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**INDIGENOUS
NARRATIVES OF
RESISTANCE**

MICHAEL D. WILSON

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Indigenous Resistance Fiction

Indigenous peoples in the United States have a long history of voicing resistance through literature to destructive policies and attitudes of colonialism. In most cases, indigenous resistance writing uses both the conventional language and form that is acceptable to a general American readership: essays, histories, newspaper writing, sermons, autobiographies, short stories, and novels. William Apess, for instance, a Christian Pequot minister writing in the 1830s, admonishes Americans for their treatment of indigenous peoples, employing innovative and at times brilliant rhetorical strategies, yet remaining firmly within the conventional traditions of “conversion narratives,” according to Barry O’Connell (1992, xiv). Similarly, indigenous writers George Copway, William Whipple Warren, and Chief Elias Johnson, among others, offer historical narratives quite different from the American vision of heroic triumph over the forces of pagan savagism, yet they write within the linear tradition of European historiography.

Other writers resisting destructive representations of indigenous peoples through conventional forms include Pauline Johnson, who offers a critique of the philosophical relationship between Americans and indigenous peoples through short fiction, and Charles Eastman, who quietly exposes the hypocrisy of a Christian nation's relationship to indigenous peoples in his autobiography. Although these writers challenge the institutions that attempt to erase indigenous peoples from the landscape of America, they do not challenge the institutional language and forms. And rightly so, for indigenous writers are not likely to gain the attention of a large audience if they experiment with conventional forms. As Roland Barthes observes, "'provocative' *thought*, insofar as it is immediate (without mediation), can only exhaust itself in the no man's land of form: the scandal is never total" (Barthes 1972, 149). Disembodied and institutional, the forms of literature such as the sermon or short story nonetheless provide a useful (but not neutral) medium of exchange for the provocative thought of resistance literatures. Indeed, these forms seem to promise a transparent (Barthes might say theological) medium through which indigenous writers can communicate reason and evidence to sway public opinion against oppression and injustice.

Although useful and even necessary, conventional forms of writing are in fact neither neutral nor transparent, for they sometimes carry within them philosophies or relationships of power that do not always reflect the interests of indigenous peoples. Sermons, for instance, provide Samson Occum and William Apess with a means to discuss colonialism in addressing their intended audiences; but at the end of the day this institutional form, by its very nature, expresses a hierarchical relationship between Christian religions and indigenous beliefs and practices. Similarly, autobiographies such as Sarah Winnemucca's *Life among the Piutes* and Luther Standing Bear's *My People, the Sioux* are useful vehicles for explaining the cultural practices of a tribal group or personalizing the destructive forces of colonialism; yet the autobiographical form itself suggests an ethos of individualism that is contrary to a vision of communal identity that is central to many indigenous groups. In short fiction and novels, perhaps the most conventional forms in contemporary fiction, the structure of conflict and resolution may appear to some readers to be a natural element of the human experience—humanity against humanity; humanity

against nature; the individual against culture, against a particular ideology, or against the forces of history. Indigenous writers such as John Joseph Mathews, N. Scott Momaday, and James Welch, working within the modernist tradition of American literature, have used this thematic approach with considerable artistry to express the conflict between indigenous societies and the forces of colonialism. Within the philosophies of indigenous peoples, however, the idea of conflict as the basis of cultural expression may be antithetical to a relational, perhaps familial attitude toward the world and the people around them. Certainly, the indigenous relationship between humanity and nature is unlikely to have either the kind or the degree of conflict held by Europeans who saw the New World as an untamed wilderness or as a blank slate upon which one writes the story of triumph and conquest.

