RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE IN THE
WORK OF FOUR NATIVE AMERICAN AUTHORS

by

Angelica Marie Lawson

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As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Angelica M Lawson entitled Resistance and Resilience in the Work of Four Native American Authors and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date: 7/15/2005
Tsianina Lomawaima

Date: 7/15/2005
Tom Holm

Date: 7/15/2005
Luci Tapahonso

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate’s submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College. I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

Date: 7/15/2005
Dissertation Director: Tsianina Lomawaima
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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SIGNED: _______________________

Angelica Marie Lawson
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DEDICATION

To my family
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ABSTRACT

In his introduction to *Tribal Secrets* (1995) Osage scholar Robert Warrior acknowledges the “resiliency and resistant spirit of Native America” as evident in the literature of the Native American Renaissance (xvi). Though he does not elaborate on this statement there is an implied balance in his pairing that is compelling. Resistance literature is an established category of writing that is political in its very nature. Resilience literature as a concept in literary criticism does not yet exist, but the construct of resilience as theorized in psychological research “extends from the 1800’s to the present” and focuses on how individuals and communities have adapted, survived, and even thrived despite adversity (Tusaie and Dyer 2004: 3).

A theory of resistance looks at how writers have resisted the false or one-sided histories and ideologies imposed upon Native Americans. Resistance literature seeks to critique and interrogate those ideologies. A theory of resilience identifies the ways Native American writers have adopted and adapted concepts from their own tribal cultures, and continued those concepts in their literature despite attempts to erase that culture. This, in a sense,
is also resistance because it resists the attempts by the oppressors to erase or eradicate those tribal cultures; however, a theory of resilience offers a more nuanced way of looking at precisely which concepts have been continued in the literature and how.

Resilience theory offers a more specific form of literary criticism beyond the all encompassing umbrella of “resistance,” to show how key concepts from Native American oral tradition have continued into the present via Native American literature. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, “resistance” might be thought of as anti-colonial and “resilience” as pro-cultural.

The four authors to be studied here include, Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Nora Marks Dauenhauer, and Ofelia Zepeda.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Resistance and Resilience in Native American Literature

In his introduction to *Tribal Secrets* (1995) Osage scholar Robert Warrior acknowledges the "resiliency and resistant spirit of Native America" as evident in the literature of the Native American Renaissance (xvi). Though he does not elaborate on this statement there is an implied balance in his pairing that is compelling. As we shall see, resistance literature is an established category of writing that is political in its very nature. Resilience literature as a concept in literary criticism does not yet exist, but the construct of resilience as theorized in psychological research "extends from the 1800’s to the present" and focuses on how individuals and communities have adapted, survived, and even thrived despite adversity (Tusaie and Dyer 2004: 3). I offer it as a complement to the concept of resistance; while both speak to a particular history of relationships between Native Americans¹ and the dominating

¹Throughout this dissertation I will be using the terms Native American, American Indian, Native, and indigenous, although I will be tribally specific whenever possible. Native American refers legally to indigenous peoples of the lower forty-eight states as well as Alaskan Natives and Native Hawaiians, so I will use this whenever possible.
forces which sought to oppress them, each term addresses a
different kind of response.

A theory of resistance looks at how writers have
resisted the false or one-sided histories and ideologies
imposed upon Native Americans. Resistance literature seeks
to critique and interrogate those ideologies. A theory of
resilience identifies the ways Native American writers have
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cultures, and continued those concepts in their literature
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Resilience theory offers a more specific form of
literary criticism beyond the all encompassing umbrella of
“resistance,” to show how key concepts from Native American
oral tradition have continued into the present via Native
American literature. Therefore, for the purposes of this

However some experts and authors I quote use American Indian and so
this phrase will also appear at times. I use “Native” as short hand for
“Native American” and use “Indigenous” when referring to Native peoples
of the world, or to refer to Native Americans in a more global context,
as part of a larger indigenous community.
study, "resistance" might be thought of as anti-colonial and "resilience" as pro-cultural.

Resistance

Resistance literature is a politicized literature that actively critiques and interrogates oppressive institutions and ideologies. Barbara Harlow explains the origin of the phrase "resistance literature" in her book by the same title. "The term 'resistance' (muqawawamah) was first applied in a description of Palestinian literature in 1966 by the Palestinian writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani in his study Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966" (Harlow 1987: 2). Harlow extends Kanafani's concept to analyze other world literatures growing out of actual armed resistance movements; however, her emphasis on the power of the literature itself to resist particular ideological oppressions established a category of literature and a phrase for literary criticism that has persisted into the present. "The term 'resistance literature' has become nearly ubiquitous since the publication of [Harlow's] book" (Rodriguez 2000: 63).

Native American resistance literature has been written both during times of actual armed resistance, and since the end of the Indian wars in the late 1800s. For example,
Mohegan writer Samson Occom’s sermons in the 1700’s interrogated racism and were critical of American colonial discourse. Sioux writers Charles Eastman and Zitkala Sa, having lived through the “Indian wars” (Eastman was on the Sioux reservation during Wounded Knee) wrote autobiographies and essays questioning the virtues of assimilation policy in the early 20th century. Both were critical of the United States’ attempts to replace their culture with American culture, and often addressed assimilation in subtle, but subversive ways. For example, in Malea Powell’s article, “Imagining a New Indian: Listening to the Rhetoric of Survivance in Charles Eastman’s From the Deep Woods to Civilization” (2001) Powell demonstrates how a close reading of Eastman’s 1916 autobiography reveals a strong critique of the negative aspects of White civilization, despite claims that the book exemplifies Eastman’s pro-assimilation stance.²

Eastman’s literary strategy to lure readers in with expected depictions of the “noble savage” only to insert powerful criticisms of White culture, its values, and its hypocrisies, creates a literature of resistance, or more specifically, “survivance.” Powell uses this term as an

² The very title, From the Deep Woods to Civilization, implies a kind of pro-assimilation stance and certainly both Eastman and his writing have been historically read this way, but Powell convincingly argues otherwise.

Vizenor’s neologism “survivance” builds on Harlow’s definition of resistance to speak to a particular kind of resistance. According to Vizenor, Native American writers must resist the “simulations” of “Indians” created by the dominant culture that define Native identity through falsely constructed representations that have no real referent. His argument relies on semiotics and postmodern theory and at times becomes problematic. In his explanation of how Native Americans reinvent themselves as “post-Indian warriors,” Vizenor claims that they rely on the very same “simulations” that they resist (Vizenor 1999: 23). As such, the “post-Indian warrior” must re-imagine and re-invent tradition and history to create a new “post-Indian” reality.

In contrast, Harlow depends on an actual Indigenous history and culture that seeks to assert its legitimacy in the face of colonial discourse, which seeks to erase that history. “The historical struggle against colonialism and

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³ Vizenor is an enrolled member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (White Earth Reservation) and so I have used the tribal designation “Chippewa” though other terms include, Anishinaabe and Ojibway. I have also used Chippewa for consistency, since this is also the tribal designation of Louise Erdrich, one of the main authors to be considered here.
imperialism of such resistance movements . . . is waged at the same time as a struggle over the historical and cultural record” (Harlow 1987: 7). Colonial discourse “operates on the assumption of the superiority of the colonizer’s culture, history, language, art, political structures, social conventions, and the assertion for the need of the colonized to be ‘raised up’ through colonial contact,” and therefore seeks to replace indigenous history and culture with its own (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998: 42). Resistance literature re-writes this history to include indigenous people and perspectives, often in a way that is critical of the “official” history of record.

This kind of resistance can be seen in the writing of Salish4 author D’Arcy McNickle. His novel The Surrounded (1936) politicized reservation life through his well-crafted and careful interrogation of assimilation policy5 via multiple character perspectives that examined the history of the Salish people pre-contact in contrast to reservation life post-contact. McNickle’s novel can be

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4 McNickle was enrolled Salish though he was actually of Cree heritage (Warrior 1995: 21).
viewed as a literature of resistance through his appropriation of the novel, to portray Salish people dealing with the consequences of allotment and missionaries on the Flathead reservation in the early 1930s. Through his appropriation he critiques U.S. Indian policy. Rather than conform to audience expectations of the 1930s to re-tell the story of the noble savage, or the “vanishing Indian,” McNickle instead portrays intelligent, complex people constantly questioning, assessing, and challenging the events of the past and the impact of those events on the present.

Like McNickle, other Native authors have demonstrated resistance to colonial discourse and its legacy, which sees Native Americans as either “savage” or “noble,” but always “vanishing.” For example, assimilation policy (1887-1934) is the extension of a colonial discourse that views European colonists as culturally superior to the indigenous “savages.” This discourse advocates for the superiority of agrarian culture over roaming tribes, individual property

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6 Like many Native Americans who have been saddled with misnomers, the Salish people have historically been called the Flathead, though like many other tribes recently have re-claimed their original tribal name for themselves. Despite this fact, the reservation is still referred to as the Flathead reservation.

ownership over communal ownership, and so on. The policy and practice of assimilation led to the allotting of Indian lands from 1887 to 1934 to individual owners for farming in order to “civilize” the Indian. Resistance literature questions colonial discourse’s ideological assumptions through literary strategies such as narrative structure and character development. Literature such as Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* (1988) resists this discourse by providing an alternative viewpoint on this practice, showing how it failed and negatively impacted Native people. Thus the assumption that the colonizing culture’s ways are superior is undermined. Through her contrasting characterizations of Pauline and Fleur, Erdrich demonstrates the racist foundations behind assimilation policy, thus politicizing the work and creating a literature of resistance. *Tracks* also demonstrates resilience through its incorporation of Chippewa aesthetics and ethics. A discussion of resilience theory follows.

**Resilience Theory in Psychology**

Resilience theory is established in the field of psychology and analyzes the ways individuals and communities have survived hardship or trauma through adaptation. Early studies of individual resilience in
psychology “focused on factors or characteristics that assist individuals to thrive from adversity” (Tusaie and Dyer 2004: 4). These studies began by emphasizing personal cognitive factors such as intelligence, creativity, and humor, then eventually included environmental factors that affected or contributed to resilience (Tusaie and Dyer 2004). From there, the research and “models of resilience” both narrowed to address specific groups such as children and adolescents, and expanded “to describe resilience in larger systems such as families and communities” (Tusaie and Dyer 2004: 6).

Though the construct of resilience has been addressed for over one hundred years in psychology, the term as applied to culture, and specifically to Native American people, is a relatively new one. “In Indian country a new construct for resilience has surfaced called ‘Cultural Resilience.’ This theory proposes the use of traditional life-ways to overcome the negative influences of oppression” (Strand and Peacock 2003: 1). Scholars working in this field rely on definitions from psychology as a foundation for their theory, but some scholars, such as Iris Heavyrunner (1997) feel that the concept of resilience has always been present in Native American communities.
Cultural Resilience

A survey of the literature on theories of cultural resilience as it applies specifically to Native Americans shows Iris Heavyrunner (now Iris Pretty Paint) to be at the forefront of this discussion. In her work with tribal colleges and student retention, she identified a number of factors that contribute to personal and cultural resilience in Native American cultures. In speaking about Native American traditions and fostering resilience she says in an article published with J.S.Morris:

Cultural resilience is a relatively new term, but it is a concept that predates the so called ‘discovery’ of our people . . . [our] traditional process is what contemporary researchers, educators, and social service providers are now calling fostering resilience. (Heavyrunner and Morris 1997: 1)

Those traditional processes include community support and storytelling. “Thus, resilience is not new to our people; it is a concept that has been taught for centuries. The word is new; the meaning is old” (Heavyrunner and Morris 1997: 1). In describing traditional processes she and Morris outline specific “core values, beliefs, and behaviors” (1997: 2). These include spirituality and the interconnectedness of all things. They claim these
traditional processes have helped Native people survive despite hardship and trauma.

Certainly, Native Americans have a history of trauma due to the colonization of this country. Yet, despite these hardships, Native Americans have adapted and continued, demonstrating cultural resilience. Resilience manifests itself in all aspects of the culture including literature. Just as Harlow ties “cultural resistance” to “resistance literature” (1987: 2-11), I tie “cultural resilience” to “resilience literature.” It is a literature that grows out of the insistence of Native people on maintaining their culture and core values despite adversity. These values, largely contained within the oral tradition, are present in Native American written literature.

In her analysis of the poetics of four Navajo writers, Luci Tapahonso states, “Though Navajo history is fraught with immense changes since the creation of our world, we have survived. Perhaps this was due to a combination of sheer determination, unyielding faith, and quiet resilience” (1993: 74). Continuing with this theme, she begins to outline those things that contribute to resilience:

We understand though that ultimately it is our way of seeing the world and of relating to all things that
sustained us. It was the love of stories, the old songs, and the long prayers that our forebears memorized and sang back to us over and over again.

(Tapahonso 74: 1993)

Indeed, songs, stories, and prayers have sustained us. Despite massive change and great loss, these aspects of Native American culture are a part of and contribute to resilience. According Heavyrunner and Morris: “ceremonies and rituals, humor, oral tradition, family, and support networks are essential protective strategies. These are the things that have kept us strong . . . These resources foster our cultural resilience” (Heavyrunner and Morris 1997: 8-9). Literatures that utilize information contained within the oral tradition addressing ceremonies and ritual, humor, and family demonstrate cultural resilience and the resilience of those concepts. Perhaps that is why Native American writers have adopted and adapted both the aesthetics and ethics embedded in these songs, stories, and prayers, and continue them in their contemporary writing.

Native American writing demonstrates the resilience of foundational concepts found in the oral tradition such as interconnectedness or “the relating to all things” mentioned by Tapahonso. Native American acknowledgement of interconnectedness provides an ethic that emphasizes one’s
responsibility to the community and to the land. This ethic finds a place in contemporary Native American writing through an aesthetic that borrows from the oral tradition. For example, the aesthetic qualities of art are defined as "the beauty of a work" or "the aspects that give pleasure brought about by its form" (Griffith 2006: 399). Tohono O’odham poet Ofelia Zepeda pays close attention to form in her poetry, emulating the concise, descriptive form of O’odham songs. Other times she expresses an O’odham ethic that emphasizes community responsibility and the importance of ceremony and ritual. This ethic is embedded in the Tohono O’odham oral tradition and becomes a grounding theme in Zepeda’s contemporary poetry, which exemplifies the resilience of this particular ethic. Her poetic expression shows a continuum of an O’odham aesthetic and ethic making Zepeda’s poetry a literature of resilience.

In order to show some of the ways Native authors create literatures of resistance and resilience I have selected four authors and four different genres to examine and analyze what kinds of literary strategies each uses.

Author Subjects

Today a large array of work by Native writers demonstrates resistance and resilience. I chose my author
subjects carefully, hoping to represent the variety and depth of this writing. For this reason I analyze several genres in order to represent this diversity. The work to be examined here includes a screenplay, a novel, a play, and poetry.

I view my author subjects as belonging to two very important groups of Native American writers. Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich have been very successful with mainstream audiences, are frequently discussed in major publications such as the New York Times Book Review, have contracts with major publishing companies, and are often included in college syllabi. They are effectively writing for a mainstream audience and their literature is not as obviously tribally specific as that of my second two Native authors. Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Ofelia Zepeda are each linguists who produce creative writing which reflects a tribally specific worldview. Their work often includes Native language and tribally specific aesthetics. Both groups are important to a discussion of resistance and resilience. Native people need to assert a voice in the mainstream to disrupt colonial discourse, challenge one-sided histories, and dispute inaccurate representations of American Indians. We also need to speak to our communities
about language and cultural revitalization and build
tribally specific canons of work.

Personal Motivations

I have been working with the novels and short stories of Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie for years. As authors whose work has become part of the mainstream literary canon—that is, their texts regularly appear in literature classes beyond studies of Native American literature to be included in the American literature curriculum—I feel a certain responsibility to teach these texts. I also think that Alexie and Erdrich are two of the best fiction writers of our time, and I enjoy analyzing their work. There is a great deal of secondary literature about these two authors, as noted in the body of this dissertation. Countless journal articles, book chapters, and reviews have been published on Alexie’s and Erdrich’s work.

By contrast, there is virtually no literary criticism on Zepeda’s or Dauenhauer’s work, beyond a few book reviews. Very recently, Caskey Russell (2004) published a journal article on Dauenhauer’s “How to Bake Good Salmon from the River” in the journal Studies in American Indian Literature. This analysis of a poem from Dauenhauer’s
collection The Droning Shaman is the only substantial literary criticism on her work to date.

I sought out the challenge of writing about two authors who have received minimal scholarly attention because their work must be closely examined due to its importance as tribally specific literature. We must ask ourselves, why have these literatures not been included in the larger discourse of Native literary criticism? Is it because they are so tribally specific? Perhaps literary critics do not yet have the tools to analyze them. The Dauenhauer and Zepeda chapters were certainly the most difficult to write, as I had no previously published literary criticism to turn to. Certainly the subject matter explored by Dauenhauer and Zepeda defies mainstream expectations of “Indianness.” The familiar sign posts for an audience with limited knowledge about tribal diversity are conspicuously missing. Add the further complication of Native language and their work demands knowledge of a tribally specific context not everyone is willing to explore.

Methodology

My methodological approach incorporates a number of reading and research strategies borrowed from a variety of
disciplines. I began my preliminary research by reading a wide variety of contemporary Native American literatures. I identified a common theme of resilience and/or resistance within each of these works despite great differences in genre, subject matter, and intended audience. This commonality was clearly due to the shared history among Natives of colonization and conquest in the United States, a subject that was always addressed in each text.

At this point, my analysis was based on close readings and logical conclusions drawn from previous course work in English, American Studies, and American Indian Studies. Close reading originates in literary theory as a method for examining the formalistic qualities of a written text. Close reading identifies specific literary strategies such as satire and irony (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, and Willingham 1999). Close reading, due to its emphasis on language and form, can also help identify instances of appropriation and Native modes of storytelling. A close reading can discern whether a particular text has conformed to or deviated from the “standard” literary rules of genre and form: “One way to demonstrate an appropriated English is to contrast it to another still tied to the imperial centre” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989).
A literature review of theoretical and analytical texts dealing with concepts of resistance and resilience as I saw them in indigenous world literature provided a more focused theoretical framework and the terminology for further analysis of these Native literatures. Cultural, postcolonial, and feminist studies afforded ways of thinking about how literary artists manipulate language to create agency and voice for historically oppressed people. (See literature review for more on this.)

My next step was to limit my author subjects and texts for more detailed analysis and to more clearly define my methodologies within the theoretical frameworks stated above. My close reading of the primary selected texts was only the beginning of my analysis. In its most literal definition, as stated by the New Critics, a close reading separates the text from its author and its historical context under the premise that all texts contained a “universal truth” that can be surmised through close attention to the formalistic qualities of the work and nothing else (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, Willingham 1999). This approach came under fire from other literary critics as being too limited and as placing too many restrictions on what was considered “good” literature. Modified concepts of “close reading” are more common today.
Basically, it is considered a necessary starting point in analysis, but not an all-encompassing methodology. Opponents of the formalistic definition of close reading argue that a text can not be separated from its author or historical context, but that the study of related secondary sources is a critical aspect of analysis.

This “text-in-context” approach to understanding literature is my second methodology. Stemming from interdisciplinary cultural studies, which draw on numerous fields (including literary studies and postcolonial studies), contextual readings look outwardly to consider social and political contexts for literary analysis. I combine this concept with an author-centered, tribally specific approach, considering what the authors have said about their own work and about Native American literature in general. As a study that privileges the Native voice, I feel it is extremely important to consider the author’s attitudes toward writing and culture, audience and reception, and related topics. This may seem an obvious point, but because of the New Critical approach outlined above, this kind of research is not always a given. For my purposes, however, consideration of additional works by my author subjects provides the opportunity for determining
intended audience, literary strategies, and indigenous aesthetics.

My next step was to consider more secondary materials, in addition to those listed in the literature review and beyond those materials written by the authors themselves. I refer to secondary materials written by Native and non-Native scholars and writers working in relevant areas of study. These materials include biographies, book reviews, interviews, journal articles, scholarly books, and other critical analyses, and have helped me to define and locate key literary strategies.

Literary Strategies

Literatures of resistance often use appropriation in order to frame their narratives of resistance. In this way, Native writers are able to use the “tools of the dominant discourse to resist its political or cultural control” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998: 19) In other words, Native writers can use non-Native genres to assert Native values and identity, challenging historical misinformation and misrepresentation. For example, Hollywood has a history of misrepresenting Native Americans as one-dimensional stereotypes largely through the Western, the most frequently made film genre to date. The underlying racism
in the Western generally portrays Native people as savages deserving mistreatment and genocidal warfare. In the film *Smoke Signals*, writer Sherman Alexie and director Chris Eyre appropriate the Western along with the buddy and road trip film to tell a different story that highlights the humanity of Native American people and their values, effectively resisting the dominant discourse. Native writers appropriate Western literary forms, such as the novel, or popular film genres, such as the Western, in order to reach a large audience. This is critical to a literature of resistance, because as a politicized literature there must be an audience, otherwise the argument goes unheard.

Resilience literature incorporates Native American aesthetics and ethics from the oral tradition. So, where resistance literature borrows from the foreign or colonizing culture to make its point, resilience literature borrows or draws from its own Native American and often tribally specific culture. In terms of aesthetics, Native writers use themes and form from the oral tradition in order to frame their stories, poetry, or plays. For example, Nora Dauenhauer uses Tlingit Raven stories to frame a contemporary Raven play. In terms of ethics, writers often promote a Native American ethic, often in
contrast to colonial or American ethics, showing in sharp relief the value of the Native construct. Resilience literatures privileges Native American ethics such as one’s responsibility to the community and to the land. Native writers accomplish these goals through their reliance on the aesthetics and ethics embedded in the oral tradition.

These strategies often overlap, producing literatures of resistance and resilience as shown in the work to be studied here. For example, Louise Erdrich appropriates the novel and postmodern writing strategies to produce a literature of resistance; however, she manipulates those strategies to better reflect Chippewa oral storytelling practices relying on multiple narrators and story cycles. She effectively borrows from both the dominant culture and Chippewa culture. In addition, Erdrich uses Chippewa symbols and characters (resilience) to critique U.S. Indian policy (resistance).

