

Nature, Identity and Indian Survival in Louis Owens'
Wolfsong

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INTRODUCTION

Wolfsong is rooted in events of real life, as Owens wrote it in reaction to the government allowing mining companies to enter wilderness areas within Native American reservations. As the protagonist Tom Joseph, a young Native American, returns from college to his remote childhood home in the Northern Cascades in order to attend his late uncle's funeral, he is suddenly caught in a complex series of events. What starts out as an opposition against a mine in a wilderness area, soon merges with the search for a lost Indian identity. Tom's family make up the last Indians in the valley. With his mother weak and dying, and his brother Jimmy almost fully assimilated into a dominant white culture, the death of Tom's uncle Jim represents a loss of connection to the past. His quest for an identity also turns out to be a vision quest, as his uncle willed his guiding spirit to Tom. In his search Tom must overcome both his own confining ideas of what an Indian is, and also the dominant culture's view of the "real" Indian as vanished and gone. The novel describes how closeness to the land and to nature are important in recovering or reconstructing an identity, and especially as Tom only appears to possess fragments of the knowledge his ancestors once had. However, by walking in their footprints, living close to the same landscape and place as they did, and by linking this to the little knowledge he has of them, Tom seems able to imagine how they were formed through their relationship with the land. Thus he appears able to recover fragments that he uses in order to create his own imagined self. Tom's dependence on the place in order to find himself, underscores the importance of nature in the novel.

This thesis focuses primarily on the novel *Wolfsong* in terms of Louis Owens' Native American view of nature. He is particularly concerned with the idea of a sustainable approach to nature, which is reflected in the novel's depiction of its

Native American hero and his search for identity. In this context, the thesis will pay particular attention to issues such as “what is a real Indian” and the myth of “the Vanishing Indian”. This also makes it important to examine the values and views of Euro-American culture as they appear in the novel, and compare and contrast these to Native American ideas. The thesis argues that the imagery of the novel links Euro-American views and beliefs to loss or decline, and inversely connects Native American visions of life to return and regeneration. Furthermore, given the immense focus on the protagonist’s closeness to nature and place, this study examines whether Owens perception of Native American attitudes to the environment can be said to represent a sustainable use of natural resources.

The thesis starts with an account of Louis Owens’ own theoretical perspectives. The first part of Chapter One examines how Native American literature assigns destinies to its heroes other than those traditionally assigned to the “tragic” Indian hero. This part also deals with the question of what Owens perceives as Indian. The second part takes a closer look at Owens’ theoretical perspectives and how, among other considerations, he challenges Euro-American notions of how Native Americans live and have lived in relationship with nature. These accounts are useful when proceeding to the analysis of the novel itself.

Chapter Two deals explicitly with the vision of nature in the novel itself. It argues that the novel sees Indian identity as contingent on a relationship with landscape and the wilderness. The chapter also focuses on the use of water imagery and how it may be connected both to separation and unification, important elements in the protagonist’s search for an identity. In *Wolfsong* water serves to embody Native American views and beliefs, and especially the view of existence as cyclic. Owens’ story also provides nature with agency. Its imagery suggests that nature is an active

force in the novel, a notion central in describing the Native American perception of man and nature as one. Thus nature or place itself plays a central role in the novel.

Chapter Three focuses on characterization, particularly on how characters represent different world views. It is quite striking how imagery is used to reinforce the contrasts between Euro-American and Native American frames of mind. Though sometimes ambiguous in its character portrayals, the novel connects characters who represent the Euro-American dominant “linear” ethos to imagery suggesting a “dead end”, whereas Native Americans are often associated with a cyclical vision of the world. The character antagonists of the novel are connected to the displacement and eradication of the Indians in the valley, also through their violent behavior against Tom and his brother, and through their antagonistic relationship to nature. The novel distinguishes, however, between these “fundamental” antagonists, and other members of the townspeople who seem inclined to be friendly towards Tom and also have an ambivalent relationship with nature, in spite the fact that they have contributed to its destruction. These represent the older generation in town, and through their experience they now warn the younger generation in town against making the same mistake as they did.

Chapter Four, “White and Indian Don’t Matter No More”, examines what it means to be a “real’ Indian” within the world of the novel. Tom discovers that he must be open to change and influences from other cultures and across ethnic borders. His interaction with others leads him to question what a real Indian is, and whether this is determined by skin color, language, religion, or the values by which one lives. Through the influence of a variety of characters, and through the help of natural and spiritual forces, Tom finally takes the steps that seemingly enable him to become a

“real” and “surviving” Indian. The chapter comments on different characters who influence and help the protagonist in his search for a usable identity.

Chapter Five argues that Native American conceptions of spirituality and the trickster are fundamental in order to understand the novel as a whole. The issue of spirituality is interrelated with all the other issues, and thus the chapter deals with the spiritual dimension of the issue of man’s relationship to nature and of Indian identity. Furthermore, it sheds light on *Wolfsong* as a trickster discourse and explains the implications that follow from this. Finally, the chapter deals with how the novel on one level can be perceived as myth, challenging the reader’s interpretations and understanding. The chapter thus stands out as vital in explaining Owens’ prediction for the American Indian – whether it is one of survival or vanishing. The ambiguous ending represents a challenge to the reader, serving to question whether one can see the survival of Tom as being on a worldly, symbolic or spiritual level. As the novel seems to stand out as a trickster narrative or a trickster discourse, it appears connected to traditional Native American storytelling, and consequently to the intricacy of the merging of reality and myth.

Throughout the analysis, the study will make use of Owens’ own theories as well as perspectives from scholars such as Gerald Vizenor and Chris LaLonde, mainly on the issues connected to spirituality, trickster narratives and discourse; and Lee Schweningen and Susan Bernardin, mostly on nature and identity. Views and theories of other scholars and writers, among them N. Scott Momaday, Barry Lopez, and Darrel J. Peters will also be brought into the discussions. It should be pointed out, however, that secondary sources on this novel are quite limited in number, at least the published sources that have been possible to procure. In the final conclusion the different perspectives from the analysis will be connected and summed up.

1. OWENS' THEORY ON AMERICAN INDIAN IDENTITY AND VIEW OF NATURE

This chapter examines Owens' theories on the issues of identity, place and nature as these are central to the reading of *Wolfsong*. The first part elaborates on Owens' theory of how Native American literature assigns a destiny to the Indian hero that is not tragic, and further his view on the issue of American Indian identity. The second part looks into Owens' perception of the relationship between Native Americans and the environment, through an analysis of essays from his collection *Mixedblood Messages*.

Owens' *Other Destinies* is a collection of literary theory and analyses of novels by ten outstanding Native American authors. The collection dedicates much attention to identity issues, and how Native American literature problematizes what it means to be "a real Indian". As the full title of *Other Destinies* reveals, the book is meant as guidance in understanding the American Indian novel. There are many parallels between the novels he analyzes in *Other Destinies* and *Wolfsong*. Thus, looking into his literary criticism contributes to a better understanding of Owens' own novel. In the essay "The Song is Very Short" from *Mixedblood Messages*, Owens elaborates on the complexity of Indian identity in Native American literary discourse. This essay provides useful theory in order to understand the focus on diversity and multicultural identity in *Wolfsong*.

The essays "Beads and Buckskin", "Burning the Shelter" and "Everywhere There Was Life" from the collection *Mixedblood Messages* focus mostly on Native Americans and their view of nature. Here Owens challenges Euro-American and Western notions of how Native Americans live and have lived in relationship with nature. On the one hand, Owens seems to claim that the role of the Native American

has been romanticized by both scholars and writers. He questions the way in which both Euro-Americans as well as certain Native Americans have portrayed the American Indian as the predestined environmentalist. On the other hand Owens also deals with the so-called revisionists who claim that the ancestors of American Indians were efficient slaughterers who ravaged the environment and made a species extinct. Owens presents a complex argument for what he sees as a genuine Native American conception of nature. Thus, the essays mentioned in *Mixedblood Messages* deal with issues central to thematic elements in *Wolfsong*.

A personal interview with Louis Owens is included. Among other themes, it touches specifically upon both the matter of identity and also nature and environmentalism. In parts of the interview, Owen talks directly about the background for *Wolfsong*, and in other parts he elaborates and comments quite extensively on theoretical perspectives on Native American literature.

The Indian Hero in Native American Literature

Owens celebrates those Native American writers who portray American Indians the way they really are today: mixed-bloods, full-bloods, living in cities, working on their cars, using microwave ovens – living as real people in a real world, and not as a "mystical shaman" ("Clear Waters", 19). He stresses, however, the importance of spirituality – but makes a point out of the fact that New York publishers and the Hollywood film industry want to see "warriors, shamans, mystical medicine women, and anger, and above all, self-destruction. Dysfunction and self-destruction are marketable commodities (ibid.)" Owens categorizes the latter as the new version of the Vanishing Indian: "(...) it's a way of neutralizing Native Americans because the Euroamerican world looks at these books and sees Indians destroying one another and sees them as no threat (...)" (ibid.).

In *Other Destinies*, Owens criticizes how the Native American character has been treated in the American literary canon. He points to how the Indian in Euro American literature always seems to play the role of a tragic hero that in the end is doomed to perish (“Other Destinies, Other Plots”, 17-18). In Native American literary criticism, this phenomenon is often referred to as the Myth of the Vanishing Indian. As a contrast, Owens emphasizes how literature written by Native Americans themselves assigns a completely different fate for the American Indian hero: ”With few exceptions, American Indian novelists – examples of Indians who have repudiated their assigned plots – are in their fiction rejecting the American gothic with its haunted, guilt-burdened wilderness and doomed Native and empathically making the Indian the hero of other destinies, other plots.” (“Other Destinies, Other Plots”, 18)

Owens compares the hero in American Indian fiction to the typically displaced modernist ”lost” hero figure. In this respect, he emphasizes that what he terms authoritative Indian fiction repeatedly shows how there is a possibility for recovering a sense of personal identity and significance. Owens also comments on the way authors of this fiction move their characters in a direction that enables them to build a personal identity on a unification of the past, the present and the future (“Other Destinies, Other Plots”, 20). According to Owens, one part in the search for this unification is expressed in Native American fiction as a search for a spiritual tradition ”that places humanity within a carefully cyclically ordered cosmos and gives humankind irreducible responsibility for the maintenance of that delicate equilibrium” (ibid.).

In the essay “The Song is Very Short”, Owens uses Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogics to show how the Native American novel has developed itself in the

interface between Native American and Euro-American discourse. Owens supports the notion that this literature is created in a transcultural zone, and that it thus affects and is being affected by the "process of ideological and cultural production" that takes place in this zone ("The Song is Very Short", 54). He warns against creating Native American literature in an isolated sphere, and solely for a Native American audience. This, according to Owens, represents only a dead end. He further warns of how the desire for Native Americans to define themselves as different from the dominant Euro-American culture implies "the risk of constructing what Vizenor has called 'terminal creeds': those monologic utterances which seek to violate the dialogic of trickster space, to fix opposites and impose static definitions upon the world" (ibid.). Owens seems to stress that it is the ability of being dynamic that should be central features in Native American literature. The abilities of dialogue and dynamics, he argues, are central in what is referred to as "survival literature"; only by adjusting and adapting are the Indians in the American Indian novels able to survive. In this respect it is also noteworthy to consider Owens' comments on a what he refers to as "ethnocriticism" ("The Song is Very Short," 55), and how he points out that a central trope within this criticism is the oxymoron, the provision of imagery of opposition and paradox which lays the ground open for ambiguous and complex interpretations (ibid.).

Native Americans and Nature

Owens criticizes what he perceives to be a literary abuse of Native American culture. He points out that essentialist Native American signifiers such as "beads, buckskin, sacred pipes, wise elders and prayers to 'Mother Earth'" ("Beads and Buckskin", 12) have been important elements of an "authoritative" Native American literature. In Euro-American literature, he claims, these essentialist signifiers have

been used solely to create a notion of Native American culture as something distinctly different from Western culture. It is made into a curiosity. Owens argues that by such means “Non-Native American authoritative discourse” defines the “otherness” of Native Americans and their culture, using the Native American drums and regalia as “commodities” to sell this message (ibid., 12-13). This argument may be linked to Owens’ observation of how, in our era of environmentalism, both Euro-American and Native American environmentalists like to speak of the American Indians as almost predetermined environmentalists (“Everywhere There Was Life”, 220). Such essentialization, Owens insists, does not represent a genuine understanding of how Native Americans lived. Owens seems to argue for another view, suggesting that Native Americans indeed made use of nature, had an effect on their environment and also left traces of their existence in the landscape.

There is, however, another Euro-American perspective on Native American use of nature that seems of particular concern to Owens, namely what he refers to as the so-called ‘revisionist view’, according to which the ancestors of today’s Native Americans were highly efficient hunters that slaughtered and exterminated the megafauna during the Pleistocene epoch¹⁾, in part merely for fun. Owens refers to an article in *USA Today* in which the notion that it was the values of the American Indians that caused them to live in harmony with nature is attacked (“Everywhere There Was Life”, 221). On the basis of his own experience and his knowledge of Native American writers who describe Native American nature ethics, Owens strongly argues against the viewpoint in this article. Owens is himself partly a Native American and points to the values of this culture that regulate human interaction with

1) 1.8 million to 10.000 years ago, when the mammals were at the peak of their existence, often referred to as the flourishing of the megafauna.

nature. Thus, Owens shows how Native American Indians have traditionally regarded their relationship with nature as one of reciprocity and equality.

