, comes in narrativized or storied forms. And knowledge or theory, when it takes the form of narrative, always focuses on process and not product. Like tradition, narrative knowledge always and continually transforms itself.

Ong argues that writing restructures consciousness almost completely: we think differently in a print-based culture than people do in an orally based one. Yet it seems clear through reading open-ended and multiply-contexted literary works like Green Grass, Running Water, Fools Crow and Almanac of the Dead that orally told stories, as well as some of the features of oral storytelling performance may be effectively recreated in writing. But the idea of loss remains connected with notions of "translating" from oral to written. This focus on loss overlooks what may be gained in the process of translation and it also negates the capacity for change and transformation that is essential to the vitality of any tradition. A focus on artifice, and not artifact, characterizes many Native cultures, as Ridington has pointed out ("Technology, World View, and Adaptive Strategy"). Focusing

on artifacts (product) rather than on artifice (process) has caused the spirit of white people to begin to disappear, as Calabazas suggests in Almanac.

In order to preserve the old notebook in Almanac, the children first memorize the pages of the text and then eat them. Their physical bodies become part of the story that is being told; the children literally embody the stories of the past in order to carry them into the future. The children's corporeal bodies, moreover, are manifest with the power of words: they are the word made flesh. In their bodies we see written an oral tradition where the influences of writing contextualize the oral, as well as vice versa. We see that Europeans are not the only ones with written histories¹ and that the fluidity of Native storytelling tradition lies in its ability to move between categories that whites have constructed as oppositions.

Silko's use of Maya texts to suggest the movement from written to oral challenges some of the stereotypes that have been constructed around Native peoples, among them the idea that they were exclusively "oral" while Euro-Americans were "print-based." It resists the construction of Native identity into the stereotypes of "barbarian," "Noble Savage," or even "storyteller." (And it seems to me that there is now some danger in viewing all Native persons as storytellers by nature. Or environmentalists. These are quite different things from arguing that Native worldview, or Native theory, is usually narrativized.) In fact, Robinson's, King's, Welch's and Silko's written texts all reveal relationships between oral and written forms that are not tidy linear trajectories from oral to written. They all put "classificatory difference into play" in the way that Jacques Derrida suggests that the oral is "already written." And they all construct dialogic interactions between readers and written texts that resemble the interactions between

storytellers and audiences. The reader is a part of the story of each novel; the story is an old story.

Robinson, the most obviously “oral” of these storytellers, is keenly aware of the power of the written word, hence his desire that the stories be recorded and written down. His incorporation of European elements into Okanagan stories reflects his life experience; Robinson, like King, Welch and Silko brings non-Native elements into his stories because these are part of the Native world now too. I am reminded of the First Nations Pizza Parlour in Green Grass, Running Water and observe that, in the twentieth century, real Indians do eat pizza. The communal and shared aspects of an ongoing tradition of Native literature is exemplified in the image of how each of the children in Almanac eats particular sections of the notebook. Each contains some of the story; each child’s life story, like the life story of Yoeme that she writes into the missing section of the notebook, is a small whole that forms part of a much larger story. No one person presumes to have the whole story. Their stories, when joined together, form the people’s notebook—the story of a people. The gaps in the text, Silko implies, lie in the voices and lives of Native peoples whose stories have not been heard.

In the process of attempting to understand a little bit of the difference of Native literature—of coming to recognize some of the disconnections as well as connections between my ideas of literature and of culture, and of what I found in Robinson’s, King’s, Welch’s and Silko’s writing—I learned that I could not approach either the reading of (or the writing about) this literature in the way that I had learned during the course of my literary studies. For one thing, I could not do “close readings” of the text without explicitly bringing in cultural and historical contexts. The readings simply did not make

sense. Consciously or not, one always brings cultural and historical contexts to bear on any reading of any text, of course, but it seems easier to ignore the obvious when you are inside its world.