These complex writing strategies produce widely varying works in terms of structures and appearances, but they all have one thing in common. They all blend both Native American literary strategies with non-Native strategies to produce literatures of resistance and resilience.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The formal history of literary criticism of Native American writing, one could say, began at the annual Modern Language Association Conference in 1972. As a product of this event, scholars and writers Randall Ackly, Larry Evers, Ken Roemer, Paula Gunn Allen, and Leslie Silko (to name a few) founded the Association of Studies in American Indian Literatures (ASAIL). Their first publication was a newsletter identifying their goals:

Our purposes are to facilitate the exchange of information among those teaching American Indian Literatures and to promote appreciation of the literary accomplishments of American Indians. For the present we are concentrating on providing assistance to those teaching, or about to teach, Indian Literatures who have problems in planning courses, devising classroom procedures, and in locating suitable texts. (Studies in American Indian Literatures 1972:1)

ASAIL played a major role in sponsoring discussion panels, workshops, and readings focusing on Native literatures at the Modern Literature Association’s annual conferences. In 1977 they launched the academic
The journal *Studies in American Indian Literatures* (*SAIL*), the official journal of the association. Today *SAIL* is still the only academic journal in the United States devoted entirely to Native literatures. Other literary journals and American Indian Studies journals that publish criticism on Native literatures include *Wicazo Sa Review*, *American Indian Quarterly*, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, and *MELUS*. Numerous regional literary journals also occasionally publish criticism on Native literature including *South Dakota Review*, the *Western Literature Review*, and others.

**Foundations**

In the 1970s and 1980s a small group of scholars including Elaine Jahner published articles, essays, and books that advocated better methods for studying Native literature. In Jahner’s visionary discussion of “Indian literature and critical responsibility,” she states, “we need conceptual tools and critical vocabulary for discussing just how it is that one's local tradition . . . provides a set of optional approaches to form and content that a writer can employ to develop the tradition's dynamic potential” (1977: 4). Calling for tools that acknowledge and depend upon the author’s tribal background seems an
obvious point, but one that was not necessarily heeded, as shown in the following example.

In reading the earliest issues of SAIL it is apparent that a more culturally aware critical approach to Native literature was needed. “Analysis” often took the form of simple book reviews, and the most important critical question was too often whether a book was really “Indian” or not. In some cases, this essentialist attitude was clearly based on limited knowledge of Indian cultures, media (mis)representations, and stereotypes. This is demonstrated in a critique by scholar Robert Sayre, a faculty member at the University of Iowa.

In Sayre’s analysis of Laguna writer Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel Ceremony (1977), Sayre summarizes one of the most critical aspects of the novel: “The most beautiful and sublime of the agents in Tayo’s healing is a kind of living goddess of the mountains, an Indian-Hippy Priestess whose name, we finally learn, is just Ts'eh” (1978: 10). Completely oblivious to the fact that this character is derived from Laguna oral texts and ceremonies, Sayre marginalizes both this holy figure and Silko. Finally, he summarizes the novel, “The romances of James Fenimore Cooper had helped the Whites to gain their early 19th century reconciliations; this romance of Leslie Silko might
help Indians and Whites to gain some necessary late twentieth-century ones” (1978: 12). Sayre appropriates Ceremony and brings it into the mainstream of American novels while ignoring the indigenous knowledge that pervades the text. Over the years critical approaches would improve, but it would be a slow process.

In addition to journal articles, numerous books and essays on Native American literary criticism came on the scene in the 1970s and gathered force in the following decade. In 1983 Laguna/Sioux literary critic Paula Gunn Allen wrote Studies in American Indian Literatures. Published by the Modern Language Association, this teacher’s guide (not to be confused with the journal SAIL) includes critical essays, course designs, and a bibliography. Emerging out of the first decade of Native American literary criticism, Allen’s guide made a significant contribution to the field and is still cited today.

Later Allen published The Sacred Hoop (1986) and Spider Woman’s Granddaughters (1989), both of which highlight Native women and Native women’s stories. In The Sacred Hoop, Allen combines personal essay with literary criticism to bring a feminist perspective to the discussion of Native American women — whom she argues have been
historically ignored or erased. She continues this argument in *Grandmothers of the Light* (1991). In this book, Allen provides a feminist critique of the appropriation of Native oral stories by the patriarchal cultures of Europe, explaining how those appropriations silenced powerful feminine voices present in many Native cultures—especially those that were matrilocal or matrilineal.

In the context of this criticism, Allen retells several oral stories, remolding them to fit a feminist perspective. Although Allen has been criticized for such liberal “re-imaginings” and re-appropriating tribal oral stories, the critical framework established at the beginning of her books (referring to how she recovered and reinterpreted these texts) expresses a Native consciousness rooted in Allen’s own Laguna culture. As such, she approaches what could be considered a Native knowledge-based criticism. Unfortunately, she has taken this idea too far, erasing specific tribal identity from many of the stories in order to impart her own gynocratic views. This is regrettable, since many of the texts she tries to illuminate resist conventional Western critical approaches and would be better understood through a Native critical approach. Still, in many respects, Allen has laid much of
the early groundwork for Native American literary
criticism.

Postmodern Theory

In the 1980s, critics began to emphasize the way these
oral texts, as well as contemporary written texts,
intentionally resisted simplistic readings through their
selection of specific subject matter and the manipulation
of traditional western narrative structures. At the
forefront of this movement was Chippewa writer Gerald
Vizenor. Influenced by reader-response theory and language
theory, his interests in postmodernism led him to edit
Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American
Indian Literatures (1989) and to publish his collection of
essays, Manifest Manners: Post Indian Wars of Survivance
(1994), among numerous works of fiction.

Vizenor’s deep conviction that words hold power – not
only in the metaphysical sense, but also in the political
sense – prompted him to devise methodologies for resisting
the rhetorical strategies of the dominant culture. In this
way, Vizenor’s work also intersects with postcolonial
theory. In his conviction that Native American literature
is a literature of resistance, his theories rely largely on
the uses of language and appropriation of English necessary for writing against the forces of colonization:

The English language has been the linear tongue of colonial discoveries, racial cruelties, invented names, the simulation of tribal cultures, manifest manners, and the unheard literature of dominance in tribal communities; at the same time, this mother tongue of paracolonialism has been a language of invincible imagination and liberation for many tribal people in the postindian world. (1994: 105)

Vizenor’s publications span thirty years and include numerous creative works as well as literary criticism. Over time, he devised original critical and theoretical strategies for producing both academic and creative texts by combining postmodern theories with tribal knowledge to produce what he calls “trickster discourse.” This discourse relies on word manipulation and “play,” taking the English language of the colonizer and turning it back on itself. The oft-cited Manifest Manners established much of the terminology for future Native literary criticism.

Although Manifest Manners is original and has deeply influenced the development of Native literary criticism, Vizenor’s heavy use of semiotic theory as well as other postmodern theories has made his work inaccessible to
audiences outside of a small, elite circle of literary critics. Vizenor’s elaborate and inventive vocabulary emulated much of the criticism of the time, which has been perceived as cryptic, excluding many readers (Adamson 2001, Owens 1998). Current debates within Native literary criticism speculate that institutional pressures to publish “credible” work that met the standards and expectations of the established dominant hierarchy left little room for Native and other marginalized scholars to create scholarship that was accessible and useful to their own communities.

According to Choctaw/Cherokee author and literary critic Louis Owens, scholar-critic-theorists legitimized their voices by “picking up the master’s tools not to dismantle the master’s house but simply to prove that we are tool using creatures just like him therefore worthy of intellectual recognition” (1998: 53). Vizenor certainly participated in this game, but in doing so he created his own “word games.” A perfect example of postcolonial resistance, Vizenor’s writing has also been the subject of literary criticism.

In an article on the writing of Vizenor, Carter Revard, and Gorden Henry, Chippewa poet and literary critic Kim Blaeser uses postmodern and postcolonial theory to
examine tribal humor and the ways authors interact with and react to colonial discourse, thus resisting its claims to "truth" by presenting new and imaginative "tricksterish" truths that challenge colonial history and empire (1994). Through humor, Blaeser asserts, these Native authors use "play and intellectual bantering [to] force a reconsideration of the processes and powers of historical reckoning and thus, essentially, liberate the reader from preconceived notions and incite an imaginative reevaluation of history" (1994: 39). Using postmodern theory on reinventing or rewriting history, Blaeser highlights Native writers' use of humor to resist certain aspects of colonial discourse. Humor works especially well for Vizenor, who turns language and its rules back on the institution that created them. As a "word warrior" (Ruoff 1986), Vizenor resists the system even as he participates in it.

Louis Owens also played the academic game and produced a "credible" text on Native literatures. Grounding his book Other Destinies (1992) in postmodern theory, Owens demonstrated his ability to move in and around complex concepts while bringing new issues to bear on identity in Native American novels. Although at the time identity was already a worn topic, Owens' approach addressed indigenous knowledge and worldviews within the texts, providing new,
more substantial readings than previous critiques emphasizing “fractured identities” and loss.

Owens’ emphasis on indigenous worldviews produced one of the best readings of Silko’s Ceremony to date. There are several pages on the character of Ts’eh, placing the events, setting, and character within the Laguna worldview and oral tradition, and providing a much deeper and more sensitive reading respectful of Laguna culture and of Silko herself — a far cry from the earlier reading by Sayre. In addition to Ceremony, Owens highlights cultural recovery in other lesser known novels published prior to 1969, such as The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta: The Celebrated California Bandit (1854) by Cherokee John Rollin Ridge, and Salish writer Mourning Dove’s Cogewea (1927). Owens’ work was a significant contribution to Native literary criticism.

Both Vizenor and Owens emphasized the survival and continuance of Native people in the face of adversity, and in that respect they will both figure into this study. However, I am more interested in Owens’ work, which has a prominent role in my research. Postcolonial theory provides much of the groundwork for my study, and I invoke many of Owens’ later works in the next section.
Postcolonial Theory

In *Mixedblood Messages* (1998), Owens published scholarly essays and criticism of literature and film. Relying on the theories set forth by prominent postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Mary Louise Pratt, Owens develops his concepts of the “frontier” of mixedblood identity and the “frontier” where Indian and non-Indian cultures and ideologies meet. In a series of lucid (though at times repetitive) essays, Owens makes a strong case for Native literary resistance: “The Indian has appropriated and occupied the frontier, reimagining it against all odds. A century after Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous pronouncement, the frontier appears to be moving once again, but this time it is a multidirectional zone of resistance” (41). Although Owens uses postcolonial theory to ground his arguments, he essentially re-molds and experiments with the discourse to fit his needs. Complaining that postcolonial scholars have ignored Native literatures, his work is also a critique of the discourse, pointing out its flaws.

Owens’ voice on the matter became much louder in a journal article published in 2001, entitled, “As If an Indian Were Really an Indian.” Here Owens takes postcolonial scholars to task for “silencing” Native
American writers in their theoretical texts even as they discuss other indigenous people worldwide who have been silenced by colonialism. He puts this dismissal into the proper context, acknowledging that although Native Americans are not technically postcolonial, their literatures exhibit many of the same qualities of postcolonial work due to the colonial relationship in the United States and indigenous efforts to “decolonize” many aspects of Native life.

Other scholars in recent years, especially Native scholars, have readily adopted postcolonial theory to discuss Native literature (Shanley 2001, Vizenor 1994, Weaver 1997). The eagerness of scholars to adopt the term “postcolonial” for Native America lies in the understood meaning of the term. Over the past thirty years, postcolonial theory has come to be used to discuss the various cultural effects of colonialism in a broader way. More importantly for Native American Studies, it has been used to address “the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998: 187). Indeed, scholars Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo note the similarities between postcolonial literature and Native literature.
In their anthology of Native American women’s writing, Reinventing the Enemy’s Language: Contemporary Native Women’s Writing of North America (1997), they use postcolonial language theory in their introduction to explain their book title. Concepts of appropriation offer hope for “‘reinventing’ the English language [to] . . . turn the process of colonization around” (1997: 25). Noting first that “ideally” Native people would use their own tribal languages, Bird and Harjo allude to the theories of postcolonial scholar Ngugi wa Thiong’o. In his book Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (1981), he asserts the necessity of returning to tribal languages as a vital part of the decolonizing process. Ngugi states that English must be rejected in order to restore Kenyan ethnic and national identity.

On the other hand, Chinua Achebe, another noted postcolonial scholar advocates writing African literatures in English in order to reach the largest audience possible. While noting the negative consequences of colonialism, Achebe also sees the inheritance of English as a unifying factor. According to Achebe, the English language, as an “instrument of international exchange,” can be fashioned in a way that carries the indigenous person’s “particular experience” (1994: 433). Although Achebe thought
literatures in African languages were a necessary part of the national body of literature, he emphasized the value of literatures written in English. He disagreed strongly with the likes of Ngugi and specifically with fellow scholar Obi Wali, whose article, “Dead end [sic] of African Literature” argued that writing African literature in anything but African languages would “only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration” (Achebe 1994: 432). Achebe felt otherwise, stating that writers for whom English was a second language, as well as writers like himself (for whom it was his only language), were perfectly capable of making English “bear the burden” of an African experience, and creating aesthetically pleasing work in the process.

Both Achebe and Ngugi advocate resistance to colonialism, but in different forms. Both make valid points, and certain aspects of each argument are of particular use to this study. Achebe’s discussion of the power of appropriation is especially useful in discussing Native literatures. American Indians have appropriated the English language and Western genres such as the novel or film to subvert colonial discourse and replace it with stories of American Indian experience.

In addition, though Ngugi’s viewpoint has been criticized for being essentialist and impractical
(Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2001: 284), writing in Native languages not only demonstrates resistance, but also resilience. It reaffirms Native identity and community. As Native linguists whose scholarly work is the recovery of Native language and Native language texts, Ofelia Zepeda and Nora Dauenhauer’s inclusion of O’odham and Tlingit in their respective creative works can be seen as significant social and political acts that reassert the importance of tribal language. As Ngugi states, “Language carries culture. . . Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world . . . “(Ngugi 2001: 290). Ngugi and Achebe’s philosophies on language offer new ways of looking at indigenous literatures that escape the colonizing effects of Western literary theory. Together, their work provides a model for thinking that, in conjunction with other indigenous theories, may help to lead us out of theoretical and critical ruts.

This is precisely what Chippewa poet and literary critic Kimberly Blaeser suggests in a book chapter titled, “Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Center” (1993). Insisting that “reading Native literature by way of Western literary theory clearly violates its integrity and performs
a new act of colonization and conquest,” Blaeser calls for a better approach that looks for “critical methods and voices that seem to rise out of the literature itself (this as opposed to critical approaches applied from an already established critical language or attempts to make the literature fit already established genres and categories of meaning)” (1993: 55). Admitting to the difficulty of the matter, she explores concepts previously discussed by feminist and postcolonial writers (Anzaldúa 1990, Christian 1990), ultimately concluding that:

Contemporary texts contain the critical contexts needed for their own interpretation and because of the intertextuality of Native American literature, the critical commentary and contexts necessary for the interpretation of works by other Native writers. (1993:60)

Blaeser’s work is well argued and refreshing in that she provides new critical tools and new materials for analysis. In short, this is what Native literary criticism needs to continue to do. It is still a relatively young and emerging field of study. As we continue to develop and refine our theoretical approaches and methodologies, we need to look not only to new critical approaches, but also to new literatures to critique.
Currently, the majority of literary criticism is centered on the work of N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Sherman Alexie. As literary critics expand their critical tools (as I hope to do here by presenting theories of resistance and resilience), they also need to expand their author subjects. Such is my goal in presenting a reading of the works of Ofelia Zepeda and Nora Marks Dauenhauer.

Conclusion

The following analysis of four Native American writers will use author-centered and tribally-specific critical tools as outlined above (i.e., those promoted by Jahner and Owens). Through these analytical lenses, I will examine the literary strategies of appropriation, humor, and the use of Native language, while borrowing from the work of Owens, Vizenor, Blaeser, Achebe, and Ngugi. Theories of appropriation regarding genre and language are particularly useful to such a study of “resistance literature.” Alexie and Erdrich both consciously appropriate Western literary and/or film genres to reach the largest audience possible. Similarly, Dauenhauer and Zepeda appropriate the English language (their second language) to create literatures
expressive of tribal worldviews. Using humor, both Alexie and Dauenhauer raise audience awareness of social and political issues in Indian country. With regard to the use of Native language, both Zepeda and Dauenhauer employ this approach, thereby targeting a very specific audience, excluding non-speakers (though this study will focus primarily on Zepeda’s use of her Native Tohono O’odham, since Dauenhauer uses very little Tlingit in the play to be examined here).

Lastly, literary strategies of resilience literature are not outlined in this survey because “resilience literature” as a category does not yet exist. However, in my effort to meet Blaeser’s challenge – to use “critical methods and voices that seem to rise out of the literature itself” - I have determined that the presence of aesthetics and ethics from the oral tradition in Native American literature is evidence of and demonstrates resilience. Therefore, in the sections that follow, I attempt to develop a theory of “resilience literature” to address and highlight those aspects of Native literature.
CHAPTER III: SHERMAN ALEXIE’S

SMOKE SIGNALS AS A LITERATURE OF RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Spokane/Coeur d’Alene writer Sherman Alexie’s screenplay Smoke Signals (1998) is a literature of resistance because he appropriates the popular Hollywood film genres of the buddy and road trip film to tell a Native story that resists Hollywood stereotypes and critiques the history of Native American representation in film. Smoke Signals is also literature of resilience in that it emulates a Native American storytelling aesthetic through the journey/twin story. It also promotes a Native American ethic grounded in the importance of community and the value of Native American women to that community. Through narrative structure, complex characters, and strategic use of symbols, Smoke Signals is a literature and film of resistance and resilience.

In section one of this chapter, I provide a biography of Alexie, summarize the main text and reactions to that text, and consider the history of Native American representation in mainstream film. In section two, I analyze Alexie’s response to, and critique of, this history through his appropriation of established Hollywood film
genres, characterization, and symbolism in the film. First looking at narrative structure, I explore how Alexie consciously chose established Hollywood film genres to shape his narrative in order to reach the widest audience possible. Through the buddy and road trip genres, and with allusions to the Western, Alexie is able to frame his screenplay in a way that speaks to a mainstream audience. This framework also allows for a Native storytelling aesthetic emulating a Native American archetypal oral story regarding hero twins.

Second, I analyze Alexie’s characterizations of the Native protagonists and co-stars. Through his complex rendering of characters, Alexie writes against the “Vanishing Noble” or “bloodthirsty savages,” stereotypes that still dominate Hollywood films today, and he creates characters representative of contemporary Native people. This is not to claim that they are “realistic” depictions; rather they are deliberate constructions meant to resist a particular history of misrepresentation. For example, the women in the film are not weakened by subservient roles, nor are they diminished by the reductive formulaic requirements of the western and the buddy/road trip film. Instead they are strong characters essential to the narrative and to the film’s resolution. Third, I analyze
Alexie’s use of symbolism to convey both universal and Native American concepts, thus reaching the largest audience possible in order to convey a Native story.

Section I: Biography

Sherman Alexie is a poet, writer, filmmaker, scriptwriter, and essayist born in 1966 and raised on the Spokane reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. He is the son of a Coeur d’Alene father and Spokane mother. His writing deeply reflects his personal experiences growing up on the reservation with love, “and a mix of traditional and contemporary culture” (Marx 1996:1). Alexie attended school on the reservation until he went to Reardan High in a nearby border town, where he recalls that he was the only Native American other than the mascot. He later went to college at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, then Washington State University in Pullman, Washington, where a poetry class taught by Alex Kuo led to his interest in creative writing. For the first time, Alexie read works by other Native Americans and realized that he too, could write about his own experiences.

Alexie’s upbringing deeply affects his writing as he has pointed out in numerous interviews including one in which he claimed, “I am a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian from
Wellpinit, Washington, where I live on the Spokane Indian reservation. Everything I do now, writing and otherwise, has its origin in that” (Bruchac 1995:2). Though Alexie now lives in Seattle, his work clearly reflects his years on the reservation. Much of his poetry and fiction have semi-autobiographical qualities, and he more recently admitted that his first short story collection, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993) “is a thinly disguised memoir. I was a child at the crazy New Year’s Eve party depicted in ‘Every Little Hurricane’” (2005:Xix). His reality informs his fiction and much of his work criticizes stereotypical depictions of Native Americans.

It has been well-argued that Alexie’s stories challenge stereotypes through irony and satire. In his excellent article “‘Open Containers’: Sherman Alexie’s Drunken Indians,” Stephen Evens claims Alexie raises audience’s awareness regarding alcoholism and contextualizes it in a way that is deeply critical of colonial history and its impact on Native people. Certainly Alexie’s uncanny ability to critique history through humor politicizes his work and makes it a literature of resistance.

Alexie is more concerned with looking critically at the impact of colonialism on Native people generally than
in looking at tribally specific issues. During President Clinton’s “Dialogue on Race” Alexie stated, “I think the primary thing that people need to know about Indians is that our identity is much less cultural now and much more political”\(^8\). Indeed, a postmodern sensibility pervades Alexie’s writing in a way that alludes to a tribally specific culture but ultimately finds absence. For example, Thomas Builds-the-Fire says in his story about going to the Spokane Falls hoping to see a sign, “I kept hoping I’d see some salmon, but there ain’t any salmon in that river anymore” (Screenplay 1998). As fishing people dependent on salmon for physical as well as spiritual sustenance, the absence of salmon points to a greater loss in Spokane culture: “For all his humor, indeed in the heart of his humor, Alexie invariably circulates the grave themes of ongoing colonial history and its personal effects in Indian country” (Moore 2005: 297). This common history leads to a greater emphasis on similarities among Native people rather than tribal specificity.

In Alexie’s writing, constant references to Custer, Geronimo, Crazy Horse, frybread, and commodity food overshadow a specific Spokane or Coeur d’Alene identity,  

but reinforce a shared history that is distinctly Native American. This distinction is the foundation of Alexie’s work and is at the heart of his literature of resistance. His emphasis on similarities among Native peoples also lends itself to a literature of resilience in that it utilizes common narrative strategies among Native people, and highlights values common to Native Americans such as the importance of community and the value of Native women: “The need for female strength and wisdom is a primary theme of Alexie’s” (Marx 1996: 39). Smoke Signals reflects this background and Alexie’s literary work in its poetic qualities and its inclusion of the themes and references listed above.

Alexie is famous for his ability to lyrically depict the harsh realities of reservation life, and he has won numerous awards, including the Washington State Arts Commission Poetry Fellowship in 1991 and The New York Times Book Review’s “Notable Book of the Year.” The collection of poetry I Would Steal Horses (1992) garnered several awards, a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship, and he won the PEN/Hemingway Award for best book of fiction. Alexie’s The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993) received glowing reviews, and
his first novel Reservation Blues (1995) was favorably received.

Alexie’s narrative technique of juxtaposing humor with tragedy was widely known by 1995. His particular brand of grim humor addressing a colonial past and its impact on the present was recognized as a distinctly Native American quality in his work. At the same time, the release of the novel Indian Killer (1996) caught American readers by surprise and garnered harsh criticism mixed with high praise. The novel is intensely confrontational, without much of the signature humor that accompanied Alexie’s earlier works. Often expressing his dislike of overused romantic images and misrepresentations of Indian people, Alexie replied to critics uncomfortable with the book, “I’m not in this to make people feel comfortable” (Egan, 1998: 19).