In her *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Paula Gunn Allen observes that in many works about indigenous peoples, the form greatly determines the content, particularly in fiction by nonindigenous writers. Allen writes: “Perhaps as a result of following western literary imperatives, most writers of Indian novels create mixed-blood or half-breed protagonists, treating the theme of cultural conflict by incorporating it into the psychological and social being of the characters” (Allen 1986, 81). In such narratives of conflict, success for characters often depends on their ability to overcome psychological or social conflict and then to (re)integrate themselves into a tribal world (rarely, if ever, into the non-Indian world). William Bevis calls these representations of success “homing in” narratives, centripetal movements of the characters back to traditional centers of culture. Indeed, for Bevis, “coming home . . . is not only the primary story, it is a primary mode of knowledge and a primary good” (Bevis 1987, 582). Almost all modernist novels by indigenous writers follow this general format: for instance, McNickle’s *Winds from an Enemy Sky*, Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, and Welch’s *Winter in the Blood*. In contrast, narratives of conflict result in failure when protagonists are unable to envision their identities in either indigenous or nonindigenous societies (the tragic Indian “caught between two worlds”), a result of either their own personal failings or destructive forces beyond their control. Examples include McNickle’s *The Surrounded*, Welch’s *The Death of Jim Loney*, and Linda Hogan’s *Mean Spirit*. Indeed, Allen claims that this

narrative form may even determine the racial makeup of protagonists, for “mixed blood” characters provide a visible sign of social tension to readers.

Indigenous fiction that focuses on conflict and resolution, then, may tell much less about the cultural narratives of an indigenous community than they tell about necessities of the literary form—in other words, fiction that is not “true to life” so much as it is “true to form.” Indigenous people in America—and indeed nonindigenous people as well—live in culturally hybrid environments, where resolutions of cultural conflict are neither possible, given the limits of nativism (what or when is “true” indigenous or American culture?), nor always desirable, especially now that indigenous peoples appropriate world cultures for their own ends. Yet in contemporary fiction, as Kimberly Blaeser points out, “homing in” narratives demand resolutions to culturally hybrid positions, for unresolved liminality remains thematically untenable and stylistically unsatisfactory. Unless the mixed-blood characters in fiction “reach that resolution,” Blaeser writes, “they exist in and are depicted in a tragic state” (1996, 158). She argues that writers such as Gerald Vizenor challenge these forms of fiction, revising the figure of the liminal mixed blood from one of unresolved tragedy into one of vitality, humor, and survival (or *survivance*, to use Vizenor’s neologism: a combination of survival and resistance). In his novel *Bearheart*, for example, Vizenor offers a quite different form of mixed-blood fiction, where success in the novel is not determined by the resolution of a protagonist’s mixed-blood identity, but by whether or not the characters demonstrate compassion for those around them. The narrative form of *Bearheart* follows this unconventional approach to mixed-blood identity, offering within a metafictional frame two distinct forms of narrative: an indigenous four-worlds narrative and a regressive, linear narrative recapitulating the stages of American progress. Vizenor’s resistant narrative is thus an implicit critique of forms such as mixed-blood conflict or Manifest Destiny that legitimate destructive representations of indigenous peoples.

The primary focus of this book is to examine different ways in which writers such as Vizenor use indigenous oral traditions to resist the metanarratives and other forms of representation that demand the disappearance of indigenous peoples—for example, Manifest Destiny, social Darwinism, and the inevitable plight of the tragic mixed blood. Yet, when writers use

oral traditions to counter the discourse of colonialism, shifting the context of indigenous traditions from orality to writing, they inevitably foreground important questions of authenticity and ethics. Indigenous writers Jana Sequoya Magdaleno and David Treuer point out that oral traditions, taken from their authentic contexts as living traditions existing for the benefit and enjoyment of indigenous communities, ironically become merely signs of authenticity for many readers when placed within the foreign context of contemporary fiction. As signs rather than systems, oral traditions become like any other repeatable sign of Indianness frequently appearing in fiction (and elsewhere): wise elders, environmentalism, exotic spirituality, fatalism, and so on. And like these signs of Indianness, oral traditions are easily adopted and reproduced by writers whose relationships to these traditions are largely textual, academic, and even imaginary—including such writers as Carlos Castaneda, Tony Hillerman, Jamake Highwater, Forrest Carter, and Lynn Andrews. Furthermore, Magdaleno argues that even in the hands of gifted indigenous writers such as N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko, oral traditions necessarily become part of an “alienated context” that provides only the illusion of authenticity, in fact denying the existence of vital traditions and instead producing “textual necrophilia” (Magdaleno 2000, 292). Treuer adds a similar view of Silko’s use of mythological stories in *Ceremony*. He writes: “They are stage props. They are on the stage but they are not the play” (Treuer 2002, 60).