Owens strengthens his arguments against the revisionist view as he cites the Lakota author Vine Deloria, Jr.: “The task of the tribal religion, if such a religion can be said to have a task, is to determine the proper relationship that the people of the tribe must have with other living beings” (“Everywhere There Was Life”, 223). Owens’ references to Luther Standing Bear’s utterances demonstrate how Native Americans have seen nature as something that is just as worthy as and equal to themselves. The idea of a kinship between man and nature and all its beings is reinforced by Luther Standing Bear’s insistence that “Even without human companionship you were never alone” (ibid., 219). Owens also incorporates in his argument the values of local Indian tribes such as the Suiattle and their relationship to one of the mountain peaks in their territory. The name of this peak is “Dakobed” in Salish language, which means “Mother Earth”. The traditional stories of the Suiattle tell them that this is where they came from when they were born. Thus, they find themselves related to this peak in an ancient way (“Mapping, Naming and the Power of Words”, 211): The peak functions as a symbol of the natural surroundings and the territory wherein the Suiattle have traditionally lived, an area which has provided for their life and existence for perhaps thousands of years. Owens also mentions the Washo tribe who traditionally have been living around Lake Tahoe (ibid., 212). They refer to the lake as “life-sustaining water” and as “the centre of the world”. In order to further point out normative conceptions in Native American culture that regulate the relations between humans and their environment, Owens refers to D’Arcy McNickle’s *Wind From an Enemy Sky*. Here the character Chief Bull is commenting on a dam that is being built by the whites in order to harness a river (“Everywhere There Was Life”,

219). Among Chief Bull's utterances we find characterizations such as "killed the water" and "A stream has its life". Owens stresses the significance of these utterances and regards them as indicators of Native Americans' own conception of their association with the environment (ibid.). Furthermore, Owens also emphasizes the importance of chief Bull's words "Were the animals and the trees asked to give their consent to this death?". Owens interprets these as a sign of a social relationship between Native Americans and the natural world. This social relationship is, according to Owens, built on reciprocity. Owens explains this reciprocity as the self-evident fact that everything that exists depends upon and relates to everything else. Thus, it is clear that a creature cannot live without having an impact on the rest of its environment (ibid., 226).

To fortify his reasoning, Owens gives reference to N. Scott Momaday's *The Way To Rainy Mountain*. Here, Momaday describes the ethics of Native American respect to the environment or "the physical world" as a matter of "reciprocal appropriation" through which man invests himself in the landscape and also "incorporates the landscape into his most fundamental experience (...) this appropriation is primarily a matter of imagination (...) And it is that act of the imagination, that moral act of the imagination, which I think constitutes his [man's] understanding of the world" ("Everywhere There Was Life", 219). Owens compares these ethics to studies of tribal people in the Amazon area, who possess a notion of the natural world as "families in place", where all members of the animal world, including humans, have their own spaces (ibid.). Transactions between the borders of these spaces are carefully monitored in order not to create imbalance. Thus, the transactions must be of mutual benefit for balance to be obtained: If you take something from the animal family, you must give something back that matches the

value of what you have taken. Owens interprets these studies along with McNickle's message as promoting a notion that the world is ecosystemic and not egosystemic.

A well-functioning ecosystem is based on the balanced exchange of resources enabling the infinite cycle of such a system. In order for any ecosystem wherein humans are a part to function, it is essential that those humans are aware of their participation in that system and contribute to its balance. The white people damming chief Bull's stream fail to see their part in this system. They only see the river as something they can use and exploit for their own short-term benefits. The anecdote of the dam shows well the symbolic difference between the holistic and cyclic Native American view of nature and the linear and egocentric Eurowestern view. Owens substantiates his argument as he includes Luther Standing Bear's description of how Native Americans are essential parts of "that complex of relationships we call environment" ("Everywhere There Was Life", 227).

By and large, Owens presents through his own knowledge of Native American culture an understanding of how its values provide the basis for a life in interrelation with the environment. He also uses these thoroughly substantiated viewpoints to argue against the above-mentioned revisionist perspectives. At the same time, he uses the contrast between these perspectives as a device to clarify his own point of view.

Owens does not argue against the so-called revisionist view exclusively by calling attention to Native American respect for nature. He argues both against a notion of Native Americans as efficient exterminators and against the idea of Indians on the other hand as moving across the land without leaving a trace behind. To encounter and demystify the latter notion is important to Owens. As he points out, there is clearly evidence of marks on the landscape left by Native Americans. We only have to think of what is to be found from the cultures of Incas and Aztecs in

South America. Likewise, Owens also points to the impact of tribes in North America. Owens uses the Anasazi people in Chaco Valley, New Mexico as an example to illustrate his point. They built irrigation systems and developed an agricultural use of the land (“Everywhere There Was Life”, 222). The fact that these people abandoned the valley in 1200 AD has been used by some revisionists as an example of Native Americans dealing fatal blows to the ecosystem. Owens criticizes this position by pointing to the fact that this valley is today a flourishing ecosystem, inhabited by both Native and non-Native Americans. What the Anasazis did, as did most indigenous people worldwide, was to adapt to the environment in order to make it possible to live there (*ibid.*). These forms of adaptations have of course left marks on the earth. However, Owens claims these adaptations had to be sustainable to the natural environment, otherwise people could not have continued to populate and live from the resources on those respective places for thousands of years. Thus, Owens criticizes Euro-American studies that have not acknowledged the Native American use of nature as being “natural”, referring to one such study that declared “(...) little or no natural landscape existed in Southern California at the time the Spaniards first arrived there” (*ibid.*, 224).

Owens tries to clear up what he perceives as a conservationist misunderstanding of sustainable use of nature by recollecting an incident that took place during the time he served as a forest ranger. The US Forest Service had given him the task of burning down a shelter that was no longer in use by the service. The purpose was to remove this human-made construction from the landscape, to leave no traces behind. Coming down from the mountain he encountered two Native American women from the local tribe. Owens had an epiphany as he discovered that the shelter he burnt down had been long used by tribes’ members as they were up in the

mountains collecting berries and herbs (“Burning the Shelter”, 215-217). He realized that the shelter was just as much part of the ecosystem in that area as was every fir tree or other plant. Owens uses this epiphany to argue that Native Americans have traditionally regarded themselves as one with nature, which is seen even more clearly when contrasted to the Euro-American perception of man and nature as separate. Thus, Owens concludes that Native Americans have developed a more sophisticated and holistic understanding of Nature compared to what Euro-Americans have. Owens adds to this conclusion by declaring that the Native American understanding of the environment is marked by reciprocity and equality and not by the attitude of the European discoverer who is out searching for extractable wealth (“Everywhere There Was Life”, 219).

Owens succeeds in pointing out many paradoxes in the ways in which Native Americans have been regarded by Europeans and later Euro-Americans. In the 18th century, Euro-America claimed that the Native nomadic use of the land gave them no right to land claims. Later, when having discovered that Native Americans actually made systematic use of the land, “revisionist” Europeans and Euro-Americans tried to argue that this use had exhausting effects on the land. The objective for Owens is, through his criticism, to make it clear that these Euro-American interpretations of indigenous land use represent a misunderstanding: Where the Euro-American studies distinguish clearly between the realm of nature and the realm of humans, Native American culture does not. Owens himself stresses the Native notion of nature or wilderness as “sameness” and not “otherness”. Owens explicitly gives his own notion of the term ‘wild’ as something that fathoms both the natural world as well as humanity (“Mapping, Naming and the Power of Words”, 207). This is a notion that Owens shares with other nature writers as well. In “The Etiquette of Freedom” Gary

Snyder thoroughly examines the meaning of the words “wild” and “wilderness”. Much like Owens, he recognizes the fact that wilderness and human presence have existed together for thousands of years (“The Etiquette of Freedom”, 7). Henceforth, it seems as if both writers stress the fact that Native Americans have known for a long time that they cannot live apart from wilderness. This connects well to the fact that Owens’ discourse also makes it clear how closely connected Native Americans are to place and to the nature and wilderness in those very places, of which the Dakobed peak and Lake Tahoe serve as prominent examples.

Owens gives emphasis to the fact that Native Americans have always used the land and the resources available in order to secure their own existence in very much the same way as do all other creatures in any ecosystem. He makes very clear the difference between a sustainable use of nature and the way in which modern, industrial societies exploit nature. Having made this point, it is also important to mention Owens’ criticism of environmentalists who one-sidedly use the Native American way of life to promote a type of environmental conservation that often excludes human activity in wilderness areas. According to Owens, these conservationists are making a mistake when they claim that wilderness and humans must be kept apart for both to survive. Owens’ answer to this misunderstanding is that Native Americans have always regarded themselves as part of nature and as wilderness.

Owens presents the reciprocal and interrelative Native American perception of the environment, including the notion that no creature can exist without having an impact on its surrounding environment, in such a way that makes a coupling between the conservationist- and the Native American perspective seem absurd. Finally, he makes clear the ethics found in traditional Native American culture concerning nature

and the environment: It demands the moral act of experiencing nature and its phenomena in order to develop an understanding of the physical world humans live in. Only this way can humans understand and find their appropriate place within the ecosystem and contribute to the reciprocal exchange of resources that in turn sustains the balance and cyclic motion of that system.

2. NATURE

This chapter examines the significance of the close and pervasive presence of the environment in *Wolfsong*, and analyzes how the novel connects nature and Indian identity, how it makes use of water as an important image, and finally how nature and place appear as physical and participating forces in the novel.

Nature and Identity

It is a known fact that a human being is influenced by his or her surroundings, and that environment as well as genetic code decide “who” one becomes. Indigenous people such as Native Americans have through their history been formed by, and obtained their understanding from, studying their surroundings – place and nature. *Wolfsong* evokes the idea of how turning to the natural environment and to the landscape can help retrieve an identity when what remains of the past are only fragments:

He [Tom] stared at the white mountain, the centre, the great mother, and tried to feel what it had meant to his tribe. They had woven it over thousands of years into their stories, telling themselves who they were and would always be in relation to the beautiful peak. Through their relationship with the mountain, they knew they were significant, a people to reckoned with upon the earth. Away in four directions the world streamed, and Dakobed was the centre, a reference point for existence. One look, and a person would always know where he was. This much his uncle’s stories, and his mother’s stories, had made clear. (92-93)

This description of the fictional Stehemish tribe’s relation to the Dakobed mountain serves to illustrate the importance of connection and belonging between man and place in *Wolfsong*. As for his ancestors, place and landscape seem to play important roles in constituting the protagonist Tom’s sense of self. Tom’s home valley with its rivers, mountains and lakes can be seen plainly as representing where he comes from, and more importantly it seems that his experiences there have at least partly formed

him into who he is. Many of these can be traced back to memories from his childhood and early youth, and in particular adventures he has shared with his late uncle. During these adventures and trips, his uncle has taught Tom things that are essential in order for Tom to understand who he is as Indian. The death of his uncle leaves, however, a gap between what Tom has already learned, and what his uncle still has not taught him. With his uncle gone, Tom appears to turn to the element in which his uncle felt most at home, namely what was left of the wilderness in the valley. As Susan Bernardin puts it: “With his identity contingent on his understanding of place, Tom turns toward wilderness as a means of ‘making real’ his uncle’s legacy of belief, story and identity” (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 89). Bernardin refers in particular to the three journeys that Tom makes into the wilderness, regarding these as part of the spiritual ritual that in the end will provide Tom with his uncle’s guiding spirit. In addition comes the obvious fact, also remarked by Bernardin, that Tom through these trips follows both the old tracks of his ancestors (ibid.).

Barry Lopez’ connection between external and internal landscapes may be analytically useful here – the way in which the exterior landscape can be seen as crucial in forming and balancing the “mind”, or “inner landscape” as Barry Lopez terms it. As Lopez describes the Navajo relation to landscape, “[e]ach individual (...) undertakes to order his interior landscape according to the exterior landscape. To succeed in this means to achieve a balanced state of mind” (“Landscape and Narrative”, 67). Similarly it can be noted how the Dakobed for the Stehemish in *Wolfsong* has been “woven (...) into their stories, telling themselves who they were and *would always be* (...), [emphasis added]” (92-93). This seems to suggest that also Tom has a chance of finding his place in the world and a sense of who he is by turning his attention to the peak and to the landscape. A close engagement with and

an attentive attitude toward the land seem to help Tom overcome his gap of knowledge and thus his confusion over who he is.

The function of storytelling is also important here. Lopez argues, “[a] story draws on relationships in the exterior landscape and projects them onto the interior landscape. The purpose of storytelling is to achieve harmony between the two landscapes, to use all elements of story (...) in a harmonious way to reproduce the harmony of the land in the individual’s interior. Inherent in the story is the power to reorder a state of psychological confusion through contact with the pervasive truth of those relationships we call ‘the land’” (“Landscape and Narrative”, 68). Tom’s mother and uncle have already told stories of the tribe and of the land, enabling Tom to understand that the relationship to the landscape has been crucial for his ancestors and should be also for him. The notion that Uncle Jim’s death represents a gap between Tom and knowledge that is important to him, is strengthened by the novel’s reference to Uncle Jim’s intention to take Tom for a long walk up north when he came home from college in order to tell him “all the stories” and “all them things you ain’t learned yet” (88).

As landscape and place stand out as crucial in Tom’s forming of an identity, it may be useful to consult Owens’ own analysis of certain traits in Leslie Silko’s novel *Ceremony*. Here Owens emphasizes the Pueblo Indians’ view of how the universe is carefully balanced (“Leslie Silko’s Webs of Identity”, 172). The balancing of the landscape through references to sacred mountains, bodies of water and the four cardinal directions may apply to the importance of Dakobed and other parts of the landscape depicted in his own novel. The mountain itself embodies the idea of reciprocity and balance between human and non-human life. Owens also stresses how the world outside of the boundaries constituted by these landmarks is perceived of as

“dangerous and defiling” (ibid.), an analogy to the way Tom feels when he is in California, “(...) sensing only (...) that here was the trap, the danger. A death of spirit in namelessness. Around them was a world without name” (160). This can be linked to the importance of naming and the knowledge of the aboriginal Indian names of the landscape and, just as important, the Stehemish language in general. As Schweninger points out, Tom in the novel reflects on the loss of language, thinking also of how his uncle must have felt mute when lacking the right words for prayer (“Landscape and Cultural Identity...”, 97). There is, however, a sense that Tom overcomes this lack knowledge of the Stehemish language:

”Stehemish,” he said in his mind. ”Stehemish,” the river echoed, rolling the *vowels and consonants* of their identities. (160, emphasis added)

Tom’s auditory attention toward the river’s “voice” seems to imply that Owens opens up for connection between nature and language. It is not clear whether Owens wants to stress the importance of understanding the Stehemish language, or if he rather suggests that the sound of the river might serve as a compensation for the loss. The latter idea seems related to notion that the sound of language is often just as important as its meaning. As he gives an account of how the semantics of the Kiowa language is increasingly evading him, Scott N. Momaday argues that “(...) much of the power and magic and beauty of words consist not in meaning but in sound” and he goes on to point out how language is a “(...) miracle of symbols and sounds that enable us to think, and therefore to define ourselves as human beings” (*The Man Made of Words*, 7). Tom appears to imagine his own identity, reading it in the river. The river returns a sound to him that is affirmative of his imagined identity.