Theory is always brought into play in literary criticism. The question remains, however, whose theory, which perspective, should be used when approaching works from different cultures, whether in the same language or not. And I return again to Sarris's question, of whether we can read Hamlet and Ceremony in the same way. If we do read these two works in the same way, then we are translating without being cognizant of the fact. And by neatly fitting a reading of Ceremony into my own familiar literary (and, by implication, cultural) categories, I run the risk of mis-representing both Silko and myself. Realizing this, at least, I was then left with the question of how to read Native literature from a perspective other than my own. As a non-Native person, I cannot presume to read works of Native literature from a Native perspective. But Sarris argues that to read a text cross-culturally, the reader must account for his/her own interactions with the text, his or her own cultural backgrounds and biases. I can also question the categories that I use to interrogate literature and the boundaries between those categories. I am not sure, however, of how far I can step outside my worldview, and so I try to tread carefully and to listen a lot, as Robinson has instructed me.

Recognizing the limits of (my) academic discourse, the only answer seems to be to continue my dialogue with these texts in other ways. This awareness, however, has also made it difficult to conclude a dissertation on the topic. If I were to write it all over again, the story would be different. Like King's narrator in "How I Spent My Summer Vacation," I felt like I could repeat the story back to Bella more or less accurately. Now I

suspect Bella would sit me down and tell me the story again, while I tried to figure out exactly what I had got wrong. But, as Brown points out, continuity and non-closure are essential to oral tradition, so perhaps this is not a bad thing (5).

In beginning my own writing, I found that I had to resort to "anthropology" as I struggled to understand a little bit of the frames of reference in King's, Welch's and Silko's novels, and before I could even begin thinking about engaging in literary criticism. And the more I learned about Blackfeet, Pueblo and Maya culture, the more I learned I did *not* know. Most of this learning has had to come through books, in true academic fashion, although I am familiar with the landscape of the southern Okanagan and southern Alberta and I did spend some time in Tucson. In the end, however, all I really had to learn from were the stories themselves.

I have always read novels, and have always felt that I learned from them as well as enjoyed them. Connecting them with ideas about the power of storytelling, and understanding how stories really do construct reality in specific and concrete ways, has also touched my life in personal ways. These are not recorded in my writing here because personal narratives do not fit with conventional expectations about what academic writing should be like. Ridington says, "Academics, I theorized, conventionally theorize in writing. First Nations thinkers, I thought, conventionally theorize in a medium of narrated discourse" ("Cannon" 19). But we all tell stories some of the time. Brown seems to have experienced some of the same discomfort, and writes about the difficulty in integrating professional and personal interaction into the stories that she worked with. She says, "I had been taught to perceive my scholarship as distinct...to consider work separate from private life. I had learned to compartmentalize my life" (70). Ironically, the essay of hers

that I quote from here was turned down as part of an edited collection for being “too personal” in style (Ridington Personal Email communication, June 6, 1999). But the image of the children’s bodies as living vessels or containers of the stories continues to resist this kind of compartmentalization and suggests instead a more holistic view.

Native literature shares with ethnography the experience of translating culture into writing, as Ridington has pointed out. Brown writes of some of the perceptions that she had to give up when she became a scholar of Native American literature. She states that the first thing she had to release was “dualistic perception” and that she quickly learned that the stories always came out of “a richly textured oral tradition” (2-3). She observes, moreover, that, “Written words are merely the extension of that tradition, not a reflection of a higher form of culture and sophistication” (3). Brown then shows how stories and their connection to everyday life and reality cannot be separated or compartmentalized, illustrating her argument with examples from Silko’s stories of Yellow Woman and connecting them with personal stories about her own experiences in researching the life of Mourning Dove. She states that the most radical thing she has learned through her dialogue with Silko’s storytelling “has been to recognize my part in the story” (7).