While many writers certainly use the oral tradition as a kind of prop within the context of conventional narratives, some indigenous writers have instead based the entire trajectory of their novels either on specific oral stories or on narratives derived from concepts of orality, such as the use of multiple narrators that suggest subjectivity both in points of view and in the grain or nuance of the spoken voice. While these novels do not, of course, escape questions of authenticity and ethics, especially when the novels unwisely include sacred or private tribal information, the oral stories in these novels are sometimes both the stage and the props, offering alternative, even resistant forms of narratives against generic expectations. For example, the first novel based on an indigenous oral story is Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea* (1929), a narrative that foregrounds its resistance to previous representations of

indigenous people in stock Western novels. Specifically, when the eponymous protagonist reads a Western novel entitled *The Brand*—an actual 1914 book by Theresa Broderick—she becomes so enraged with the actions of a subservient Indian character that she throws the book into the fire. Rather than mimic the form and thematic conventions of the stock Western, Mourning Dove conceived the book as the rewriting of a traditional Okanogan oral story about a chipmunk and Owl Woman (Mourning Dove 1990, 51–59). As an itinerant farm worker, however, who carried her typewriter from job to job, Mourning Dove had little hope of finding a publisher until she met Lucullus McWhorter, an amateur ethnologist and collector of Indian artifacts. It is both tragic and telling that McWhorter revised the novel so that it might be more appealing to an American reading public—adding footnotes, epigraphs, and sections depicting indigenous peoples as mythical, warring, and ultimately doomed. The result is a highly uneven novel that oscillates between visions of indigenous survival and destruction, but is it also a novel that starkly demonstrates how differing beliefs about representation produce much different kinds of fiction about indigenous people.

In the first chapters of this book, I consider questions of authenticity and ethics as they relate to different works of indigenous literature such as Momaday's *Way to Rainy Mountain*, Silko's *Storyteller*, and her novel *Ceremony*. In particular, I examine how traditions of the social sciences such as ethnology and anthropology, which have predominated in studies of indigenous people and continue in recent literary studies, foreground the binary opposition of purity and impurity, authenticity and inauthenticity, necessarily placing all contemporary forms of indigenous expression in a subaltern position. I also consider Magdaleno and Treuer's incisive criticism that the use of oral traditions in contemporary literature is frequently offered as a sign of authenticity, rather than an expression of indigenous sensibilities. In the second part of the book, I look at specific works of indigenous literature that do not use indigenous traditions as signs of authenticity, but instead as patterns, to use Frantz Fanon's term,¹ for narrative of resistance: Mourning Dove's *Cogewea*, Vizenor's *Bearheart*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, and Ray Young Bear's *Black Eagle Child*. With the exception of the conflicting structure in *Cogewea*, the trajectory of the narratives in these later novels reflects aspects of orality