The creation of Tom’s sense of self appears to be a dialogic process between the outer landscape and Tom’s mind. As also Schweninger points out, Tom “trie[s] to

feel what it [the Dakobed] had meant to his tribe” (ibid., 99, emphasis added). The direct link to the knowledge of the language and traditions of his own tribe is lost to Tom, and to compensate for this he uses his relationship to nature in order to *construct an imaginary self*. In this context it is central to bring in Momaday’s reflections on the history of the Kiowas. Much the same way as Tom searches for his lost ancestral connection, Momaday also describes that what is left of the Kiowa culture is “fragmentary: mythology, legend, lore, and hearsay – and of course the *idea* itself, as crucial and complete as it ever was. That is the miracle [emphasis added]” (*The Way To Rainy Mountain*, 4). He describes the history of the Kiowas as “the history of an *idea, man’s idea of himself* [emphasis added]” (ibid.). As Tom is left with what appears to be only fragments of his tribe’s history he must also construct an idea of himself as Indian, and he must do it the way his ancestors and, as Momaday also points out, the Kiowas did, namely through a journey, an “evocation of (...) a landscape that is incomparable, a time that is gone forever, and the human spirit which endures” (ibid.). As long as there are fragments of knowledge that can be exchanged between generations, Momaday’s concept of *man’s idea of himself* gives contemporary Indians an opportunity for compensation through the timeless and unlimited act of imagination. Kimberly Blaeser, when commenting on Momaday’s *Rainy Mountain*, asserts that “Momaday’s text begs us to transgress the old codes, to collapse divisions, to create a literature of poliphony, of simultaneous performance, of ‘*eternal happening*’ [emphasis added].” (“The Way to Rainy Mountain...”, 53). Momaday’s perspective sheds an optimistic light on how future Native Americans will be able to feel a sense of belonging with their past. His ideas are directly applicable to Tom’s predicament in *Wolfsong*. The novel assigns a future for Tom and

his eventual successors in spite the fact that he in the end appears to physically leave his native valley.

Water Imagery

Water is a symbol that evokes several connotations such as life, motion, force and return. Water is also dynamic, and it pervades most of the earthly world. It represents unity through its vastness, as well as geographical and elemental separation. As a power, water can be seen as both a force of growth and destruction, and its intimacy is evident through its inhabitancy in all living beings. In *Wolfsong* the use of water imagery connects water to all of these notions. In the novel, closeness to nature is emphasized, and the most intimate element described is water. Its presence pervades the novel, making it stand out as an important symbol.

The significance of water is stated already in the opening lines of the novel, as Tom's uncle is out in the wilderness getting ready to shoot at the machines building the road to the new mine:

The rain fell onto the down swept branches and collected and fell to the hard undergrowth with a steady hammering. (...) Water soaked through his frayed mackinaw, through the flannel shirt, and lay next to his skin, familiar and comforting. The years eased away as the drumming of the bush deepened. (1)

This passage demonstrates how water can be an intimate element. Uncle Jim perceives the rain as friendly and sympathetic, no matter how cold and uncomfortable it might seem to the reader. The soaking rain illustrates the pervasiveness of water, and seems to connect the old Indian with the surrounding environment. Similar impressions are evoked through the imagery used to described Tom's feelings on his way home from California:

Staring out the rain-streaked window, he could feel the vastness of the rain, sensed the water gathering in the high country, sliding down the granite peaks and running into channels that fed streams

that fell to rivers that consumed the rocks, earth and trees until all was disgorged into the sea and the sea threw it back at the land. As soon as they had left California the damp had closed in, working its way through the bus till it found him and settling into his bone and muscle like a contented, wet cat. (13)

The relationship between Tom and the rain and dampness is one of reciprocal contentedness, a strong symbol of the close relationship between man and nature. The passage also evokes thoughts of a cyclic motion, as the reference to dampness, rain, rivers and sea alludes to the circular motion of water. Thus the novel makes use of water as an including and unifying element. Through its geographical situatedness it unifies spatially, through its cycles it unifies temporally. This interpretation seems strengthened by Chris LaLonde's statement that "rain calls to mind kinship and connections" ("Trying on Trickster in *Wolfsong*", 25). LaLonde elaborates this view by giving an explanation of how the Salish worldview "acknowledges the interrelatedness of all things and the fluid nature of boundaries" (ibid.). The notion that water brings together and fuses is also sustained by Owens' own statement that the merging of the three rivers the Stehemish, the Sauk and the Skagit in Forks is symbolic ("Clear Waters", 7).

It must, however, be argued that on this point the rain trope appears ambiguous in the novel. While on one hand making use of imagery of water as a unifying element, the novel on the other hand applies it to show how Tom initially perceives water to be an element that separates the valley from the world outside: "This damp, darker world didn't have anything to do with the one he'd left in California, or much to do with what was closer, as close as Seattle or any of the white cities" (23). Tom appears to be taking for granted his own personal relationship with the damp air and the rain, while at the same time he seems to be rejecting the idea – or the fact – that water through its vastness is a shared and unifying element. Tom's

perception of water at this stage in the novel reflects his innate skepticism towards everything and everyone outside his home valley and his tribe. However, as Tom begins his purifying journeys as preparations for his vision quest, after a while he acknowledges that water is a symbol of both unity and change. As Bernardin points out, “[w]ater also assumes central importance for Tom’s identity quest, as it continually reminds him that the land is a dynamic presence (...)” (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 87). Thus the water might be perceived as contributing to the change that is necessary in order for Tom to complete his quest.

Water is also described as a spiritual and religious element. Both Tom’s uncle and Tom himself dive into water in search for their guiding spirits. According to the stories Tom had heard, spirits lived in the water:

He thought of the importance of water stories. The most powerful spirits lived in the water, and water separated the worlds of the living and dead. The world was an island in a great ocean. (52)

As water is connected to spirits, it can be perceived both as spiritual force itself or as having the ability to transfer spirituality. This can be linked to the vastness and omnipresent abilities that water inhabits, creating an imagery that suggests everything has spiritual life, both animate and inanimate nature. Hence the fight over taking control of the water becomes symbolically important. The construction of the mine in the valley implies that the mining company will take control over the waterflow, as the water will be regulated and used in the production. Additionally, the contractor J.D. Hill is taking control over the waterworks in town (200). The figurative and symbolic implications that evoke from this imagery may be explained through LaLonde’s words of how “[i]t [water] counters those [narratives] of *mastery* and *control*, the narratives that compose the dominant culture’s discourse over the land, [emphasis added]” (“Trying on Trickster in *Wolfsong*”, 25). As the representatives for

the dominant culture takes control of the water, they harness and thus metaphorically prevent its life-sustaining cycle. Moreover, the mining company's use of water is likely to affect the water level of Lake Image, suggesting that they disregard and interfere also with the spiritual relations in nature. The lake plays a central role in the novel, being the one in which Tom's uncle merged with his guiding spirit (166). In this respect, Tom's sabotage of the water stands out as not a destructive, but a liberating act. He can be seen to free the water from restraints and reenable its life-sustaining cycle, both on a physical and spiritual level, leaving the impression that it regains and maintains its significance as a force and symbol of dynamics and regeneration. As Susan Bernardin argues, water in the novel is a "force of growth, regeneration and cyclical return, which counters narratives of vanishing and loss" ("Wilderness Conditions...", 87). Consequently, the overall impression is that the novel's use of water imagery pronounces a promising future for the Indians.

Nature as Agent

The forces in nature come to the fore in different forms. In *Wolfsong*, nature and place appear as forces visualized both in the form of physical and violent power, but even more as subtle agents. The novel appears to assign to the environment a moral and persuasive function, taking on the resemblance of a partner for Tom.

Nature most obviously stands out as a destructive and violent force in the scene where Tom blows up the water tank and the water subsequently kills J.D Hill. It appears symbolically important that it is water "controlled" by Tom Joseph that kills Hill (220, 221), suggesting that the Indian Tom Joseph is able to ally with the forces of nature. That Tom survived his momentous meeting with the element of water (164) whereas Hill did not, might be indicative of how nature treated these two persons differently. Nature appears to regard Tom as friendly, but perceive Hill as hostile.

Thus the novel appears to personify the environment, in turn making it appear as a force with moral conscience.

The impression of nature as agent is strengthened as Tom toward the end of the valley has stolen the dynamite and heads up the valley. First of all it is striking to observe the level of determination that characterizes Tom's actions. He might be acting out of his own free will. However, there is a strong notion that he is influenced by the environment in the valley:

The drainage drew him in like a funnel, and when he glanced into the mirror he saw the night close in behind. (210)

First, this imagery serves to illustrate the power that lies within his strong relationship to the place. Secondly, it serves to question who is really the protagonist of *Wolfsong*. Owens himself has stated that he wanted to write a novel about the wilderness, making the place itself the real protagonist, as well as enabling the characters to give the trees, mountains, streams and glaciers a voice ("Clear Waters", 6-7). The notion that place itself takes on a central role in the novel is sustained by Susan Bernardin as she argues that "the environment in *Wolfsong* serves as protagonist itself, shaping and even directing Tom Joseph's search for belonging and identity" ("Wilderness Conditions...", 87).

There are also examples where nature seems to play a less active, but nonetheless important part in exerting influence on Tom. As Tom early in the novel goes to bed in his uncle's room for the first time after his homecoming, the valley itself appears to have an impact on Tom's mind:

His thoughts eddied. He had a sudden impression that the peaks surrounding the valley had shifted to block the way out. He wouldn't be able to leave. (41)

There are at least two ways of interpreting this imagery. Place itself can be seen to determine Tom's destiny and the development in the novel, as Tom's decision not to leave the valley and go back to college might be said to constitute the an important basis for the plot. Thus the place, represented by peaks, can be seen as helping or urging Tom to go ahead with his "unfinished business" – his vision quest. This deterministic impression is strengthened as the passage following the description of the blocking peaks refers to a dream that Tom has, which foreshadows the ending of the novel:

Tom Joseph climbed an icewall, chipping steps with his knife, dreaming that he lay in his uncle's bed on a rain-stilled night, dreaming the rising howl of the wolf, moon-bright snow and a running shadow. (41)

The peaks may be seen as metaphors for the obstacles he must overcome on his way. However, at the same time, taking into account that one of these peaks is the Dakobed, they may also be seen as a "beacon" leading Tom in the right direction toward where he will receive his guiding spirit and thus overcome both the physical and the obstacles in his mind.

Nature appears to influence Tom in several manners, convincing him of what decisions to take. J.D. Hill makes many attempts in order to try to talk Tom into either leaving the valley or giving up his fight for the wilderness and rather join Hill's company. However, Tom seems to have another persuader as well:

"Why not? Name me another guy as smart as you, and one who knows this country as well as you do." (...) Tom let out a deep breath and looked at the scudding clouds. "I appreciate your offer, and I'll think about it."

The moon slipped from the clouds for an instant and silvered the glacier on Whitehorse, and then the clouds slid back across the moon in quick shadows. (67)

After Hill's strong line of arguments, Tom's consciousness appears to be focused on the beauty of nature rather than on the conversation. This evokes an impression that he is in some way consulting nature, and that natural beauty appears to persuade Tom to not listen to Hill.

The "nature as agent" - imagery relates to central differences between Native American and Euro-American nature views. The novel seems to emphasize the significance of the environment by appearing to give the wilderness an active function and a central role in deciding the trajectory and outcome of the novel. By giving nature such a central position, Owens reinforces the importance of the Native American view of existence as ecocentric and not anthropocentric. However, one must not misread this as the novel placing the environment in the middle, while leaving Tom a peripheral role. It must be that they are both in the middle, an idea that is sustained by the novel's rendering of how the environment acts more or less as a partner for Tom, sometimes appearing to be "inside" or to be merging with his mind. Consequently, this calls for a perception that the boundaries between Tom and nature are undefined or at times collapsing, underscoring the Native American perception of nature as a non-hierarchical system with no definite borders between human and non-human nature. This is in compliance with the way the novel as a whole presents boundaries between human beings and nature as an artifact, a view that Owens himself has clarified. Nature as force or agent is also accounted for in Chapter 5, with a more extensive focus on the spiritual connection between human and non-human nature.

3. DIFFERENT WORLD VIEWS: OWENS' USE OF IMAGERY AND CHARACTERIZATION.

This chapter examines how the characterization of types and the use of imagery in *Wolfsong* are linked to Euro-American and Native American world views. These world views are different in more than one way. As pointed out in Chapter One, Owens argues that Euro-American culture sees nature and wilderness as *other* and separate from human life, whereas Native Americans see themselves as part of their environmental surroundings. Other scholars concerned with Native American nature relations seem to have opinions that sustain Owens' reasoning. As Donald Fixico argues, "Native Americans viewed themselves as a part of the earth (...) All things had a separate identity, although they were all a part of the same totality of existence. Like atoms in a molecule, each particle representing a different element was pertinent to the entire being of existence in the circle of life (...) The people see themselves as being no more important than the animals or plants; they are equal in brotherhood or sisterhood." ("The Struggle For Our Homes", 37). This view is connected to the perception within many native cultures that there is no hierarchy between human beings and other living beings, a perception in great contrast to how Euro-American relationship with the environment is defined by many scholars. In Brande's words, Euro-American ethics on the land are based on "an underlying assumption that the land is a stock of resources to be (...) efficiently exploited (...)" ("Not the Call of the Wild...", 250).

Fixico's argument also touches upon the "circle of life", which brings attention to how Native American traditional cultures view existence as cyclic. This implies that much like nature's seasonal cycle, death can be regarded not as a final end, but as a transition back to regeneration and new life. As a contrast, Euro-

American culture, as well as most Judeo-Christian dominated cultures, conveys a view that is linear. This implies that time and existence are seen as moving “forward” in one direction, and that what has passed on cannot return to worldly life. In the novel, everything “Indian” seems to be connected to cyclical imagery, and at the same time the antagonists and semi-antagonists seem connected to a finite linear world view.