Yet, with Smoke Signals Alexie intentionally sought to reach the largest audience possible (Purdy 1997; Teters 1998) and so found ways to make them “comfortable.” In his effort to resist the misrepresentations of Native American people, he needed to reach those people who believed those misrepresentations. He did this largely through a familiar narrative format—the buddy/road film, interesting characters, and universal symbolism.
Main Text and Reaction to Work

*Smoke Signals* is the story of Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, two young men who travel from the Coeur D’Alene reservation in Idaho to Phoenix, Arizona to retrieve the ashes of Victor’s father Arnold. Many of the smaller stories contained within this larger narrative focus on the men’s relationship with Arnold prior to his leaving the reservation when they were just boys. The young men have very different views of Arnold. Thomas sees him as a hero and father figure, while Victor sees him as a failure for abandoning Victor and his mother. Thomas and Victor make their physical and emotional journey to retrieve Arnold’s ashes with the help of many women, ultimately leading to Arnold’s literal and metaphorical return to the reservation. Through this storyline the film creates a depth and complexity of characters not previously seen in Hollywood film. This quality and others were acknowledged at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998.

*Smoke Signals* premiered at Sundance and was recognized as the first full-length feature film written, directed, acted, and co-produced by Native Americans with a mainstream distributor (West 1998: 29). The film was well received and won the Festival’s Audience Award and the Filmmaker’s Trophy. In addition to being recognized as a
famous first, *Smoke Signals* was highly regarded for its multi-dimensional portrayal of Native Americans, a virtual first in- and - of itself. According to *Cineaste* magazine, “Every few years or so, press kits arrive at the offices of film magazines announcing that a forthcoming film about Native Americans decisively breaks with the stereotypes of the past. *Smoke Signals* is the latest film to advertise itself as so, but, unlike most of its predecessors, *Smoke Signals* delivers on its promises” (West 1998: 28). Alexie’s successful rendering of narrative, character, and symbols with universal appeal reached a large audience while it simultaneously challenged their expectations of Hollywood Indians: expectations based on more than one hundred years of misrepresentation.

**History of Native American Representations in Mainstream Film**

Native American characters in film have historically been one-dimensional, polarized stereotypes serving to accelerate the plot, pose a threat, or add an exotic touch to scenery: “The Hollywood Indian is a mythological being that exists nowhere but within the fertile imaginations of its movie actors, producers, and directors. The
preponderance of such movie images has reduced native people to ignoble stereotypes" (Jojola 1998: 12). An Indian presence in American film is as old as American film itself, but despite more than a century of filmmaking the images depicted on screen have changed very little. “When inventor Thomas Alva Edison premiered the kinetoscope at the 1893 Chicago Columbian World’s Exposition by showing the exotic Hopi Snake Dance, few would have predicted that this kind of depiction would persist into contemporary times” (Jojola 1998: 12). Persist it did, as Ellen Arnold notes: “The Indian has been a staple for the Western movie since its inception with the silent news reels of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show in 1898,” and by far the Western is the most popular place to find the “Indians” of the American imagination (Arnold 1997: 347).

Yet, the Hollywood Indian seems to be paradoxically both a presence and non-presence. Jane Tompkins explains in West of Everything why a discussion of Indian characters is conspicuously absent from her work. Though she concedes, “One of the things that let’s you know when you’re in a Western is the presence of Indians,” she ultimately concludes:

The ones I saw functioned as props, bits of local color, textural effects. As people they had no
existence. Quite often they filled the role of villains, predictably, driving the engine of the plot, threatening the wagon train, the stagecoach, the Cavalry detachment—a particularly dangerous form of wildlife. (1992: 8)

But Natives did not exist in the Western, according to Tompkins, as real people. Considering the sheer number of Westerns released in Hollywood over the last century, and the understanding of Westerns as “one of the chief expressions of the basic American experience” these films have had a powerful effect on how Americans have come to know and understand Indians (Berkhofer 1978: 103). The one-dimensional, bipolar extremes of bloodthirsty savage versus noble savage persist into the present.

Attempts to address this problem in the last several decades have largely failed. Even the “sympathetic” films of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s often only “reversed the traditional imagery by making the Indian good and the White bad” (Berkhofer 1978: 103). A recent example can be found in the film Dances with Wolves (1992). The Sioux are a near perfect example of the noble Indian, contrasted with the savagery of white civilization. As one-dimensional characters in Hollywood film, Native Americans are rarely portrayed as contemporary, complex, flawed, and/or gifted
human beings. The white protagonists, on the other hand, struggle with the complexities of human nature and eventually come to better understand who they are. In the case of Westerns this is often with the help of a Native American guide or mentor, yet the Native American is rarely the focus of the film and is seldom rendered in complex ways. As mentioned, *Smoke Signals* is a film of resistance because it politicizes and criticizes this history of misrepresentations of Native Americans in film by offering an alternative. It renders contemporary complex characters who at times—as we shall see—directly challenge that history. Far from the Hollywood Indians of old, the protagonist Victor is allowed a great deal of character development throughout the film as the audience witnesses his identity formation and personal growth. The Native American community surrounding Victor also includes complex characters critical to this formation.

**Section II: Narrative Structure: The Hollywood Buddy/Road Film Meets the Native American Oral Tradition**

*Smoke Signals* begins by conforming to Western literary concepts of plot development as the film opens with a sequence that establishes the setting for the audience. They are made aware of the location, year, and day, as a
deejay announces: “Good Morning Coeur d’Alene Indian Reservation. It’s a rainy Bicentennial Fourth of July and time for the morning traffic report.” A subtitle identifies the year as 1976 as the deejay speaks to the reservation residents. The audience is a third party observing the story until this narrative form is usurped by the voice-over of Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Speaking directly to the audience Thomas presents a counter-narrative to mainstream American history.

On July 4, 1976, my mother and father celebrated white people’s independence by hosting the largest house party in Coeur d’Alene tribal history. I mean, every Indian in the world was there. And then at three in the morning, after everyone has passed out on couches, chairs, the floor, a fire rose up like General George Armstrong Custer and swallowed up my mother and father.

I don’t remember that fire. I only have the stories. And in every one of those stories, I could fly.

I was just a baby when Arnold Joseph saved me from that fire and delivered me into the hands of my grandmother.
And Victor Joseph was just a baby too when his father saved me from that fire.

You know, there are some children who aren’t really children at all. They’re just pillars of fire that burn everything they touch.

And there are some children who are just pillars of ash that fall apart if you touch them.

Me and Victor, we were children born of flame and ash. (Scene 4)

This counter-narrative begins with Thomas’ statement regarding “white people’s independence.” By indicating the Fourth of July is neither his, nor his parent’s independence, he presents an alternative interpretation of this event. Thomas’ voiceover resists typical themes in Hollywood film by emphasizing a Native American perspective on American history. Framing this story and others are the familiar Hollywood genres of the buddy film and the road film, which Alexie appropriated to make Smoke Signals accessible to a wide audience. Eric Gary Anderson, in his discussion of Powwow Highway (1989) describes the road film as one where “two very unlike characters and their parallel, but very different, purposes begin to share the same journey,” and the buddy-movie as one “in which two same-sex characters gradually acquire respect and affection
for each other, finally overcoming their differences to bond near the film’s conclusion” (Anderson 1998: 146). In Smoke Signals, Victor the “warrior” and Thomas the “storyteller” pair up to travel to Phoenix, Arizona to retrieve the ashes of Victor’s father, Arnold Joseph. The two characters could not be more opposite. Their relationship is often uncomfortable and frequently hostile due to their conflicting personalities and their different feelings towards Arnold. Victor sees his dad as a violent drunk who abandoned him when he was very young; he can barely tolerate Thomas’ glorification of Arnold. Thomas sees Arnold as a father figure and hero who saved him from the house fire that killed his parents.

Demonstrating his fondness for Arnold, Thomas frequently tells the story about when he walked from the Coeur d’Alene Reservation to “the Falls” by the YMCA in Spokane in order to have a vision; “Yeah, so I walked there, you know? I mean, I didn’t have no car. I didn’t have no license. I was twelve years old! It took me all day, but I walked there, and stood on this bridge over the falls, waiting for a sign”(Scene 49). After waiting for hours, Arnold appears and tells Thomas, “All you’re going to get around here is mugged!”(Scene 50) He puts his hand on Thomas’ shoulder in a show of concern, then takes him to
Denny’s for breakfast. The act of Arnold retrieving Thomas from the city is important to the narrative. As the one who saves Thomas from the house fire he is a much better father to Thomas than to Victor, and for other reasons discovered much later, Arnold takes a kind of responsibility for him. In this way he is father to both Victor and Thomas.

As such, the film begins to echo the basic narrative structure of a familiar archetypal story found in many of the mythologies of Native American tribes. Stories centering on the actions of two brothers abound in Native American oral texts. The basic plot structure frequently involves a journey where they find or discover their father. In some cases, the father is the sun or a star. The brothers often originate through unconventional means. In Kiowa oratory, the brothers are initially one boy born of a human mother and the sun. Later the boy is split in two, creating twins who become honored figures in Kiowa storytelling (Momaday 1969: 24-34). According to John Bierhorst, “one of the best known of the boy-hero myths, told throughout the Plains from Canada to Texas” involves the violent birth of twin boys who, after many adventures, eventually return home to find their father gone. They soon learn their father has become a star, which is often a metaphor for death (Bierhorst 1985: 157-58).
In *Smoke Signals* Thomas and Victor become brothers through the accidental death of Thomas’ parents. As children “born of flame and ash” the two are united through their relationship with Arnold who abandons them as children. They are later united in their journey to retrieve Arnold’s ashes after he dies. The surface story is simple, but the underlying subtext is that Victor’s identity has been stunted by Arnold’s abandonment and it is necessary for him to make this journey in order to discover who he is and where he belongs, so he can rightfully take his place in the community. Echoing the narrative framework of twin-stories, Victor and Thomas, two opposites from the same community, venture together to Phoenix, Arizona to retrieve the ashes of Victor’s—and by extension of “adoption,” Thomas’—father.

In the mythologies the brothers go looking for their father in order to better understand who they are (often the father is unknown), and to better understand their father and why he left. In this way they attempt to find their identity within their community. In the film, the brothers go to Phoenix for similar reasons. Though the father is no longer physically present, they are looking for answers. It is interesting to note that in the scene at the bridge correlating with Thomas’ favorite story about
how Arnold took him to Denny’s one day, the camera angles so that during the re-enactment of this memory, when Thomas looks up at the booming voice coming from above his head, all he sees is a dark shadow with sky filling all the space behind it. Thomas squints at the shadow as if blinded by light though it is a cloudy day. Later in the film, Victor, who was not present during this event, sees the identical image of his father in his mind. These scenes imply that Victor shares this collective memory with his “brother.” This journey/twin story narrative exists simultaneously with the buddy/road film adding an interesting dimension to the story.

Resisting the Western

Throughout Smoke Signals Alexie uses multi-layered narrative structure as a vehicle to critique Hollywood misrepresentation of Native Americans. In a funny scene highlighting this history the film focuses on a conversation between Victor and Thomas on the Greyhound bus that will take them to Phoenix. During this film sequence allusions to the Western film genre add dimension, depth, and humor to the conversation. The sequence begins with a shot panning the western landscape, desolate and spacious, similar to gorgeous landscapes of the Hollywood Western
meant to reinforce belief and pride in Manifest Destiny. As
the shot pulls back to reveal Victor sitting on the bus
next to Thomas, the conversation turns to Hollywood. After
accusing Thomas of watching Dances with Wolves “a hundred,
two hundred times,” Victor yells at Thomas, “Oh, jeez, you
have seen it that many times, haven’t you? Man. Do you
think that shit is real? God. Don’t you even know how to be
a real Indian?” Thomas says “no,” so Victor decides he’ll
have to teach him. His lesson includes, “get stoic,” and
“look mean . . . like a warrior . . . like you just got
back from killing a buffalo.” To which Thomas replies, “But
our tribe never hunted buffalo. We were fishermen” (Scene
59). In a funny moment Victor goes on, listing Indian
attributes directly based on films such as Dances with
Wolves despite his earlier comment that such films are not
real. Clearly, he has bought into the stereotypes: he uses
them to define himself, and is trying to force Thomas into
adopting them as well.

Victor’s attempt at identity formation fails
completely however, when a few scenes later they are re-
boarding the bus and find their seats taken by two cowboys.
The allusion to the Western film genre’s “cowboys and
Indians” motif is clear as the large cowboy tells them to
“find somewhere else to have a powwow” (Scene 62). As the
young men go to the back of the bus a version of the tune "Gary Owen" plays. This recognizable song was a favorite of General George Armstrong Custer, who would have his military band play the tune as he went into battle. It was adopted in the 1980’s as the official theme song of the United States Seventh Calvary and had been previously used for years in Hollywood Westerns such The Searchers (1956) and Little Big Man (1970) to connote a military presence on screen.

This version of Gary Owen, however, is notably different. It is sung by Native American women using vocables. The tune is appropriated and revised in this way. Because it is Gary Owen it signals a loss for the Native protagonists; yet, because it is appropriated and revised by Native singers it implies a future win which immediately follows. As the young men take their seat at the back of the bus, Thomas complains that the cowboys always win. Victor counters that “the cowboys don’t always win” then sings a song about John Wayne’s teeth, subverting, if only slightly, the margin of winning for the cowboys.

This scene, though brief, is loaded with references to the Western and its assumptions while it points out alternatives to these assumptions. It also highlights Victor’s confused identity while indicating through his
composition of a subversive song that there might be hope for him yet. In this humorous scene the audience is invited to share a few “inside” jokes. Dances with Wolves was “hailed as a landmark film because it treated American Indians as fully realized human beings . . . [making them] believable, likable, and interesting” (Kilpatrick, 1999: 124). At the same time, film critics recognized that the portrayal of the Sioux in the film was heavily romanticized rather than realistic. This part of the narrative challenges the audience to question whether they have bought into the same romantic stereotypes and to juxtapose those with the characters they see on screen. Victor and Thomas are neither romanticized Noble savages nor doomed Vanishing Americans. This moment resists Hollywood stereotypes of Native Americans through humor and in this way Alexie raises awareness in his audience.

Resistance and Resilience as Expressed Through Female Characters

Although Smoke Signals alludes to the Hollywood Western and is a buddy/road trip film, it also resists and veers away from these formulas through the female characters. These characters do not operate as a foil to the bonding of the two male characters, which is typical of
buddy films, nor are the women diminished by demeaning roles typical of the Western. The film industry is notorious for its negative portrayal of Native American women. As a scholar of the Western, Jane Tompkins reflects on the negative images of Indian women in Hollywood film. Referring specifically to the Comanche woman “Look” in John Ford’s The Searchers (1956) she states:

This woman was treated so abominably by the characters—ridiculed, humiliated, and then killed off casually by the plot—that I couldn’t believe my eyes. The movie treated her as a joke, not as a person. I couldn’t bear to take her seriously; it would have been too painful. (1992: 8)

Literature and film critic Ellen Arnold argues, “such images misrepresent the powerful social roles that Native American women historically played in their cultures” and adds, “these stereotypes, by influencing public perceptions, also interfere with the recognition of contemporary Native American women’s vital roles as cultural mediators, political activists, and leaders of resistance” (Arnold 1997: 349). Alexie, very much aware of the powerful roles Native women have occupied throughout history, purposefully wrote strong women into his screenplay. “When Arlene Joseph stands up to Arnold, she is
being the kind of powerful Indian woman I’ve known all my life” (Alexie 1998: 160).

Smoke Signals differs from conventional Hollywood films by portraying strong women who are not diminished in their roles, nor are they portrayed in opposition to the men. The female characters, far from being an obstacle to male bonding, contribute to the resolution and bonding of the male characters. This represents a distinctly Native American sensibility. In both Native American history and myth, Native American women frequently serve as creators, healers, leaders, and advisors, contrary to the way they are portrayed in the majority of American history and myth (Arnold, 1997: 349) Examples of Native women performing these critical functions can be found in many tribal histories and oral texts, even in those cultures considered to be patriarchal.

Among the Sioux, White Buffalo Calf Woman appeared during a time when the people needed direction. She advised them, brought the sacred pipe and the Seven Sacred rituals so they could survive. The impact of her message is readily seen in the customs and religious rituals of the Oglala; their grandmothers teach the children, because White Buffalo Calf Woman promised that the women would be the
ones to recall her messages of spiritual value (Niehardt 1988: 1-7).

Further south, Apache women are/were highly regarded and seen as self-sufficient: “Men were not thought able to survive for any extended time without the presence of women . . . Women, however, were thought capable of living for extended time periods without the presence or assistance of men” (Stockel 1991: 15). The high regard for women among the Apache was, and is, recognized ritualistically through the puberty ceremony, which is governed by the story of White Painted Woman. This ritual exists today as a testament to the success of Apache women in preserving critical elements of their culture.

At the other edge of North America, the Iroquois believe Sky Woman created the Earth. As a matrilineal people, the Iroquois saw women as the caretakers and owners of the land, as well as owners of the food harvested from that land. Women also played important political roles as Clan mothers, holding hereditary rights to office titles, choosing representatives to the village and tribal councils, and holding the power of impeachment (Allen 1986: 15, 33, 219).
For present-day representation of Native female leadership, one only has to look to Wilma Mankiller, former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. There are many more examples, but suffice it to say Native women occupy a very different place in many Native cultures than in Western culture. As Ellen Arnold notes, “Not only were Native American cultures frequently matrilineal and matrilocal, but women in these cultures often served as warriors, political and religious leaders, healers and shamans” (1997: 349). Smoke Signals subtly addresses this reality, despite its emphasis on male bonding and father-son relationships. The female characters, though not the focus of the film, have an important presence as they serve as advisors, guides, and catalysts for action.

In one story contained within the narrative, Victor’s mother Arlene steps into the role of deity in Thomas’ mythical retelling of a feast where there were 100 people and only 50 pieces of frybread. In the story Arlene “magically creates” one hundred pieces of frybread from fifty. In a visually dramatic on-screen moment, Arlene is shown with frybread in hand as she raises it over her head and looks toward the heavens. She then tears it in half “magically” feeding the one hundred people. This scene usurps a dominant Christian narrative, replacing it with a
contemporary humorous story. Considering that female deities have been known to appear to Native communities in times of great need, especially during times of hunger, this contemporary spin on those stories places Arlene in a modified Native narrative.

Arlene is also a catalyst for Victor’s finding his place in the community. As mediator, she offers Victor advice on going to Phoenix, after Victor tells her that Thomas offered to give him the money for the bus ride providing he can go along. Victor dislikes Thomas and has no intention of accepting until he talks to Arlene. While she is making her famous fry bread, Arlene offers Victor advice in a non-direct Native fashion:

You know, people always tell me I make the best fry bread in the world. Maybe it’s true. But I don’t make it by myself, you know? I got the recipe from your grandmother, who got it from her grandmother. And I listen to people when they eat my bread, too. Sometimes, they might say, “Arlene, there’s too much flour,” or “Arlene, you should knead the dough a little more.” I listen to them. And I watch that Julia Child all the time. (Scene 23)
Victor accepts his mother’s advice and lets Thomas help him, which ultimately leads to his journey and the beginning of his identity formation.

Thomas is much more secure in his identity and this is largely because he relies on his grandmother. Thomas’ grandma serves subtly as an advisor, but more importantly as Thomas’ foundation for his place in the community. She is not presented as the grand old wise woman of Hollywood stereotype, but rather as the one constant in Thomas’ life whom he can count on. This is reinforced visually on screen through their interactions.

In a scene between Thomas and his grandmother at the dinner table, both characters bow their heads as in prayer. They are perfectly balanced in the scene, each taking up about half the frame directly across from one another. Their thick braids and thick glasses make them appear as near mirror-images. They hear a knock at the door and simultaneously look up, then at the door, then at each other barely able to contain their joy from the knowledge that it is Victor at the door. The staging of this scene firmly establishes visually Thomas’ relationship with his grandmother. They balance and complement each other perfectly. There is a sense of strength in this balance
that visually places Thomas in a very solid position in terms of identity.

Victor is in greatest need when it comes to identity formation, and he finds the missing stories that lead to his further development in Phoenix, Arizona through the character of Suzy Song. Suzy does not serve as an obstacle to the male bonding in the film, which is typically the role of most females in the road trip/buddy movie (Arnold 1997: 356) nor does she inhibit the lead character’s ability to resolve his conflict with his father. Instead, she is a catalyst for the resolution that must take place.

Suzy’s presence forces a critical turning point in Victor’s understanding of his father and himself. Suzy is quite possibly the one person who really knew Arnold, because she knew why he left. Beginning with a series of casual and polite stories about how she met Arnold, what they talked about, and a story Arnold told her about playing basketball against Jesuits, Suzy eventually moves to telling Victor the most critical information he needs. She tells him that Arnold was the one who started the house fire that killed Thomas’ parents. Without realizing it, Victor has encountered the one story he really needed to know.
Throughout the various narratives Victor has stumbled across huge voids that could only be filled with the stories from his community. His father, as a member of that community, cheated Victor out of vital information in his identity-forming process. Only through this understanding can he come to forgive his father and himself. Both as a member of the Native American community at large, and as an unknown figure who appears with guidance in a time of great need Suzy contributes to the Native dimensions of this narrative.

The Importance of Community

As survivors of the house fire, both Victor and Thomas had to negotiate growing up without parents. Victor struggles with this most, as Thomas was too young to know his parents when they died. In addition, Thomas has his grandmother to whom he is very close, and he willingly adopts Arnold as a father figure. Victor, on the other hand, has to deal with the knowledge that his father abandoned him by his own free will. This loss drives the plot in terms of a Native sensibility, according to literary critic James Ruppert, because Native stories frequently focus on how “An individual is encouraged to find the greater self in the communal, and perhaps in the
smallest and most essential unit of the communal, the family” in order to determine their identity (1995: 28). Victor is lost and unable to deal with his loss because he does not know his place in his community or family.

Nowhere in the film is this loss made clearer than when Victor wakens Thomas early to leave Phoenix with Arnold’s ashes. Despite the fact he now knows more about Arnold and why he left, Victor still has many unresolved issues. He initially reacted to Suzy with anger and jealousy because she knew Arnold better than he did. He does not yet realize that she has given him critical pieces of information needed to better understand himself.

Victor’s lack of this realization is indicated in the scene that takes place as they are driving back to the reservation in Arnold’s pick-up. Thomas begins yet another story about how Arnold took him to Denny’s when Victor yells, “I’m sick of you telling me all these stories about my father like you know him or something” (Scene 97). Thomas replies that he does know Arnold and maybe Victor doesn’t know himself. Accusing Victor of “moping around the reservation for ten years,” Victor shoots back, “What do you do all day long?” Thomas states:

I take care of my grandma.

Victor: And I take care of my mom.
Thomas: You make your mom cry.

Thomas: Shut up, Thomas.