that not only suggest indigenous forms of fiction, but also underscore areas of concern quite different from plots based on conflict and blood identity. In Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, for instance, the novel enacts some of the complexities of orality by using the form of multiple "voices," each providing different perspectives on people and events in this tribal community. This narrative form coincides with one of the central questions for the characters: namely, whether they are able to "hear," or at least accept, the changing, contradictory, and often unfathomable subjectivities of others. Young Bear's *Black Eagle Child* also draws from indigenous oral tradition by shaping the lives of the characters and the history of community in a metamorphic journey that mirrors a religious ceremony in the early chapters of the novel. In this metamorphic narrative, characters leave their homeland—physically and sometimes spiritually—and attempt to return with new perspectives about themselves and their community. The novel suggests that such journeys are important and even necessary, especially if the community is to complete its journey back to its traditional system of governance. At the same time, the journeys are also quite dangerous, for characters sometimes lose their way, return home damaged, or perhaps worst of all, return home to find that the community no longer accepts them or their new perspectives. Rather than completely reject culturally hybrid positions, then, *Black Eagle Child* uses a metamorphic approach that both complicates the "homing in" narrative, and also foregrounds the necessity of incorporating aspects of other cultures into one's own.

This book follows the trajectory of several studies that examine resistant narratives, including Phyllis Peres's *Transculturation and Resistance in Lusophone African Narrative*, Mudrooroo Narogin's *Writing from the Fringe*, and Barbara Harlow's *Resistant Literature*. These authors examine poetic and fictional works by postcolonial writers who appropriate literary forms to resist colonial representations of cultures and history that are both false and self-justifying. In her chapter "Narratives of Resistance," for example, Harlow demonstrates how authors such as Sergio Ramirez (Nicaragua), Manio Argueta (El Salvador), and Siphon Sepamla (South Africa) reconstruct historical narratives so that they expose the language of colonial control. For instance, Ramirez's *To Bury Our Fathers* contains six distinct but somewhat

fragmented plots, each representing different threads of Nicaraguan history. Both the complexity of differing historical narratives and also the complexity of the psychology of speakers create, according to Harlow, “a panoramic vision of contradictions riddling Nicaraguan society in the first half of the century” (Harlow 1987, 93). Stylistically and thematically, this irreducible complexity in the novel undermines Anastasio Samoza’s dictatorial attempt “to maintain systemic control over the popular chorus of oppositional elements within the society” (93–94). Harlow writes: “Formal experimentation is in fact characteristic of these ‘resistant narratives’” (95). Consequently, these novels not only expose the narrative alibis for colonial power, they also reflect the complex, internal tensions within postcolonial societies through the use of innovative narrative structures.

Citing Harlow’s book as a resource, Phyllis Peres similarly demonstrates how prominent Angolan writers Luandino Vieira, Uanhenga Xitu, Pepetela, and Manuel Rui appropriate colonial discourse through the process of transculturation to create an imagined, hybrid, and contentious nation-space. She writes:

Homi Bhabha has described the liminality of the nation-space as that narration of selfhood that does merely define itself in otherness, that is, in relation to other nations. Rather the narration of nation creates a liminal signifying space that deconstructs the monolithic construct of “we, the people” so that the imagined community is that of a heterogeneous, oftentimes contentious people. (Peres 1997, 67)²

In her chapter on the fiction of Pepetela, for instance, Peres describes how his novel *Lueji* enacts or performs its own central tensions between historical truth (*verdade histórica*) and the truth of oral stories (*verdade estória*) by offering a narrative strategy that includes multiple levels, variations of tales, and contradictory narratives. This strategy not only reflects the contentious versions of history in Angola, it also foregrounds the importance of oral stories, “the narrative form that has become most identified with emergent Angolan national literature” (82). Likewise, in her chapter on the works of Manuel Rui, Peres once again shows how fiction performs the tensions of orality and writing in “the

complex and changing narration of nation" (95) Specifically, in his short story "O Relógio," Rui describes the performance of a former guerrilla commander who tells a group of children about a watch taken from a Portuguese major and later offered in exchange for prisoners. Peres writes: "Each week, the *estória* is transformed through the active role of the commander's audience—children who ask questions, change details, and thus re-tell the tale as collective authors" (94). Just as the exchange of the watch challenges linear, hegemonic concepts of the time, so too does the oral story challenge the received colonial narration of history and offer the possibility of "future imaginations of nation and possibilities of collective authorship" (95).

