Connected to the Land: Nature and Spirit in the Novels of Louis Owens

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As the author was preparing this essay, he learned of the untimely and deeply sad passing of Louis Owens. As a result, what had originally been planned as a review of Peter LaLonde's book about Owens' novels was altered to serve as a tribute to Owens' memory and to show why he should be regarded as one of the major voices in Indigenous literature.

Abstract

Many authors who have contributed significantly to Native American writing are mixed bloods, because such individuals are invariably the ones who will initially engage the dominant culture. The mixed cultural experiences and traditions of these individuals predispose them to working in art forms that do not arise from tribal cultural traditions. Louis Owens, a Choctaw-Cherokee and Irish writer and scholar was especially effective in presenting clear images of what it means to be of mixed blood. Owens evoked a sense of Indigenous tradition and identity as a means of coping with events taking place outside of tribal culture. One of his strengths was his ability to incorporate the physical landscape and the non-human elements of the community as vital presences into his writing. Owens also integrated the spirit world very effectively into his writing. To the Indigenous reader this means that elements that are important to

Indigenous identity, but often ignored by most writers, including other Indian writers, are allowed to become important elements of the story. These concepts are explored with examples drawn from the five novels Owens published during his life.

Native American writing began to be taken seriously as literature when Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969.[1] It continued to develop its reputation with the publication of other important and award-winning works such as James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* in 1974,[2] Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* in 1977,[3] Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart* in 1978,[4] and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine: A Novel* in 1984.[5] Stimulated by the pride and power generated by these major works, Native American literature has come into its own in the 1990s.

Most authors who have been significant contributors to this literature are of mixed blood, a topic that has been controversial within the Native American intellectual and academic community. It has been argued that much of the "mixed-blood literary movement is personal, invented, appropriated, and irrelevant to First Nation status in the United States," because this literature "is not generated from the inside of tribal culture," thus rendering it a "literary movement of disengagement."[6] Native author, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is of the opinion that Native American literature should avoid assimilation, despair, escapism, or fantasy,[7] and become engaged in a "rebirth of native nations" and "development of worthy ideas, prophecies for a future in which we continue as tribal people who maintain the legacies of the past and a sense of optimism."[8]

Cook-Lynn may have performed a valuable service in raising these points despite the whiff of the Soviet "Realism" movement in her arguments, especially in her call for a literature of "tribal realism." It is important to recognize, however, that the relatively few Native authors whose work she endorses, such as Momaday and Silko, are also of mixed blood ancestry. Perhaps more important, individuals of mixed blood are invariably the ones who will initially engage the dominant culture through literature, because the mixed cultural experiences and traditions of these individuals predispose them to working in art forms that do not arise from tribal cultural traditions.

"If a writer happens to be of mixed ancestry, . . . aware of and interested in one or both sides of that mixture, and if the writer seeks understanding for language of himself and his reader by the telling of stories, should the writer not write of that 'mixed blood' subject that is the complex self? . . . To do so, of course, is to write of those tensions, dynamics and torsions of family, history, community and nation that give rise to the hybrid self."[9] Such questions lie at the center of all effective writing that deals with personal experience, and how such experience contributes to worldview. The late Louis Owens, a Choctaw-Cherokee, Irish novelist and scholar, and the writer who posed these questions was especially effective in "maintain(ing) the legacies of the past" while at the same time presenting clear images of what it means to be a person of mixed

blood.[10] In addition, Owens developed many worthy ideas, and envisioned a future in which we continue as tribal people who maintain the legacies of the past. Few writers succeeded as well as Owens in evoking a sense of Indigenous tradition and identity as a means of coping with events taking place outside of tribal culture. Owens explored what it means to be mixed blood, coping simultaneously with tribal cultures and traditions and those of the dominant American culture with every fiber of your being.

Over his career Owens wrote two scholarly books on John Steinbeck (the subject of his doctoral dissertation), two collections of autobiographical essays, a couple of books of literary criticism on American Indian literature, scores of scholarly papers and reviews, and served as an editor of the American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series from the University of Oklahoma Press. Despite this impressive output, Owens' five novels contributed most to his public reputation and also demonstrated his growth as a writer.

One of Owens' major strengths was his ability to incorporate the physical landscape and the non-human elements of the community as vital presences into his writing. To the Indigenous reader this means that elements that are important to Indigenous identity, but often ignored by most writers, including other Indian writers, are allowed to become important elements of the story. Place is very important in the identity of Indian people, and Owens emphasizes how place figures into the identity of his Indigenous characters (see below).

Owens set his novels in localities that were important to him and that he knew very well because he had extensive experience of them during his life. The Stillaguamish River valley and the North Cascades where Owens worked after completing his undergraduate degree are the setting for his first novel, *Wolfsong*.[11] Parts of the opening pages of *Wolfsong* are almost identical, word for word, with Owens' description of his first arrival in northern Washington.[12] The southern Salinas Valley and California Coast Range around Atascadero, California, and the Yazoo River country in Mississippi where Owens grew up are the setting for *The Sharpest Sight*.[13] The University and the coastal mountains around Santa Cruz, California where Owens lived while he taught as a faculty member from 1990-1994 are the setting for *Bone Game*.[14] The mountains and desert around Socorro and Magdalena, New Mexico where Owens hunted and fished when he was a faculty member at the University of New Mexico are the setting for *Nightland*.[15] The Fort Apache and San Carlos Reservations and the White River are the setting for *Dark River*.[16] I have lived and spent considerable time in New Mexico, and the Salinas Valley and Santa Cruz. Owens evokes all of these landscapes fully and makes their physical characteristics an important component of his storytelling.