Brown’s awareness that *all* the stories are connected to every other in a web-like manner, and her observation that, “From the middle of the web linear thinking can look self-absorbed, immature, and contrived” (4) describes some of the frustration I felt. How could I fit a web with its multiple threads of narrative, moving in all directions, into the genre of an academic dissertation? Almanac, in particular, resisted attempts to structure passages and sections in terms of categories like space/time and story/history. Every point I made, every reference to Almanac, threatened to slip into another section. Brown’s

realization that she had to shed “dualistic perceptions” in order to engage in dialogues with Silko’s storytelling means that it is no longer possible to separate literature from the experience of the everyday world. Dis-embodied, the stories can no longer live; the children remain a crucial part of the stories that their bodies hold within them.

It is because dialogue and dialogistic texts suggest their situatedness in terms of *parole* rather than *langue* that they can take us into other worlds of experience. Each text, each particular version of a story, functions like Bakhtin’s notion of the *utterance*. An utterance can be expressed as a single word, a sentence or an entire book. It can be as simple as the interjected “See?” that Robinson frequently inserts into his storytelling performances. What distinguishes the utterance, however, is that it always presumes a response from someone who is listening. This is different from a system that sees *langue* as primary, for *langue* only exists at an abstract level. In fact, it does not really exist at all. In linguistics, individual instances of language use act as (synchronic) data from which an “ideal” expression is abstracted. But that expressed ideal can never be concrete or real itself. You would never hear an instance of *langue*.

In a sense Saussure’s view of language is similar to Plato’s view of literature; Plato sees literature as gesturing towards some ideal reality. In this system literature is a second order system: it reflects reality, and the extent to which it mirrors the real world and simultaneously gestures towards utopia is the measure of its value. It is when this dualistic perception of *langue* (as idealized) and *parole* (as experienced) is displaced that stories have the power to create and re-create reality. Stories can then interact intimately with the world rather than transparently reflecting it.

The notion of living a storied life, of embodying the stories, ties language and reality together in powerful ways. Robinson, King, Welch and Silko connect past and present through a storied reality where, as Linda Hogan says, “Words...are a materialization of consciousness” (141). Hogan, like many Native writers, understands language and stories as “concrete, the word standing for what it signifies” (135). My own categories of understanding cannot explain a system where the word and the deed are the same thing. I have been taught all my life that thinking, talking or writing about something is worlds apart from doing it. I think, for instance, about how we teach small children that it is perfectly fine to *think* about hitting another child, so long as they do not act on their thoughts. And I wonder about how we might frame similar teachings in new and different ways.

This other view of language means that I can no longer fully separate my experience of the world from my expression of it. What is fact and what is fiction? I recognize that my perception always interprets the world and creates my reality. Thus, I could tell the story of my life in very different ways in different contexts, to suit the situation—and yet every version would be “factual.” Magical realism, a literary concept, I argue cannot really be described as characteristic of Native literature because the term implies the distinction between real and unreal in ways that are constructed by white cultures. But in a literature class, when I use the “anthropological approach” to describe the juncture between dreaming and waking worlds in novels like Fools Crow, I run the risk of appearing “un-literary” in my analyses. I therefore spend considerable time explaining how stories or narratives could possibly create real worlds of experience. I talk about narrative theory. And when I connect narrative and narrativized knowledge to the

real world, I spend a lot of time being “un-literary.”² I think again of what Robinson says of stories, that they should be enjoyed and that we should learn from them at the same time. (Of course, the idea that learning, or “work,” should be experienced as pleasurable also strains against the Protestant/Calvinistic underpinnings of North American society.)

If we lose our dualistic perceptions, fact and fiction become less rigid categories of thought and Bella’s idea that story *is* history begins to make a new kind of sense. Stories connect past and present. How we tell the stories tells something about who we are and about the social conditions in which we are writing. Tedlock, for instance, discusses how Cortes did not write his interpreters into his account of the conquest of Mexico, and he shows how Cortes used indirect discourse to construct a text where he creates his own subject-position as “conqueror” of Mexico. Cortes presents the story from his own point of view and erases the voices of any interpreters that might suggest exchanges of meaning (Tedlock “Dialogues” 163-179). He tries to eliminate the possibility of other stories, other voices, being heard; Cortes creates monologue from out of dialogue. But Cortes’s accounts have long been used to re-create the “neutral and objective” historical texts that children are still taught in schools today.