In similar fashion, Mudrooroo Narogin demonstrates how Aboriginal artists in Australia appropriate and revise non-Aboriginal forms of expression in poetry, fiction, drama, the visual arts, and music. Mudrooroo is responding in part to Australian critics from "Anglo-Celtic" traditions who dismiss the works of Aboriginal artists as being more protest than poetry, and he is also responding to Aboriginal poets who, in his view, rely too heavily on European forms for their works. Thus, while Mudrooroo defends the works of Aboriginal writers against these critics, he also harshly critiques their approach, even suggesting that their works should be replaced entirely.³ He writes: "The aim is to destroy the type of poetry directed at the majority community by poets such as Jack Davis and Oodgeroo Noonucal and to replace it with the desires in the shape of language and structure which are found in the depths of Aboriginal being" (Mudrooroo 1990, 38). Mudrooroo has in mind the unconventional poetry of Lionel Fogarty, a writer whose work not only reflects an Aboriginal sensibility in both substance and form, but also a writer who enacts the very processes of Aboriginal artistic expression by finding his inspiration in dreams.⁴ It is a method, Mudrooroo tells us, that corresponds to "traditional Aboriginal society," where "the dreaming of literary works such as the Ngurlu of the Kimberly region of Western Australia is the accepted form of literary creation" (Mudrooroo 1990, 37). In drama, the visual arts, and music, Mudrooroo locates similar examples of expression that resists non-Aboriginal forms and subsequently helps to resist the process of assimilation of Aboriginal people into a metropolitan Australia. Thus, for Mudrooroo, literature plays an important part in an active struggle

to maintain an Aboriginal “independent identity” within the larger desire for political independence in Australia (14).

As with poetry, Mudrooroo finds few novels that employ Aboriginal forms, offering as an example only his own *Doin' Wildcat* because it “utilizes Aboriginal speech patterns throughout” (Mudrooroo 1990, 28). Mudrooroo cites two reasons for the dearth of such Aboriginal novels: the cost of producing longer works of fiction, and the editing process of the publishing industry. On the one hand, Mudrooroo sees little evidence of a growing body of Aboriginal resistance fiction. He writes: “Except for *Doin' Wildcat*, there is no sign that the Aboriginal novel will break radically from European-derived models” (28). Yet on the other hand, Mudrooroo appears to hold out for the possibility that small Aboriginal publishing houses will exert more editorial control when publishing fiction by Aboriginal writers who are “least affected by assimilation” (30). Furthermore, Mudrooroo applies Frantz Fanon’s three stages of intellectual decolonization to Aboriginal literatures, perhaps in the hope of demonstrating how future novels may move toward forms of resistance. For example, to illustrate Fanon’s first stage of decolonization, where writers imitate European forms because they desire acceptance or equality, Mudrooroo offers his own novel *Wildcat Falling* (1965), “with its emphasis on the outsider and laced with quotations from Samuel Beckett” (29). Mudrooroo does not give examples of Fanon’s second stage, in which the colonized writer “has only exterior relations” with his own people “and is content to recall their lives” (29).⁵ Fanon himself suggests that the colonized writer in this stage produces only a kind of ineffective literary ethnology; he or she has “no hesitation in using a dialect in order to show his will to be as near as possible to the people” (Fanon 1963, 223). In this second stage, Fanon observes that “old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed estheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies” (222). In his 1959 address “On National Culture” to the second Congress of Black Writers and Artists, Fanon emphasizes again and again that the most important goal of any colonized people is not the expression of their unique cultures, but the struggle for freedom and independence. In a famous observation, Fanon writes: “You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out little-known cultural treasures under its eyes” (223).