Owens also integrates the spiritual world more effectively into his writing than any other Indian author. He is so effective at doing this that it is often difficult to determine the physical substance of some of his characters. To traditional Indigenous people there is often little or no distinction between the spirit world and the physical world. Owens allows this lack of distinction to

develop characters that have very distinctive attributes. In addition, such characters are integrated so seamlessly that many readers may be unable to tell if a character is a spirit, or of flesh and blood. This is particularly true of many of the tribal elder characters, which in many cases seem as much a part of the land and as closely connected to their non-human relatives as they do to their human descendants. They are protective of their descendants and try to guide them, but they also work to insure that these younger Indians, often of mixed blood, recognize their connections to the land and the animals that share their homes with them. This integration of nature, the non-human, and the spirit world into his novels makes Owens one of the most Indigenous of writers.

The Novels of Louis Owens

A book length evaluation of Owens' novels was recently published by the University of Oklahoma Press,[17] which chooses an interesting device for a book of criticism by opening and closing the book with discussions of Owens' final published novel, *Dark River* (1999) and I follow this structural device in this essay. *Dark River* is the story of a Choctaw mixed blood, Jacob Nashoba, who for 20 years works as a tribal game warden on an Apache reservation in Arizona. Jake is a former special forces warrior who served in Vietnam, has retreated to Arizona, and married and then been divorced by an Apache woman who cannot live with Jacob's memories of his Vietnam experience. The impact of Vietnam and the ghost sickness it induced in Indian veterans was an important theme in Owens' novels. Attis McCurtain in *The Sharpest Sight* is also a Vietnam veteran irrevocably damaged by his experiences and the racist attitude he perceived to be endemic in the U.S. war effort.

Nashoba means wolf in the Choctaw language, and wolves show up as prominent presences in Owens' first novel *Wolfsong* and his last novel *Dark River*. This link may be important in understanding the arc of Owens' writing (see below). The wolf familiar to the Choctaw and Cherokee is not the group-hunting, pack-forming gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) familiar to most tribes, but the smaller, solitary hunting red wolf (*Canis rufus*) of the bottomland hardwood forests of the South. As a Choctaw, Jacob is both a warrior and an excellent hunter, but he is also an individual who moves and acts alone. In contrast, the symbolic role of the gray wolf in Plains culture is as a good hunter and provider who is connected to and part of a large family, and who taught Indians to hunt and hunted with them.[18]

The wolf was an important link to the natural world for Owens. In his first novel *Wolfsong* (1991) his protagonist is Tom Joseph, a young full blood Salish, who drops out of the University of California to return to his community in the Cascade Mountains of Washington. Tom is spiritual heir to his uncle Jim Joseph, who received wolf as his guardian spirit during his vision quest. Jim Joseph was resisting the development of a wilderness area and river valley that he regarded as sacred when his spirit was called home by wolves and by "drummers and

dancers" in the woods. After his return to the valley, Tom is attended regularly by a wolf who is presumably his uncle in spirit form.

Wolfsong is the work of a young but gifted writer. Owens completed this novel in 1976 when he was 27 years old, even though it was not published until 1991. The conflict it sets up between white pro-development forces, resistance to development by traditional Indians, and the confused acquiescence to white ways of acculturated Christian Indians is a common one in Native American fiction, but this is the only time Owens employed such a theme. The most interesting characters in the book are the elders, Jim Joseph, who, although he dies in the first chapter, continues to be a major presence throughout the text, and Tom's mother who is trying hard to survive as a Christianized Indian while also maintaining a strong identity as a tribal person. This intergenerational dynamic, in later novels involving full blood elders and mixed blood descendants, is an important theme of all of Owens' novels. Owens' protagonists are generally relatively passive and conflicted mixed-bloods (except Tom Joseph), and the compelling and powerful characters are typically the elders, both Indian and non-Indian, who advise and try to protect the younger characters.

Over the course of *Wolfsong* Tom Joseph is drawn more deeply into the life of his home valley and the peaks that surround it. The mountains, rivers, glaciers, and forests of the North Cascades are powerfully evoked, and much more compelling in their identity than many of the human characters. Conflict over his mixed blood Cherokee girlfriend with a locally prominent white family, the Hills, sets up the dynamic situation that drives the story. Local whites, including his girlfriend's fiancé, attack Tom and his brother after a meeting on future development of the valley. During this fight Tom severely injures and cripples the initiator of the violence.

Two points are worth making at this juncture. First, Owens' novels are all filled with violence and they get progressively more violent. If they were not ghettoized into Native American literature, they would be recognized as some of the best thrillers written over the last two decades. Lest readers think that Owens wrote about Indians as victims of violence, however, it should be emphasized that his Indian characters give as good or better than they get. None of Owens' Indian characters could be classified as victims, even when they suffer discrimination and race-based harassment, unless they lose touch with their tribal identities. This leads to the second point, which is that Owens does not automatically treat Indians as saints and whites as sinners. His novels are filled with characters who have complex motivations and are often conflicted. In *Wolfsong* numerous white characters are troubled by development and what has happened to the tribe. Owens realized that the major difference is that whites accept "progress" and development as inevitable outcomes of their way of life, whereas even though some Indians acquiesce to development, all are troubled by its implications, and a few Indians actively resist. The fear with which the dominant culture regards what Gerald Vizenor calls "survivance" (survival

combined with resistance) on the part of Indians generates many of the conflicts that drive Owens' stories.