The antagonists in the novel are relatively easy to recognize, as they seem to inhabit attitudes toward nature that are inconsistent with what the protagonist Tom stands for. They appear to see nature only as a resource to be exploited. That the land is sacred to Tom, and has been for his ancestors for thousands of years, comes across as meaning nothing to them. The antagonists neither seem to accept that Tom and his brother are “real” Indians, arguing that the real ones are dead and gone centuries ago. Thus the novel gives the impression that these people carry ideas and viewpoints relating to what Owens and other Native American writers term the Myth of the Vanishing Indian. The novel repeatedly makes use of imagery connected to nature in order to distinguish between characters. The novel depicts Tom and Uncle Jim as characters who perceive nature as familiar and comforting. As a contrast, characters that share the Euro-American view of nature are portrayed as having a strained relationship with the environment. To these nature seems to represent something hostile and unfriendly, and the feeling appears to be mutual. One scene that illustrates this is where the one of Tom’s opponents in the novel, the violent and racist Jake Tobin, is alone in the mountains, guarding the construction site:

The mountains were too quiet, without even the abrasive barking of the ravens. He didn’t like staying in the mountains alone. (...) As soon as the ranger was gone, he’d go and take a few pot-shots at the marmots. Next time, he thought, he’d bring a shotgun up and try for the hawk that was hanging around. (175)

In the novel, this hostile-like attitude toward nature seems to be linked to the antagonists' rejection of the Native American approach to place and nature. Already early in the novel, as Tom's uncle lies shooting at the road-building vehicles, it is apparent that the workers on the road fail to understand his profound feelings and motivations. Instead, they perceive of him as crazy. This lack of insight is metaphorically reflected in the description of the surrounding forest as an impenetrable obstacle seen from the workers' perspective. They appear not to be able to achieve the same intimacy with nature as the Indian Jim, which in turn makes them unable to understand it the way he does:

Above him [the road worker], above the gash they'd [the roadworkers] carved out of the base of the mountain, the forest leaned in a black wall, wet and impenetrable. (3)

In its depiction of the Indians in the valley, the novel presents the paradox of having to adapt to a prevailing and dominant economy that consumes what once provided the basis of survival for the Native Americans, and from which their culture and identity have been formed through thousands of years. It is, however, also interesting to examine the portrayal of the white characters in town, especially the older generation. Although they are white loggers who have contributed to the deforestation of the area, and thus also destroyed the land of Tom's tribe, the novel tends to present these in a more empathic way than the complete antagonists. Their experiences finally seem to enable some of them to understand that what they have done to nature was wrong, and thus they warn against making the same mistakes over again, this time with the mine. The younger white generation in town appears, however, to repudiate this warning. This underscores the notion that the destruction of nature is unstoppable, evoking connotations of being trapped in a development that is impossible to escape.

In its portrayal of both landscape and people, *Wolfsong* often makes use of a curiously ambiguous imagery of life and death. Depictions of decay are often accompanied by references to fertility and growth. This evokes thoughts connected to the cycles of nature, where new life grows from the decay of old life, a view that is consistent with the Native American view of existence as cyclic. This imagery can also be connected to the recurring blurring of boundaries in the novel, as a cyclic world view also may imply that there are no fixed boundaries between what is dead and what is alive; death does not mean a final end, but regeneration. Tom's family is described as being the last Stehemish in Forks, and one of the most striking depictions of decay occurs through the portrayal of the Joseph family home:

The porch sagged like a broken bird wing. One support post swung free beside the steps, while the other bowed toward the road with drunken dignity. (...) In the windows of either side of the screen door, more panes had given way to plywood. The moss had thickened on the roof, and he [Tom] saw a hint of gray smoke coming from the thin chimney where a broken guy wire pointed toward the low clouds. (25)

It is interesting to observe how the depiction of the house matches some of the characters in the novel. "Drunken dignity" might well refer to both Tom's brother and mother, as they both seem to be relatively heavy consumers of alcohol. More generally, it also evokes connotations of the historical displacement of Native Americans; they have in many ways, like a bird with a broken wing, been unwillingly removed from their natural element. According to Susan Bernardin, the fact that the house is situated at the edge of town is an illustrative metaphor for how the Stehemish had been displaced and peripheralized by the town community, and how they in the course of time have seemed to vanish ("Wilderness Conditions...", 83). "Drunken dignity" can thus be seen as referring to the social problems arising from this displacement and alienation. Interesting in this respect is also the explanation of how

Tom's fellow tribesmen have vanished, namely that "the tribes and clans had melted like July snow" (51). Bernardin reads this as Owens' reference to the myth of the vanishing tribes – underscoring how Tom at this point in the novel is still "suffering" under the misconception that "real" Indians do not exist anymore ("Wilderness Conditions...", 83). However, it is important to note that the snow imagery makes this passage ambiguous. The melting of the snow implies a seasonal cycle. Thus Owens' simile between Stehemish and snow may well be seen as the promise of return for Tom's tribe.

Similarly, it is important to note the ambiguity of the description of the decay of the Joseph house, first represented only by the moss on the roof. However, nature seems to increasingly take over the house, and seems to in the end almost "attack" the house:

When he [Jimmy] hooked the door closed, the wind worked to rip it free (...) The support post on the porch swung slowly back and forth and came loose, vanishing into the yard (...)

The old house seemed to settle closer to the earth, and the roof of the porch fell with a soft thud into the tall weeds. (213)

Preceding this "attack" is the death of Sarah Joseph. In light of these occurrences it is of course possible to see nature's attack on the Joseph family home as "hostile", contributing to the driving away of the Stehemish people from the valley. However, in spite of this impression the evocation of how nature, or more precisely the earth or the place, "takes back" the old house piece by piece, need not stand out as an attack on the Stehemish people. First, Sarah Joseph's death appears to have a propulsive effect on Tom, who directly after her death starts his final journey in order to blow up the water tank, merge with his guiding spirit, and escape from his pursuers. Second, the impression that nature seems to be "taking back" is an imagery with positive implications for Tom and the Stehemish, as the "return" of the wilderness can also be

seen as representing the return of Tom's tribe. This way of connecting between the Indians and nature and place is particularly noticeable in the description of Uncle Jim as he begins to shoot at the caterpillars used in the construction of the road:

His [Tom's uncle] elbows sank into the moss and rotten bark, and the log seemed to grow up around them. He rested the ancient 30-40 Crag on the log and it, too, sank into the decay. (2)

Uncle Jim is here described as not only close to nature, but even as an integral part of the valley. This impression is strengthened through the feelings of Sam Gravey, as he collects the dead body of Tom's uncle:

Then he led the mule down toward the river, feeling the weight of his friend's body lying heavy over the drainage, from the glaciers where the river began to the rapids where the river curved back toward the new road and distant town. (12)

This passage also connects Jim Joseph to the environment. And in spite of the fact that Uncle Jim is dead, Sam Gravey's thoughts are not focused on death. On the contrary, the passage ends with an emphasis on the river, and a description of how it moves from the glaciers, all the way toward the town, and consequently also toward the sea. Jim Joseph's death is thus linked to the river, a symbol of motion and life. And even more important, the river is a reminder of the water's cycle, a promise of return. These perspectives may serve to suggest that nature's "taking back" of the Josephs' house is not a reference to the vanishing of the last Stehemish people, but rather an evocation of the return of the Stehemish. This idea may be connected to the ending of the novel, which by Bernardin, for example, is interpreted as a promise of return ("Wilderness Conditions...", 91).

Some of the imagery of deterioration and death is, however, used to describe the situation for the town itself. Owens seems to link it to several perils that at least figuratively pose different threats to the Forks community. Most critics point to the

financial threat springing from the recess in the logging industry, and Susan Bernardin connects what she calls the antagonistic relationship with the land directly to the economic crisis that affects the town. She also points out how the clear-cutting of forest and the establishing of “untouchable” new wilderness areas “feeds the pervasive sense of loss and disappearance shadowing the white community”, a sense that is only strengthened by the very fact that Forks is situated at what Bernardin calls “the terminus” of the Euro-American expansion westward. It seems to represent the “end of the road” (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 80).

The sense of entrapment, loss and dead end seems connected to many of the non-Indian characters. However, there is also a great sense of ambiguity in the way some of these people relate to and see nature. Not all of the non-Indians appear as “hostile” antagonists in the novel. One such split character is the local logging-entrepreneur Vern Reese. Reese is friendly set against Tom, however he is presented with elusive traits when it comes to how he relates to nature:

Tom watched his boss. The gray hair, stiff with sweat, stuck out from the angle of the hardhat. He couldn't figure the old man out. That morning he'd stopped the crummy to point out a bear cub in a clearcut, and everyday he raced to get up the mountain in time to see the alpenglow on the glacier across the valley. He hated Sierra Clubbers, but he'd told Jimmy that he'd once hiked two hours just to look at one of the old, giant cedars inside the wilderness boundary. The old man loved nature and was deadly efficient at stripping it bare. (150)

Vern represents the paradox faced consciously or unconsciously by many of the loggers in Forks, succinctly expressed by the line “The old man loved nature and was deadly efficient at stripping it bare”. These characters are sympathetic to nature, yet their economic survival requires that they destroy it. They seem trapped within the economic system on which they have been made dependent. This seems to be why Owens tends to present these characters in less negative terms, which is also noted by

Brande who points out “that Owens refrains from demonizing the loggers and other characters in *Wolfsong* who are eager to cut timber and mine copper out of the designated wilderness area” (“Not the Call of the Wild...”, 255). In Brande’s words they are not able “to imagine any alternatives to the ways of life to which they have been acculturated and which seem (literally) compulsive” (ibid.). However, it must be argued that the characterization of those who support the building of the mine is more negative than the description of those who are “only” loggers. Vern Reese is portrayed as a more benign character because first, he provides Tom with work as long as it is “safe”, and secondly, he is described as the last local logging entrepreneur who stands against both the larger companies, and serves as a counterweight to the mining project and the Hills.

Finally, Vern Reese’s antagonism towards the “Sahara Clubbers” [environmentalists of the Sierra Club] might also be seen as a positive trait. As Bernardin argues, these “tend to romanticize Indians and the wilderness” and they share this view “with those who demonize the land” and see it as “other” (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 86). At least Reese and the loggers and mine prospectors in Forks realize that people cannot live separate from nature. This is a realization that at least seems to place these people a bit closer to the Native American ethos than the preservationists who in Brande’s words “attempt to purify nature of human involvement” (“Not the Call of the Wild...”, 253).

In the view of the younger white generation in Forks, the new mine is going to save the town. Both the plot and the imagery in *Wolfsong*, however, connect both the mine itself as well as several of its promoters with something quite different than salvation. To Tom, of course, it is quite clear that the mine poses a threat, but the mine can also be seen as representing a final end to the place in general – including its

white community. One fact that insinuates this is that the mine represents an economic progress that is clearly time-limited. There is also a recurring use of imagery about the town that evokes death and decay. Already the first time Jimmy and Tom discuss the mining project, Jimmy attempts to persuade his brother to leave and assures him that there is no future in Forks in spite of the prospects of the mine:

Jimmy looked at him [Tom] with surprise. "That's crazy," he said finally. "You stay here, Tommy, you'll rot like me and all the rest of these guys. Go back to the land of opportunity. This valley's dying." (38)

At first it seems tempting to regard Jimmy's statement as a reference to the way in which members of the older generation like his uncle and Sam Gravey are passing on. This idea is in fact voiced by one of the old-timers, Ab Masingale, as he contemplates his own generation:

In Sam, Ab saw the unwinding of a generation, his and Sam's and Floyd's, and it worried him. It had seemed that they would go on forever (...). But Sam was the clock, and the clock was running down. (123)

What is striking, however, is that Jimmy's words "the rest of these guys" do not seem to differentiate between the young and the old people in town. A young, new generation ought to have symbolized regeneration and growth, spurred by the promised employment that follows with the mine, but the novel makes use of pervasive imagery that suggests otherwise. Rather than projecting a promising future, the mine is associated with decline, and so is the younger generation. When Ab Masingale engages in a discussion with Buddy Hill, the representative of the younger generation, Ab argues that his own generation helped ravage the wilderness, and that this pattern of destruction only seems to continue:

At one of the tables, Ab Masingale held forth. "What I'm saying is it's a danged shame they got to punch a road another

twenty-thirty miles into these mountains and dig a big dog-danged hole up there. I used to hunt that ridge, and there ain't a prettier place in the world than that lake with that big old mountain shining in it." (...)

"What I'm getting at is that once this whole valley and all these mountains was the finest danged country a man could lay eyes on. And now most of it's been clearcut and got roads through it and most of the game's gone, and it's a crying shame. And it was fellas like me that done it, me and Floyd and Sam and the rest of you yahoos that made them roads and cut them trees and shot ever last grizzly and wolf below Canada. And you all know it ain't going to stop. There ain't no way it can stop. Now they're digging that open-pit mine up there, and pretty soon there'll be another reason to go a little further. Pretty soon there won't be nothing left." (...)

"There it is. A man's got to make a living any way he can, and if cutting trees and digging a hole is the only way, then by god he's got to do it. And it isn't old farts like me and Floyd got to worry about it. It's you young farts going to be round here a long time's got to worry. Hell, someday a man won't be able to breathe anymore." (184 - 185)

One should think that their own involvement in depleting natural resources would prevent characters like Ab from taking a firm stand against the mine. However, the old logger seems to address the issue quite explicitly. Not only does he take a stand against putting in the mine, he is also examining his own role in ruining much of the beautiful nature that once existed in the area. He touches directly upon the core of the problem connected to an economy based on resource extraction. When resources are depleted in one spot, the extractors will soon move on to the next. In this respect, Ab's argument of how this pattern will never cease until there is "nothing left" is central. It is a foreshadowing of how the town and the valley will face a "dead end" if the younger people do not change their course. As Bernardin points out, the society of Forks seems to have come to a crossroad – as the name of the town itself suggests ("Wilderness Conditions...", 80). The prospects, however, do not appear very promising. The lines "And you know it ain't going to stop" and "There ain't no way it can stop" give an impression that this tragic outcome cannot be avoided, a

premonition that is strengthened through Buddy Hill's answer of how he is not willing to accept any change of course, nor does he admit to the existence of any real Indians in the valley:

“(...)What good's a fucking wilderness to us, the people that practically own it?” (...)

“Ain't you forgetting some other folks that used to practically own it?” Ab said, nodding toward the bar. (...)