The signal feature of his third stage, the “fighting” stage, Fanon tells us, is that the author desires to “shake the people,” to become an “awakener of the people” by writing a literature that inspires a communal desire for the liberation of their nation. He writes:

The crystallization of the national consciousness will both disrupt literary styles and themes, and also create a completely new public. While at the beginning the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether with the intention of charming him or of denouncing him through ethnic or subjectivist means, now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people. (Fanon 1963, 240)

For Fanon, the crystallization of consciousness is the battleground upon which liberation depends: similar to ideology, crystallization is a particular vision of the nation that reflects, as he writes in “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” “the innermost hopes of the whole people” (148). Yet as a kind of ideology, the hopes of a people may focus on ideas that are theoretically suspect, or that reinscribe colonialist, hierarchical relations among classes and “races.” In *Black Skins, White Masks*, for instance, Fanon writes of the “black schoolboy in Antilles” who comes to believe in the racial hierarchies of black and white, savage and civilized, through “illustrated magazines for children” such as Tarzan and Mickey Mouse. He writes: “Little by little, one can observe in the young Antillean the formation and crystallization of an attitude and a way of thinking and seeing that are essentially white” (Fanon 1967, 148). In his address “On National Culture,” Fanon also warns of the problems of unifying African consciousness through questionable assumptions about *négritude*, “race” or culture. He writes, for instance, that proponents of *négritude* offer an “unconditional affirmation of African culture” through essentialist and even stereotypical binary oppositions between African and European people: “old Europe to a young Africa, tiresome reasoning to lyricism, oppressive logic to high-stepping nature” (213). Likewise, solidarity based on “race” or culture elides important differences between and among groups that have far different hopes, tactics, and goals. Fanon points out that the struggle for civil

rights by black Americans is much different than the Angolan fight for independence against the Portuguese. Solidarity based on culture offers similar difficulties: “There is no common destiny to be shared between the national cultures of Senegal and Guinea; but there is a common destiny between the Senegalese and Guinean nations which are both dominated by the same French colonialism” (234).

For indigenous tribal groups in America, as with the colonized peoples of Africa, the issues of “race” and culture are often more differentiating than cohesive. Although we understand that a woefully inexact science of genetics determined the “blood quantum” of individuals at the end of the nineteenth century, these fractional markers of identity remain intact and powerful for many individual and tribal groups even today. And although culture has at times become a cohesive presence for indigenous people in the history of the Americas (e.g., the Tree of Peace of the Haudenosaunee, the Ghost Dance of Wovoka, the culture of the Lakotas for the American Indian Movement), no single indigenous culture has become a crystallizing force for all indigenous peoples, not only because there are over five hundred tribal groups in the United States, with many different cultural beliefs and practices, but because many of these groups are profoundly committed to the personal, communal, spiritual, and even geographic truth of their beliefs. Despite their many differences in culture, most (if not all) tribes today crystallize their national focus on their assertions of tribal sovereignty, self-government, and self-determination—in other words, their status as “domestic dependent nations” as defined by the United States Supreme Court in 1832. It is a constant struggle, for a federal policy terminating this dependent, national status between 1954 and 1966 ended self-government for over one hundred tribal nations. While many tribes regained their status, the policy of Termination was a stark reminder not only that indigenous peoples must keep constant vigilance if they wish to maintain their semi-sovereign status, but that the United States exerts ultimate political and military power over them to determine their fates.

Resistant indigenous fiction in the Americas corresponds to this struggle, asserting the contemporary existence of indigenous peoples as cultural, political, and geographic entities. Since the first European settlers arrived in this hemisphere, almost every religious and cultural narrative that