Tom's decision to continue his uncle's survivance leads him to continue to resist development of the valley and a copper mine. To preserve what is sacred to him and his uncle after the death of his mother leads him to severely injure several whites and to create a situation that leads to the death of J.D. Hill, the local oligarch whose son has impregnated and married Tom's girlfriend. Following this path Tom is pursued through the mountains by whites. During this pursuit Tom is attended and guarded by wolves as he attempts to escape, even though wolves are supposedly extinct in the North Cascades. Another key element is that during all of the attempts to stop development, both Jim and Tom Joseph are accompanied by ravens who observe and comment on the action. This has been interpreted as an effort by Owens to introduce "trickster" figures into his narrative.[19] Although it is undoubted that Raven functions as both trickster and creator in Salishan stories, it should be emphasized that it is well established that a major ecological relationship involves ravens accompaniment of wolves in their activities, serving both as an early warning system and locators of food. These two species have a close and mutualistic relationship in North America.[20] Owens, as an accomplished naturalist, was surely aware of this relationship and built it into his story so that the ravens also accompany and warn Jim and Tom, the human heirs of the wolf spirit.

After publication of *Wolfsong* in 1991, Owens followed quickly in 1992 with *The Sharpest Sight*, a novel that I regard as his masterpiece and one of the greatest novels ever published by a Native American writer. A major development in Owens' writing in this book is his increased ability to deal effectively with what would be referred to by the dominant culture as the supernatural. In *Wolfsong* Owens appeared unsure about how to integrate the wolf spirit that may have been Jim Joseph directly into the story. In *The Sharpest Sight*, Owens is fully in command of how characters who are no longer physically alive, yet remain part of the action, fit into his story. In addition, Owens' confidence in integrating tribal stories and traditions into his writing is much more sophisticated. Of the Indian writers, only Louise Erdrich is as successful at fitting characters from tribal stories and traditions into contemporary narratives.

The Sharpest Sight introduces as its protagonist Cole McCurtain, a mixed blood Choctaw, and Owens' most autobiographical character. Like Owens, Cole grew up in the southern Salinas valley, spent time in the swamplands of Mississippi, and had an older brother who went to Vietnam and returns to convince his younger brother not to repeat his mistake. As in *Wolfsong*, *Sharpest Sight* is a novel that deals with violence. The main theme is the social forces that lead to violence, and the consequences of violent acts to surviving family members and their community. Underlying this surface story is the theme of Choctaw culture and the responsibility that Choctaws owe to family members. The act that sets things into motion is a love affair between Cole's older brother Attis and a local white girl, Jenna Nemi. When Attis returns from Vietnam he is

so damaged by his experience that he kills Jenna, and is sent to the California State Mental "Hospital" that is located in Atascadero.[21] In an attempt at vengeance, Jenna's younger sister Diana orchestrates Attis' "escape" from the institution, and then kills him, and his body is thrown in the Salinas River during full flood, which is where the novel (if not the story) begins.

Before he kills Jenna, Attis warns his brother Cole not to join the army or go to Vietnam, like he had been planning, because of his experiences and the way Indian soldiers are treated. This mirrors Owens' own experience of being warned not to volunteer for Vietnam by his older brother Gene who served three tours of duty in "Indian Country."[22] In *Sharpest Sight* Cole flees California to avoid the draft, and hides out with his "uncle" Luther Cole in the Yazoo River country of Mississippi. The FBI follows him there in an effort to arrest him for draft evasion.

Overseeing these events are a number of elders, both living and non-living, who attempt to protect and guide their descendants, and also provide an overarching historical perspective. Owens tells the story in a nonlinear fashion, which loops back through the history of events and their subsequent consequences, involving local Indians, whites, and Hispanics. The way the history of the family of Hispanic deputy Mundo Morales is made part of the story illustrates Owens' ability to incorporate complex elements to weave a tapestry. Mundo is a friend of Attis, and the only person to actually see his body in the river other than his killer(s). Mundo's entanglement in the plot brings his grandfather and other elders back to advise and counsel him while explaining to him the history of his family's involvement in these events.

During his time in Mississippi, Cole learns a great deal about what it means to be Choctaw through his interactions with Luther Cole and Onatima Blue Wood, a mixed blood Choctaw elder. These sections show a strong Indigenous combination of humor and power. What transpires might be criticized as escapism or "fantasy,"[23] however, these events go to the essence of tribal identity by showing that tribal elders are powerful in ways completely separate from the political and economic power wielded by whites. Learning how to live from these traditional elders heals and strengthens the confused Cole while at the same time giving him a sense of tribal identity.