Thomas: You make your mom cry. You make her cry her eyes out, Victor. I mean, your dad left, sure. Yeah, he ran away. But you left her, too. And you’re worse because you still live in the same house. (Scene 97)

Victor does not make a positive contribution to the community because he has selfishly focused on his losses and is emotionally absent. He especially does not make a positive contribution to the most “essential unit of the communal,” his family.

In the scene that follows, Victor and Thomas are in a car crash. As Victor runs for help his mind flashes to the bits and pieces of Suzy’s story, emphasizing evidence of Arnold’s love for Victor including the fact that Arnold ran into the burning house looking for him. Overwhelmed with the stories and by physical exhaustion, he collapses, to awake to a vision of his father looming over him huge and imposing. Victor squints at the sight of Arnold as if blinded by a bright light. This event and vision appear to be a turning point for Victor. In this particular sequence, the action drives the plot.

The trauma of the car crash causes Victor to relive Suzy’s stories, as visualized on the screen in a montage of
events from the past. When Victor sees Arnold standing over him extending his hand to help him up, he accepts. Victor’s sudden acceptance of his father does not come from an elaborate psychological narrative where he spends a great deal of time looking inward for answers, but comes suddenly with the stories and the action. According to Ruppert, “traditional Native American oral narratives develop in an essentially apsychological manner . . . actors in a mythic story are defined by what they do, not by how they feel or what their motivation is” (1995: 26). The death of his father, the journey to Phoenix, the encounter with Suzy, and the car crash all add up to the final resolution for Victor. The resolution does not come from introspection, because Victor has refused to think about defining his identity in terms of his relationship to his father, as shown in the conversation with Thomas quoted above. It instead comes from the stories and the action. As stories from the past and pieces of missing stories join together visually, they create a kind of introspective moment for the audience. Arnold is psychologically “explained” as the reasons for his leaving are finally illuminated. With a better understanding of Arnold, the audience can better understand Victor.
At the hospital after the car wreck Victor finally accepts the can of ashes Thomas has been carrying all this time because Victor refused to touch it. When the two finally arrive back on the reservation, Victor willingly gives Thomas half the ashes. He has finally agreed to share his father with Thomas and in this way accept Thomas as family. This is his first step in finding his place in the community. The next is to find his place in relation to his father. As Victor gives Thomas his half of the ashes Thomas says nearly in tears, “Victor, I am going to travel to Spokane Falls one last time and toss these ashes into the water. And your father will rise like a salmon/He’ll rise.” To which Victor responds, “I was thinking about doing the same thing myself. But I never thought of my father as a salmon. I mean, I thought it would be like cleaning out the attic, you know/ Like throwing things away when they have no more use” (Scene 137). He has finally decided to let his father go.

This scene reflects typical Hollywood formulas in that there appears to be a clear resolution. The son ultimately forgives his father and agrees to share him with the brother. When the two young men return to the reservation, Thomas asks Victor yet again; “Hey Victor? Do know why your dad really left?” To which Victor replies, “Yeah. He didn’t
mean to Thomas.” By not telling Thomas what he knows (that Arnold accidentally killed Thomas’ parents by starting the house fire) Victor protects Thomas from emotional harm. In this way he acts as an older brother, and takes a responsible position in the community.

Symbolism

The resolution comes from forgiveness and acceptance on Victor’s part, but also from the return of Arnold’s ashes to his homeland, and more importantly, to the river. The clear references to the salmon are no coincidence on Alexie’s part, who chooses to use this imagery frequently in his work as a metaphor for both the Spokane tribal people and the loss of a traditional way of life (Alexie 1992; 1993). The reference to salmon in a Western sense also clearly refers to the idea that salmon always return to the place of their birth. Arnold’s death in Phoenix disrupts the cycle because he never returns to his home reservation. According to Suzy, “Arnold was always trying to get home” but he failed in his struggle. The cycle is complete when the boys return Arnold to the reservation, and to the river.
The film is thick with metaphorical imagery and language that borrows from both mainstream culture and Native American culture. The river and water in general are symbolic of healing and resolution, juxtaposed with the fire and conflict at the beginning of the film. Fire also relates directly to Arnold’s last place of residence. According to young Thomas, Arnold has “lived everywhere” since he left Victor and Arlene, but it is important that he ultimately ends up in Phoenix, Arizona. Upon his death his body is cremated and the ashes remain in Phoenix waiting to be retrieved by Victor and Thomas. The allusion to the mythological bird that rises from the ashes again and again is clear in the ending sequence, but what may be less clear is the final allusion to the twin brother story in Native mythology.

The ending sequence of the movie does some wonderful things with both of these ideas. The final sequence takes place after Thomas is reunited with his grandmother. As she holds his face in her hands she asks, “Tell me what happened Thomas. Tell me what’s going to happen,” and Thomas closes his eyes. The scene cuts to a birds-eye view of a river flowing downstream as Thomas recites a poem in the voiceover. As the camera follows the water it progresses from a quiet, narrow, meandering path to a huge
rushing river that becomes more and more turbulent as it nears Victor standing on a bridge. From the birds-eye view, the camera gets closer and closer to the violent turbulence of the water before swooping up to a shot of Victor from below. He is throwing the ashes into the water. As he does so with great emotional pain, the camera continues to rise until it is at eye-level with Victor for a moment before passing over his head. What is most interesting in this sequence is that as the camera rises from the water to a shot of Victor from below it catches the sun shining beside him. The sun’s rays grow until they flare the camera, which then moves slightly to the right placing the sun directly behind Victor. This natural back-lighting gives Victor’s silhouette enormous radiance as the film is briefly overexposed. His silhouette is faded and the frame fills with intense red and orange light all around him. Then as the camera goes over his head, the scene quickly cuts to a view of Victor from the other side of the bridge, where the turbulent water has calmed slightly and rushes away behind him. The shot fades to black and the movie is over.

The mythic story of two brothers who go in search of their father ultimately discovering that he is a star or the sun (sometimes a metaphor for death) often ends with the brothers also becoming stars. When Victor throws the
ashes into the river there is a sense of rising out of the water as the camera swoops up and over him and he becomes completely illuminated, radiating light like a star. According to director Chris Eyre, this was a “serendipitous moment” in filming. The camera accidentally caught the sun to produce these effects. Though this part of the filming sequence was a “visual accident,” Eyre kept it because it strongly conveyed the various subtexts of the film and was representative of Victor’s spiritual catharsis as he threw the ashes over the bridge.\(^9\) This visual representation of Victor radiating in the sky, though brief, visually reinforces the twin story narrative as Native singing and drumming bring the film to a close. Thus ends one of the most unique films featuring Native Americans to date.

**Conclusion**

Alexie’s goal to move Indians in film beyond the one-dimensional, polarized stereotypes discussed by Berkhofer, Arnold, Jojola, and others was successful in *Smoke Signals*. This film, through its complex layering of Native American and American narratives, successfully appropriates popular Hollywood film genres while telling a Native story. The film most clearly demonstrates resistance as it rewrites

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\(^9\) Personal conversation with director Chris Eyre in 2000.
Native Americans in film and consciously critiques previous representations of Native Americans. It demonstrates resilience in that it emulates a common Native American narrative of the journey and hero twin story. It establishes a Native American ethic through emphasis placed on Victor’s identity formation and finding his place in the community. The film also highlights the value of Native women through Alexie’s complex rendering of the female characters.

Yet, because of Alexie’s lack of tribal specificity regarding aesthetics and ethics, Smoke Signals does not demonstrate resilience as clearly as the work by other authors to be discussed next. While he clearly adopts general concepts, as demonstrated in this chapter, his work is more obviously a literature of resistance in its polemic. As we shall see, future author’s works to be discussed here become increasingly more exemplary of resilience and less so of resistance. For example, though Louise Erdrich’s work is also clearly a work of resistance, it offers more easily definable qualities of resilience in its tribal specificity.
CHAPTER IV: RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE
IN LOUISE ERDRICH’S TRACKS

Chippewa¹⁰ writer Louise Erdrich’s novel Tracks (1988) is a literature of resistance in its appropriation of the novel as a literary strategy to critique the history of colonization and assimilation of Native Americans in the United States. In particular, Erdrich uses the medium of the novel to critique the devastating results of federal allotment policy on tribal lands and communities. Yet Tracks is also literature of resilience in its aesthetics and ethics. Aesthetically, Tracks adapts Chippewa oral storytelling practices while appropriating postmodern narrative strategies. This is evident in Erdrich’s ability to convey a Chippewa storytelling aesthetic through postmodernist dual narration. Through Erdrich’s contrasting characters and use of Chippewa symbols, Tracks also promotes a Native American ethic – one that is grounded in a responsibility to community and land. Such a combination

¹⁰ According to Joni Adamson, the Chippewa are also called the Ojibwa but are more correctly called the Anishinabeg” (2001: 192). Like Adamson, I use the word Chippewa because it is the term Erdrich uses in Tracks; however, when directly quoting other literature and resources other terms may be used to maintain the integrity of the quote. For example, Lawrence Gross uses the term Anishinaabe when discussing “The Trickster and World Maintenance” in Tracks.
of historical commentary and critique, appropriation, aesthetic treatment, and the promotion of culturally-specific ethics makes Tracks an example of resistance and resilience in contemporary Native American literature.

In section one of this chapter, I provide a biography of Erdrich, summarize the main text of Tracks, and discuss some reactions to her work. In section two, I analyze the novel's narrative structure, its characterization, and Erdrich's use of Chippewa symbols.

Section I: Biography

Louise Erdrich is a writer firmly established in the realm of Native American and American writing. She is an example of a Native American writer whose works have traveled to the "metropolitan centre" where they have been recognized, critically received, and welcomed into the mainstream American canon of literature (Chavkin 1999, Jacobs 2001). Erdrich was born to Ralph Louis and Rita Joanne Erdrich in Little Falls, Minnesota on June 7, 1954. Her parents are Chippewa and German and she spent much of her youth in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where her parents taught at the Wahpeton Indian Boarding School. Her maternal grandfather, Kaishpau Gourneau, served as tribal chair of the Turtle Mountain Band of the Chippewa in the late 1880s
and some critics think he is the inspiration for some of her characters, including Nanapush in Tracks and Nector Kashpaw in *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*. Although Erdrich did not grow up on the Turtle Mountain reservation where she is enrolled, the influence of her Chippewa heritage is plainly visible in her fiction and poetry.

Even as a child, Erdrich’s parents encouraged her creative writing abilities. Her father paid her a nickel for every story she wrote and her mother would bind the stories together. Later Erdrich’s formal education honed her skills as a creative writer. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and creative writing at Dartmouth College in 1976, and a Master of Arts degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins in 1979. She published her first poem in *Ms. Magazine* before graduating from Dartmouth and went on to publish numerous short stories including “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” which won the Nelson Algren Fiction Award in 1982. This story, in addition to other previously published short stories, later became part of the novel *Love Medicine* (1984/1993), a novel about several generations of Chippewa families. This novel won the National Book Critics Award for best work of fiction and launched the book series that would come to be known as the “North Dakota Cycle” (Hollrah 2004: 90) or the


Although Erdrich has demonstrated her remarkable skill in several genres, it is for her fiction, especially her novels about the Chippewa, that she is renowned. In fact, Erdrich’s portrayal of the Chippewa is her greatest achievement and the source of much of the enthusiastic critical and popular attention directed toward her work. (Chavkin 1999: 1-2). Erdrich’s novel Tracks falls squarely within this category. As her third novel in what would eventually become an
ongoing cycle of novels linking several generations of characters from the same families, Tracks is chronologically first, going back in time from Love Medicine.

Summary of the Main Text

Tracks begins in 1912 when taxes are due on land allotments for the Chippewa characters. The story is told through alternating narrators and focuses on the character Fleur, a young Chippewa woman surrounded by myth and tradition. Throughout the novel, Fleur tries to maintain her family’s hereditary lands and culture. She is an enigmatic character, who is closely associated with Chippewa totems that infer symbolic resonance with a traditional Chippewa worldview and ethic. Nanapush, an old man and Fleur’s adopted father, starts the book. He represents the Chippewa culture, so named for their trickster character Nanabush. He is a traditional character who is adaptable and resilient to change, but ultimately relies on Chippewa philosophy to guide his life. Speaking to Fleur’s daughter, Lulu, Nanapush begins with the story of how he saved Fleur’s life after her family had perished from disease.
Pauline, a young Christianized and assimilated “half-blood” (the antithesis of Fleur), begins the second chapter. Pauline has completely internalized the rhetoric of colonization and views the Chippewa people as lesser and “Other” from herself. Yet she is completely fascinated and envious of Fleur, the focus of both storytellers’ attention. Her fascination turns to obsession as she tries to figure out how to become more powerful than Fleur (a known “sorcerer”) while still rejecting her culture and heritage. Chapter two also begins with stories about Fleur, but Pauline is recounting them to no one in particular. This is an important aspect of Pauline’s narration, because (as we shall see) Pauline becomes an unreliable narrator as the novel progresses. In this way, the reader is able to compare Nanapush’s stories with those of Pauline, which are representative of a colonial (i.e., assimilationist) perspective. Most importantly, the novel is sympathetic to Nanapush’s narration, leading the reader to question Pauline’s version of the story. In this way, Erdrich privileges a Chippewa worldview.

The plot centers on the Chippewa community’s attempts to retain their tribal lands in the face of the General Allotment (or Dawes) Act. Many of the characters in the novel, including Fleur, rely on a subsistence lifestyle
until they are forced to participate in a wage economy in order to earn the money to pay taxes on their land. This is the underlying plot; however, the subtext addresses the effects of assimilation policy generally on the people, not only in terms of land loss, but also in terms of identity. Assimilation policy, which sought to strip Native people of their culture and language in order to blend them in with mainstream American culture, is internalized by Pauline who allies herself with Christianity in order to escape the fate of her people.

As part of the legacy of colonial action based on the belief that Native Americans were “savages” and less than “civilized” people, assimilation policy advocated the conversion of Native Americans to Christianity. Pauline whole heartedly subscribes to this idea, but her version of Christianity is twisted and exaggerated. This is understandable, since the religion both sought to convert and condemn the “savages” at once. Pauline cannot win in this situation, but she tries, and eventually convinces herself that she is better than Christians, in fact better than Christ himself (Erdrich 1988: 192). This delusion, it is implied, is the result of Pauline’s fractured identity. She becomes the symbol of both the colonizer and the colonized through her twisted worldview. This is in stark
contrast to Nanapush and Fleur, who despite the devastation they incur, maintain their identity, and abide by Chippewa ethics regarding land and community.

Reaction to Work

Critics and reviewers generally view Tracks in a positive light and a great deal of literary criticism has been written about the book. Articles have focused on everything from narrative structure to characters, and they often show how the novel both resists and abides by postmodern literary conventions. For example, Catherine Rainwater’s (1999) chapter on “Ethnic Signs in Tracks and The Bingo Palace” uses semiotic theory to explain how Erdrich creates “listeners” to her work, implying an oral quality in the novel despite its literary form. In terms of character analysis, one of the most frequently discussed characters is Nanapush, representative of the Chippewa trickster Nanabush. Much has been written about his trickster-like qualities and how as a character he functions as a literary device in the novel. For example, in “The Trickster and World Maintenance: An Anishinaabe Reading of Louise Erdrich’s Tracks,” Lawrence Gross psychologically analyzes Nanapush, showing how his trickster qualities demonstrate his adaptability and
therefore allowing him (and his trickster-like girlfriend Margaret) to survive the onslaught of colonial culture.

Gross writes, “Both follow the same strategy for adaptation and survival, participating in the new ways of the white world, but maintaining Anishinaabe culture as well” (2005: 58). Pauline and Fleur have also been analyzed as tricksters, though much less convincingly than Nanapush, who is more clearly linked to the Chippewa culture hero.

Not all critics have positive views of the novel, however. In Spokane literary critic Gloria Bird’s (1992) article, “Searching for Evidence of Colonialism at Work: A Reading of Louise Erdrich’s Tracks,” Bird asserts that Erdrich is perpetuating negative stereotypes of the “Vanishing Red Man” through her first chapter in the novel, where Nanapush tells Lulu the story of how the tribe was devastated by disease. Bird claims Erdrich has internalized a colonialist perspective because, “the novel . . . aligns it[self] closely to the construct of savagism: that Fleur Pillager, her cousin Moses, Pauline and Nanapush are all the last of their respective bloodlines is a manifestation of the ‘Vanishing Red Man’ syndrome” (Bird 1992: 42).

Indeed, many American writers - even Native American writers - have perpetuated or come close to perpetuating
this stereotype in literature. Erdrich, however, is not one of them.

Bird’s criticism fails to take into account that none of these characters is actually the last of their bloodline. In fact, they are the parents, grandparents, and relatives of the dozens of characters that populate Erdrich’s other novels - many of which are set chronologically later than Tracks. For instance, Love Medicine narrates the dynasty of Fleur and Pauline through tales of their daughters Lulu and Marie, respectively. Each daughter has many children and the novel revolves around five generations of family that largely begin with these two women. Nanapush’s name and knowledge are passed on through his adoption of Lulu as a granddaughter/grandniece, and it is clear in Love Medicine that his descendants have "inherited" his qualities as a trickster through the characterizations of Gerry Nanapush and Gerry’s son Lipshaw. None of these characters is "vanishing." The characters and their children and grandchildren appear again and again in the elaborate North Dakota Cycle.

However, Bird is not the first to criticize Erdrich. After the publication of Erdrich’s second novel, The Beet Queen (1986), Laguna author Leslie Marmon Silko launched what would come to be known as the “Silko-Erdrich
Controversy” when she publicly criticized The Beet Queen as being too “postmodern.” Silko’s critique of Erdrich’s work began a debate about what “authentic” American Indian literature should encompass, because Silko claimed Erdrich’s “sleek and dazzling prose” was the “outgrowth of academic, post-modern, so-called experimental influences” (1986: 10). She saw this as problematic because the work was self-referential and possessed an “ethereal clarity and shimmering beauty because no history or politics intrude[d] to muddy the well of pure necessity contained within language itself.” The problem was, in her opinion, that Erdrich’s writing was “light-years away from the shared or communal experience that underlies oral narrative and modern fiction” (1986: 10). Surprisingly, most critics find Erdrich’s use of postmodern writing strategies, such as multiple narrators, to be evidence of her attention to the aesthetics of oral narratives.

Section II: Narrative Structure: Postmodernism Meets the Chippewa Oral Tradition

Native American writing is, at its core, a literature of resistance. In expressing what it means to be a Native American living in today’s America, many writers contend with issues of colonization. Writing has become a powerful
outlet for that contention. Ironically, the writing must be
done largely in the language of the colonizer, and for an
audience consisting primarily of non-Natives. The Native
writer’s answer to that paradox has been to appropriate the
language and forms of traditional Western literary
techniques to suit the purposes of their tribal identity.
One method has been to manipulate categories of literary
genres. A prime example of this kind of “genre-bending”
can be found in Erdrich’s work.

Erdrich not only bends Western literary genres to blur
the lines between short story, novel, poetry, and prose but
also bends those same genres to create forms that are non-
Western and reflective of Chippewa storytelling traditions.
This aspect of her work has been consistently recognized
and discussed by literary critics. Reid states, “Drawing on
both Native American oral traditions and conventional Euro-
American narrative forms, Erdrich creates a new set of
textual gestures that can more faithfully capture the
multiple voices and extended family networks of Native

Erdrich appropriates a multitude of Western forms and
adapts them to her own needs, making them a better vehicle
for representation of Native forms. For instance, in Love
Medicine Erdrich re-makes the Western form of the short
story to become chapters in a complete novel with a unifying action, protagonist, and resolution. Similarly in Love Medicine, she re-fashions the novel with a non-linear progression to reflect the episodic nature of Native storytelling practices, “in which the order of the telling is up to the narrator, and the audience members are intimately involved in the fleshing out of the narrative and the supplying of the connections between the related stories” (Sands 1993: 269). In addition, the novel “also encodes the norms and values of the tribal kinship system. . . it makes the reader work especially hard to trace out and retain in memory the direct line of descent among members of the families” (Sands 1993: 269).

It is Erdrich’s ability to appropriate and manipulate postmodern strategies such as dual or multiple narrators that makes her work especially remarkable. In Tracks she uses two narrators who essentially tell the same stories about one protagonist (Fleur) but from very different perspectives. In this way, critics claim, Erdrich is able to reach a large reading audience. Quoting Rainwater (2005), “Erdrich seems deliberately to cultivate a general readership by crafting multiple points of entry into her texts, then proceeding to educate the audience more specifically in particulars of American Indian history,
culture, cosmology, and epistemology” (273). In Tracks, Erdrich is able to “educate” her audience about Chippewa culture, specifically Chippewa ethics through two versions of the same story, as told by the narrators Nanapush and Pauline.

Both Love Medicine and Tracks include Native “genres” from Chippewa oral texts that infuse the work with a Native sensibility. According to Nancy Peterson, Tracks opens in a fashion typical of oratory: the narrator does not name himself, nor his addressee, the language contains rhetorical patterns typical of oratory employing repetition, and he uses traditional oral tribal names rather than anglicized textual ones (Peterson 1994: 985). At the same time, there are Western literary markers such as the date at the top of the page and the narrator’s name. Erdrich’s ability to manipulate postmodern literary constructs does not, as Silko claimed, make her work too mainstream to be Native, but rather a Native work that reaches the mainstream: “Erdrich gains our support as readers precisely because her text partakes of both dominant culture and Ojibwe culture. Her use of multiperspectivity enables her to reach a mass audience” (Shultz 1991: 8). Continued debates on the categorization of Erdrich’s work only highlight the fact that she has
ultimately escaped categorization. Erdrich’s ability to escape these boundaries and categorizations has provided her with the opportunity to become a resistant writer whose voice has reached the mainstream.

Close analysis of her work reveals that rather than giving up agency and a voice for Native people to write novels that present “a carefully managed exoticism that is entertaining but not discomfiting to the non-Native reader,” she has produced work that has realized a “genuinely appropriationist and subversive end by packaging text[s] in sufficient imperial wrapping as to get [them] past the palace guards” to that very exclusive metropolitan centre (Owens 2001: 181-2). In this way Erdrich’s voice is heard by those who have benefited or participated in the very systems that she critiques. This is critical to her literature of resistance, for what is the point of resisting if no one is listening?

Characterization

Erdrich strategically juxtaposes two very different female characters in Tracks as a means to critique colonialism and in particular assimilation policy, while also promoting Chippewa ethics. This critique is accomplished through her characterizations of Pauline and
Fleur whose opposite personalities represent opposite perspectives on colonialism. As stated previously, Pauline has internalized colonial ideology wholeheartedly, and she strives not only to be as “white” as possible, but to save the Chippewa people through Christianization. Fleur’s Chippewa world is negatively impacted by assimilation policy and the implementation of allotment on the reservation, yet she remains whole by adapting tradition.