legitimated the actions of the colonists left little or no place for indigenous peoples. With the exception of the Spaniards in the American Southwest, whose social system required a peasant, farming class, these grand narratives of America envision indigenous peoples primarily as obstacles to be removed or eliminated (Wilson 1999, 194–95). Examples of such narratives include the creation of the City on the Hill, progress from savagery to civilization, divinely inspired visions of Manifest Destiny and *E Pluribus Unum*, and the natural and purported objectivity of the science of social Darwinism. Combined, this cultural ethos of America (ironically its vision of its best self) denies the possibility of tribal groups as contemporary and equal peoples, and instead requires that indigenous peoples be relegated to images of the past or of loss—for instance, the tragic mixed-blood figures in literature, sports mascots in popular culture, and place names on the landscape. Consequently, although indigenous fiction displaying images of loss, tragedy, and despair foregrounds the terrible effects of a history of colonialism, this literature does not serve to resist colonial discourse or destructive metanarratives. On the contrary, such fiction is well received because, as Fanon argues, cataloging the ills of colonized peoples in “tragic and poetic style” only “serves to reassure the occupying power” (Fanon 1963, 239). He writes: “The colonists have in former times encouraged these modes of expression and made their existence possible. Stinging denunciations, the exposing of distressing conditions and passions which find their outlet in expression are in fact assimilated by the occupying power in a cathartic process” (239).

As domestic dependent nations, indigenous tribes in America have political means to assert their positions as separate, contemporary, and semi-sovereign peoples. Yet at the same time, these positions—while necessary and even powerful in some ways—nonetheless remain fundamentally subordinate to the United States government, subject to any number of directives within a guardian-to-ward relationship, including termination. Thus, Vine Deloria Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle conclude: “Since [tribal self-government] will never supplant the intangible, spiritual, and emotional aspirations of American Indians, it cannot be regarded as the final solution to Indian problems” (Deloria and Lytle 1984, 13). Likewise, drawing from the Haudenosaunee tradition that asserts an egalitarian “brother to brother” relationship between their nations

and others, Mohawk political philosopher Taiaiake Alfred concurs, writing that “any notion of nationhood or self-government rooted in state institutions and framed within the context of state sovereignty can never satisfy the imperatives of Native American political traditions” (Alfred, 1999, 72).⁶ In Australia, too, according to Mudrooroo, the Fanonian struggle for complete Aboriginal independence has become muted by Aboriginal demands within a state structure. Mudrooroo writes that “the stage of active struggle for an independent identity may be passing. . . . It might even be said that Aboriginal affairs is entering a stage of post-activism in that any separate goals are being replaced for those of equal opportunity in the wider Australian community” (Mudrooroo 1990, 14). Because many tribes have found stability and occasional prosperity in their legal status as wards of the federal government, the eighteenth-century struggle for complete independence has been replaced by the demands for increased self-determination, better government programs, and proper representation both in American culture and government.

Nonetheless, the dream of eventual independence for indigenous peoples remains with writers such as Alfred, Mudrooroo, and Young Bear. In fact, *Black Eagle Child*, perhaps more than any other indigenous novel in the United States, corresponds to Fanon’s vision of third-stage or “fighting” literature, for the novel directly questions the validity and efficacy of a fundamentally subaltern relationship with the federal government. In the afterword to his novel, Young Bear writes:

Historically, there was equality in the First-Named systems, but materialism and greed spawned novel methods by which to manipulate others. The day divine leadership was deemed unimportant was when the sacred myths began to crumble under the wheels of suzerainty. (Young Bear 1992a, 260)

Within the novel itself, external impositions of power on the community always result in the further deterioration of the community—for instance, boarding schools that removed indigenous children from their homes for years at a time, and elected governments that superseded traditional clan structures. Resisting external forms, Young Bear’s novel employs a circular “journey of words,” derived from oral traditions, to demonstrate the possibility, or at least

the hope, of a reconstitution of traditional forms of identity and especially governance. Disrupting the “literary themes and styles” of American literature (in fact, Young Bear rarely reads other writers), *Black Eagle Child* asserts oral traditions as relevant and effective in the process of reinvigorating the desire for independence. As Fanon says of the fighting stage of literature: “the oral tradition—stories, epics, and songs of the people—which formerly were filed away as set pieces are now beginning to change. . . . The storyteller once more gives free rein to his imagination; he makes innovations and he creates a work of art” (Fanon 1963, 240–41).