In *Wolfsong* the animal spirit featured prominently was wolf, who functioned as a supportive guardian and teacher. In *Sharpest Sight* the dominant animal spirit is *koi* or *Nalusachito*, the black spirit panther that appears on the bridge over the Salinas to alert Mundo about Attis' body in the river, and reappears in the Mississippi swamps. Attis' *shilombish* (ghost) has traveled to Luther's cabin where it waits for its remains to be brought home. The straightforward manner in which Luther and Onatima deal with these extraordinary events illustrates the power of traditional tribal life. *Nalusachito*, the soul catcher,[24] was aroused by Attis' death, and both it and the *shilombish* can only be appeased by the return of Attis' bones to Mississippi, which must be done by Cole and their father Hoey. The *Nalusachito* sequence is based on an actual experience Owens and

his family had in his childhood in Mississippi, when a black panther followed his father home and jumped on the roof of their cabin.[25]

The non-Indian characters in *Sharpest Sight* set events into motion that lead to violence worthy of Shakespearean tragedy. A local bar owner, Jessard Deal, whom Diana engaged to engineer Attis' escape, is revealed as a sociopath who, when things get dull, provokes violent fights between his bar patrons. Having helped her to kill Attis, Deal feels that he controls Diana, and when she tries to free herself from his influence, he rapes her to demonstrate his control. Diana's father goes to confront Deal over the violation of his surviving daughter, and is tricked and killed by him. These events mirror similar events in *Wolfsong* where a locally powerful white man, who tried to manipulate events to serve what he perceived to be his own interest, is a victim of the hubris that he and his family set into motion. Mundo, in his role as deputy sheriff, tries to stop Deal and Deal tricks him and is about to kill him as well, when Hoey, who has been following events to learn what has happened to his older son, shoots and kills Deal, saving Mundo.

Like *Wolfsong*, *Sharpest Sight* is a complex, multifaceted story involving Indian people, who although not powerful in the sense of the dominant culture, are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves in extreme circumstances, and who draw much of their integrity from their tribal identities, and the traditions and beliefs of their peoples. The full bloods, Jim and Tom Joseph, in *Wolfsong*, and the mixed blood Hoey along with Luther Cole and Onatima in *Sharpest Sight* are smart, competent people who draw their strength from their understanding of the land, and what they know of their cultural traditions. In contrast, the white characters are conflicted and their attempts to control situations only succeed in provoking violence and destroying their own need for peace and economic (and psychological) security. The Indian and Hispanic elders in *Sharpest Sight* are wise and empowered, and their primary goal is to assure that their descendants remain as protected as they can make them from the destructive forces which have been set loose, while remaining aware of the traditions and connections that link them to the physical places from which they come.

In *Bone Game* (1994), Owens returned to the story of Cole McCurtain 25 years after the end of *Sharpest Sight*, when Cole is a professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where Owens served on the faculty while writing this novel. Cole is a very troubled man, divorced from his wife, living apart from his daughter. He suffers from dreams in which owls call to him from the forest outside his house and he sees images of rearing grizzly bears and painted Indian gamblers.

Unbeknownst to him, some of Cole's white male students obsessed with Indian traditions, and with him as a "genuine Indian instructor," have been killing other whites in some sort of unspecified ritual sacrifice. Their activities have linked them in a synergistic interaction with the vengeful spirit of Venancio Asisara, an Ohlone spiritual leader, "a consciousness awakening and looking

around at a world entirely familiar and entirely alien simultaneously, rather the way the Ohlone were forced to see in a single generation the near destruction of their cultural world, by the Spanish."[26] Thus Monterey Bay is still the Ohlone homeland, but it has been made alien by urban sprawl. Development of the community of Santa Cruz with its new age sensibility mixed with the unfettered greed of its developers has created a place of unstable power (Santa Cruz is currently one of the most expensive communities in the U.S. in terms of cost of living).

Like Owens' earlier novels, *Bone Game* is very violent. Owens used as his premise the activities of two serial killers who plagued Santa Cruz in the early 1970s. One of these individuals specialized in the murder of female students from the University, and the killers in *Bone Game* are killing predominantly young women as well. Thus, Asisara's spirit is associated with the murders of whites by other whites, so that once again we have the scenario where Euro-American (including Spanish) hubris caused violence in the past, which in turn leads to much more violence in the future. In his critical study of Owens' novels, literature specialist, Chris LaLonde characterizes Asisara as the embodiment of evil, and Rochelle Venuto, literature specialist, argued "Venancio's continued presence demonstrates that evil, which will always exist, must be acknowledged in order to maintain the world's balance."[27]

This appears to be a interpretation of the dominant culture, however, as Owens described Asisara as follows: "My sense is one of immense anger and power, the kind of power that comes with being a holy person, but warped into an uncontrolled anger that rises out of the very earth itself, set in motion, or awakened, by the violence of the two murderers."[28] The irony is that *Bone Game* became a popular best seller in Santa Cruz, where locals were thrilled with Owens' effective evocation of local place and authentic Native voice even as it indicted their history and way of life, which is a classic case of life imitating art.