When the novel begins, both Pauline and Fleur have left the reservation for the white town of Argus. In chapter two, Pauline narrates her experiences working in a butcher shop with Fleur. Each has left the reservation for very different reasons. Pauline explains that she had left home in order to forge a new, non-Indian, identity whereas Fleur leaves only to raise the allotment fees for her family’s land. Fleur eventually returns to the reservation as planned, and Pauline also returns, though reluctantly. Each woman forges a new family from the pieces of the nearly devastated community upon their return. Each also occupies a different role in the community once they are there. These different roles can be analyzed more closely to reveal how each character’s construction of family reflects their responses to assimilation.
The different attitudes toward family each woman has are addressed early on in the novel. Nanapush narrates the first chapter of the story explaining how when Fleur was a young woman he had to tear her away from her family and their cabin even after all had perished from disease; “I was also the one to find the old man and woman . . . the little brother and two sisters, stone cold and wrapped in gray horse blankets, their faces turned to the west. . . . then something in the corner knocked. I flung the door wide. It was the eldest daughter, Fleur” (3). The fact that Fleur remains with her family even after they died shows her strong commitment to them. She seems disoriented and confused when Nanapush finds her. It could be argued this is why she stays; yet she is conscious enough to know when they are dead and she lays them out properly with their heads facing west.

By contrast, Pauline chooses to leave her family at an early age. She refuses to form a bond with them despite the fact that she is already at a natural disadvantage. Her clan itself has suffered an identity crisis, “We were mixed bloods, skinners in the clan for which the name was lost” (14). Evidence that she cares little for her family is made clear when she learns that they have all either died or abandoned her; yet she is not concerned. She does not
try to find them or ask questions about them. Later, when both women return to the reservation they begin constructing new families, but their relation to those families and the way they function within them further reveals their differences.

Fleur creates a family on her land, at her cabin. She incorporates Nanapush as an adopted father whom she greatly respects. She chooses a husband whom she dearly loves and even convinces Margaret, once her enemy, to be a caring mother-in-law. The family is complete when Lulu is born. According to Erdrich, “informal adoption is common in Native American cultures” (Norwick 1986: 9), and Fleur’s family is constructed in a non-Western fashion, with little emphasis on biological relations. In her article, “Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich,” Catherine Rainwater (1990) argues at length the differences between the Western-European concept of family and Native American concepts. It could be argued that these are the two different approaches that Pauline and Fleur utilize. Rainwater argues, “The Native American ‘family’ allows for various ties of kinship - including spiritual kinship and clan membership - joining the individuals living together in one house” (1990: 418).
Rainwater also points out the significance of names in the crossing of Western-European boundaries that were created for the definition of family: “To give Lulu a legitimate name, Nanapush declares her to be his biological child when she is born. However, he also calls her ‘granddaughter’ and she calls him ‘uncle.’ She is . . . not directly kin to Nanapush at all. However, because Nanapush saved Fleur from death, she is a ‘daughter,’ and Lulu is thus a ‘granddaughter.’” (1990: 418). It could also be added that Fleur also calls Nanapush “uncle” as well as father.

By contrast, Pauline arranges her own “adoption” into the Morrisey family. Her attraction to this family lies in the fact that they are not what she considers to be “traditional Indians.” Michelle Hessler’s article “Catholic Nuns and Ojibiwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich’s Tracks” (1995) is quick to point out that Pauline joins this family as part of her plan to become less Indian and more white:

In comparison to Fleur, Pauline does not return to the reservation to reestablish ties with the community . . . She selects the family of the Catholic mixed-blood Bernadette Morrisey to inquire for lodging, for she admires their material wealth,
civilized manners and level of education . . . whereas Nanapush teaches Fleur the traditional ways, Bernadette instructs Pauline in the ways of white civilization: reading, writing, arithmetic and modern medicine. (41)

Pauline then abuses this “adoption” and out of envy sets out to destroy the Morriseys. She convinces the young girl Sophie to have sex with Fleur’s lover Eli while he is working on their farm. This causes a scandal and divides the family. In addition to this she has sexual relations with her adopted "brother" Napoleon. Within their families the two women fill very different roles. Pauline is the destroyer and divider whereas Fleur is a uniting force.

Issues of motherhood also reflect these two women's attitudes about family and life. Fleur is a good mother devoting much of her time to her daughter Lulu, and when she gives birth a second time she does everything she can to save the child’s life. Pauline, on the other hand, abandons her child, despises it and envisions it to be the result of sin. As a representative of the colonizer, Pauline sees the Indians as “Other” and as such defines herself in direct opposition to them. In her explanation of why Pauline cannot be a good mother, Hessler points out Nanapush’s early insight that Pauline was “good at easing
souls into death, but bad at breathing them to life, afraid of life in fact, afraid of birth” (1995: 57). Hessler describes Pauline as, “harbinger of death . . . unable to assist the difficult birth of Fleur’s daughter Lulu” (1995: 41). As a “harbinger of death” and one afraid of life and birth it is no wonder that Pauline is the antithesis of a good mother.

Pauline’s negative attitude regarding motherhood shows itself in a number of ways when she becomes pregnant. First she tries to abort the child by means of purposely falling upon an ax handle. After this she considers traditional Indian medicine, “I knew that Moses Pillager, who had given me the love charm, helped out girls upon whom it worked too well. He concocted medicines of pounded roots and barks. If I had known them I would have purged my own body” (1988: 132). Later, when she is in labor she tries to hold the child in, “If I gave birth . . . I would be an outcast, a thing set aside for God’s use, a human who could be touched by no other human. Marie! I shook with the effort, held back, reduced myself to something tight, round, and very black clenched around my child so that she could not escape” (1988: 135). Finally, when the child is born she gives it away to Bernadette, disowning it and claiming it to be Satan’s child.
Pauline subscribes to the colonial rhetoric of the Indians as savages, a group to which she does not wish to belong. “Once Pauline enters the Mission, her disapproval of the “primitive” Anishinabeg turns to outright hatred, revealed in her repeated attempt to abort her child because its drunken father Napoleon affronts her “civilized” ways” (Hessler 1995: 41). After Pauline’s daughter Marie is born Pauline wants nothing to do with her. Pauline despises the idea of family and does all she can to avoid or destroy it.

Pauline’s self-imposed alienation from the community renders her powerless, whereas Fleur easily gains strength from her newly created family made up of Nanapush, the Kashpaws and Lulu. In fact, Fleur is often presented as the hub of this family, and it is this position that gives her strength where Pauline has none. The two women’s differences regarding self-identity and motherhood juxtapose a Chippewa and non-Chippewa community ethic. Where Fleur is unites Pauline divides. The significant differences between these two characters are deepened even further in the novel via symbolic representations.

Symbolism

Erdrich’s symbolic use of Chippewa totems adds depth and complexity to her characterizations of Fleur and
Pauline. Fleur is associated with the bear and an important manitou, Misshepeshu. These are well-established totems in Chippewa culture. Pauline, in contrast, is not associated with any totems, which is precisely the point. Pauline is not grounded in a Chippewa identity - in fact, as one who belongs to a clan “for which the name was lost,” she operates on the fringes of Chippewa society. She views Fleur and her totemic associations negatively and through a colonial lens.

In describing Fleur, Pauline states: “Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth . . . . It comes through the eyes, too, belligerent, darkest brown, the eyes of those in the bear clan, impolite as they gaze directly at a person” (Erdrich 1998: 31). She goes on to accuse Fleur of becoming a bear herself:

[She] went out hunting, not even in her own body. We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. (Erdrich 1988: 12)

Pauline’s descriptions come dangerously close to describing Fleur as a witch, when in fact, in traditional Chippewa culture, associations with an animal totem were not seen as
negative. According to Basil Johnston, “Originally there were five totems representing the five needs of the people and the five elementary functions of society” (1990: 60). Under this organization, the bear was associated with defense and was viewed as critically important to the community (Johnston 1990: 60). Viewed in this light, Fleur’s association with this totem positively reflects her connections to Chippewa culture.

In another attempt to portray Fleur negatively, Pauline tells the story of Fleur's first two encounters with near death through drowning - events that link her to Misshepeshu, a lake “monster” and manitou. Pauline explains that Fleur survived only because the men who saved her died to take Fleur’s place. Pauline describes the stigma associated with Fleur as a result: “Men stayed clear of Fleur Pillager after the second drowning. Even though she was good-looking, nobody dared to court her because it was clear that Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself” (Erdrich 1988: 12).

Critic Gloria Bird finds this characterization of Fleur problematic because it depicts Fleur as a “witch” reinforcing negative stereotypes of Native people (Bird 1992: 42-44). However, this negative depiction comes directly from Pauline’s narrative, which represents a
colonial perspective that views the Indian as “Other.” Throughout the novel Fleur is depicted as being under the protection of the lake monster, Misshepeshu - historically recognized as a figure associated with sorcerers and power. But power by Chippewa standards is not considered either good or evil. The simple fact that Fleur is powerful does not automatically make her a witch. In fact, it was expected in traditional Chippewa culture that every individual seek their power from a higher source at an early point in life.

Yet the situation becomes complicated when Fleur indirectly “murders” the men who saved her from drowning. By Christian standards this is a sin, but not necessarily by Chippewa standards. What Bird fails to note about the death of the two men who save Fleur is their occupations. Jean Hat, who rescued Fleur by pulling her out of the lake, “got himself run over by his own surveyor’s cart;” George Many Women, who found Fleur washed up on shore, would not “guide the mappers back into the bush” until the day he drowned in his own bath tub (10-11). It is no coincidence that both men are involved in the business of selling Chippewa land. When this is taken into account, it becomes clear that Fleur, rather than occupying the role of “witch,” is actually occupying the role of “defender” - or
more precisely, “warrior.” If their death is the result of a warrior’s defense, then it still falls within the bounds of a Chippewa ethic. This makes perfect sense when her other totemic associations are taken into account. According to Johnston, “Animals of fierce disposition, the bear, wolf, and lynx, were the totems of warriors” (Johnston 1990: 67). Thus, Fleur serves as a warrior for her community in her attempts to protect the land from allotment.

It would seem that Bird’s criticism is missing the point of dual narration entirely. Pauline’s characterization parallels colonial narratives, which presented Native people as demonized “Others.” It is precisely this strategy that makes the text subversive and critical of colonialism.

Furthermore, Pauline is completely discredited as a narrator early on and throughout the text as readers learn from Nanapush to be distrustful of all that she has to say:

But she was different once her mouth opened and she started to wag her tongue. She was worse than a Nanapush, in fact. For while I was careful with my known facts, she was given to improving the truth . . . Pauline schemed to gain attention by telling odd tales that created damage. (Erdrich 1988: 39)
The reader learns to see Pauline’s narrative as a colonial interpretation of Native culture, one that is one-sided and without a tribal context. In erasing her own Chippewa identity she deprives herself of a critical context to understand Fleur’s connection to Misshepeshu, and the bear clan.

In a fit of madness, Pauline attempts to conquer the lake monster, and thus take Fleur’s place as the “hinge” between the Chippewa world and the spirit world. Pauline’s desire to overpower Fleur, who symbolically represents the Chippewa community, is manifested in her attempt to conquer the lake monster. When Pauline sets out on the lake it is a fine day and the water is calm. However, she envisions the anchor that she has fashioned as falling to the lake monster's lair and waking him. In her mind this is an equaling device between her and Fleur:

Down it went. Down to where the thing was coiled, half-sluggish from the winter. In my mind, I saw the stone glance off its shoulder. One gold eye opened. I stood in the boat, my wool cloak gray against a change of sky. The blue brightened, drifted over with wisps of sparkling fog. The wind increased its spring blow . . . wind caught my veil
and chips from the crackling and singing ice
glanced off my face. (Erdrich 1988: 197)

Pauline believes that if she tames the lake monster and
tames the waters, she will then also tame Fleur, who is
representative of the Natives who resist assimilation - but
she fails.

In turn, the characters themselves become symbolic.
Fleur symbolizes the land, tradition, and resistance.
Pauline symbolizes death and destruction - in short, the
colonizer. Within such a context, the symbolism of Fleur
and Pauline brings oral narratives and the history of
colonial conquest together.

Conclusion

Tracks is perhaps Erdrich’s strongest commentary on
the inappropriateness of using an imposed, foreign religion
in an attempt to assimilate Native Americans. The rhetoric
of federal assimilation policy dictated the perceived
necessity of a “guardian” for the “child-like” Indians
through policies such as holding allotted lands in trust.
Pauline’s attempt to conquer and replace Fleur is, in a
sense, her attempt to “mother” the people she sees as
beneath her but in need of being saved. Erdrich’s depiction
of Pauline as the antithesis of a good mother highlights the absurdity of such a prospect.

Erdrich’s depiction of the colonial legacy of assimilation through her characterizations of Pauline and Fleur resists the rhetoric of assimilation. By contrasting these two characters she is able to effectively comment on the destructive qualities of assimilation policy and produce a literature of resistance.

Furthermore, Erdrich’s use of particular Chippewa symbols in the novel deepens her character development and adds an element of resilience in her work. Reliant upon a vast body of Chippewa oral stories, Erdrich is able to make complex statements about Fleur and Pauline, adding layers to each character’s significance. By associating Fleur with a Chippewa totem and the bear clan, and a powerful Manitou, Fleur becomes symbolic of Chippewa culture. Pauline, on the other hand, is not associated with any totems and belongs to a “lost clan.” This symbolic distancing of Pauline from the Chippewa community emphasizes her position as an outsider. Her views of the culture reflect the views of those who sought to assimilate and Christianize the “savages.”

While Pauline does regard Fleur as a powerful figure, because of Pauline’s internalization of colonial rhetoric
she views Fleur’s power as demonic and sacrilegious. Ultimately, however, the reader is led to view Pauline in a similar light as her sanity deteriorates and she is driven to madness. In contrast Fleur remains stable, despite the trauma incurred by the community. Such richly developed characters as Fleur and Pauline, when closely analyzed, reveal Erdrich’s strategic use of Chippewa oral tradition, characters, and symbols to privilege a Chippewa ethic over colonial rhetoric, thus also producing a work of resilience.

However, while Erdrich’s text is more tribally specific than Alexie’s due to its blended aesthetics, it still leans more toward postmodern and mainstream writing. Critics do note the influence of the oral tradition on Erdrich’s form, but it is difficult to find exact, tribally-specific parallels to the Chippewa tradition. Instead, the reader has to work to glean these parallels. Perhaps the postmodern form and the desire to reach the mainstream obscure them. Nevertheless, unlike Dauenhauer who uses a Tlingit Raven story to structure her play; and Zepeda whose poetry exactly reflects O’odham song aesthetics, Erdrich’s use of Chippewa aesthetics remains somewhat elusive.
Regardless of its position on such a continuum of resilience, Erdrich’s work nevertheless demonstrates such qualities and does so in perhaps in an important way — by successfully reaching a mainstream audience. Yet, as we will see, other Native authors (who may not appear on bestseller lists) are writing and creating works of resilience that enrich the canon of Native literature in ways mainstream authors cannot. The following chapters will highlight and analyze their work.
CHAPTER V: NORA MARKS DAUENHAUER’S “RAVEN LOSES HIS NOSE” AS A LITERATURE OF RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Tlingit linguist, scholar, poet and playwright Nora Marks Dauenhauer’s Raven Play, “Raven Loses His Nose” (2000) is a literature of resistance in its appropriation of the English language to critique American capitalism and its bureaucracies. “Raven Loses His Nose” is also literature of resilience in its adaptation of a Tlingit storytelling aesthetic to promote a personal and Tlingit ethic regarding racism, the environment, and Tlingit concepts of ownership. An analysis of narrative strategies, the character Raven as trickster, and symbolism in “Raven Loses His Nose” shows how this play is a literature of resistance and resilience.

In section one of this chapter I provide a brief biography of the author, summarize the book Life Woven with Song (2000) in which the play is published, and discuss responses to this work. In section two, I first analyze Dauenhauer’s use of the Raven story as a narrative strategy that utilizes humor as a means of social critique. Second, I consider Raven as a character while analyzing the ethical issues addressed by Dauenhauer throughout the play. Third,
I analyze the Raven play as a metaphor with Raven symbolizing Native people and the creative ways they deal with bureaucracies. Dauenhauer’s use of the Raven story as a means to promote a personal and Tlingit ethic regarding racism, land, and ownership is successful through this literature of resistance and resilience.

Section I: Biography

Nora Marks Dauenhauer was born in 1927 and raised in the rainforests of Southeastern Alaska where she spoke only Tlingit in her formative years. “Everyone spoke Tlingit . . . the entire family and everyone in the villages . . . Even in Juneau, the native people spoke nothing but Tlingit” (Peterson 2005:1). Her family practiced subsistence style living relying on fishing and trapping, and at times her family lived aboard her father’s fishing boat. This subsistence lifestyle, and Dauenhauer’s early experiences as a young Tlingit girl, deeply influence her work. Images of life in this environment dominate her essays, poetry and plays.

Dauenhauer did not start school until the age of eight, claiming it was not easy, “truant officers often detained families such as ours, forcing them to settle in towns. This made it impossible to pursue the traditional
seasonal subsistence economy” (Krupat and Swann 2000:103). When she finally did attend school she found more difficulties in her first exposure to English. She recalls being punished for speaking Tlingit and not knowing enough English to defend herself. When she was sixteen she wanted to attend high school in Sitka, but her grandmother would not allow it, so it was not until later in life that she earned her GED and attended college (Krupat and Swann 2000:103).

After Dauenhauer’s children were grown and had gone to college, she decided she would go, too. She attended the Alaska Methodist University in Anchorage, where she studied linguistics and folklore before earning a B.A. in Anthropology, with a concentration in Tlingit literature. Dauenhauer wrote *Beginning Tlingit* (1976), which she produced jointly with the Alaska Native Education Board.

While at AMU, she began what would become her life’s work: transcribing and translating Tlingit oratory. Richard Dauenhauer directed this project, and eventually the two decided to marry. Jointly they continued to gather, transcribe, and translate Tlingit oratory. They published three volumes of work in their series *Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature: Haa Shuka, Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narratives* (1987), *Haa Tuwunaagu Yis, for Healing Our*
Spirit: Tlingit Oratory (1990), and Haa Kusteeyi, Our Culture: Tlingit Life Stories (1994). The Dauenhauers also have plans to publish a fourth volume on Raven stories. The books in the series have won high praise from fellow scholars as well as from the Tlingit community.

The Dauenhauers have also guest-edited two books: Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers and Orators (1986), and Because We Cherish You: Sealaska Elders Speak to the Future (1981). They are regularly invited to attend and present their work at academic and community functions related to cultural preservation, indigenous language, and Alaska Native writing.

Both scholars are recognized for their creative writing talents, as well. Nora has published two books of creative writing. One book is a collection of poems entitled The Droning Shaman (1988), and the other book, Life Woven with Song (2000), is a collection of personal essays, poems, and plays. I have selected Life Woven with Song for its plays, and in particular the play “Raven Loses His Nose” as the subject of this chapter.

Summary of Main Text

Life Woven With Song (2000) is a multi-genred work, with subject matter that is both personal and political. In
the essay portion, Dauenhauer weaves happy stories and memories of family with the harsh reality of the difficulties faced by Tlingits due to past invasions of Tlingit land, and the impact on Tlingit subsistence life and culture. For example, the essays range in topic from the environmental damage to Tlingit lands due to canneries and lumber practices, to a story of her father running away from boarding school, to a story about her family preparing dance regalia for her grandson.

Similarly, Dauenhauer’s poems in the second section of the book can be both political and personal. In “Storm from an Enemy Sky”, she makes clear references to the difficulties of working in the area of language revitalization, and the resistance she sometimes meets:

There is an undertow
created by an unknown force—
the politics of language—
turning my love into a vile taste on my tongue.

(2000: 90)

In another poem she allows readers to experience her sense of loss at her father’s hospital bedside:

You said to me you were ready to go . . .

I was lost,

adrift on an ocean of tears
Dauenhauer’s poetry tends to focus on family and hints at her early subsistence lifestyle. With poem titles such as, “Grandpa Jakwteen in Eclipse” and “Auntie Frances, My Father’s Sister”, it is clear that Dauenhauer’s poetry is informed by Tlingit values, for she focuses on family and ancestry. Her Raven plays, in the third section of the book, also promote Tlingit values through the narrative form of Raven stories.

The Raven plays constitute the final section of the book and are adapted from stories told by Tlingit elders. These poems were commissioned by the Naa Kahidi Theater and were performed worldwide (2000: 99-101). They are humorous narratives that ultimately teach audience members lessons about proper ways of behaving. These plays will be explored further in the analysis section of this chapter.

Responses to Work

Very little literary criticism has been published on Dauenhauer’s creative texts at this time. There are three book reviews and one journal article on a poem taken from Dauenhauer’s first book of poetry, The Droning Shaman (1988). Reviewers such a Robin Riley Fast and James Ruppert
have recognized the “indigenousness” of Dauenhauer’s work. Fast is quick to describe Life Woven With Song as reflecting “a deep rootedness in indigenous language and traditions” (Fast 2000: 203), while Ruppert describes the poems in The Droning Shaman as “informed by the Tlingit worldview” (Ruppert 1993: 86). Reviewers, however, spend considerably less time discussing the political and subversive nature of the work.

It is significant that Dauenhauer’s Tlingit upbringing, early subsistence lifestyle, and Tlingit language shape the material and reflect a Tlingit consciousness comfortably expressed in English. The resilience of Native people in their ability to adapt and manipulate foreign languages and cultures to their own needs, and to turn those languages back on those who would seek to oppress through rigid definitions of “Indianness,” are clearly reflected in Dauenhauer’s work. Her plays successfully appropriate the English language to reflect a Tlingit worldview; yet they resist a nostalgic or romantic view of Native American life. Dauenhauer conflates traditional Tlingit symbols with those of contemporary American capitalism to depict Raven in a current setting, and to address issues relevant to the Tlingit world. In specifically commenting on the Raven plays, Dauenhauer
distinguishes them from the original Raven stories in Tlingit:

What’s here is part of a new and expanding tradition of Native American literature. Composed in writing and in English but growing out of our general experience as Native people and our personal experience as individuals and members of family and community.

(2000:102)

Indeed, Dauenhauer’s play addresses general Native experiences, such as repatriation, regional Native experiences such as environmental damage by canneries and over-fishing, and personal experiences with racism.