“You mean the injuns?” Buddy's voice rose incredulously (...) “Hell, that was so long ago nobody even remembers what real injuns looked like. Sides, they weren't doing nothing with it anyway. Ain't that right, Tom?” (186)

Through this intergenerational quarrel the profound conflict between Native American and Euro-American interests is also brought to the surface. The retrospective and critical view that Ab Masingale represents stands in great opposition to the perceptions of the young and prospective Buddy Hill. Representing central values in American dominant culture, Buddy argues in favor of progress and employment no matter the cost. Buddy's rejection of the significance of the wilderness seems closely connected to his denial of the existence of real contemporary Indians and their right to the land. In this manner, Buddy casts aside a cyclic world view and the possibility of regeneration. As a contrast to the imagery evoked in connection with the death of Jim Joseph as well as Sarah Joseph and the disintegration of the Joseph family home, the succession of generations among the white townspeople seems associated with destruction and final ends, rather than with regeneration and cyclic return.

There seems to be a parallel between this generational conflict and the conflict between Tom and Buddy in the novel. There are several circumstances placing Buddy in opposition to Tom. The relationship between Buddy and Karen is one of these. No good explanation seems to be given as to why Karen makes up her mind to ditch Tom

and then choose Buddy so quickly. The argument that Tom has been away for too long seems too easy. Karen's behavior suggests that economic convenience overrides deeper and truer feelings. It may even be argued that Karen's choice serves as the most poignant illustration of a central motif in the novel, namely the choice of short-term material and economic security at the expense of non-material values and without regard for the long-term consequences. Buddy and Karen's relationship and intercourse also serve as prominent symbols of how Tom's chances for securing a new Indian generation in the valley are lost. The white Buddy Hill makes the mixed-blood Karen Brant pregnant, and the Indian bloodline is utterly diluted. This serves to create an image of Buddy Hill as a conqueror of Indians. Such an image of Buddy is strengthened in the passage describing how Buddy has built his house:

Tom opened the door. "Do you know where they're living?"
"Karen? I heard Buddy bought the Nations place out on the Prairie, where those old Stehemish longhouses used to be. Bayard said he's already had the whole house remodelled. He had that old camas patch ploughed under, Bayard said." (157)

The reference to how Buddy has ploughed under an old camas patch, camas being a plant whose roots the Native Americans used as part of their food staple, along with the use of the word "Prairie", brings to mind strong connotations of the way in which Europeans took over Indian hunting grounds in the prairie, and literally ploughed those grounds into agricultural land. Ploughing is a method of cultivation, and it is easy to see how this might serve as an image for the way European culture was brought on to the American continent. In this respect, ploughing can also be seen as an early example of how the wilderness was corrupted by man. This may serve as a parallel to how the mine in *Wolfsong* in a similar way will corrupt and destroy the wilderness in the valley above Forks.

A character closely connected to Buddy is his father J.D. Hill. He is the local entrepreneur who is working for the mining company. Tom's antagonism toward Hill is suggested at an early point in the novel, when Tom is a passenger in Amel Barstow's truck. Here the profound conflict between Tom and Hill can be seen as foreshadowed:

Tom thought about Amel's words, and he remembered a song that said, "Let my people go." Who were his people? It seemed like they'd been let go a long time before. *Then he saw J.D. Hill's house.* (19, emphasis added)

The immediate reference to J.D. Hill that follows Tom's thoughts, connects Hill to the disappearance of Tom's relatives. This might represent several things: For one, it is a foreshadowing of how Hill and the mine he is helping to develop will finally drive away Tom. It can also be seen as an image of Hill as a representative for an economic activity that through the years has driven away every last one of the Indians in the valley. However, it is also possible to connect both of the Hills to imagery of death and ending not only to the Indian tribe, but to the whole town of Forks. Ab Masingale's foreshadowing of how "someday a man won't be able to breathe anymore" (185) is one example that ties the prospected mine, in which Hill takes part building, not only to the destruction of the wilderness, but to the "death" of the whole town as well as on a much broader scale. Important in this respect, and approached from another angle than in Chapter Two, is also the imagery evoked from the fact that Hill is killed by water that he himself has organized the damming of. This might be read as an example or forewarning of how the mine project is going to have a grave and deadly implications for people in the town.

A "dead end"-imagery is also apparent through the portrayal of other antagonists. Dan Kellar is perhaps the character that is presented as the worst

antagonist. He is in person the representative for the mining company that is intruding and destroying the wilderness area. Kellar seems to have a very strained and antagonistic relationship with the landscape surrounding Forks:

Above all, he was aware of the mountains that ringed the town. He had the feeling that the timber had crept ever closer to the small cluster of buildings until it stood poised for some kind of dark revenge. Attack of the second-growth. The second-growth from hell. He grinned, but the grin vanished quickly. The peaks cut off escape with a wall like jagged metal, and two fast rivers slid through the town like time itself. (114)

Whereas the novel presents the imagery of nature's return, here referred to as the second-growth, and as a positive sign of regeneration and return from a Native American perspective, Kellar sees it as a threat. His devaluing of nature also represents opposition against ideas such as regeneration and cyclical return. This adds to an already growing premonition that the mine represents a culmination for the whole town. This notion is strengthened through Kellar's impression of the mountains that surround Forks. The vanishing smile and the perception of the peaks as cutting off all escape makes the valley appear as a sort of trap or captivity – a dead end.

On one level it seems apparent that in the novel it is the Stehemish tribe that vanishes from the valley above Forks, and that it is the white townspeople who are looking at a bright future, the mine that offers economic progress for the town. However, the imagery in the novel suggests otherwise. The different views of nature that the various characters appear to represent are linked to two main types of imagery. Tom and his uncle advocate a Native American view of nature as cyclic and non-hierarchical, and the imagery in the novel makes these two characters integral parts of nature. In accordance with a cyclic view, the imagery also suggests that death does not represent a final end, but is only a transitional stage that involves return and regeneration. As a contrast, characters connected to the Euro-American view of nature

are described in terms of imagery of destruction and prospects of a progress that is described as a dead end. Both characterization and imagery indicate which characters are sympathetic and which characters are antagonistic. In between the extremes can be found representatives of the older generation. Even though they have destroyed much of the nature and wilderness through clear-cutting and other activities, the novel by and large seems to make allowances for their actions, by the very fact that they seemed not to have any choice. Moreover, these characters seem to at least have a more realistic view of the relationship between man and nature than many of the preservationists. Hence the imagery describing these characters is more ambiguous and contradictory, and they function as voices of knowledge and experience. Much the same way as Uncle Jim represented an adviser to Tom, Ab Masingale and his companions offer advice to the younger generation in town who now seem to be facing a choice between continuing to make the same mistakes as their predecessors, or changing their course. They have the possibility of heeding the old men who warn against a continued depletion of resources, but they do not want to stop the process. It may be argued that there is a strong analogy between Buddy Hill's choice and the choice of the Vanishing Indian, as both choices involve holding on to the old ways and refusing to change no matter the cost. *Wolfsong* appears to assign to Buddy Hill and his likeminded companions what Native American fiction in general often assigns to the static Indian, a dead end. Hence the recurring vision of entrapment that seems to haunt many characters in the novel. They are caught in the orthodox patterns of thought of their own culture, unable to change in spite of the unmistakable evidence that their objectives – mining and logging – some years ahead represent a dead end to the valley and its town.

4. “WHITE AND INDIAN DON’T MATTER NO MORE”

The issue of Indian identity is central in *Wolfsong*. This chapter elaborates on different views about what a real Indian is, and in what way Tom Joseph relates to these opposing concepts. Many of the characters in *Wolfsong* are attributed with complex and ambiguous traits. They are a mix of Indian and white, of environmentalists and clear-cutting loggers. These characters are described in terms of complex patterns of imagery that engender a sense of paradox and ambiguity particularly with regard to culture and ethnicity. This imagery makes it difficult to identify and distinguish the exact cultural and ethnic belonging of many characters. Owens seems to be portraying a borderland – a transcultural frontier where blood, culture and values have crossed ethnocultural boundaries and merged with each other. Some of these characters seem to fill the roles as helpers or guides for Tom. They appear to contribute to his ability of being dynamic and open, and making it possible for him to paste together fragments from the present and the past, a process that appears necessary in order for Tom to recover a sense of self and to be able to function in contemporary society. More specifically these characters come across as having opinions that challenge Tom’s view of what it means to be an Indian in a world that is constantly changing.

In his theoretical work Owens highlights and examines the complex issue of Native American identity, pouncing on what it means to be an Indian, and questions of whether one must be full-blood, half-blood or one eighth. He continues asking if language is a prerequisite, or if one has to be raised within a traditional “Indian” culture (“Other Destinies, Other Plots”, 3). Furthermore, Owens emphasizes the difference between the Euro-American notion or Western scholarly notion of what an Indian is – or was, and what Native Americans perceive themselves to be. He is also

critical towards what he finds to be a prevalent Euro-American belief, a belief that shines through both in literature and other media, of the true or "real" Native American as nonexistent today. Owens goes a long way in suggesting that the dominant idea of the true Indian is an artificial Euro-American invention:

Even individuals seemingly well informed about American Indian literature can exhibit this tendency to relegate "real" Indians to an absolute past, as when we see a writer for *The New York Times*, reviewing James Welch's *Fools Crow*, stating in the simple past tense that "Indians APPLIED revelations from the world beyond to the workings of this one, for they BELIEVED that by tapping into the spiritual they could gain power over everyday occurrences." Such statements leave no room for the Indian today who still applies such revelations and believes in the compelling force of the spiritual. In fact, the Indian in today's world consciousness is a product of literature, history and art, and a product that, as an invention, often bears little resemblance to actual, living Native American people. ("Other Destinies, Other Plots", 4)

These arguments are highly relevant in explaining central features in *Wolfsong*. There is a parallel between what Owens describes as the Euro-American perception of the Vanishing Indian and the fact that the Joseph family in *Wolfsong* are the only Indians left in the valley. References to this and other Euro-American inventions of "Indian" are found in *Wolfsong*, illustrated by how Tom in school learns about how Indians are supposed to be, namely proud Sioux Indians on horsebacks (83), as well as Buddy Hill's remark that the real Indians are dead and gone centuries ago (186). However, *Wolfsong* does not end with the conclusion that American Indians are vanishing. On the contrary, as Aaron Medicine states, they are coming back. The novel launches what can be seen as a counter-strike against the Euro-American view of the "real" Indian as vanished and gone.

In an interview Owens touches upon how American Indians of today are a group of profound diversity and complexity. He focuses attention on the fact that the contemporary Indian is everything but the one "riding a spotted pony across the plains

chasing buffalo”, and that they do not all live in tepees on reservations, but in cabins and ordinary houses in cities (“Clear Waters”, 16). This observation adds to other arguments by Owens that the contemporary Native Americans live and develop in a transcultural dialogic zone, open to multicultural exchange. In this context it is appropriate to also bring in his theoretical approaches on how survival for the Indian hero in Native American fiction has depended exactly on his ability to be dynamic, instead of static (“The Song is Very Short”, 54-55), and that this ability comes from taking part in a dialogic process in a transcultural zone. This theoretical approach is applicable to the plot and story in *Wolfsong*. In the beginning of the novel, Tom is very much focused on the way his ancestors lived, and he thus appears to be caught up in the dominant culture’s idea that the “real” Indians were those who lived centuries ago. He appears not to realize that it is impossible to cope in the contemporary world by living as his forefathers or, for that matter, his Uncle Jim did. Tom’s skepticism toward change and influence from others seems to leave him isolated, and his stasis seems to represent a dead end to him and the Stehemish tribe. On this point Tom stands in opposition to his mother, as she declares to him that everything and everyone always has changed and how he also has to change. Her advice to Tom about leaving the valley may at first glance give the impression that she wants him to give up and become part of Euro-America (78). However, Sara Joseph is not saying that Tom has to give up. On the contrary, not only does she explain to Tom that things always have to change, but she appears to be the only character to explicitly tell him that he must start a quest to find his own identity:

“(…) Men, they know the stories, too, but they remember and have dreams about how it used to be, and then they want all that back again (…) They get to wanting it so bad, like my brother [Jim], they forget things got to always *change*. Like the salmon, you know.” (76-77, emphasis added)

“Go to bed now. You’ve come a long way, and you must go a long way back to find out who you are.” (78)

Sara Joseph’s ability to take on a Christian faith while at the same time holding on to traditional Indian belief seems to be a demonstration of how American Indians have adapted and mixed with white culture through centuries. And Sara Joseph, despite some of her assimilative traits, does stand out as a true Indian. She has not lost her connection to the past; she practices her traditional religion, and she is convinced that the American Indians took better care of nature than the present dominant white culture. She is also a surviving Indian. She has survived because she was able to change, and now she wants Tom to do the same. Darrell J. Peters notes that Jim Joseph had lost his cultural framework, and could not change, but that for Tom, there is no other way (“Diving Home...”, 476-477). Tom finally realizes that even though his desire is to live the old traditional way of his ancestors, he must compromise. He has to open up for impulses that are at first strange to him, and understand that these impulses combined with his connection to the past in the end will make him stronger.

Tom’s good relationship with McBride, his companionship with Martin Grider, and his attendance at Aaron Medicine’s sweat ceremony, which he felt to be a shared multicultural and spiritual experience of unity, serve to illustrate how different cultural experiences are exchanged on what Owens refers to as a “transcultural frontier”. This description of multiethnicity is accompanied by references to diversity in language as well, both Indian and European languages (190-191). It is interesting to observe how the ritual itself has changed from being traditionally exclusive, emphasized by McBride’s comment on how women traditionally were not allowed (189), to being totally inclusive, accepting people of various ethnicities and cultures, as well as both genders. The fact that this diverse group of people is gathered to take

part in what appears to be a religious ritual, strongly suggests that they have something profound in common that cuts across borders between cultures and ethnicity. To Tom the participation in the ritual appears to free him from his innate skepticism, and during his prayer he seems to become comfortable with the setting:

“Grandfather,” he heard himself say, wishing he could pray in his ancestors’ language, “I thank you for the rivers and streams and mountains, for the trees and rocks, for the people of the water and earth and air.” It felt awkward, and he wondered if the words were all wrong. He sensed the others’ held breaths. And then the tension was suddenly gone, and he breathed deeply and felt, for the first time since childhood, a great sense of peace. When he spoke again his voice was a whisper, barely audible in the thick darkness. “Uncle,” he said, “Father of the rain.”