Cole is fortunate to encounter Alex Yazzie, a cross-dressing traditional Navajo, who is a visiting scholar at the University. Chris LaLonde describes Yazzie as a trickster figure, and I concur, given the playful way Alex deals with Cole and also serves to regularly confuse the minds of white characters, including one of the murderers. Cole is called to intervene when Yazzie is ritually butchering a road killed deer in the center of faculty housing at the University, a scene of high humor to indigenous readers and a disturbing one to white readers, who in my experience are more inclined to identify with Yazzie's white faculty neighbors. Yazzie recognizes that Cole is a troubled mixed blood, and works to reconnect Cole to his Indigenous roots while at the same time providing him with a true colleague and friend. Yazzie also serves as the brother figure to the protagonist that figured importantly in both *Wolfsong* (Jimmy) and *Sharpest Sight* (Attis and Mundo). Yazzie also provides much of the humor in *Bone Game*. When Cole is depressed over his teaching, having confused his white students by attempting to explain the complex reality of Black Elk, Alex "comforts" him by

offering to adopt him and give him "a real Indian name. *Middle-Aged-Man-Afraid-of-his-Students*."

As in *Wolfsong* and *Sharpest Sight*, in *Bone Game* a powerful animal spirit is represented by the grizzly bear who appears with, or as, Asisara. Like the wolf in the North Cascades, the grizzly bear is now extinct in California, yet their spirits are powerful symbols and very familiar to the Indigenous peoples of those locations. The combination of Asisara and the bear represents a conjunction to two powerful spirits that have been exterminated from their homeland, yet the two murderers are tapping their angry spiritual power.

To counteract this spirit power, Luther, Hoey, and Onatima are called from Mississippi to California to help Yazzie rescue Cole and his damaged spirit. Onatima comes to protect and instruct Cole's daughter Abby, who has come to visit her father. Luther and Hoey travel by pickup through New Mexico where they encounter a Navajo elder who provides them knowledge and counsel to help them deal with Asisara. They also rescue a Navajo woman from witches in a rest stop outside of Gallup, in a scene full of references to Silko's *Ceremony*. Onatima, who appears to inhabit a different physical reality, simply appears in California, and serves as an advisor to Abby, teaches her about traditional Choctaw ways and how to deal with Indian males. Abby and Alex become allies, and the two of them work together to help rescue Cole, who has become a focal point around which the two murderers and Asisara revolve. Yazzie and Abby create situations that result in the deaths of the two murderers. Afterward his Choctaw family takes Cole back to New Mexico away from the haunted shores of Monterey Bay. Asisara's spirit remains, roaming the forests and mountains that surround the town of Santa Cruz and the bay.

Nightland is a story about madness loose in Indian country. Set in the mountains and desert around Magdalena, New Mexico and Cibola National Forest, *Nightland* deals with drug dealing and double-crossing driven by historical desires for vengeance and retribution among Southwestern peoples. Caught up in this chaos are two mixed-blood Cherokees, Billy Keene (Kaneequayokee) and Will Striker (Manstriker). These two men, given the same first name by their parents, are the children of Cherokee men who married white women and moved from Oklahoma to New Mexico to escape racial prejudice directed at mixed marriages and to share ranchland purchased from a New Mexican Hispanic family land grant.

This land, which Will owns outright, and Billy has mortgaged, contains the spring where the Spanish massacred a group of Apaches. Although the two men have spent their lives together, growing up virtually as brothers, they are very different in personality, with Billy being impulsive and outgoing, and Will being introspective and solitary. Although both are worried about losing their ranches because of drought, Will has kept a community together, caring for the dog and pot-bellied pig abandoned by his wife when she left Will to attend law school and then work as a lawyer in Albuquerque. Will also cares for two aging

bulls and an old horse, and allows his heifers to run free on his land for the remainder of their lives, whereas Billy has sold all his cattle and keeps no other animals. Billy does, however, live with "Grandpa" Siquani, a Cherokee elder who remembers not only living in Oklahoma, but participated in the Trail of Tears, and even experienced the lives of the Cherokee before the arrival of whites.

Nightland refers to the "land to the west" where the sun goes in the evening and we all must someday follow, the Cherokee land of the dead. The story opens with Will and Billy deer hunting in the National Forest when a man and a suitcase containing nearly a million dollars fall out of the Western sky. Billy claims the money is a gift from the Great Spirit, whereas Will calls it "corpse money" and wonders what Siquani would think about this and what to do about the man's body, impaled on the top of a juniper. Billy prevails as he usually does. As a thunderstorm begins and the two drive off in Billy's Land Cruiser, they are attacked by a helicopter, which they shoot down, raising the body count to at least three in the first chapter.

Nightland is Owens' most violent book. Only one person dies violently in *Wolfsong*. Three die violently in *Sharpest Sight*, but Attis' death takes place before the book begins. *Bone Game* deals with serial killers, but this serves primarily as a backdrop to the story of Cole's psychological battles, and only the murderers die as a central part of the action. *Nightland* is about violence, violence against Apaches, Cherokees, and Pueblo peoples in the past, and how that violence generates continued consequences into the present.

There are a number of vivid characters, including Duane Scales, a ruthless hit man who is also a thoughtful if angry environmentalist, and Arturo Cruz, the man who fell from the sky, and after his death, joins Siquani to discuss the implications of what transpires. Siquani (suckling pig in Cherokee, which links him to the pig that Will cares for) is one of Owens' most unforgettable characters. Owens wrote *Nightland* as an exploration of the Cherokee part of his heritage (the book is dedicated to his Cherokee ancestors), and Siquani is the embodiment of the Cherokee people. As Siquani tells it, Billy's father (who was his descendant) asked him to come along when they left Oklahoma and he agreed to "see how the story ends." Siquani places things in perspective for Will, but he cannot save Billy from his folly, his greed, and his desire to "be American."