Section II: Raven Story as Narrative Strategy

In Dauenhauer’s introduction to her Raven plays she credits the original storyteller and is careful to make an important distinction between her plays and the originals:

To avoid some potential confusion . . . The plays here are based on such stories by Tlingit elders but what is presented here is my own retelling. They are related to, but not the same as, the Raven stories told by Tlingit elders, in their own words, written down by me in Tlingit and published in facing translation. (2000:101-102)
Dauenhauer’s retellings adapt the elder’s versions and bring the content up-to-the-minute while maintaining the aesthetic integrity of the story in terms of theme and plot. She also adapts the written format to imply the oral nature of the stories via strategic line breaks. In discussing the written format of the Raven stories published in *Stars Above, Earth Below: American Indians and Nature* (1998), Marsha Bol says, “Such stories are designed to be read orally; therefore a short-line format, in which the line turnings reflect pauses in oral delivery, is used” (60). Dauenhauer adopts this style for writing down her Raven plays in *Life Woven with Song*. For example, the first three lines of the first play, “White Raven and Water” begin this way:

White Raven,

Walking along a beach:

He was looking for water.

He knew there was no water. (2000: 104)

This format was the result of an “evolution” of the plays from a more westernized format using “several actors” with speaking parts to a single narrator. In moving to a single narrator, Dauenhauer claims, the plays were able to evolve into a form that more closely resembled “traditional dramatic and ceremonial forms of the native people of the
Northwest coast” (2000:99). This new design “allowed for greater use of singing, drumming, dancing, and theatrical development of masks and costumes” (2000: 99). In these ways the plays aesthetically echo more traditional forms of performance. However, Dauenhauer’s greatest achievement in terms of aesthetics is simply in her choice to adapt the Raven story, or trickster story, to tell a contemporary tale that expresses a Tlingit ethic to a wide and diverse audience.

Dauenhauer began writing the plays when the Naa Kahidi Theater asked her to “write some comedy that would appeal to children as well as adults” (2000: 99). In her decision to use Raven stories she adopted a tried and true storytelling method that has been addressing adults as well as children for generations. “Such lesson stories were and are taken very seriously in Tlingit culture, and are not considered merely children’s stories” (Partnow 1999:x). Dauenhauer’s strategic adaptation proved to serve her well.

The performers enjoyed much success, as Dauenhauer notes in her introduction to the plays. “For almost ten years, the Naa Kahidi Theater enjoyed enormous popularity, playing at venues throughout the United States and in Europe” (2000:99-102). No doubt, part of Dauenhauer’s success lies in the narrative form she chose to use.
Through humor, trickster stories have been a way to reach wide and diverse audiences for generations. These stories sought to instruct and provide moral guidance through humor. This use of humor has been a constant in Native American oratory, and has been equally prominent in Native American literature.

Humor as Aesthetic

Humor as a literary strategy is a critical vehicle utilized by all classes, ethnicities, and genders to resist, or subvert oppressive or dominating discourses. Certain elements frequently characterize particular “brands” of humor based on a group’s own historical and social experiences. For example, Kenneth Lincoln (1993) identifies “Indi’n” humor in Native literature as a specific kind of satire and irony derived in part from group consensus regarding the historical events of colonization and conquest. In discussing Sherman Alexie’s use of satire, Stephan Evans quotes Holman and Harmon’s definition of satire stating, “[It] is a literary manner that blends a critical attitude with humor and wit for the purpose of improving human institutions and attempts through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling” (Evans 2001: 51). These literary critics and others have identified “Indian humor” as both a
rhetorical and political strategy for survival and resistance. According to critic Paula Gunn Allen:

Certainly the timeframe we presently inhabit . . . [has] much that needs to be treated with laughter and ironic humor; it is the spirit of the trickster-creator that keeps Indians alive and vital in the face of horror. (1986: 158)

Since irony is "the perception of a clash between appearance and reality, between what seems and what is" it becomes a useful tool for social and historical critique. (Frye, Baker, Perkins 1985). Ironic humor provides the opportunity to laugh at rules and regulations that promise one thing, but do another. Certainly, the history of U.S. Indian policy speaks to this idea as activists, scholars, and Native American communities have pointed out the clash between what "seems" (policy) and what "is" (practice).\textsuperscript{11} In addressing this history, Native writers have used humor to raise important points.

This applies to Dauenhauer’s play. By using a tried and true Tlingit method of storytelling Dauenhauer successfully generates laughter both to entertain and enlighten audiences while raising important issues.

\textsuperscript{11} Vine Deloria, Jr’s work frequently addresses this history with humor and wit. Deloria’s book \textit{Custer Died for Your Sins} does so most famously.
Adapting trickster stories, their characters, and even playing the role of trickster as writer, are not strategies new to Native literature. Numerous authors, poets, activists and others have relied on tricksters and their humorous strategies for educating and bringing awareness to particular issues in Indian country. Writers from Alexander Posey to Will Rogers, Gerald Vizenor, and Sherman Alexie have played the part of trickster themselves, relying on humor, in particular irony and satire, to make political and social commentary. The same can be said of Nora Dauenhauer.

In the case of Dauenhauer, Raven becomes the agency through which she voices her concerns and raises awareness regarding issues of importance to her and other Tlingit peoples. Like Raven, a transformer, Dauenhauer transforms a traditional Tlingit narrative to address issues of racism, environmental ethics, and concepts of ownership.

The Play: “Raven Loses his Nose”

In the last play in the collection, Dauenhauer tells the story of how Raven loses his nose to a group of fisherman while trying to steal their bait. The play begins with Raven walking along the beach: he’s hungry. Tricksters are often hungry, which usually leads to trouble: “Driven
by hunger, greed, and lust, Raven is the ultimate con man, often using kinship terms and other co-membership strategies to smooth-talk his ‘marks’ or victims” (2000: 101). He approaches some fishermen he sees walking down to their boats, and asks if he can have some of their bait. Of course they say “no,” so he devises a plan to go under the ocean to steal the bait off their hooks. In his greed he starts putting the bait and hooks in his mouth all at once, and his beak is caught. After some effort, the fishermen yank the beak from Raven’s face thinking they have caught a fish. When they pull the beak on board they decide it is an artifact worthy of the Museum of Natural History and send for a consultant. Raven disguises himself as a consultant and successfully retrieves his beak.

The manner in which Raven retrieves his beak is interesting since the story is a vehicle for social and political critique. Throughout the play Dauenhauer addresses racism, land issues, and repatriation, as the following analysis will reveal.

Asides and Ethics: Racism

Dauenhauer begins by addressing a personal ethic in the play through a narrator’s aside to the audience. Through her use of asides via the narrator or Raven,
Dauenhauer often instructs her audience on how to behave properly. This didactic form makes sense, since trickster tales were often designed to instruct. Like other Native American authors, Dauenhauer sometimes uses humor as a corrective, as a means to address difficult subjects such as racism, that might otherwise alienate her audience. In an interview with Laura Cotelli, Laguna author Leslie Marmon Silko identifies her own writing strategies using humor. In noting how she addresses issues such as "loss of land, discrimination, racism, and so on" she says:

’There’s a way of saying it so people can kind of laugh or smile. I’m mean I’m really aware of saying things so you don’t offend somebody, so you can keep their interest, so you can keep talking to them. (Cotelli 1990: 147)

Dauenhauer utilizes these strategies, too, through her Raven play.

Early in the play when Raven asks the fishermen for some of their bait they tell him, “Hey, buddy. Take a number and get in line!” (2000: 124). Despite their response, Raven continues to think about the bait:

Raven, smacking his lips, can taste the fat.
But he seems invisible to the fishermen.
They just ignore him.
(Aside: Have you ever felt like that in a store)?
Raven felt terrible.
But even this didn’t damage his self-esteem. (2000: 124)

This aside correlates strongly with comments Dauenhauer has made elsewhere regarding racism. In an autobiographical essay, also entitled “Life Woven with Song,” Dauenhauer relates primarily positive and happy memories of her childhood, but she also describes the racism she experienced in the past and her awareness of racism in the present. In this essay, Dauenhauer tells a story about how as a child she was subjected to racism when her family would go into town:

From the first time I saw white hate I experienced racism as a white-hot whip that can bring you to your knees with one strike. As a child, the stares of white children were so hot and cruel that I cowered and wanted to hide and never come out again. (Krupat and Swann 2000: 108).

Growing up Dauenhauer tried to protect her little brothers from these kinds of experiences, just as she still tries to protect children today. “These patterns still exist . . .

This was a negative aspect of growing up, and I try to be assertive today to help defend our youngest generations
from the same patterns of abuse” (Krupat and Swann 2000: 108). Dauenhauer is able to do this through her Raven play using humor.

The aside brings the issue to the attention of the audience, but does so in a non-threatening or accusatory way. By leading up to the issue with humor—i.e., the fishermen’s comment to “get in line,” and the narrator’s assertion that “even this didn’t damage his self-esteem,”—Dauenhauer both raises the issue and asserts a strong vantage point for Raven, with whom members of the audience who have been ignored can identify. “Humor has always been a central figure in the languages of Indian survival. Native American humor works both to strengthen internal community relationships and to attempt to keep threatening forces at bay” (Haladay, 2000: 113). These threatening forces might also include damage to the environment, as in another point brought up in the play.

Asides and Ethics: Land

Dauenhauer uses a humorous aside later in the play to promote a Tlingit land ethic in regard to preferred fishing practices. Using modern fishing technology appears to be acceptable as Raven loses his nose to the strength of one of the fisherman’s “new Penn reel/ and my new monofilament/
100-pound-test line/ from Kmart” (2000: 128), but modern fishing technology regarding artificial bait is clearly not acceptable. This is made clear when Raven says of the bait the men are using:

I’m glad they’re not hoochies
because hoochies are plastic.
They’re no good for eating,
and they’re no good for the environment.
They’re not biodegradable. (2000: 126)

This seemingly innocent aside can be read as something more significant when placed within the context of the book as a whole, as well as within the context of Tlingit history generally. Dauenhauer’s decision to insert this statement on environmentally sound fishing practices speaks to a long history of Tlingit peoples having to live with the consequences of non-environmentally sound practices brought in by foreign cultures—specifically American capitalist culture.

In the first essay in Life Woven with Song, Dauenhauer describes the devastating impact on Tlingit homelands due to cannery and other kinds of encroachment in the years since Euro-American invasion. “In 1953 President Eisenhower declared the fishing communities of southeast Alaska a disaster area” (2000: 5). This was due to the unethical
fishing practices of the canneries, which varied tremendously from Tlingit subsistence fishing practices:

The canneries built barge sized fish traps that were anchored along the migration routes, intercepting thousands of salmon on their way to spawn. Entire salmon runs were depleted by fish traps and by logging practices that ruined their habitat. (2000:5)

In contrast, Dauenhauer notes, “Traditional Tlingit fish traps were woven and could be hand carried” (2000:5). Tlingit people had historically practiced a land ethic that paid close attention to limitations on resources, emphasizing balance and reciprocity.

Balance and reciprocity are key concepts in Tlingit culture (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1994:13). This concept extends to the environment, where for generations information contained within the Tlingit oral tradition established proper ways of interacting with the world around them. This ethic helped maintain the sustainability of resources in the Tlingit environment:

For thousands of years, through human ingenuity, the natural abundance of the region was used to sustain the population without damaging its forests, without over-fishing its teeming waters, without interfering
with its animal populations. (Townsend-Gault 1994: 445)

This system was negatively impacted by the invasion of foreign cultures and corporations which sought to exploit the rich resources in that area.

Dauenhauer’s play hints at this history while also addressing present concerns. While not all audience members would pick up on this, many from the Northwest Pacific coast area would, since environmental issues have been high profile issues for generations.

Most Alaska Natives, regardless of where they now live view traditional Native subsistence foods as much more than a means of physical survival; they are also a crucial aspect of cultural survival and spiritual sustenance—and a tangible means of maintaining ties to ancestral traditions and distinct tribal identities in an increasingly industrialized and ethnically diverse world. (Breinig 1999: 291)

Within the context of Tlingit history and land use, Tlingit audience members would be fully aware of the seriousness of this message.
Raven Takes on Repatriation

Dauenhauer’s play also addresses another high profile legal issue for Native Americans: repatriation. After the fishermen yank Raven’s beak off, thinking it is a fish, they examine it, and decide to sell it to the Museum of Natural History. Raven, desperate to get his nose back, recalls a “new law for getting things back from museums,” (2000: 130) disguises himself as a consultant, and goes after his nose.

After getting the “bureaucratic runaround” (2000: 130) Raven finally ends up at the correct house where his nose is being kept. When he arrives, the beak is on “special exhibit” and he is told he needs an ID tag and “gauzelike gloves” before he approaches it, which he does with “appropriate reverence and awe” (2000: 131). The nose has already gained a privileged status in the short time since the fisherman caught it:

It’s resting on display
on a pile of down feathers
on a pedestal
under a special light. (2000: 131)

Part of the humor in this scene is Raven’s approaching his very own beak with “appropriate reverence and awe.” During this ironic moment, the audience (unlike most of the
characters in the story) is aware of the reality of the situation versus what appears to be happening. In other words, they are in-the-know along with Raven. Also, the audience is likely to be aware that Raven, like all tricksters, never truly regards anything with “reverence and awe.” In writing about Coyote (another well-known trickster character) Paula Gunn Allen states:

a large part of his bag of survival tricks is his irreverence. Because of his irreverence for everything . . . coyote survives . . . partly out of luck, partly out of cunning . . . (1986: 158)

Raven, typical of all trickster characters, does indeed survive his current crisis through cunning. He knows that in order to beat the system, the most effect approach is to work with it. This strategy has been used by Native Americans for generations.

Ethics of Ownership

Native Americans are no strangers to the endless yards of bureaucratic red tape they have had to deal with over the years, and one of many examples of this is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act passed in 1990 (NAGPRA). In talking about NAGPRA, James Nason, a professor of anthropology involved in Tlingit repatriation,
said, “When NAGPRA passed, people predicted that this would be the end of museums as we know them . . . they envisioned tribes driving pick-up trucks to the backs of museums and just taking it all out” (Burke 2001:1). Stating that this has not been the case, he adds, “Instead Tribes have faced an arduous process of reviewing extensive museum collections and identifying individual artifacts eligible for return, based on repatriation guidelines” (Burke 2001:1). Raven getting the “bureaucratic runaround” (Dauenhauer 2000: 130) hints at the numerous hoops one must go through in order to simply gain rights to what is already his.

In this case, Raven becomes a metaphor for the many clever ways in which Native Americans have worked within the system in order to beat it. This has been largely done through the court systems. One example was the founding of the Alaska Native Brotherhood in 1912 and the Alaska Native Sisterhood in 1923. These two organizations, “won crucial political battles, including the right to vote and the right of Native children to attend public schools” (Breinig and Partnow 1986: 291). Thus, this is a concrete example of one way Tlingit people have worked with the system in order to beat it. Dauenhauer comments on the “bureaucratic
runaround” Native people often face in trying to work with the system using Raven’s predicament as a humorous example.

Like other Native authors who have critiqued the “museumization of culture and the appropriation of cultural identity and story,” Dauenhauer’s play becomes a metaphor for larger real life issues. In Kim Blaeser’s literary analysis of stories by Gordon Henry and Gerald Vizenor, Blaeser analyzes events similar to that in “Raven Loses His Nose.” In Vizenor’s screenplay, Harold of Orange, Harold claims that “the bones in a museum case may actually be, not those of an Indian, but those of a white anthropologist lost in a snow storm and later mistaken for a dead Indian.” This plot causes a “playful reversal” that “challenge[s] readers to reconsider the readily accepted treatment of the remains of “primitive’ cultures as museum objects” thus critiquing the practice of collecting and displaying Native remains (Blaeser 1994: 41).

Likewise, Henry’s novel The Light People features a leg that finds itself in a situation similar to Raven’s beak.

Through a series of bizarre circumstances, the ceremonially dressed and amputated leg of an Anishinaabe man, Four Bears from Fine Day reservation, becomes the discovery of a young graduate student in
anthropology and the pride of a metropolitan museum.

(Blaeser 1994: 41)

Henry begins a debate between the anthropologist, the museum board members (the experts), and the tribal members regarding the origins and meaning of the leg. That the leg might actually belong to a living man never occurs to the experts. Blaeser uses this dialogue to humorously depict the absurdity of the situation.

Dauenhauer’s story differs slightly, though meaningfully, from the stories above in that she does not employ the strategy of setting up a dialogue between two opposing sides. Rather, she by-passes this possibility entirely, making Raven the representative for both sides. He is, in a sense, both the tribal representative attempting to re-acquire what is rightfully his, and the “expert” called in to establish the value and authenticity of the object.

In by-passing this dialogue, Raven becomes the sole story maker, thereby increasing his chances for success. He disguises himself as a consultant and uses repatriation as a way to legally enter the museum. However, unlike Tlingit officials who would follow proper procedures in accordance with the rules of NAGPRA, Raven instead follows his own brand of justice. In true trickster fashion he uses the
consultant disguise to gain access to his beak, which he then steals. This is his very own form of “repatriation.”

Raven: What a Character!

The ending to the story suggests an alternative to repatriation that is more fantasy than reality. However, this fits perfectly within the tradition of Raven stories where Raven is, “on the one hand a rearranger and perfecter of the natural created world; and, on the other hand, he is a negative example of human imperfections” (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998: 41). Importantly, Raven as thief is a typical motif in many Raven stories. This is part of his role as transformer. Often his misconduct indirectly benefits human kind. For example, in one story Raven steals water from his greedy brother-in-law then inadvertently spills it across the land as he is making his escape. This water becomes the rivers and streams in Tlingit land.12 In this way Raven’s cultural role is important:

He redistributes and modifies most of creation to human advantage by destroying monopolies and distributing to the common people the necessities for human survival that were formerly horded by rich,

12 Dauenhauer adapts this story as one of her three Raven plays.
remote, and powerful creatures and people. (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998: 41)

Rules regarding the distribution and ownership of resources and materials are a fundamental concept in Tlingit culture. Raven stories in many ways reinforce this concept.

Symbolism

Formally known as at.óow, and literally meaning, “An owned or purchased thing or object” (Cruikshank 1997:61), at.óow actually speaks to a very complex and detailed philosophy of ownership and distribution among Tlingit peoples. Everything from land, to ceremonial objects, to songs, and crests are owned by clans and cannot be used or taken by another without permission.\(^\text{13}\) Within this system, giving away or selling at.óow that is owned by another clan or person is completely unethical and is a serious matter. In “Raven Loses His Nose,” the fishermen decide to sell Raven’s beak to the Museum of Natural History, though it is not their place to do so.

The fisherman’s decision to sell the beak to the museum alludes to a long history of at.óow being taken from

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\(^{13}\) This is a very basic definition and it is not within the scope of this chapter to completely outline the extremely complex rules surrounding the concept of at.óow. For a detailed definition see any of the introductions in the series Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature by Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer
Tlingit people and removed from their cultural context for the purpose of collection and display. In the late 1800s there was “massive collection activity for cultural objects” (Burke 2001: 2). Collectors took items such as Tlingit house posts without permission, possibly not realizing that the Tlingit “consider the poles their relatives” (Burke 2001: 1). In Dauenhauer’s play, Raven’s actions, though they do not most obviously benefit human kind (as when he creates the lakes and streams), serve as a metaphor for the importance of returning cultural objects to their proper owners. The collectors symbolize those “rich, remote, and powerful creatures” who horde items. For example, during the late 1800s, “One business man, George Heye, collected more than one million objects in just 12 years” (Burke 2001:2). Raven’s liberation of his beak is symbolic of the necessity of restoring at.óow to their rightful owners. Since at.óow are a foundational part of Tlingit culture, their return is not taken lightly. “When two Native American house posts from the Burke museum’s collection made the long journey to Southeast Alaska in July . . . their return was cause for great celebration among the Tlingit people” (Burke 2001:1).
Conclusion

Dauenhauer’s Raven Play, “Raven Loses His Nose” (2000) successfully appropriates English to tell a Tlingit story that promotes a personal and Tlingit ethic. Dauenhauer uses a tried and true formula for reaching an audience of adults and children alike, by modifying the Tlingit Raven story to contemporary times. Her play demonstrates resilience through this trickster aesthetic, which relies on humor—a strategy used to disarm and educate while entertaining. In this way, Dauenhauer is able to raise issues regarding racism, environmentalism, and repatriation.

Aesthetically, Dauenhauer is most able to demonstrate resilience through the Raven narrative. She relies on Tlingit aesthetics to frame her story, much like the following author who depends on tribally specific aesthetics for her work.

Ofelia Zepeda relies largely on an O’odham aesthetic for her poetry, unlike Alexie and Erdrich who blend forms with Western literary forms. Zepeda’s short song poems nearly replicate the O’odham songs of her community, and her longer poems demonstrates aspects of an O’odham aesthetic through her use of formulaic beginnings and endings.
Tohono O’odham writer Ofelia Zepeda’s bilingual poetry collection, *Ocean Power* (1995) is a literature of resistance in her use of the Tohono O’odham language and her appropriation of the English language to express an O’odham worldview. *Ocean Power* is also a literature of resilience through Zepeda’s promotion of an O’odham aesthetic through conscious choices in form and content of her poetry; it promotes an O’odham ethic grounded in the importance of ritual and ceremony. Through poetic structure, characterization, and tribally specific symbolism, *Ocean Power* is a literature of resistance and resilience.

In section one of this chapter, I provide a biography of Zepeda, summarize the main text and responses to that text, and consider the importance of Zepeda’s decision to write in Tohono O’odham. In section two, I analyze Zepeda’s creative appropriation of English to express an O’odham aesthetic and ethic through poetic structure, characterization, and tribally specific symbols. First looking at poetic structure, I explore how Zepeda emulates O’odham song aesthetics through form and content in her
poetry. Second, I analyze Zepeda’s characterization of the men in the poem “Ocean Power” as a means to emphasize an O’odham ethic regarding the importance of ceremony and ritual. Third, I analyze Zepeda’s use of O’odham symbols in “Ocean Power” and her attention once again to form, in order to reinforce an O’odham aesthetic and ethic.

Section I: Biography

Ofelia Zepeda is a Tohono O’odham linguist, poet, and professor from the Sonoran desert, where she was born in 1954 and raised in Stanfield, Arizona. Zepeda grew up in an O’odham community not far from the reservation where families of migrant workers lived and worked in the cotton fields. Despite this setting, Zepeda claims “our community organization replicated the traditional O’odham village community” and “even in the unlikely setting of cotton farms the traditional beliefs were held on to steadfastly. Many traditional practices were carried out in these communities” (2000: 409). This background deeply affects Zepeda’s poetry where she blends stories of working in the cotton fields with poems that recognize concepts from those “traditional beliefs,” such as the ceremonies for “pulling down the clouds,” that is, ceremonies designed to bring rain and fix the earth (Zepeda 1995: 5). Zepeda heard about
the ceremonies and rituals from parents and older siblings as a child, and when she was older she participated in them herself.

Zepeda’s early education was unique for a Native American child of her generation. She calls herself an “anomaly” in that she was not made to attend boarding school, but instead attended a local, public, rural school where many fellow O’odham from her community also attended. While the school focused on English, O’odham was also used. “The home language was O’odham and it was very common for children to go to school speaking only O’odham; this was certainly the case for me and all my siblings” (2000: 409). She adds, “I believe it would be accurate to say the many ‘rural’ O’odham children never experienced the devastation of attending boarding schools. Since we lived in these farming communities there were small public schools in easy access . . . so even though we went to school speaking only O’odham, the trauma of being forced to learn English was not so great” (2000:409). As a result, Zepeda remained fluent in O’odham even as she learned English.