“Ho!” came from different voices of the circle, and he recognized Aaron Medicines’ as the deepest grunt of approval. (191-192)

Tom’s prayer gives expression to his love and attachment to nature, and it is also in accordance with traditional the Native American non-hierarchical view of people and nature. The thankfulness to “Grandfather” may be perceived as gratefulness to his Indian ancestors for not destroying nature but instead, passing it on to new generations. Here lies also an imperative for the current generations to use the earth in a way that makes it possible to pass it on as a life-sustaining system to future generations. It is important to notice how Tom’s profound message is approved and understood by the other participants in the lodge, and how this approval seems to give Tom an inner peace. This suggests that he has finally found other people who understand his search for an Indian identity, and the dependence and relationship to nature inherent within. Tom’s conversation with Aaron Medicine after the sweat supports this notion:

Aaron Medicine nodded.

“We’d like you to come again. We’re trying to live the right way up here, you know. A lot of us had some problems and now we’re trying to help others, mostly Indians but others too. And we’re

trying to live by Indian values.” He grinned. “Don’t let all that junk outside fool you. There’s a lot more to it.” (...)

“You can go into those trees and start walking and you never have to stop. I always think of that. Things get too bad, that’s where I’ll go.” He looked intense. “Too many Indians don’t know shit about nature anymore. They’re living in places like L.A. and Vancouver and sticking needles in their arms, and real nature scares the shit out of them.” (...)

“(...)We don’t mean that an Indian can’t watch the superbowl or use a microwave oven if he feels like it, we just want people to find out who they are.” (193)

This passage seems to explain some of the ideas behind the sweat. What the participants have in common is apparently a wish for living in accordance with Indian values. Many of the people attending the sweat bear marks of having experienced trouble in their lives. Aaron Medicine’s remark about many Indians living as drug addicts in the large cities, serves as a contrast to how he and his group of followers have moved close to nature to lead a new and better life, while creating or re-creating a Native American identity. However, it is also important to note Aaron Medicine’s claim that to be an Indian does not mean having to turn one’s back on the rest of America. As Peters argues, “[h]e [Aaron Medicine] is not narrowly focused on strictly adhering to a traditional lifestyle (...)” (“Diving Home...”, 478). This viewpoint sustains Owens’ own perception that Indians who live ordinary lives in the midst of Euro-America must be acknowledged as just as “real” as those who lived in more primal societies ages ago. At the same time, however, the novel emphasizes that closeness to nature may play an important role for identity formation. Thus Aaron Medicine’s view mirrors Tom’s need to connect with the past, while at the same time taking part in contemporary society. This, together with the words of taking action (194) and walking into the woods, makes Aaron Medicine stand out as an influential character in Tom’s process of decision-making later in the novel.

Bob McBride was the character who brought Tom along to participate in Aaron Medicine's sweat. This is only one of many traits of his character that make him – this mixed-blood, almost white full-blood Indian – play a central and catalyzing role in the novel. As Lee Schweninger points out, “Bob McBride offers lessons in change by the ease with which he marries different cultures and by his insistence that he and Tom are brothers because both are descendants of Salish speaking tribes” (“Landscape and Cultural Identity...”, 99). McBride is Tom's roommate at Santa Barbara, and his Indian ancestry equals one eighth. Though he is almost a white full blood, McBride appears as a person much dedicated to the “Indian cause”:

McBride, an eighth Flathead but enrolled, with pale skin, light-brown braided hair, and a beard, joined everything. President of the Native American Students Association on campus (...) McBride liked to point out the Salish part and say, “We're related, man. You Stehemish folks are Salish too. We're bros, man.” But when he looked in the mirror, he had trouble thinking of himself and McBride as bros. (18)

McBride's overall white appearance belies the fact that he is presumably enrolled through affirmative action. The implied irony is strengthened by his position as President of the Native American Students Association. It also appears as if McBride's pan-Indian idea of brotherhood is not too well received by Tom, as his own image in the mirror serves as the major refutation of this notion. However, other passages reveal that Tom's view of McBride is not only ironic. McBride is the only person at Santa Barbara who, according to Tom, can refer to Tom as “Chief” the “right way” (20). This impression is strengthened as McBride is by and large presented as a friendly and positive figure, emphasized through his visit to Forks:

McBride's green eyes seemed alive with light as he looked at Tom and beyond, taking in at once his friend, the yard, the trees and even the mountains.

“Man this is one fine valley you got here. No wonder you bored the shit out of us talking about it.” (182)

Here McBride appears as an attentive and respectful person, in spite of his somewhat ironic posture. He appreciates the whole of the place, something that immediately strengthens the connection between him and Tom. Nonetheless, Tom and McBride seem at first to have very different views on what an Indian is. Tom's view appears as a more concrete one, whereas McBride's view is more imaginary. As Darrell J. Peters points out "McBride (...) sees Native Americans in the abstract sense, but Tom views them as real people, living real lives, in the real place from which he came" ("Diving Home...", 473). This might serve to explain some of Tom's initial skepticism against those who claim to be Indian but visually appear to be non-Indian. It can be argued that Tom's perception of Indianness is formed through his childhood and youth, and those who do not fit into his own experiences he does not regard as Indians. A provincial trait, it must be argued, with a strong parallel to the way the Euro-Americans, according to Owens, perceive of the "real" Indian as the one riding across the Prairie chasing buffalo while rejecting that contemporary Indians are "real". These two different pictures are painted within two different cultures, and there is a strong sense that in *Wolfson* they both stand out as false. Important to mention in this respect, is that Tom's perception of Indianness changes through the novel, in contrast to those who hold a Euro-American view.

Tom's encounter with Aaron Medicine and the sense of community he experiences present during the sweat emphasize the paradoxical relationship Tom has to his brother and to his mother. McBride's comment as he leaves Forks, "Tom Joseph, the one-man tribe" (195), strengthens an already growing perception that Tom, in spite of the presence of his closest relatives, is indeed the only "real" Indian left in Forks. Especially Jimmy appears to be an Indian only through the color of his

skin. He seems to have lost the spiritual contact with his surroundings, and appears to have taken on the view of the other townspeople when it comes to the mine. Nonetheless, Jimmy can also be said to contribute to Tom's realization that he has to change and not become the exact copy of his uncle. As Peters points out, Tom is challenged through Jimmy's arguments that neither he nor Tom knows what Indian means anymore ("Diving Home...", 476). Furthermore, in spite the fact that Jimmy appears to have repudiated his Indian heritage, he physically supports Tom on several occasions. This is well illustrated through the incident in the bar, where Buddy Hill attacks both Jimmy, Tom and McBride. However, first and foremost Jimmy stands out as the "big brother" as Jimmy and Tom are attacked by Buddy Hill, Jake Tobin and two other men after the town meeting (130-134). As the men intimidate the two brothers with racist insinuations, Jimmy is actually the first one to strike (131). It is also interesting to see how Jimmy's appearance is depicted after the fight:

A drop of rain broke on the windshield, and then a flurry swept down across the pickup, touching lightly upon Jimmy's face and glistening dark hair. (134)

The image of Jimmy's black hair seems here to strongly emphasize his Indian traits. Furthermore, the depiction of how the flurry lightly touches him upon his face evokes a notion of nature as inclined in a friendly way towards Jimmy, almost rewarding him for protecting his brother. Given the pattern elsewhere in the novel of the reciprocal relationship between nature and Indians, this passage gives an impression of Jimmy as a genuine Indian. However, most descriptions of Jimmy in the novel connect him to heavy consumption of alcohol and physical decay. The last reference to Jimmy in the novel seems to suggest that he has fallen deeper into alcoholism, but at least there are passages where he clearly shows potential and ability to act.

The forest ranger Martin Grider is a character that shares Tom's attitudes against the mine. Even though Grider and Tom are new acquaintances, there is a sense of connection and common understanding between them. Their shared feelings about the mine as well as their common amazement over nature and wildlife give the impression that they are almost twin spirits. In many ways Grider seems to represent the kind of person Tom would have been if he was white instead of Indian, a compliment to John Purdy's portrayal of "ranger Grider" as "but one further example" of "[c]haracters who complicate the essentialist ideals of racial binaries abound" ("*Wolfsong and Pacific Refrains*", 184).

As Tom and Grider discuss how to stop the mining project, Tom again reveals his skepticism toward becoming something else than what he perceives as Indian. By appealing to Tom's affinity for the wilderness, Grider tries to talk him into joining the Forest Service. However, Tom seems to reject this idea, as it appears to dawn on him that as a ranger, the possibility of saving the valley from the mine is marginal:

"It's a peregrine, all right," Tom said. "There's always been a couple of them around here."

"Do you realize that if we could prove there was a pair of peregrines nesting up here we could maybe stop this whole goddamned operation? If we couldn't stop it, we could sure cramp their style." (168)

Grider first mentions the possibility of stopping the mine, whereas in the next sentence he limits his expectations and settles with the idea of cramping it. There is a strong sense that the pattern is the same as Ab Masingale describes, namely that this development cannot be stopped. Postponed perhaps, but never stopped. The following paragraphs from the conversation between Grider and Tom only add to the impression that the valley is now beyond salvation:

“A little town there is what they have in mind. And when they’re finished there’ll be a fucking highway all the way to Lake Image. You ever see what happened to Railroad Creek?” (...)

“Well, that’s not even a drop in the old bucket to what they’ll do here,” Grider said.

Tom imagined his uncle shooting at machines, and he could understand it clearly for the first time. The falcon shrilled from somewhere up the ridge, and Grider started down toward the flat, sliding and scrambling on loose scree as far as the watertank. There he turned and waited for Tom.

When Tom arrived, Grider was running his hand over a seam in the big tank and looking carefully at the riprap foundation of rock under it.

“It sure wouldn’t take much to knock this baby off the mountain,” he said. He grinned at Tom. (168 - 169)

There is a strong notion that Grider’s forecast of what can be expected from the mine adds to a growing awareness within Tom that finally makes him realize what his uncle fought against. Tom appears to see no way around the fight against the destruction of the valley other than through the use of illegal means, following the same pattern as his uncle. Tom appears to see the judicial means of protection, on which Grider will have to rely, as only representing an inability to act. This seems to bring about a certain distance between the two characters – in spite the fact that blowing up the tank actually appears to be Grider’s idea.

Though he is portrayed as mainly a positive character, Grider also expresses views that may appear complex and difficult in relation to a Native American discourse. As he tries to talk Tom into becoming a ranger, Grider broadens Tom’s horizon through a geographical and historical reasoning:

“All the way to Canada there’s a million of acres of wilderness north of here. You could start walking right here and keep going all the way to the border and be in wilderness all the way. And once you get into Canada you can just keep going all the way to Alaska, and that’s where the wilderness really begins. It’s a big country. The Bob Marshall Wilderness is a million acres, with places nobody sees in ten years, and there’s Bitterroot and Saw tooth and a lot of other country.”

“This is my country, not the Bob Marshall. That’s Blackfeet or Nez Peerce or something like that.” (...)

“I know what you mean, but you also have to figure out that it’s all your country now, just like it’s all mine. White and Indian don’t matter no more. Your people weren’t always here. They came from somewhere, probably from the north. You could think of Alaska as home, Mongolia maybe. I talked with a Navajo woman once who had gone to Mongolia with an anthropology class. She said she could understand some of the native language.” (173)

In the questions concerning the conservation of nature in the valley, Tom and Grider do have a common interest. Their angles of approach are however different. Grider’s reasoning seems to offer little consolation to Tom. One might even argue that the forest ranger’s historical and scientific reasonings must appear quite rude and offensive to Tom as a Native American. Arguments such as “I know what you mean, but you also have to figure out that it’s all your country now, just like it’s all mine. White and Indian don’t matter no more” may at first appear as arguments persuading Tom to join the forest service. However, these arguments may just as well be considered as an acceptance and acknowledgement of how the Europeans once took hold of the American continent at the expense of the Native Americans. This impression is strengthened by the fact that Grider in his argumentation points out how also Native Americans at some point in time migrated to America – similar to the way the Europeans migrated there thousands of years later. Furthermore, as he tries to talk Tom into enjoying the wilderness areas to the north, Grider appears unaffected by Tom’s arguments that these areas belong to other tribes such as “Nez Peerce or Blackfoot”.

Grider’s approach implies forbearance of history, and he uses pragmatism to account for adjustment to its outcome. Grider’s reasoning seems initially incompatible with Tom’s perception of reality and his stand against being willingly assimilated as a forest ranger. It would however be unfair to leave Grider’s historic account at this.

Given a different angle of approach, it is also possible to see Grider as arguing in favor of unity in an attempt to stand against further depletion and destruction of nature. The remark on how Native Americans and people worldwide are related, as well as the statement that race or ethnicity do not matter anymore, points to a holistic world view. In such a perspective, Grider's incorporation of the wilderness is also important. The description of how it stretches across borders and boundaries seems to suggest that nature helps to unify the world.

Even though Grider is not an Indian, he has knowledge both of the history of Indians, as well as, to Tom's surprise, the meaning of the Stehemish name Dakobed:

He [Tom] looked at Grider. "My tribe used to call her Dakobed." (...)

"It means something like mother or the source, doesn't it?" Grider asked.

Tom nodded. "I thought you just started here this summer?" (...)

"So how do you [Grider] know things like that?"

Grider smiled. "I read books. I went to college like you."
(167)

Grider demonstrates how it is possible to establish an understanding of the past based on fragmentary information that is still available. As John Purdy points out, the encounter with Grider provides a lesson for Tom about the potential of procuring knowledge about his forefathers through cross-cultural exchange ("*Wolfsong* and *Pacific Refrains*", 184-185).

The overall impression of Grider is that he appears to help Tom by enabling him to feel some kind of unity and engage in exchange with people other than his own tribe. It is possible to see Grider as a mediator or unifier. In this respect Darrel J. Peters offers an interesting approach, focusing on the resemblance between Grider and Christ in a dream that Tom has. Peters argues that this resemblance is indicative of the hybridization between cultures that is necessary in order for Tom to complete his vision quest ("*Diving Home...*", 477). Grider beyond doubt represents a bridge

between Western and Native American ontology, a widening of perspective for Tom. As Peters observes, “[t]he boundaries between white and Indian become blurred both in the dream and in the words of Grider” (ibid.). Other critics, such as Susan Bernardin, question Grider’s intentions when trying to persuade Tom to become a forest ranger. According to Bernardin, Grider does not only want to enlist Tom because of his knowledge of the backcountry, but also because of “his symbolic value as an Indian who could guard against further devastation of the wilderness” (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 84). Whether it is Tom’s fear of becoming a symbol on a “white” pedestal that makes him decline a career in the Forest Service remains unknown. The overall impression is, however, despite the complexity and ambiguity of Grider’s character, that Tom takes to heart some of Grider’s ideas, and that these ideas appear central in his identity and spirit quest. Grider’s influence appears to contribute to Tom’s questioning of the existence and significance of strict ethnic and cultural boundaries.