When Billy and Will return to their ranches, Will finds a number of buzzards (Black Vultures) hanging about his ranch. Billy finds a large numbers of crow at his place. Siquani explains to Will that, "Old Buzzard was real important bac in the beginning . . . Buzzard flew around to see where animals could live."[29] Th buzzards recognize the difference between Will's place and Billy's. Will's place is where the animals can live, whereas Billy has given up on his place, his animals, and his people. Will's ranch is compared to the earth itself, which is cared for so the animals can live there, whereas Billy thinks of himself as American rather than as Cherokee.

From an Indigenous perspective some of the most significant aspects of *Nightland* are the discussions of history. Arturo Cruz is the nephew of Paco Ortega, employer of Duane Scales, who is running cocaine on a large scale through New Mexico because he believed that running drugs is "sending the smallpox infested blankets back to the whites" and that the money gained from the drug trade is "the white man's weapon which we must learn to use against him in the long war."[30] When Duane complains to him about damage to the environment and why Indians don't react violently to destruction of the earth, Paco responds, "I admire your environmentalism, but did you ever think that perhaps the war you talk about is already going on and you're part of it? Maybe you're like those Indian scouts who led Custer to the Little Bighorn."[31] Paco and Duane meet a Hispanic who states that his family came to New Mexico with Oñate in the sixteenth century. Ortega responds to him, "Oh? So your illustrious ancestors were the ones who massacred the people of Acoma. You must be proud of your family."[32]

Ortega's arguments, like those of Duane, are compelling and logical. It is an interesting and distinctive tactic to put these words in the mouths of career criminals, who kill to protect their interests. Ortega's statement when discussing Wounded Knee as a "battle" is that "The answer has to be in the way Americans conceive of themselves, and I think that everything in the psyche of this country tells people they can just put the past behind them, and that they aren't responsible for yesterday."[33] This statement represents a perfect rebuttal to anyone who says "I never personally killed any Indians (owned any slaves, etc., fill in the blank), so why blame me for history." It also functions as a prescient explanation as to why Americans can support actions that resulted in the death of over 100,000 Iraqi citizens during the Gulf War in 1991, and yet feel victimized with an uncomprehending shock and horror over the events of September 11, 2001.

In *Nightland* Owens expects Americans to face the consequences of their actions, and stop denying that Wounded Knee and the Trail of Tears were not acts of genocide. He also shows how destructive some Indian acts of reprisal can be. Owens may intend to use Paco Ortega's arguments as a parody of statements by tribal leaders and other Indians who justify casinos (or selling tax-free cigarettes) on the ground that they are "using white man's greed to build an economic base and create sovereignty for their people."[34] After all drugs and gambling are both expensive vices of the dominant culture and can be used also to allow claims of sovereignty to protect harmful activities.

This point is reinforced by the introduction of the most manipulative and destructive Indian character Owens created. Odessa Whitehawk, the beautiful full blood Mescalero Apache Ph.D. from Berkeley, who plays off everyone against each other, and personally kills Arturo, Duane, Paco, and Billy, and tries to kill Will. Odessa is the flesh and blood spiritual descendant of Venancio Asisara; even her love bites are toxic. She is a descendant of the Apaches whose massacre helped establish Spanish ownership of the land containing the ranches of Will

and Billy. When she confronts Will after killing Billy and the others she tells him "You deserve everything that's happening to you . . . This land was the home of my ancestors. They never pretended to own it, but their bones are in the earth you call yours. You and Billy aren't supposed to be here. You're no better than the whites. You let them push you off your own land in the east and march you into the homes of other Indian people in that so-called Territory, and you became just like them. . . You live on top of my people's bones now."[35] Odessa also claims that her Ph.D. from Berkeley in "American Indian religion and law . . . specializing in Indian sovereignty" is actually "a PhD in genocide. When I was young and innocent I thought I could get a white education and fight back."[36]

Siquani conducts rituals and ceremonies to protect Billy, who he knows is in great danger, however, Billy is too determined to "be an American," when to survive he needs to acknowledge his Indian heritage. Siquani is able to protect Billy against Paco and Duane, but not against Odessa, with whom he has fallen in love. What saves Will from Odessa is his non-human community. Will's old dog, who distrusted Odessa all along, attacks Odessa, distracting her sufficiently so that Will is able to kill her before she kills him.

The killing of Odessa seems to break a curse on the land. Siquani conducts a Cherokee water renewal ceremony with Arturo as he buries him. The massacre of the Apaches led to a drought, and Siquani's healing ceremonies bring the rains back and restore the spring. As Siquani puts it "Them coyotes and crows been having a big celebration all night and done wore me out." Will's wife returns to live with him, making his the only successful male-female relationship for a main character in any of Owens' novels. Ultimately Will's connections allow him to survive where everyone else but Siquani has died. Will's animals kept him from being alone when he lived without human company, and his responsibilities to them kept him functioning during these events. When Will and Siquani meet at the finish, Siquani explains "I had to help Billy find the path. . . They been piling up things to hide it for all these years now, but our world is still here, Willum. Sometimes we forget because we got to look so hard to see it and people get tired . . . *but the animals know and they don't forget. We got to listen*."[37] The animals had been trying to warn Will and Billy all along. The Buzzards came to Will's ranch because that was where the animals could live, and the crows kept flying over Billy and his ranch and trying to warn him, but he had lost the path and his connections to the living world, which is how he became "American."