As a fluent O’odham speaker, Zepeda assumed she could read O’odham, until she tried and found that she was not literate in the language. This sparked an interest in learning the written language. She began working with Ken
Hale, a visiting professor of linguistics from MIT who was teaching at the University of Arizona in the early to mid 1970s. Already a student at the university, Zepeda changed majors from sociology to linguistics and eventually earned a B.A. in 1980, an M.A. in 1981, and Ph.D. in 1984, all in linguistics at the University of Arizona. She specialized in the Tohono O’odham language and wrote the book *A Papago Grammar* (1983, reprinted 1993). In 1986 Zepeda became the Director of the American Indian Studies program at the University of Arizona, and the co-director of the American Indian Language Development Institute (ALDI). The institute was designed to train teachers to teach Native languages in their schools, and it continues to this day, with Zepeda as director.

Zepeda’s contributions to the general field of American Indian Studies and specifically to Native language revitalization have been invaluable. Even before becoming a professor at the University of Arizona, Zepeda participated in projects to encourage language revitalization and literacy. One of the many projects she spearheaded was to encourage students of the O’odham language to write original stories, poems and essays in their language. Many of these students were educators themselves and were teaching at bilingual schools. Zepeda’s original goal for
writing and eventually publishing in the O’odham language was to help build an O’odham literature base in order to increase literacy: “As a language teacher, and having been a student of my own language, I saw how limited the literature was as far as anything that could be used in a classroom setting, for adult readers of O’odham especially” (Peterson 1992: 2). Zepeda’s efforts to produce literature in O’odham led to collections of student poetry and stories, sometimes collected informally, and in the case of *Mat Hekid o Ju/ When It Rains: Papago and Pima Poetry* (1982) collected and published by the University of Arizona Press. Zepeda is currently an editor for the press and a series editor for Sun Tracks, which publishes Native American creative writing.

As a top linguist whose work with the Tohono O’odham language has garnered her much praise from her peers, Zepeda has earned several awards: these include The Tanner Award in 1996 from the American Indian Alumni Association at the University of Arizona and a MacArthur Fellowship in 1999 for her work with the Tohono O’odham language. Her academic and creative works are published in numerous journals, books, and anthologies and her contribution to the revitalization of the O’odham language should not be underestimated. Nor should her creative works be
underestimated. Zepeda’s earlier poetry was created for the purpose of having O’odham texts for her students to read in their language classes, but she eventually published two books of her poetry, *Ocean Power: Poems From the Desert* (1995) and *Jewed ‘I-hoi/ Earth Movements: O’odham Poems* (1997). *Ocean Power* is the main text to be considered here.

**Main Text**

Zepeda has stated that her poems in *Ocean Power* are simply about daily life (Zepeda 1998), but they are in fact much more than that. They are expressive of an O’odham continuum of aesthetics and ethics that in many cases speak more to traditional culture than contemporary culture. In other words, many of the poems reflect values and themes important to the traditional O’odham culture. Rather than poems about shopping at Safeway or teaching at the University of Arizona—things which are certainly aspects of Zepeda’s daily life—the poems are instead largely about the environment of the place she inhabits.

Seasons, weather, and landscape affect nearly every poem. Even poems that seem to be simply about daily life such as washing dishes, or doing laundry address the poet’s consciousness of her location—of place and landscape. The poem “Kitchen Sink” hints at the ideas expressed in the
introduction to the collection, where O’odham women schedule chores around the sun: “Like the people before them, these women gauged the movement of the summer sun and the amount of work that needed to be done... [They] planned their day around the heat and the coolness of the summer day” (1995: 1-2). In “Kitchen Sink” Zepeda is also aware of the sun’s movements, “The light from my kitchen-door window comes through in a special way./ I can see the seasons change in my sink... During the afternoon the sink is full with sunlight/ Not necessarily a good time to be washing dishes” (1995:68). The speaker gauges the seasons by the sun’s shadow in her sink: “Later in summer there is a sense of urgency as the shadow gets longer and begins to slant/... winter is coming.” (1995: 68) Such a seemingly simple poem about washing dishes is actually complicated in its reference to an older heritage indicated in her introduction to the collection. These are not only poems about daily life, these are poems that reflect centuries of lives lived in the desert—they are place and culture specific. The themes as well as the various formats Zepeda adopts reflect aesthetics and ethics long held by the O’odham people and exemplified in their oral traditions, as we shall see in the analysis portion of this chapter.
Responses to Work

_Ocean Power_ has yet to receive substantial attention from literary critics aside from book reviews, and to date there are no full length articles on this text. Reviews of _Ocean Power_ are positive and indicate the connection between the O’odham oral tradition and Zepeda’s poetry:

“Ofelia Zepeda has produced a fine first volume of quietly powerful poems that reflect the oral traditions of her Tohono O’odham people and her experience as a Native woman” (Danker 1996:72-73). Reviewers also note Zepeda’s emphasis on family and community and make abstract connections between her poetry and an O’odham worldview. Dennis Holt observes, “It is clear that some significant part of the older tradition is still alive in her worldview and in her poems, which can be seen to have arisen out of a spiritual and psychological framework in which the elemental aspects and forces of the world have retained their essential values” (2001:1). Holt does not however, elaborate on what those values are, or how they are specifically retained. Most reviewers emphasize worldview in their comments, but due to the brevity of the form they rarely elaborate on what exactly this worldview encompasses.
Navajo poet Laura Tohe comes close by recognizing that “Ocean Power speaks of the Tohono O’odhams’ intimate relationship with the landscape, a relationship thousands of years old. They listen to the land and know its demands. They are equally alert to the movements of rain clouds in a place of little rainfall, welcoming and celebrating it” (Tohe 1998: 297). She also notes, significantly, “These poems are community centered and are generated from the oral tradition of the Tohono O’odham people. They are therefore rooted in a tribal storytelling aesthetic” (Tohe 1998: 298). Danker begins to get at this aesthetic when she states, “Zepeda writes in a straightforward and graceful style, reminiscent of traditional O’odham songs and orations in its use of repetition, personification, and closely-observed images of nature” (1996: 73). While I disagree with Danker’s term “personification” because cosmic kinship does not personify nature, but actually sees it as real living being, she is correct in noting Zepeda’s use of repetition, which is consistent throughout the book. There are also closely-observed images of nature throughout, noticeable in what I will call song poems: short, descriptive poems that resemble traditional O’odham songs.
Critics also note Zepeda’s use of her O’odham language throughout the book. In fact, there is a substantial amount of O’odham poetry, sometimes with translations and sometimes without. In her introduction to *Ocean Power* Zepeda states:

As for the pieces that are written in O’odham, for the moment I will simply say that O’odham is my first language. I feel confident in the language and so am able to create pieces solely in my first language. The O’odham pieces could be meant for the small but growing number of O’odham speakers who are becoming literate. Here, then, is little bit of O’odham literature for them to read. (Zepeda 1995: 4)

However, despite her humble claim that the poems are simply “a bit of O’odham literature for [O’odham speakers] to read,” her inclusion of these untranslated poems is in fact a political statement regarding the legitimacy and vitality of the O’odham language—a statement that speaks to the resilience of the language and a resistance to Native language eradication. According to Zepeda, some readers have deemed her poetry non-political due to its lack of an overt criticism of the history of colonization and its affect on Native people in the United States (Zepeda
1998).\textsuperscript{14} Ironically, her collection of poetry is in fact very political since it resists attempts at Native language eradication.

Section II: O’odham Language Poetry as Resistance and Resilience

\textit{In short, we need to understand indigenous literacy as social and political action.}

(Watahomigie and McCarty, 1997: 107)

Considering the history of colonization worldwide, and the significance of language eradication in the policies of assimilation, writing in one’s own Native language is indeed a powerful political act. In his seminal \textit{Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature} (1981), African scholar and theorist Ngugi wa Thiong’o contemplates the ideological and psychological power of language and he asserts the necessity of a return to tribal languages as a vital part of the decolonizing process. "In my view, language was the most important vehicle through which that power [colonization] fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the

\textsuperscript{14} Specifically, her lack of mention of boarding schools, assimilation, and other topics often expected from Native American writing. Zepeda’s response was that she was not political, that she just wrote about daily life.
physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (Ngugi 2001: 287). Recalling the humiliating assimilative practices of the colonial regime, which employed corporal punishment of those who spoke Gikuyu, Ngugi bitterly asks, “What were the consequences of, on the one hand, the systematic suppression of our languages and the literature they carried, and on the other, the elevation of English and the literature it carried?” (2001: 288). Ngugi asserts that language and culture are inextricably intertwined and that culture was “the set of spiritual eyeglasses through which [human beings] come to view themselves and their place in the universe” (2001: 289). He believes a complete rejection of the English language was the only way to restore the Kenyan ethnic and national identity that was displaced by colonization.

Certainly language is a point of political struggle in colonized places. In writing about post-colonial resistance, the authors of The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures (1998) say of language:

Language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the
imperial center—whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a ‘standard’, against other variants which are constituted as ‘impurities’ or by planting the language of empire in a new place—remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998: 283)

Wresting and re-positioning that control through the revitalization of Native languages is a powerful form of resistance and resilience. While Zepeda is comfortable writing in both O’odham and English, as a linguist and a figure of critical importance in the Native language revitalization movement she is aware of the significance of writing and publishing in Tohono O’odham:

It is language, of course, that orders, carries, and expresses this [Native] experience and . . . transmits it to future generations. But this implies more than simply language capacity or language as speech. The meanings, symbolism, shared history, and experiences of a people within a landscape all reside within individual languages. (McCarty and Zepeda, 1999: 198)

In addition Zepeda claims, “I like to think that writing and getting material published in my native language will . . . also serve, on a global scale, to give an additional
dimension to the language, the written form, thereby bringing it closer to the level of other so-called prestige languages of the world” (Zepeda, 2000: 407). Indeed, noted literary scholar David Moore reveals that, “Zepeda leaves untranslated passages of Tohono O’odham language mixed with English in her own poems as a resounding though silent statement that her Indian tongue is as legitimate as the colonial one” (1997:638-9).

Zepeda’s poetry resists the history of colonization and eradication of Native languages in the United States. It begins to establish O’odham as a world literature alongside other published literatures in that it moves beyond the simple translations of colonial texts, such as the Bible, into a Native language. This practice dominated early Native language writing along with transcribing Native oratory into written texts, a practice which still continues, and is still valid, but it does not produce original work. Zepeda’s poetry produces new and original writing in a Native language that begins in O’odham thought and remains entirely O’odham, “I can have something start out in O’odham. The whole experience starts out in O’odham. The words that I use or play with are in O’odham only and English never comes in” (Evers 1992: 6). This is a powerful statement on Zepeda’s part and is a potent counterpoint to
her English poems which also reflect a distinctly O’odham consciousness through her appropriation and manipulation of English.

Writing in English

In acknowledging the similarities between postcolonial literature and Native literature, scholars Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo collected Native women’s writing in an anthology titled, Reinventing the Enemy’s Language: Contemporary Native Women’s Writing of North America (1997). They explained their title utilizing postcolonial language theories to discuss the political and cultural implications of writing in the “enemy’s language” of English while expressing Native viewpoints, experiences, and history. Ideally, they claim, Native people would write in their own languages, but since this is not always an option, they look to theories of appropriation.

Other nationalist literary movements from other colonized peoples have recognized the need for a literature to be produced in native language for native language speakers. Along the way, there is hope that in “reinventing” the English language we will turn the process of colonization around, and that our
Bird and Harjo’s belief that writers can use English, or the colonizer’s language to express a Native perspective is in line with other indigenous writers such as noted post-colonial African writer and scholar Chinua Achebe.

In contrast to Ngugi, but in agreement with Bird and Harjo, Achebe advocates writing African literatures in the English language while still acknowledging the devastation brought on by colonialism. He sees the inheritance of English as a uniting factor, making it possible for the numerous and diverse African tribes to communicate with one another and the world, thus making English a tool of resistance. Describing English as a universal language, he also emphasizes the necessity of consciously using English to express an African experience. “The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English which is at once universal and able to carry his particular experience” (1994: 433). Although Achebe also thinks literatures in African languages are a necessary part of the national body of literature, he emphasizes the value of
literatures written in English as well. He feels indigenous writers are perfectly capable of making English “bear the burden” of an African experience, and, in the process, creating aesthetically pleasing work.

Acoma writer Simon Ortiz also advocates for the revitalization of Native languages while arguing “that American Indian writers are transforming English for their own expressive purposes by incorporating elements from their tribal narratives (along with their cultural expectations, structural patterns, linguistic peculiarities, and association with specific geographical locations) into their contemporary fiction and poetry” (Adamson 2001: 120). On many occasions Ortiz has addressed this transformation in his public readings and classroom presentations. In his often cited, “Toward a National Indian Literature” he speaks at length on this issue using the Acoma culture’s appropriation and manipulation of aspects of colonial culture (specifically Spanish religion), to render a contemporary Acoma worldview expressed through song, dance, and language (1981).

And because in every case where European culture was cast upon Indian people of this nation there was [a] creative response and development, it can be observed that this was the primary element of a nationalistic
impulse to make use of foreign rituals, ideas, and material in their own—Indian—terms. (Ortiz 1981: 8)

This demonstrates both resistance and resilience. In resisting the complete suppression or destruction of Native culture the people appropriate those “foreign rituals, ideas, and material” and remake them to suit their own needs. The incorporation of their own cultural values via aesthetics and ethics in this process of adaptation demonstrates resilience. The manipulation of foreign languages is also part of this “creative response” and can be seen in Zepeda’s original poetry which appropriates English to express an O’odham worldview, specifically through her adherence to O’odham aesthetics and ethics.

Song Poems as Resilience and Resistance
Zepeda’s short descriptive poems addressing the natural phenomena in the Sonoran desert demonstrate both resistance and resilience through her appropriation of the English language to express an O’odham aesthetic. Ocean Power contains several brief descriptive poems that resemble O’odham songs. I call these “song poems.” In particular they are similar to rain songs in both form and content. In terms of form, O’odham songs are concise, descriptive, evocative of an event, and may employ
repetition. In terms of content they often address cloud formation and rain (Zepeda 2000).

It is important to note, that while Zepeda recognizes the aesthetic similarities between her short poems and O’odham songs she does not consider herself a singer. Songs are dreamed by an O’odham person and then may be passed down to future generations (Underhill 1969: 11). Unlike poetry, a person does not simply decide to compose a song. A song is “given by supernatural powers. A man who desired a song did not put his mind on words and tunes . . . one day, in a natural sleep, he would hear singing . . . perhaps the clouds sing, or the wind, or the feathery rain spider, swinging on its invisible rope” (Underhill 1969: 6). Zepeda acknowledges this difference between her poems and O’odham songs, while also acknowledging the similarities. In reflecting on comments after a public reading Zepeda states, “Some people later told me, ‘you know the little pieces you have they’re not songs, but they’re like songs in a way because they’re short, because they describe things that we see, we understand”’ (1992: 5). This comment begins to get at an O’odham aesthetic.

The songs are brief and descriptive, to be sure. They are also meant to evoke (or invoke) an event, and often include repetition. Importantly, they are also place-
specific. The “we” in “what we see, we understand” refers to the O’odham community who have for centuries lived in the Sonoran desert straddling the U.S./Mexican border in the Southwestern United States. This home has, naturally, inspired many songs about rain. “The songs deal with the holiest of all things to the desert people, rain. To them rain is . . . life itself” (Underhill 1969: 8). Indeed, the annual ceremonies performed by the O’odham are living proof of the significance of rain. In Rainhouse and Ocean: Speeches for the Papago Year, Donald Bahr notes regarding the yearly ritual cycle of the O’odham, “It is a system that grew from the relation between the Papagos and their desert homeland. In its details it could belong to no other people as, for example, the rains which are very important in this system come from a certain direction at a certain time of year, the ocean which is also quite important lies in a different direction, etc” (Bahr et al 1979: 5). And while Native American writing is well-known for its emphasis on the land and the people’s connection to the land, Zepeda makes this distinction between her work and others: 15

Rain in the desert is a theme I continue in much of my writing. I don’t claim that I write about the land,

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the landscape of the desert . . . I like to think that I am more influenced about the movements and the changes in the atmosphere of the desert environment. Changes that occur most drastically when it rains.

(2000: 412-413)

In regard to O’odham oratory she states, “And of course the O’odham have a great deal of oral tradition that speaks to the topic of rain. The oral tradition, whether it is in the form of song, oratory, speech, prayer, or story, can speak of the moisture and other minute instances of it in the most poetic way” (2000: 413).

O’odham songs, as opposed to long ritual oratory, tend to be very concise and descriptive. They are often meant to evoke, or invoke an event, such as rain.¹⁶ They also rely aesthetically on repetition. Take for example, the following O’odham song collected by Frances Densmore in the early 1900s. The song, “I Draw the Rain” was given to the people “to be used in a ceremony to bring the rain” (Densmore 1929: 150)

Here I am sitting and with my power I draw the south wind toward me

¹⁶ Historically, songs in O’odham culture were a part of everyday life; while they were critically important to ceremonies, people might also sing songs in many other circumstances. See Ruth Underhill Papago Woman (1979) and Singing for Power: The Song Magic of the Papago Indians of Southern Arizona (1969)
After the wind I draw the clouds
And after the clouds I draw the rain
that makes the wild flowers grow
on our home ground and look so beautiful

Here the five aesthetic qualities listed above are present: the poem is concise, descriptive, invokes an event, uses repetition, and is place-specific. Note the extreme brevity of the song. In her autobiography as told to anthropologist Ruth Underhill, Maria Chona said about O’odham songs, “The song is very short because we understand so much” (Underhill 1979: 51). This now famous phrase speaks to the cultural specificity and place-based aesthetic of O’odham songs. The audience needs little explanation of the meaning of the song because it is all contained within its brief form. In an interview in The Tucson Weekly, Zepeda discussed an O’odham way of thinking and speaking about natural occurrences in the Sonoran desert, “Traditional O’odham songs . . . are very delicate and, in a way, very concise about how the singer viewed the environment, just for that split second” (Peterson 1992: 2). In speaking about Native American songs generally Margot Astrov says, “The singer sketches only a thought or an impression and [the rest] is left to the poetical imagination of the listener” (Blaeser 1996: 120). Such brief songs are not
meant to fully paint a picture for the audience, but rather invoke, or evoke an event. For example, the song Chona describes was one sung by her father. In this case, the song was meant to recreate the image or evoke a moment in time for the listeners, rather than make the event happen. Here the song follows:

   There is a white shell mountain in the ocean
   Rising half out of the water
   Green scum floats on the water
   And the mountain turns around (Underhill 1979: 50)

In commenting on this song, Chona notes “We can understand how tall and white the mountain was, and that the white shell is something precious, such as the handsome men of old used to have . . . and it would shine all across the earth as they walked” (Underhill 1979: 51). In this way, her father successfully recreates the image in the song, the song that he had dreamed. As we shall see in the analysis portion of this section, Zepeda also successfully creates images in her poetry that are place-and culture-specific; however, her song poems are more accessible in some ways than other poems in that they rely less on culturally specific symbolism (as in the song above) and
more on language that animates the event. This animation is largely achieved through her use of repetition.

O’odham songs often include repetition. In comparing and contrasting an O’odham aesthetic with an American aesthetic in her book, Singing for Power: The Song Magic of the Papago Indians of Southern Arizona (1969), Ruth Underhill claimed, “One real difference there is between the Indian sense of beauty and our own: we can have enough of repetition; the Indian, apparently can not” (Underhill 1969:16). Indeed, many of the songs included in Underhill’s book include repetition despite her claim that “in this book some of the repetitions have been omitted” (1969: 6). Take for example the following song for “pulling down the clouds:"

Where stands the cloud, trembling
On Quijotoa Mountain
The cloud trembling,
There lies my heart
Trembling. (Underhill 1969: 26)

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17 A note on accessibility: While the O’odham poems are largely inaccessible to a non-O’odham literate audience, the English poems are very accessible. I recently taught this book to a few students who commented on the accessibility of Zepeda’s poetry, one saying “I really didn’t like poetry until I read this book. I understood it the first time through, and liked it even more after our class discussion.” (Summer 2006)
The song repeats the word “trembling” in three of the five lines building emphasis through the accretionary power of this word. This is one kind of repetition. Another may involve the exact repetition of a phrase, for example in this poem for singing up the corn:

Blue evening falls,
Blue evening falls;
Near by, in every direction,
It sets the corn tassels trembling. (Underhill 1969: 44)

The exact repetition of a phrase in the Native American oral tradition is a common device “serving to reinforce the theme and to focus the participant’s attention” (Allen 1995: 11). This kind of repetition is found throughout O’odham songs and oratory and also in Zepeda’s work. Her poem “Ba: ban Ganhu Ge Ci: pia:” (1995: 59-60) restates the phrase, “Someone go over there and ask them” again and again as a constant refrain. Other poems employ repetition through formulaic beginnings or endings, as in the poem “Ka: cim Su:dagi” in which the first three lines of the second stanza state: “Toward it we extend only good thoughts/ Toward it we extend only good feelings/ Toward it we extend kinship” (1995: 82).
As we can see, O’odham songs exhibit specific qualities that can be outlined here. They are concise, descriptive, employ repetition, and evoke a sense of the event being described. They are place specific. They speak to the desert homeland of the O'odham people and to the importance of rain. Zepeda adheres to these qualities in her original English poetry, and is conscious of this aesthetic even in her translations. An analysis of a Zepeda translation offers a window into analyzing her poetry in a way that reveals the resistance and resilience of a traditional O'odham song aesthetic in her work. The skill Zepeda demonstrates in her “translation” of a poem from O’odham to English is a good example of her mastery of word manipulation for the purposes of conveying an O’odham aesthetic. In talking about the English versions of her O’odham pieces she explains that the English versions are, in a sense, original poems:

Then as the O’odham piece exists for me its possible to have an English piece be there as well. And in this case it is not merely a translation, going line by line . . . there were pieces that didn’t come out right in English . . . it seemed there was something missing. So what I think I do is simply do another
According to Zepeda, “O’odham people do have the most sincere appreciation for speakers who are thoughtful and creative with language” and they “pay close attention to the creative manipulation of words by the speaker” (2000: 414). Zepeda’s success with creative language and the manipulation of words in O’odham may simply be abiding by an O’odham aesthetic, but when applied to the English language—a colonial language—her creative manipulation becomes an act of resistance. According to the authors of The Empire Writes Back, “The appropriation of the [English] language is essentially a subversive strategy, for the adaptation of the “standard” language to the demands and requirements of the place and society into which it has been appropriated amounts to a far more subtle rejection of the political power of the standard language” (Ashcroft, et al. 1998: 284). Zepeda’s successful manipulation of the English language to reflect an O’odham song aesthetic makes her song poems literature of both resilience and resistance. An analysis of her English version of “Cloud Song” demonstrates this:

Na:nko Ma:s CewagĪ /Cloud Song

Greenly they emerge.
In colors of blue they emerge.
Whitely they emerge.
In colors of black they are coming.
Reddening, they are right here.