In a comparative context, we often ascribe similarities between texts where there are, in fact, crucial differences, as Tedlock notes. A description of a primordial flood in the Popol Vuh, for example, may evoke the idea of Genesis in us, when, in fact the words that are used to describe ensuing events are antithetical. The meaning of the two events is different when each is set in their cultural context. The primordial calm of the Popol Vuh contrasts with the primordial state as a maelstrom in Genesis (Tedlock Spoken Word 263). Comparison constructs knowledge in particular sorts of ways and we should be

careful of applying comparative criteria across cultures, and to be suspicious of similarity when we find it. There is always the danger of obliterating difference in the search for universals—and by now we should know just whose “universal” paradigm is likely to become hegemonic.

The novels of King, Welch and Silko present readers with old stories situated in a Native world that contains many different cultural influences. The intended audience of these new stories is both Native and non-Native; there is a sense in each of these works that, like Robinson, the authors want these stories to be heard. In highly literate contexts, through an English language, these authors illustrate how the old stories are still being told and continue to work their power in culturally specific ways. Tayo, in *Ceremony*, perhaps reflects the connection between a storied past and present most succinctly when he finally recognizes that the old ways have not disappeared:

He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together - the old stories, the war stories, their stories - to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time” (246).

The boundaries as Tayo has experienced them have been artificial, white constructs.

Emergent Dialogues

Many of the presuppositions about oral tradition and orality are still saturated with opposition—oral and written, white and Native, self and other. But differences are more

complex than their easy reduction into linguistic oppositions suggests. The syncretism of oral tradition moves extends that tradition. But, as Silko points out:

Europeans were shocked at the speed and ease with which Native Americans synthesized, then incorporated, what was alien and new. Mexican Indians had embraced Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the saints almost at once; the Indians had happily set the Christian gods on their altar to join the legions of older American spirits and gods. The Europeans completely misread the inclusivity of the Native American worldview, and were disgusted by what they perceive to be weakness and disloyalty by the Indians to their Indian gods. For Europeans, it was quite unimaginable that Quetzalcoatl might ever share the altar with Jesus (Yellow Woman 177).

The study of literature concerns itself with boundaries, from the construction of literary canons, to course descriptions focusing on categories like prose or poetry, twentieth century Canadian or post-colonial literatures, and so on. Even the idea of contemporary Native literature reinforces this kind of categorization.

The kind of inclusivity—an inclusivity based on differences—that Silko describes makes it impossible to construct binary oppositions. In this worldview, there is no separation between stories as literature and stories as a way of theorizing the world. Ceremony, performance and ritual, and even the connections between land and people, are anchored in story. Thus, the novels of King, Welch and Silko cause us to ask basic questions about our understanding of the world. Their ontological and epistemological status are as relevant to the conversation as their literary qualities. Silko's critique of the lack of inclusivity in Western worldviews, highlights an ongoing problem: will we now

“let” novels like Ceremony and Almanac of the Dead share centre stage with the canonical texts of American literature written by Melville, Hawthorne and Cooper? When King writes Captain Ahab and Ishmael and Natty Bumpo and Chingachgook into his novel he asks the same question. And he simultaneously shows us that, whether we like it or not, these characters and texts have become part of a Native story, just as English has become another Native language.