The idea of what constitutes a “real” Indian is quite complex in *Wolfsong*. After this analysis of the portrayal of different characters, it seems possible to argue that the full-blood Indian Jimmy is in fact less “Indian” than the almost full-blood white McBride. Owens’ purpose of blurring the boundaries between Indians and non-Indians thus becomes quite interesting. In “Other Destinies, Other Plots” (22) Owens notes that the mixed-bloods in Native American literature often turn to the past for an Indian identity, and at the same time turn away from the collective dream of America. In *Wolfsong* however, as stated also by Peters (“Diving Home...”, 480-481), Owens has given a full-blood Indian a new and possible alternative, where he adapts to his surroundings and draws strength from cultural multiplicity. The impression is strong that people such as Grider, McBride and Aaron Medicine help Tom broaden his view

when it comes to defining what a real Indian is. McBride stands out as being almost fully white, but his engagement in Native American causes, as well as the sincerity and respect that marks his relationship to Tom make him stand out as at least “true to the Indian cause”.

The impression that skin color or blood amount have a minor function in determining Indian identity is strengthened through Tom’s participation in the sweat. Here Tom realizes that he shares profound common interests with other people across ethnic and cultural boundaries, and Aaron Medicine’s words about how an Indian can watch the Super bowl and use a microwave oven and still live by Indian values is certainly a blow to the Myth of The Vanishing Indian. As Peters puts it when commenting on Aaron Medicine’s words about “realbears”: “Aaron Medicine shows him that the romantic vision of the Native American dying bravely is a lie” (“Diving Home...”, 478). Aaron Medicine’s Indian is a dynamic one, able to survive and participate in modern American society on his own terms, but still being a “true” Indian in his values.

As Bernardin points out, both Tom, Jimmy, Sarah and Jim have survived and held on to their land “by working in logging and selling ‘authentic Indian socks and caps’ to tourists” (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 83). Additionally, Sarah Joseph has rather successfully amalgamated traditional Native American belief with Christianity. In spite of the fact that Sarah and Jim have more or less adapted to the dominant culture, the impression is that they have also kept alive their spiritual relationship to the world around them, and contribute to Tom’s necessary change. Both in terms of characterization and plot, Owens emphasizes the importance of the multicultural or dialogic zone that most contemporary Native Americans, including Tom Joseph, are liable to live in. Owens’ point seems to be that by choosing not to adapt, Native

Americans take on exactly the role that the dominant culture is so eager to assign them, namely as “ancient artifacts” unable to exist and cope in a new and modern society. Owens assigns Tom, in accordance with a concept of a “real” and “surviving” Indian, the ability of being dynamic, adaptive, and open to cross-cultural exchange of values and ideas.

5. SPIRITUALITY, MYTHS AND TRICKSTER TURNS

The first part of this chapter examines how the Native American spiritual relationship with nature is portrayed in *Wolfsong*, and how spiritual forces appear to help Tom in the novel. Furthermore, it looks into the connection between Tom's spirit quest and other central motifs and themes in the novel – Tom's ability to change and his transgression of borders being central focal points. The second part sheds light on how the novel is linked to Native American oral tradition. Moreover, this part analyzes the novel in terms of trickster discourse and myth. Trickster discourse or narrative, as well as storytelling and myth, gives way for interpretations that often turn the tables, and thus the analysis of the novel's ambiguous finale is also included in this part.

Spirituality

Chapter Two describes physical nature as an active participant in the novel. In accordance with Native American belief, Owens also links nature to spirituality. Similar to the way the novel unfixes the borders between human and non-human nature, it also blurs the boundaries between the earthly and the spiritual world, making it possible for Tom to also receive help and guidance from forces inhabiting that transcendental level.

Uncle Jim's death represents a loss to Tom, not only a personal one, but also a loss of knowledge. His uncle was not finished teaching him everything he knew, and before Tom left for college, his uncle promised him that as soon as he got back they would go for long walks and talk about those things he yet had not taught Tom. Thus it appears not to be coincidental that it is Uncle Jim, paradoxically through his own death, who is the cause for Tom's homecoming. And it is his death that becomes the incentive for Tom to start his search for the knowledge necessary to find an identity, a

sense of self. The trajectory of the novel may be seen to be driven by Tom's yearning for knowledge, his constant search for an identity, and particularly the quest for his guiding spirit. In a way it is Uncle Jim who is the instigator of the plot, and by willing his guiding spirit to Tom, also the one who moves it forward. Focus is thus brought on Uncle Jim, as it was he who willed his guiding spirit to Tom. Even after his death, Uncle Jim and his teachings constitute the foundation of Tom's world. It is not only the *memory* of Uncle Jim that appears to affect Tom's decisions and the course of events, but also his spirit. The appearance of the big hunting dog or wolf several times in the course of the story strongly suggests that the uncle's spirit is confronting Tom. That the uncle's spirit has taken the form of a wilderness creature strengthens the idea of unity between the Native Americans and nature. Furthermore, it strengthens the idea of nature as something spiritual. As mentioned in the nature chapter, Owens himself stated that he wanted to make the place and wilderness itself the protagonist of *Wolfson*. The imagery of the descriptions of the natural surroundings sustains the notion of nature as an agent and a driving force. As nature is connected to spirituality, its function as a force is strengthened. Consequently, the novel – especially the ending of novel – has implications that transcend the physical world.

Wolfson also appears to have a strong environmental perspective, and in this respect it is important to establish the relationship between this and the theme of spirituality. Critics such as Schweninger are perhaps stating the obvious when writing that as people destroy the land, they also destroy their spiritual connection to it. He bases his thoughts on Momaday's "Land Ethic", and concludes that losing sight of the connection to land will end in death ("Landscape and Cultural Identity...", 94-95). The idea of preserving the valley in *Wolfson* goes further than what is known as Western environmentalism. To Tom, the essence of the landscape and wilderness is

far more personal spiritual. As Uncle Jim wills his spirit to Tom, it is clear that in order to receive it, in order to become “whole”, the place Tom must go is the *wilderness*. Chris LaLonde explains how the Salish tribes, of whom the fictional Stehemish in *Wolfsong* are part, regard landscape and place as sacred. He points out how the Salish culture does not recognize any boundaries between human and other-than-human life, and how nature is essential as it represents the place they go to find their own guiding spirits. Especially lakes and other bodies of water were important in this respect, as they represented places of cleansing and purification (“Trying on Trickster in *Wolfsong*”, 26). Thus, in accordance with LaLonde, it may be argued that the mine to the valley in Forks poses a threat to the core of the whole Salish world. This becomes remarkably visible through the draining of Lake Image, the lake where Uncle Jim received his guiding spirit.

Spirituality in *Wolfsong* also represents the unfixing of boundaries. The close connection between worldly life and spiritual life stands in contrast to Euro-American perceptions of nature and science as spheres that are separate from spirituality and religion. In the novel Uncle Jim comments on this as he asks, “How could you separate the spirit from life and call it religion?” (51). This question illustrates how the concept of separate spheres seems meaningless from a Native American point of view. Uncle Jim’s is explained by LaLonde’s reference to how the Coastal Salish perceive of no boundaries neither between worlds, e.g. the spiritual and the physical, or within worlds, e.g. the social and natural worlds (“Trying on Trickster in *Wolfsong*”, 25-26). In a similar vein, Schweninger argues that these tribes regarded physical place as being alive, and as representing the embodiment of spiritual significance (“Landscape and Cultural Identity...”, 104). The crossing of boundaries is central in *Wolfsong*. Not only must Tom go beyond his own misconceptions of

what a “real Indian” is, but he must also cross into new territory in his spiritual quest. For Tom to succeed in his vision quest, he must be able to integrate the physical and spiritual aspects of the landscape – to transgress the border between them (ibid., 94). Schweninger sees Tom’s function similar to that of the Northwestern coastal Native tradition, where humans take on the role as mediators between different spiritual realms (ibid., 101).

In order to find his guiding spirit, Tom must go through purification rituals represented by his journeys into the wilderness. These rituals seem to correspond to the rituals Uncle Jim underwent when he received the wolf spirit, but Tom’s seems to have further to go. According to Susan Bernardin, for each journey Tom makes, he seems to get closer to the wolf spirit. She refers to how Tom on his second journey hears voices nearby, and how his name is called to him from the river (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 90). In spite of this, he feels alone:

(...) and he walked the ridge (...), alone in this whirling world (162)

He felt alone, cut off, a distant speck in the whirling world (163)

This might serve to explain why, as both Bernardin (90) and Peters (476) observe, the lake refuses to give Tom back his own reflection (163). Already here it seems clear that he is not ready to receive his guiding spirit; he cannot receive it while seeing himself as “The Vanishing Indian”. If Tom had gained true insight and knowledge, he would have understood that he was not alone or cut off, but connected to the nature and landscape around him, and that all aspects of these represented life and were his companions. It may also reflect how he must be open to change in his relation to people as well, perhaps in particular be open to participating in a community with people of other ethnicities and cultures. Tom’s initial sense of detachment from nature strengthens the impression that he at this point is still static, while nature is in

constant motion: “(...) the land was all movement and, all flux, a wailing arc from birth to death” (160). According to Peters, Tom has not seen his home in a larger context. Peters links Tom’s refusal to change to Silko’s *Ceremony*, and its suggestion that the ceremonies always have changed (“Diving Home...”, 476). It seems as if Tom’s education has to do with learning that motion. His failure to receive the guiding spirit shows, however, that he has not yet been able to find his own place within that moving system. Thus, as the spirit refuses to follow Tom, it also leads him further on his journey towards attaining more knowledge. Consequently, the guiding spirit also functions as a catalyst in the novel.

Spirits as agents of the plot are also present in the scene of Tom’s final flight. The crevasses of the mountainous landscape that serve as obstacles to his pursuers, seem to provide assistance to Tom during his flight up the mountain. There are also signs of the presence of another dimension in his physical surroundings:

Around him the mountains drummed and the streams sang, in rhythmic voices. (228)

Here the surrounding nature is explicitly attributed with personifications, with drumming and singing. It is also important to observe that there is not one but several voices. In view of the novel’s numerous insinuations of the connection between Indians, both those dead and those alive, and nature, this reference to chanting voices and drumming rhythms evokes connotations to a tribal ritual or dance. With respect to the quest in which Tom is engaged, the landscape itself may be seen as performing a supportive ritual. This idea may be related to LaLonde’s description of how the Salish people went out into the wilderness to receive the knowledge about one’s particular dance and its relation to one’s *song* (“Trying on Trickster in *Wolfsong*, 26). Thus, it is far from coincidental that this spirit dance occurs immediately before Tom will

receive his *wolfsong* and become one with his guiding spirit. Uncle Jim also has encountered these spirit dancers, and LaLonde points out how spirit dancers represent a sense of relatedness to people as well as to place (ibid.). Tom failed his next-to-last vision quest because he could not relate properly to place and people. The spirit dance may be a sign that he now has overcome this obstacle, and that he is getting closer to his own song, his guiding spirit. This notion is strengthened by the presence of a wolf several times in the novel and especially through the last part. When Tom heads up the valley with the dynamite in the truck, an animal that is presumably a wolf, jumps right in front of the car. Furthermore, on his way up the mountain Tom finds a deer-carcass that cannot have been taken by any other animal than a wolf (225). The following night Tom hears the first deep and long howl (227). The presence of and closeness to the wolf are also apparent as Tom several times during his flight up the mountain is described as taking the form of an animal:

In the steepest places he fell to all fours. (222)

He covered two miles in an hour, gliding through the lessening shadows like a predator (...) He *sniffed* the air for the smell of fire (...) (226, emphasis added)

As Tom reaches his final obstacle, the ice wall, it appears almost impossible to mount. He is hurt, and the wall is steep and without any cracks. The posse is right behind him. This is the moment when the wolf song starts, filling both Tom and the air:

A deep tunnel of sound welled up in the clear night and enveloped the valleys and rose up around the mountain, a howl came out of the forests and ascended until it filled the world. He listened to the rising howl of the wolf and felt the small hairs straighten on the back of his neck. The wolf drew the long howl again and again from the ridges somewhere down the mountain, and suddenly he understood (...) The dizziness left him and he felt strong. Every delicate shadow stood out clear and sharp-edged on the rock and snow (...)

Methodically he chipped a fourth step and a fifth, not hearing the clatter of the knife and falling ice. At his back the wolf howled, and the sound flooded through him and he continued to climb, using the wounded arm as well as the good one. (248)

This passage leaves little doubt that the wolf spirit appears as a force that is helping Tom. The strength Tom gains cannot be explained otherwise than as being a spiritual strength, only physically referred to as sound. And here Owens challenges the perceptions of boundaries; as Tom is spiritually reinforced, he is physically strengthened, too. Bernardin also acknowledges that Tom is “rewarded” with the wolfsong, after what she identifies as a three-day fast and cleansing by water (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 91). Peters support this notion, as he points out how Tom more or less unconsciously goes through a purification ritual during his flight from the posse. Peters appears to see Tom’s fall into the crevasse – “into frozen water” – after being knocked down by a bullet, as his dive for the spirit (“Diving Home...”, 479-480). The fact that it is the Dakobed that constitutes the scene for Tom’s merging with his wolf spirit is important. Both Peters and Bernardin underscore the significance of this. Bernardin points to the fact that the mountain represents the center and reference point to the Stehemish people in the novel (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 91). To this must be added Peter’s observation of how the novel equates the Dakobed with a spider web (226) – a place of creation, balance, and strength. According to Peters, it is the perfect setting for the spirit quest (“Diving Home...”, 479). And as Tom receives his guiding spirit, he receives his song, and thus he becomes a singer. As the novel points out, an observation also commented on by Schweninger (104), “the power of a singer was a subtle thing... a complex web that drew upon all the forces of the mountains and brought them to a single focus like perfect silence” (85). Schweninger connects this to Tom’s realization that everything

has life and spirit – a belief, he argues, deeply rooted in coastal Salish culture (ibid.). Tom is finally made aware that there are no boundaries between the different spheres either; that there is a unity between everything. When commenting on Tom’s reception of the spirit, Bernardin argues that the wolf song and the song inside Tom merge. She goes on to point out that it might serve to symbolize how the boundaries between Tom’s self and the outer world collapse (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 93). Thus it may be argued that the collapsing boundaries also have something to do with Tom’s realization of how he must be open to change.