In the English version of "Cloud Song," Zepeda manipulates English words and syntax to convey a meaning closer to the original poem and to reflect the aesthetics of O'odham song-making as outlined above. Zepeda conveys an atmospheric change in a manner that tries to emulate the succinct and more adequately descriptive language of O'odham. She does this by manipulating standard English syntax and creating a new vocabulary. She creates the neologism "greenly" in an attempt to bring the experience evoked by the poem closer to an O'odham perspective.\(^\text{18}\) By taking the noun "green" and making it a verbal noun or adjective, she not only describes the color of the cloud, but animates it and gives it agency. This neologism is an unexpected moment in the text. It is an unexpected aesthetic for an English speaker since it does not conform to the syntactical rules of the "standard English." It is a successful appropriation and manipulation of English to convey an O'odham worldview and concept--the unique

\(^{18}\) During a classroom visit at the University of Arizona, she stated that there is not an English word equivalent to describe this particular kind of cloud with a greenish-blue hue. (1998)
attributes of approaching desert clouds--not directly translatable into English.

By creating the words “greenly” and “whitely” Zepeda abides by a song aesthetic which prescribes brevity and clear description. She is also successful in evoking a sense of the moment through the animation of the clouds and through repetition. In discussing the skill of O’odham singers, Zepeda states, “When they talk about the colors of clouds, how they start getting closer to you, how they change dimension—it’s a large thing they’re looking at, a very complex atmospheric change that they’re observing. And they pack it all into a four-line poem” (Peterson 1992:2). In “Cloud Song,” Zepeda has beautifully adapted the English language to “the demands and requirements of the place and society into which it has been appropriated.” The following poem, “Cewagi” also abides by this aesthetic. “Cewagi” does not rely on new vocabulary but adheres to the qualities outlined above demonstrating the resilience of this aesthetic through brevity, descriptive imagery, repetition, and the evocation of an atmospheric event:

*Cewagi*

Summer clouds sit silently.
They sit, quietly gathering strength.
Gathering strength from the good wind.
This strength that becomes the thunder.
The thunder so loud it vibrates the earth.
The thunder that surrounds us. (1995: 26)

The success of this poem lies in its accretionary power accomplished through repetition. The poem is brief, but through the accretion of specific images of animated clouds sitting and gathering strength, Zepeda is able to give the reader a sense of the event. Through the rearrangement and repetition of specific words such as “strength” and “thunder” Zepeda is able to convey the intensity of the moment. In this way she abides by an O’odham song aesthetic.

Zepeda also emulates O’odham aesthetics from the oral tradition in her longer narrative poems. In terms of form she relies on repetition. However, these longer poems allow Zepeda to employ other literary devices in order to express ethic as well as an aesthetic through her use of characterization and symbolism. An analysis of the last poem in the collection entitled “Ocean Power,” will reveal the way Zepeda is able to promote this ethic.
“Ocean Power”: Ethics and Aesthetics through Characterization and Symbols

In “Ocean Power” Zepeda alludes to an O’odham ethic addressing the importance of ceremony and ritual. “Ocean Power” refers to the annual pilgrimage O’odham men historically made to the Gulf of California to retrieve salt and power. This journey was once such an important aspect of O’odham culture that Ruth Underhill referred to it as the “cornerstone of their philosophy and the passport of dreams” (1968:111). A sense of this significance is developed in the poem through characterization, symbolism, and repetition. The characters in “Ocean Power” have arrived at the ocean against their will: they are being deported to Mexico. Utilizing this setting, Zepeda alludes to the old time ritual of journeying to the ocean for power, a ritual that the men in this situation have not been able to participate in. Through poetic devices Zepeda comments on this loss less directly than in other kinds of writing such as prose. For example, in her forward to a recent reprinting of Singing for Power she directly states, “Rituals and ceremonies must be continued” (Underhill 1993: vii). In “Ocean Power” she shows why they should be continued through her characterization of the men and their
great sense of loss that they feel while standing at the ocean.

Historically, this journey was an important one for the community. The ritual associated with it established an O’odham ethic in regard to community responsibility and respect for the ocean. The pilgrims making the trek through miles of unforgiving desert were held in high regard, and their journey was viewed as a physical sacrifice made to gain spiritual and environmental renewal. “It is an arduous duty undertaken for the sake of the kindred, and the reward is rain” (Underhill 1969: 111). Community also includes the ocean itself. The O’odham considered the ocean a deity and there was an established protocol for partaking in this journey in order to meet it (Bahr 1979: 38). If followed correctly, the men could ask something of the ocean. For example, they might ask to be singers or hunters. But as stated above, the journey was not selfish. This pilgrimage served practical and spiritual purposes for everyone. Salt gathered from the ocean was used in trade, in ceremony, and for physical nourishment, therefore enriching the community as a whole. The ethic established by the journey and the ceremony surrounding it was important to everyone.
Characterization

Donald Bahr explains that O’odham people have regarded the ocean (particularly the Gulf of California—the closest body of salt water to traditional O’odham territory) as a “Supreme Being” and did not approach it casually (1979: 38). Yet the men in “Ocean Power” have arrived at the ocean against their will and by automobile—a departure from the traditional four-day ceremonial pilgrimage on foot. This unconventional arrival has engendered discomfort. Though the men recognize the power of the ocean through a sense of cultural reverence, they feel remorse for their lack of adherence to cultural protocols. Zepeda emphasizes this throughout the poem, thus reinforcing her position on the importance of ceremonies.

The poem is partly written in the collective voice of a group of O’odham men who “came too close to the ocean as they were being deported back to Mexico from Arizona” (1995:86). “Ocean Power” however does not focus on the politics of deportation, rather the focus is on the effect the ocean has on the men who have arrived there by force and without prior ritualistic preparation. Zepeda reveals the reverence the speakers have for the ocean in the first two lines which build the characterization of the men: “Words cannot speak your power. / Words cannot speak your
beauty” (1995: 83). The next four lines switch to the third person and further develop this characterization. “Grown men with dry fear in their throats / watch the water come closer and closer / Men who had never seen the ocean / it was hard not to have the fear that sits in the pit of the stomach” (1995: 83). These first lines indicate a particular worldview: even though the men have not arrived at the ocean by foot and have not carried out the proper ceremonial procedures, their reverence for the power of the ocean still resides in them collectively as O’odham people. By developing and building on the reaction of the men, Zepeda establishes a strong characterization that illuminates an O’odham ethic grounded in the importance of adhering to cultural protocol. The lack of ritual in their current situation is clearly upsetting to the men:

We are not ready to be here.

We are not prepared in the old way

We have no medicine. (1995: 84)

The “old way” of preparation involved detailed ritualistic preparation and ceremonial objects of symbolic meaning. Zepeda lists some of these objects in the poem to further emphasize what is missing.
Symbolism

The mention of cornmeal and feathers further highlights the lack of preparedness of the men. “We do not have cornmeal, feathers, nor do we have songs and prayers ready” (84). Cornmeal and feathers had symbolic significance to the salt pilgrimage and to O’odham culture generally. Young men used to acquire power through the ritualistic killing of an eagle to obtain feathers used in ceremony and daily life. The tail feathers were used for arrows, the top two wing feathers were “divining plumes” used by medicine men, the remaining wing feathers went to the singers (Underhill 1969: 105-6). The downy breast feathers remained with the eagle killer and were considered “rain magic, so like the clouds that they can summon them” (Underhill 1969: 105). As the poem indicates, these feathers were important to the journey. On the third day of the pilgrimage toward the ocean, the men would arrive at the base of Mount Pinacate. Here they would race to the top and give the eagle down to the mountain (Underhill 1969: 120).

These feathers also figured significantly in the ritual upon arriving at the ocean since they symbolized rain, and part of the purpose of the salt pilgrimage was to
bring rain. Here the leader would plant a stick topped with eagle down in the salt field and speak kindly to the ocean stating, “We do not come to harm you; we come only to gather salt” (Underhill 1969: 128). This respectful approach to the ocean was and is still a key feature of O’odham culture. For example, in a more playful poem entitled “Under the Sea,” inspired by the Disney movie The Little Mermaid, Zepeda mixes refrains from the movie’s soundtrack with real life instruction on how to properly interact with the ocean: “If you go into the water/ make sure that you smile. / If you turn your back to the ocean, / say ‘excuse me’” (1995: 79). Proper interaction with the ocean was largely dictated through the prescribed protocol associated with the salt pilgrimage, and the ethic implied by that protocol is still relevant today. However, the ritual itself is lost.

This sense of loss is made apparent in Zepeda’s poem which recounts precisely what is missing. In stating, “We do not have cornmeal” Zepeda alludes to the importance of cornmeal to the ritual. Since the pilgrimage was partly a test of strength and courage, the only food the men were allowed to take was a small bag of cornmeal which they could mix with water every evening and drink for

19 Zepeda explained the origins of this song to a University of Arizona class on Native literature in 1998
nourishment. It also served a purpose upon arriving at the ocean. Here the men would gather salt. Then they would enter the ocean, “Strewing corn meal as the ritual bade them, on the advancing waves” (Underhill 1969: 128). Proper protocol prescribed even how one should distribute the cornmeal, “a man holds corn meal in his left hand and throws it on the waves with is right. If he has done any evil . . . the sea will not take his offering. But if it is accepted, perhaps then and there he may see a vision” (Underhill 1969:129). Zepeda’s inclusion of these culturally specific symbols adds depth and dimension to the poem and to the situation being described.

Aesthetic

Zepeda’s attention to form throughout the poem adds further to the characterization of the men and their regret at not being able to abide by an ethic so thoroughly inscribed in this ritual. The salt pilgrimage required a great deal of oratory including O’odham speeches made before, during, and after the journey (Bahr 1979:12) Underhill 1968). This oratory relied on repetition in many places as part of the entire speech. Consider this excerpt from Bahr:

\textsuperscript{20} Underhill spells corn meal as two separate words, Zepeda as one. I have followed Zepeda’s lead in my own writing.
Although the earth seemed very wide,
Clear to the edge of it did they go.
Although the north seemed very far,
Clear to the edge of it did they go.
Although the south seemed very far,
Clear to the edge of it did they go. (Bahr 1979: 66)

Zepeda’s use of formulaic beginnings and repetition in “Ocean Power” mirror in some ways the traditional oratory. For example, the last four lines of the third stanza state:

this place with sky too endless.

This place with the water too endless.

This place with air too thick and heavy to breathe.

This place with the roll and roar of thunder always playing to you ears. (1995: 84)

The men’s discomfort is emphasized poetically through the constant refrain of “this place” in contrast to “that land” that is the desert, “that land we know” (1995: 83).

Zepeda’s use of repetition also serves to maintain the somber tone of the poem, as in the constant restating of “we are not” and “we have not” mentioned earlier. This repetition highlights the absence of cultural knowledge, the absence of medicine, and the absence of ritual in the men’s encounter with the ocean. It emphasizes a sense of
loss and reiterates the concerns of the men over their lack of preparedness and adherence to a particular ethic.

“Ocean Power” is a beautifully written poem that demonstrates Zepeda’s successful “creative manipulation of words,” in English—a language foreign to the original ideas and construction of the salt pilgrimage speeches. Zepeda manipulates the English language to better reflect an O’odham worldview. Her choice of setting exemplifies her creativity: by placing the poem’s speakers in the present and at the ocean, Zepeda alludes to an older ritual that provided the cornerstone of O’odham philosophy. Moreover, by acknowledging absence in this contemporary setting, Zepeda is able to speak to an O’odham ethic that insists on the importance of ceremony and ritual. In commenting on the importance of the rain ceremony to the O’odham Zepeda states, “We believe that this ceremony and many others must be continued in order that everything be right. Should the ceremonies end, we believe that the world as we know it would not be the same” (Underhill date: vii). Zepeda speaks poetically to this concept in “Ocean Power.” The men are clearly distraught at the absence of ritual and ceremony in their current situation, thus Zepeda artistically expresses this ethic in an aesthetically pleasing way.
Conclusion

While Zepeda’s poetry is clearly exemplary of resistance through her inclusion of O’odham and manipulation of English, her poetry tends to lean more towards resilience. In Zepeda’s successful adherence to O’odham song aesthetics she demonstrates the resilience of those aesthetics. In her creative approach to the topic of loss of tradition, Zepeda is able to allude to an O’odham ethic grounded in the importance of ceremony.

Aesthetically, there is a sense of irony in “Ocean Power.” The construction of a poem essentially about the men’s lack of adherence to tradition is nevertheless written with attention to cultural patterns of O’odham oral tradition. Zepeda acknowledges a lack of tradition while simultaneously recreating and reinventing traditional patterns in the framework of the poem demonstrating the resilience of an O’odham aesthetic and ethic. The poem is undeniably O’odham. Although the men lament a lack of tradition associated with their visit to the ocean, Zepeda displays an abundance of cultural continuity through the poem’s structure, her vivid characterization of the men, and use of O’odham symbols.

This is typical of Zepeda’s poetry. Of the four authors studied here, Zepeda’s text most clearly
demonstrates cultural resilience through her aesthetic choices and ethics. This is largely due to Zepeda’s decision to write in her Native language and to continue an O’odham aesthetic in her work. This does not necessarily make her work less accessible to a mainstream audience, but she seems less conscientiously trying to accommodate one. Her work is tribally specific, and unlike Alexie and Erdrich, she relies almost entirely on an O’odham aesthetic to write her poetry. Rather than blend Western or American literary styles with her own, Zepeda relies on her own notion of what is beautiful, and what is poetic. Zepeda’s ability to write and publish a bi-lingual, tribally centered text is a remarkable achievement in American writing.
CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that despite tremendous differences in background, age, and education, Native writers exhibit both resistance and resilience in their work, albeit to varying degrees of intensity.

Sherman Alexie is the only writer in this study who was born and raised on a reservation, yet his writing is the least tribally specific in its aesthetic and ethics. Louise Erdrich, an enrolled Chippewa raised away from her reservation and educated at Dartmouth with degrees in creative writing, produces very tribally specific literature, but her adaptation of Chippewa aesthetic and ethics in terms of symbols and references are somewhat obscured by her postmodern writing style.

Nora Marks Dauenhauer was born and raised in a subsistence living environment in Southeastern Alaska and writes very tribally specific work, borrowing directly from a Tlingit Raven story aesthetic, yet she does so for an international audience and so utilizes the universal language of humor. Still, her writing, while very accessible in its straightforward trickster story, is Tlingit specific in its references to Tlingit issues and land.
Ofelia Zepeda, raised in the cotton fields a short distance from her tribe’s reservation, writes the most tribally specific work of all. Emphasizing resistance in the most direct way—through Native language—Zepeda also most powerfully demonstrates resilience in her English poems. Aesthetically speaking, they are the least hybridized of all the Native authors studied here in terms of form and content. Though they are written in English, they do not rely on postmodern writing strategies nor strategies of accessibility, but are simply what they are—straight forward poems about “daily life” that are rooted in a specific place and history.

Yet, despite these significant differences, all four writers have specific things in common. All demonstrate resistance in their writing. Alexie produces politicized writing, using humor and allusions to pop culture to counter misrepresentations of Native Americans in film. His work is politicized through his overt critique of that history. He usurps the Western and makes use of the buddy road film to reach a mass audience with his unique images of Native Americans in a contemporary setting.

Louise Erdrich demonstrates resistance through her overt criticism of assimilation policy and land allotment by contrasting two major female characters in her novel
Tracks. Erdrich speaks back to, and rewrites the history of colonization and assimilation by showing the devastating impact of that policy on Native people.

Dauenhauer adapts a Tlingit Raven story that is critical of capitalism and bureaucracies. Using humor, she entertains even as she instructs her audience. Ofelia Zepeda publishes in her Native language and also appropriates English to convey a Tohono O’odham worldview.

All four authors also demonstrate resilience through their incorporation of aesthetics and ethics derived from the Native American oral tradition. Alexie borrows from a variety of tribes emphasizing pan-Indian ethics such as the importance of community and the significance of Native women to community.

Louise Erdrich strongly conveys a Chippewa ethic regarding one’s responsibility to the community and the land by contrasting two female characters that represent a Chippewa worldview and the antithesis of that worldview. Through this juxtaposition, Erdrich conveys the resilience of a Chippewa ethic embedded in the oral tradition.

Nora Marks Dauenhauer uses a tried and true method for teaching values and ethics by adopting a Tlingit Raven story to express personal and Tlingit ethics regarding racism, the environment, and ownership. Using humor and
trickster comedy Dauenhauer adopts an aesthetic that has reached audiences of adults and children alike for generations.

Ofelia Zepeda adopts a Tohono O’odham aesthetic for her poetry, at times directly emulating the concise, descriptive songs of the O’odham. Other times she adopts specific aspects of this aesthetic choosing to incorporate repetition and formulaic beginnings and endings for her poems. She also demonstrates resilience through her themes and symbolic references which are grounded in a place-specific history and culture. Her poem “Ocean Power” alludes to the old salt pilgrimage of the O’odham, one which required elaborate preparation and ritual. In showing the consequences of the loss of that ritual, Zepeda promotes an O’odham ethic based on the notion of the importance of ceremony and ritual. As she says in the introduction to Singing for Power, “The ceremonies must continue.”

All of these authors demonstrate resistance and resilience in their writing. Alexie and Erdrich lean more toward resistance with their politically charged work and Dauenhauer and Zepeda lean more toward resilience with their more tribally specific work. The fact that writers
like Dauenhauer and Zepeda are now being published is a great accomplishment for Native people.

The early period of fiction writing for Native Americans in this country required subtly subversive writing that faithfully emulated the dominant culture’s literary styles and content. Works like Eastman’s *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* appropriated Western literature genres and themes in order to appeal to a non-Native audience. The subversive nature of this autobiography made his a work of resistance, but not necessarily of resilience.

Novels written during the Native American Literary renaissance—post 1969—began to experiment with genre and content to better reflect tribal culture, as Leslie Silko’s novel *Ceremony* demonstrates. However, bilingual texts were rare unless they were works of translation. Zepeda and Dauenhauer give us new and original creative writing that reflects their personal and tribal backgrounds. It is a significant achievement to have Native American writing that uses Native language and aesthetics and is published along side those literatures of appropriation.
Situating this Study in the
Larger Discourse of Native Literature

Native American literatures of resistance and resilience have a place alongside other world literatures as works that assert an indigenous identity and re-assert the value of indigenous culture and traditions, while criticizing those cultures that seek to colonize or dismiss them. While other writers around the world have been recognized in literary criticism and theory for their contributions to the “decolonization” of their cultures, Native American literatures have only recently been included in this larger discourse of “post-colonial” literature, theory, and criticism. Mainstream writers have been accused of assimilating, or becoming “colonized,” while writers working in their Native languages have been virtually ignored in literary criticism.

In his critique of post-colonial literary theory, Louis Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee) argued that Native American writers were performing acts of “decolonization” through their work, but were not being recognized as such by prominent people in the field. While acknowledging the fact that Native Americans are not technically postcolonial, he asserted that their literatures exhibited many of the same qualities due to the history of colonization in this
country. Owens recognized Native American goals to resist one-sided histories and to assert Native identity and values in their writing, similar to the recent writing of other indigenous cultures. In observing the many similarities and parallels in Native writing to those of other resistant literatures and postcolonial texts, he wondered why Native people were excluded from this discourse. Using specific examples he stated:

Imagine what lengths Bhabha and other postcolonial theorists would have to go to in order to come to terms with Vizenor’s “trickster hermeneutics” . . . or the work of poet Luci Tapahonso, who writes in both Navajo and English from a position deeply embedded in her Dine culture while moving freely within the academic Diaspora, liberating and appropriating villanelles, sestinas, and sonnets to a Navajo voice and epistemology. It is difficult to take seriously any cultural/critical theorist who is ignorant of this rapidly growing body of [Native] work. (Owens 2001: 173)

Indeed, after much debate among Native scholars regarding the usefulness of postcolonial theory for Native literature analysis, scholars are beginning to use the basic concepts
more comfortably as ways of thinking and talking about the literature.

**New Directions**

The most notable and concerted effort to date is a special issue of the *American Indian Quarterly* journal “Native American Literature as Empowerment” (Winter/Spring 2004). This special issue is dedicated to situating Native literatures within post-colonial discourse. For example, literary critic Patrice Hollrah’s article, “Decolonizing the Choctaws: Teaching LeAnne Howe’s *Shell Shaker*” focuses on the novel’s characters and how they “exemplify the process of decolonization” through their actions in the novel (2004: 73). Likewise, a call for submissions by the *American Indian Quarterly* noted “the rise in the use and presence of indigenous languages in the works of the imagination (novels, short stories, essays, poems, and autobiographical works)” (*American Indian Quarterly* call for papers December 2005). I am hopeful that this new interest in Native languages in contemporary literature will call more attention to literatures like Dauenhauer and Zepeda’s. This brings me to the pedagogical reasons behind my author selections.
Pedagogical Applications

As someone who teaches Native American literature and film, the pedagogical applications of this project have always been on my mind. I have hoped throughout my exploration of these texts that I would be adding to a list of teaching resources and new ways of looking at these literatures. My analysis of Alexie’s Smoke Signals situates itself within an already established discourse on the film that recognizes Alexie’s response to misrepresentations of Native Americans in film, but my analysis veers away from this older discourse due to my emphasis on narrative structure and female characters in the film.

My analysis of Erdrich’s Tracks also situates itself within a well-established discourse on both the author and the novel, but positions itself against claims by another Native literary critic that Erdrich’s work is too mainstream to be “Native.” Erdich’s work is actually a good example of resilience literature, but it is not as obvious when compared to other writers such as Dauenhauer and Zepeda.

My analyses of Dauenhauer and Zepeda’s texts bring new resources to light as the first substantial analyses of material from Ocean Power and Life Woven With Song.
Hopefully these will present a useful starting point for other teachers who want to work with these texts.

It is critical that we address a variety of texts in our classrooms. It is wonderful that more and more colleges and universities are teaching Native American literatures in their classrooms, but the tendency is to teach the same five writers--Momaday, Silko, Welch, Erdrich and Alexie--again and again. While it is important to teach some of these groundbreaking authors (partly why I include Alexie and Erdrich in this study) it is also important to teach lesser-studied texts by authors such as Dauenhauer and Zepeda. In an effort to show the world the resistance and resilience of Native writing, we must show them the varying degrees of such writing.
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