After the violent Cherokee and Apache history lessons of *Nightland*, Owens returned to Apache country and a Choctaw protagonist in *Dark River* (1999). *Dark River* is different from Owens' other books in that Jacob Nashoba is alone. He has no brothers, or close friends. His ex-wife Tali is becoming a tribal leader, and although they maintain a sexual relationship they do not live together. Jake finds her communal lifestyle hard to cope with, and his ghost sickness from his Vietnam experiences frightens her. After Will's semi-successful marriage in *Nightland*, *Dark River* returns us to the Owens' realm of failed relationships

between men and women. Jake survives psychologically through his relationship to the river of the title and the canyon through which it flows.

Like Billy in *Nightland*, Jake rejects his Choctaw heritage. Mrs. Edwards, an Apache elder, confronts Jake about his troubled relationships with his wife (who is her designated successor) in relation to his heritage by asking "Why didn't you ever tell your wife or her children about your own culture? Did you forget everything, or don't those Choctaw people you come from have stories?" His response is "Look Grandmother, I'm No Indian. My people have stories of leprechauns and something called the *sidhe* . . . Besides home is where the heart is."[38] This reference to Jake's (and Owens') Irish heritage is a deflection, acknowledging the spirits and stories of a foreign land, while refusing to acknowledge the spirits and stories of his native land. As with Billy in *Nightland*, this refusal will have fatal consequences.

Dark River develops themes hinted at in earlier work. In *Nightland*, Odessa asks Billy during an early stage of their relationship "Have you ever wondered what it would have been like if Europeans had never come?" Billy watches a coyote walk through the sagebrush and responds "Maybe we'd be a theme park, a kind of ocean to ocean Disneyland, where we could charge Frenchmen and Germans $5000 for a weekend vision quest, $30,000 for a shaman school diploma."[39] In *Dark River* the Apaches are making lots of money off a casino, and by selling hunts for trophy elk they raise on the reservation. An anthropologist who has come to live with the Apache and lives more traditionally than do the Indians themselves, asks to speak to the tribal council, and contends that "there is a cultural cost involved in such enterprises," and suggests that they abandon their casino and lodge and become a traditional tribe, "tear down the government shacks and build authentic wickiups, eat venison and dried chokecherries . . . all the things our ancestors did." If they live traditionally, they could get grants from an incredible number of sources, and an Apache elder argues that "it's not just the grants but all the tourists that'll come. . . Nobody's going to go out to Sioux country because they get depressed by the poverty, and that bunch of Cherokees in North Carolina have nothing but a little circus and they still attract millions of tourist dollars. . . We'd be bigger than Yellowstone or Yosemite, bigger than Universal Studios or Disney World."[40] One council member responds, "What're we going to do with all that money? I mean we can't have no satellite dish and color TV and no Land Cruiser." Another says "We already have that Native American village thing in June with *authentic dwellings and dancers and stuff for the tourists*."[41]

One Apache is already taking initiative along these lines. Jessie, a young man who tries to use Jake as a role model, is running weekend vision quests for Europeans, and using the proceeds to start a scholarship fund. The irony is that unlike Jake, Jessie has genuine connections in the community. One of Jessie's fake vision quests turns into a genuine spiritual experience, which only Jake and Jessie can resolve. In an effort to make money for himself Xavier Two Bears, the

tribal chairman, in collusion with Sam Baca the tribal chief of police, has rented Dark River canyon to a group of militia who want to use it for a survival experience run by a retired American officer from Vietnam. Jessie has taken his client, a Frenchwoman, into the canyon for her vision quest. Wearing a realistic wolf costume to give his clientele a "genuine" vision, Jessie is shot and killed by the militia who think they are rescuing his client from attack. The militia then hold the client and Tali's (and Jake's) granddaughter, Alison, who was also in the canyon on her own vision quest, to keep them from revealing their activities. Jake goes into the canyon to rescue Alison, and Jessie returns, but in the actual form of a wolf, and the two of them help Alison escape from the militia. The leader of the militia exercise is a former commander of Jake's and he decides that the mission is compromised and tries to call off the exercise. At this point, Jensen, the most fanatical survivalist in the militia, persuades the militia to turn on their leader. Jensen then uses Jake, who was a legendary point and recon man in Vietnam with considerable SEAL combat training, as the target of "a little search and destroy practice" to test their skills as fighters in a sort of "virtual reality war, except the reality bleeds."[42]

From this point on *Dark River* descends quickly into madness. The militia is all killed but Jensen; most by Jake, some by the women with the help of Jessie as a spirit wolf, and two of them even kill each other. In all of this violence Jake is mortally wounded and falls into a hole in the earth. Exactly how *Dark River* ends is unclear, Owens posits several endings and then has them rejected by various characters as overly clichéd, too postmodern, unacceptable to Mrs. Edwards. All that seems clear is that Jake is attended by grandmother spider, who is also the helper of the Apache hero Monster Slayer, and that grandmother spider takes Jake home into the earth. After his passing Jessie changes from a spirit helper into a proper ghost and leaves as well.