Black Eagle Child is a reminder that the long story of indigenous peoples is not finished, and that we may yet have something to say about our destinies. Only a few generations ago, indigenous peoples lived as true sovereigns in this hemisphere—not as race-based, dependent nations, a legacy of Collier’s Indian Reorganization Act, but instead, in Phyllis Peres’s formulation, as changing, therefore “hybrid” and sometimes contested nation-spaces. *Black Eagle Child* reflects this older vision of indigenous cultural complexity, incorporating not only contested concepts of “race” in the formation of tribal identity, but also several different accepted religious practices, including Christianity. For instance, a venerated grandmother Nokomis respects both Christian and indigenous beliefs, telling the narrator: “To believe in two, three, / or even four is by far a better means to pray. / Combined, the religions brought your uncles / back from the Germans and Japanese” (Young Bear 1992a, 63). Consistent with Fanon’s critique of certain movements in Africa, the novel demonstrates the difficulty of crystallizing tribal consciousness around the irresolvable questions of “race” or culture, but offers instead the possibility of tribal nations engaging such questions within the process of their own perpetual metamorphosis, free from external impositions of power and governance.

Given the ethos of unity in America in the form of *E Pluribus Unum*, most spectacularly displayed in the Civil War, and given the changes in policies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Allotment, the Indian Reorganization Act, Termination, Relocation, and most recently Self-Determination—that further inscribe native nations into a system of dependency, the possibility that indigenous tribes in America will see independence and equality seems quite

small. Yet these changes in policies also remind us that indigenous people will likely see many more such upheavals in the next century as well. Who knows what will happen if indigenous peoples crystallize their thoughts on independence in the next hundred years, among new generations of peoples from all backgrounds who will think about the world quite differently than we do today, and who may have a far different approach to the deep injustices of American history?

This study is the result of my years of teaching indigenous literature to diverse populations of students. I hope that these chapters will provide other teachers and readers of indigenous literatures with some useful ideas for thinking about and discussing oral traditions and indigenous writing, and also will provide ways to consider a permanent place in this hemisphere for indigenous communities. In my classes, I have attempted to help students appreciate the aesthetic innovations and the political consequences of indigenous fiction by writers who have in profound ways refashioned the English language and Western genres into new forms, or at least the possibilities of new forms, of indigenous literature. I also try to impress upon students that all of our cultures—not only indigenous cultures—have changed drastically over the past five hundred or even fifty years, and anxiety about the loss of culture understandably motivates indigenous (and nonindigenous) people to become conservative and suspicious of change. Yet circumstances surrounding indigenous communities continue to change at such incredible rates that it is becoming more imperative than ever that indigenous people be proficient at negotiating between progressive and conservative forces, both within and outside their tribal communities. Indeed, many gifted indigenous people such as Ray Young Bear and Louise Erdrich refuse the alternatives of museums or melting pots, and instead they create from a history of tragedy and ruin works of literature that stand as testaments to the continued existence and power of Native thought in our lives and in our dreams.



Assimilation or Appropriation? The Idea of the Center in N. Scott Momaday's *Way to Rainy Mountain* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

Several years ago, the *National Geographic* published a large photograph showing an Indian youth sitting in a tipi watching television. It must have come as a pleasant shock to the photographer, this juxtaposition of two very dissimilar cultures—a moment of Barthesian *frisson* or *jouissance*, perhaps. Yet, had several of the indigenous youth's friends happened by, it is unlikely (although possible, if they were being highly ironical) that they would have exclaimed in a burst of ontological distress: "A television in a tipi!" More likely they would have asked, "Is the basketball game on yet?" Similarly, in his *Marvelous Possessions*, Stephen Greenblatt relates his initial disappointment when he witnessed a moment of indigenous assimilation upon seeing a group of Balinese watching television on a *bale bajar*, "the communal pavilion in which I knew—from having read Clifford Geertz and Miguel Covarrubias and Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead—that the Balinese gathered in the evenings" (Greenblatt 1991, 3). As he approached