Literature written by Native authors in North America is usually situated in a marginal space on the periphery of mainstream American or Canadian literatures. Criticism often centres on the not-so-subtle expectations of what constitutes “great” or “universal” literature. Reviewers of works written by Native authors have often suggested that the plots do not satisfy; novels do not have coherent beginnings, middles and endings; character development is “weak”; there are too many characters; the Native culture represented does not seem “authentic”; the bleak view of reserve life is too negative. These responses come out of externally imposed views of what and who is Native and what is not, a concern that Sarris also sees reflected back in much of the literature itself. All of these responses, however, seem to share the view that literature is a separate system, closed to the outside world. One reviewer, for instance, described Almanac as “an unholy mess”; I found myself thinking, in response, “Life *is* messy.” Re-presenting life as a tangled web of story seems to fit that messiness better than linear story lines. Brown connects our dislike of a non-linear messiness with our culture’s dislike of spiders and their webs. When we sweep away spiders’ webs, as Brown observes we do, however, we often sweep them under things and into corners. They are really still there, their presence hidden; but the spiders and are webs are not really absent.

The webs of story are woven into the fabric of the land as well as of the imagination. Cartography processes physical space in the same way that the alphabet processes acoustic space. In many ways therefore, it is the land, as the living body on which people breathe, eat and sleep, that also connects oral and written traditions, just as it is the children's bodies who live and breathe the stories of the past. When one speaks, one fills acoustic space. The oral is thus already spatialized, already connected to the physical space of the land. In its containment of space, the map at the beginning of Almanac shows us how place connects with oral storytelling, oral tradition, through writing. The image reinforces, through self-conscious spatial distortion, how borders are artificial constructs. Silko's map evokes, in a visual image, the fluidity and syncretism that is characteristic of Native oral traditions, showing how these move beyond the verbal to include other modes of thought. Through the convergences on the map Silko also reinforces how each story contains and evokes every other.

Lisa Philips Valentine and Regna Darnell point out that in "the practice of theorizing the Americanist tradition" critics enter into a dialogue with Native American traditions as well, and that the theorizing between them must remain conversational, or dialogic (4). The only way I can have a conversation with the stories of Robinson, King, Welch and Silko is to account for my own interactions with the text, as Sarris suggests. But I have found this difficult to do in the genre of the dissertation and have often veiled my experience of the text in subtle and not so subtle ways that are typical of academic discourse. I have struggled with how to foreground my engagement in the dialogue, accounting for my own personal experiences, and at the same time conforming to

academic genre conventions. I am not accustomed to writing theory as narrative so there could likely be another version of this story.

In anthropology and other social sciences much emphasis has been placed on examining how texts are socially constructed. The idea that there can be such a thing as a neutral and observable “fact” that is then translated into a verbal construct has undergone intense scrutiny—but researchers have then had to go out and collect their data anyhow. In literature departments we also know that language is never neutral or transparent and we recognize that realism is as much a convention as modernism, surrealism or post-modernism. But literary critics have not foregrounded their experience as they interact with literary texts in the same way that anthropologists have when conducting their fieldwork, as Sarris notes (122). In the realm of the literary, the notion of fiction as dealing with “fictional” worlds of experience seems to insulate the literary critic from any engagement with the outside world.

As Tedlock points out, when we are reading cross-culturally, the question is not, “What pieces of data can this text contribute to current theory, but, “What kind of world is theorized by this text?” (“Dialogues” 178). The culturally specific characteristics that are reflected in these various novels require different models of literature and literary criticism, and changing the roles they have in the world we live. As we shift perspectives, the world as we understand it changes. And whether we like it or not, we are being written into the stories.

Listening to stories
Reading stories
Embodied narratives
The body of the story
Living life like a story

I realize we are all
Stories in process.
As Lecha says.

The story of this writing
has no beginning, middle or ending.
It ripples into other stories, other lives.
It cannot be contained.

Spoken words
Slipping into written words,
Sub-merged writing.

Words,
Sometimes hanging in the air
Taking up space
Long after the voice is gone
We hear the stories.

¹ Schele has written that the Mayans have a 1000 year *written* history and Tedlock observes how there has been considerable resistance to this idea, as well as the discovery that Maya writing was phonetic.

² One literary critic who reviewed a forthcoming publication objected to my consistent use of the word "story" in my essay. I suspect if I had used the word "narrative" more frequently, and "story" less, it would have been less problematic.

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