The ending of *Dark River* is clearly in the realm of trickster material, and probably also falls into the realm of escapism and fantasy of which native scholar Cook Lynn is so disapproving.[43] The irony is that Owens' suggesting that endings are not fixed and literal, and that spirit figures can play large parts in the action make his writing thoroughly indigenous. Owens worked to imagine the world in the way that an Indigenous person who is strongly connected to tribal traditions might exist. The presence of animal spirits and elders with considerable knowledge and power who influence events but cannot determine their final outcome fits in well with what I would consider crucial to the "rebirth of native nations" and "development of worthy ideas, prophecies for a future in which we continue as tribal people who maintain the legacies of the past and a sense of optimism."[44] The sad irony is that Cook-Lynn considered Owens to be outside this legacy, yet it is clear that Owens operated in the same sphere as did Momaday in *The Ancient Child*, when he had his protagonist have a relationship with a young woman who was also a paramour of Billy the Kid, and eventually turn into a bear.[45]

In some ways, Owens may have been responding to and parodying Cook-Lynn in *Dark River*. It is his only novel that Owens set entirely within a tribal community, and it presents a story of many tribal members as committed to casinos and the American way of life, unwilling to give up their westernized life-styles, color television, satellite dishes, canned food, and so forth. These are tribal people who fail to maintain the legacies of the past. Xavier Two Bears, the tribal chairman is described as "looking like Wayne Newton," and he has sold out the values and spiritual traditions of the tribe for profit. The individuals who actively "maintain the legacies of the past and a sense of optimism" are the Apache women Mrs. Edwards, Tali, and Alison, even though Tali has worked as a stripper, and Alison insists on going on a vision quest even after being told that this is not the Apache way. Jessie, despite his vision quests for hire, turns out to have a much deeper sense of tribal tradition than the members of the tribal council, functioning as a spirit wolf, which ironically turns the fake vision quest he was selling the Frenchwoman into a genuine vision experience.

One thing I find both fascinating and troubling is that Owens started his first novel with Jim Joseph being called home by wolves and traditional drumming as his spirit passed in the woods while resisting development and the white way of life. With Owens' recent death, his *defacto* last novel ends with Jacob Nashoba dying and falling into the earth while resisting whites who killed his "nephew" Jessie and threatened the life of his "grand-daughter" Alison. As mentioned above Jake's last name means wolf, "To an Apache the coyote might have been disturbing. If they knew what Nashoba meant, they'd be even more disturbed by him, too."[46] Jessie chose to use the wolf in his vision quests, even though wolves have also been exterminated in Arizona. Jessie manages to come back as a wolf after he is killed; perhaps Jake taught him more than either one of them knew.

Thus the arc of Louis Owens novels starts with a wolf as the symbol of Indian survivance and ends with the passing of a valiant Indian warrior whose name identifies him with the wolf. In between, Owens gave us bears, eagles, ravens, crows, buzzards, panthers, and deer as important figures in his stories, and linked these entities to the spirituality of his Indian characters. No Indian writer has been as effective at illustrating and describing the true sense of Indigenous spirituality. His passing has robbed all of Native America of one of our truest voices.

It is said . . . It is said that Louis Owens went home, (July25,2002).

Notes

1. N. Scott Monday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).
2. James Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Penguin Books, 1974).
3. Leslie Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Press, 1977).
4. Gerald Vizenor, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (Saint Paul: Truck Press, 1978).

5. Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine: A Novel* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1984).

6. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story," *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter 1996), 71.

7. See Ron McFarland, *Understanding James Welch* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).

8. *Ibid.*

9. Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film Family, Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 153.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Louis Owens, *Wolfsong* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1991).

12. See page 59-60 of Owens' (2001) autobiographical "In the service of forests" with pp. 13-16 of Wolfsong, *Ibid.*

13. Louis Owens, *The Sharpest Sight* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

14. Louis Owens, *Bone Game* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

15. Louis Owens, *Nightland* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

16. Louis Owens, *Dark River* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

17. Chris LaLonde, *Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns: The Novels of Louis Owens* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

18. Joseph Marshall III, *On Behalf of the Wolf and the First Peoples* (Santa Fe: Red Crane Press, 1995).

19. See chapter 1, LaLonde, *Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns.*

20. See Bernd Heinrich, *The Mind of the Raven: Investigations and Adventures with Wolf-Birds* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

21. The Salinas valley town is where Owens grew up, chapter 2, Louis Owens, *I Hear the Train: Reflections, Inventions, Refractions* (Norman: University of Oklahom Press, 2001).

22. See chapter 1, *Ibid.*

23. Cook-Lynn, "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story."

24. See Owens, *I Hear the Train.*

25. See chapter 1, *Ibid.*

26. Louis Owens' personal communication to author, February 11, 2002.

27. Rochelle Venuto, "Bone Game's terminal plots and healing stories," *Studies in American Indian Literature*, Vol. 10, (1998), 23-42.

28. Louis Owens' personal communication to author, February 11, 2002.

29. Owens, *Nightland*, 48.

30. *Ibid.*, 93.

31. *Ibid.*, 162.

32. *Ibid.*, 179.

33. *Ibid.*, 180.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 209.

36. *Ibid.*, 209-210.

37. *Ibid.*, 214, emphasis added.

38. See Owens, *Dark River.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, 72.

41. *Ibid.*, 73.

42. *Ibid.*

43. See Cook-Lynn, "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story."

44. *Ibid.*

45. N. Scott Momaday, *The Ancient Child: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

46. Owens, *Dark River*, 124.