Trickster discourse, stories and myths

Trickster narratives are based on Native American oral tradition, and they are recognized by most often assigning a comic or promising rather than a tragic outcome for their heroes. Central in trickster narrative or discourse is the challenging of false premonitions and actions. *Wolfsong* stands out as a trickster narrative in that it confronts and questions especially Tom’s perceptions and moves. Stories and myths are also central in Native American oral tradition, and their function is often to blur the borders between what is perceived as reality or story. Seeing *Wolfsong* as a myth is central when interpreting the novel’s ambiguous ending.

Peters uses the scene with Tom’s sabotage to introduce the idea that *Wolfsong* is a trickster narrative. He does so by pointing to the seven ravens that circle over Tom near the water tower, and comments on how barking ravens often stand out as trickster figures mocking false steps or ideas (“Diving Home...”, 478). Schweningen likewise argues that the novel makes use of trickster elements. He identifies Tom’s blowing up of the water and the killing of J.D. Hill as typical trickster acts, and suggests that such acts imply loss of control or loss of power (“Landscape and Cultural Identity...” 105-106). The mockery of the ravens might be seen as a warning

to Tom that his future does not lie within the realm of continuing his uncle's acts of sabotage. The raven's warnings seem to be justified, as the explosion and the water kill J.D. Hill, an event that further forces Tom to flee from his own valley.

In Chris LaLonde's wording, the trickster appears as a raven that scolds, barks, watches, shouts, laughs and mocks in an attempt to help Tom overcome the gaps of knowledge that he is facing, and which need to be closed in order for Tom to find himself ("Trying on Trickster in *Wolfsong*", 35). Like Schweninger, LaLonde interprets the trickster ravens to be questioning Tom's sabotage (ibid 40-41). However, LaLonde's interpretation of the trickster raven must also imply that it serves the function of "driving" Tom up the mountain toward the summit where he will have his vision: "He sat back and waited for his strength to return (...) and listened as raven made grave pronouncements in the rocks above (243)". The raven does not want to leave Tom in peace. He wants to keep Tom on his toes, as if to make sure that he will escape his pursuers, and finally helps Tom to fill the gap of knowledge by merging with the wolf spirit. Thus the trickster raven stands out as both a guide toward knowledge and as a liberator. There is parallel between these scenes and what happens early in the novel. As Jim Joseph lies shooting at the machines that work on road to the mine, the ravens above bark and mock (3). The similarity, as pointed out by LaLonde, is striking between Jim Joseph and the trickster raven ("Trying on Trickster in *Wolfsong*", 36). Much like the raven, Jim Joseph also stands out as an irritant, trying to "bark" at the machines and men in an attempt to make them change their minds about building the mine, just as Tom by opposing the mine becomes an irritant and thus also stands out as a trickster figure (ibid.). The parallel between the trickster raven and Tom also makes the latter in the end emerge as a liberator and a guide to knowledge.

The positive image of Tom stands, however, in great contrast to the rather gloomy future that both Tom alone and the Stehemish as tribe seem to face toward the end of the novel. In Schweninger's opinion there appears to be a major ambiguity in the novel's depiction of how active resistance only leads to forced removal from the land. In addition, Tom must abandon the place from which the spirit he receives comes ("Landscape and Cultural Identity...", 106). In the same vein, Bernardin focuses on the troubling question of taking a life, and the isolation that awaits the Joseph brothers ("Wilderness Conditions...", 91). These dire prospects for the future are directly connected to Tom's fatal action. The ambiguity of the ending becomes even more apparent if one argues along LaLonde's lines of thinking that Tom's extreme action was absolutely necessary in order for him to initiate his final and successful vision quest ("Trying on Trickster in *Wolfsong*" 50-51). According to LaLonde, the trickster is a trope for action, and it is by taking action that the trickster is able to transform (ibid., 55). And transformation is exactly what Tom must go through in order to succeed in his spirit quest. As he gets hold of the dynamite (210), Tom waves the spider web aside. The spider web in Native American beliefs often symbolizes centering and balance, and its destruction forebodes chaos and destabilizing. When Tom steals the dynamite, and heads up the valley in order to blow up the water, this is exactly what happens: "He knocked the spider webs out of the way with the flashlight and took one small box from the shelf" (210). Peters interprets this as Owens' way of showing how Tom is exposing himself to danger by such an act. ("Diving Home...", 478). It may also serve as a symbol of how his actions from that moment on destabilize the world that has been balanced neatly like the threads in that web. This is an image in accordance with Vizenor's words of how "[t]he trickster livens chaos" ("Trickster Discourse", 284).

Tom initiates chaos, but chaos does not only counteract order, but also stasis. Thus it is possible to see Tom's act of destabilizing as not only something that is dangerous and threatening, but also something that represents a chance for change. As Tom disturbs the web, the "fragments" of existence may be seen as whirling around. Tom now appears to have a chance of changing his own story, and he has the possibility to play another role than that of the Vanishing Indian. In his flight up the mountain, Tom seems at first to be caught within the same pattern that has haunted Native Americans since the arrival of the Europeans, namely forced flight and dislocation. As Tom climbs the mountain, however, there is an impression that the tables are turned. This time it is the Indian who becomes the hero of the story:

A fleshwound, he thought, and grinned weakly at the cowboys-and-Indians joke. It was always the cowboys who got the fleshwounds. Indians clutched their chests and fell from spotted horses (243).

The Vanishing Indian becomes the hero of Owens' tale. The elements of the web have become reorganized – the fragments of Tom's limited knowledge of his own culture, his experiences from living in a transcultural society, and also the knowledge and impulses he has gained from the people he has encountered during the "migration" of his spirit quest. People such as his uncle, his mother, McBride, Grider and Aaron Medicine are important in this respect. And as the wolf song fills him and he becomes a singer, he appears able to integrate all of these elements with the knowledge and insight he obtains through his guiding spirit. Near the summit of the Dakobed, Tom seems to draw the strings in a new web for the future. In Peters' view, the ending emphasizes Owens' own idea that Indians can find identity and draw power from the fragmented worlds in which they have been forced to live ("Diving Home...", 481).

There are, however, still loose ends that need to be tied together in order to understand the ending of *Wolfsong*. Even if, according to LaLonde, Tom's dangerous

action was of pivotal importance in order for him to receive his guidance, the bleak prospects for the future, as Schweninger and Bernardin also point out, still seem to be problematic. This impression of uncertainty and obscurity is strengthened, as certain passages describing Tom's flight seem to question whether the ending of the novel is credible or probable:

He [Bayard] thought about what they could do. He could go back down and they could radio for people to cut off the route on the other side, but Will Baker must have thought of that already. And if he went back down now, and Tom Joseph was wounded badly, Tom probably wouldn't survive the night. There had been too much blood in the bergshrund. (245)

As Bayard comes to these conclusions over Tom's injury and flight, both Tom's "fleshwound", his ability to reach the summit, as well as his possibility for a final escape on the other side of the mountain are brought into question. This impression of ambiguity is only strengthened by the next-to-last paragraph that describes how Tom mounts the ice wall and escapes over the mountain:

The moon framed him against the glistening wall and glinted off his black hair, and inside him the song grew louder, and then the explosion of a rifle turned the night suddenly quiet. (248)

Had this been the last paragraph, the ending of the novel would have been a closed one; it would have been very difficult to interpret this as not representing Tom's death. And still when succeeded by another paragraph indicating that Tom escapes safely and soundly over the top, the ending is quite open – ambiguous at best. It does not help matters that "END" then appears, printed in capital letters, after what actually seems to represent the beginning of something new for Tom.

Bernardin interprets the "END" as not representing a final end, but a promise of return. She points to how the wolf song that ends the novel is an icon representing the seemingly vanished wilderness, and how the belief in the return of Indians and

wolves “threads through” the whole novel (“Wilderness Conditions...”, 91). Peters, in his account, seems to stress Tom’s symbolic motion to the north, to Canada where his uncle had planned to “tell him all them things” (“Diving Home...”, 481). Not even Schweningen seems to choose to investigate the contradiction that would arise if one reads the next-to-last paragraph to mean that Tom actually gets killed while climbing the ice wall. Schweningen argues that the pessimism of Tom’s forced exit out of the valley is overcome by the fact that he and the spirit transcend place. Then he recognizes that Tom, by starting a migration to the north, “retains the potential of achieving mythical proportions” (“Landscape and Cultural Identity...”, 106-107). Here Schweningen introduces the issue of whether the novel’s ending is credible in traditional terms. He suggests that Tom’s survival may be read on a mythical level. It can be argued that the end of novel has three possible interpretations. First, Tom can be seen as surviving and successfully escaping. This implies a very promising future for Tom. Secondly, an alternative the critics seem almost not to dare to take into consideration, is that the physical or “real” Tom is killed or at least does not succeed in his flight. At a glance this interpretation stands out as less promising, and Tom’s “survival” can only be read on a mythical level. Finally, it is possible to see the end as open, and as an intended challenge for the reader.

The novel repeatedly demonstrates how borders between different spheres or worlds have been transgressed, challenged and blurred. In Euro-American culture, life and death are binary oppositions. There are definite and fixed borders between what is alive and what is dead, and between worldly and spiritual life . Such perceptions are contested in *Wolfsong*:

Along the back of a cedar log six-feet through grew a row of small firs, each about two feet high, marching in file along the nurselog towards the enormous rootwad. There was no demarcation, no place where he could say, “This is alive, this is not.” (83)

As pointed out earlier, part of Tom's challenge in his quest has been to realize that there are no fixed boundaries between what seems to be alive and what is not. He has to realize that both animate and inanimate nature – including rock, earth, mountain and river – are all living things. And having achieved this insight, Tom must further realize that there are no fixed boundaries between himself and these realms. He himself is part of the life that is found in animals and nature and landscape, and the type of life they share is on a spiritual level. Thus, even if the conclusion is drawn that the body of Tom Joseph is shot dead while climbing the ice wall, he will still be spiritually alive. By being part of the spirit-world, he is also a part of the place and landscape. According to Schweninger, “For Tom, the spirit and the physical landscape become indistinguishable; the wolf-spirit is as elemental as the air he breathes. If there is finally no distinction between landscape and spirit, Tom must be seen as one to be reckoned with on earth” (“Landscape and Cultural Identity...”, 107). That the novel fuses contradictions such as “life and death” or “real and unreal”, is also seen through Tom's merging of myth and reality. As Tom has started his flight up the mountain and lies listening to the hailstorm, he recalls a story he has heard from his uncle:

Tom lay on his back in the wool blankets and listened to the hail sweeping down on the ridge, and he thought of a story his uncle had told. As the sun climbed over the Cascades, two women were rolling hail. All day they played, rolling the hail from east to west, sunrise to sunset. Their laughter was thunder, and when they loved a man he had power, his wound cooled and healed by the hail sweeping through the mountains from sunrise to sunset, east to west. He [Tom] hears the hail soften and watched through the branches as the snow began to obscure the meadows (216).

As Tom thinks of the story, it merges with his real situation. In this way, as also Schweninger points out (“Landscape and Cultural Identity...”, 104), the myth

becomes reality. The borders between “real” and “unreal” are blurred, or even better; there is no such thing as “unreal”.

It may be argued that nowhere else in the novel is the blurring of boundaries between what is “real” or “realistic” and what stands out as “unreal” more apparent than toward the end. In Euro-American and Western culture there exists perhaps no deeper ambiguity than the perception of how someone or something can be dead and alive at the same time. Vizenor deals with this contradiction. He points out that “in trickster discourse, the trickster is a comic trope, a chance separation in a narrative”, and he then refers to Bakhtin’s statement that “[t]here are elements that, in principle, cannot unfold in the plane of a single and unified consciousness, but presuppose two consciousnesses that do not fuse (...)” (“Trickster Discourse”, 282). When it comes to Tom’s final fate, *Wolfsong* seemingly offers two ways of perceiving the world, both of them repeatedly evoked through the whole novel, and both distinctly accentuated toward the ending. It seems clear that the concept “Tom the Vanishing Indian” cannot fuse with “Tom the Returning Indian”. In the novel Tom is always given choices throughout his quest – venues of action. And just as he has refused to be categorized and stereotyped by the dominant culture through the preceding parts of the novel, he neither in the end chooses to become the Tragic Indian hero or the Vanishing Indian. By making visible the possibility of Tom’s death or certain captivity on one level, Owens manages to create a contrast that even more clearly underscores Tom’s triumph on another. Vizenor comments upon this feature in his theoretical work, and his citation of Richard Sewall seems to strengthen the impression that a sense of tragedy strengthens a comedy: “Without a sense of the tragic, comedy loses its heart, it becomes brittle, it has animation but no life” (ibid., 283). As Owens evokes the “sense of the tragic”, he constantly challenges not only Tom, but also the reader. Time and

again, especially toward the end, tragic outcomes are suggested for Tom, and every time he seems to “choose” to overcome them. In the final paragraph, the reader and Tom encounter Owens’ last test, the final suggestion of Tom’s “end”:

He pulled himself over the edge and stood, looking down at the three men wrestling with the rifle below him. An then he turned to run just as the wolf began to call again, and this time it kept growing, louder and louder and spinning in ever-widening circles through the thin air until it was deafening and seemed a part of the air he breathed. He ran with long, smooth strides down the mountain, the moon hurling his shadow northward before him, listening to the rising howl of the wolf that went on and on until the night seemed ready to burst. (249)

Examining this paragraph in isolation, it portrays a promising future for Tom. First, it describes how he survives the flight and merges with his past by receiving the spirit willed to him by his uncle. Secondly, the circle-imagery evokes a strong sense of return, whereas the northward motion might suggest community with Aaron Medicine’s group. The merging of the howl and the air seems to represent Tom’s ability to transgress the border between the spiritual and the physical world.

Taking into consideration the parts that precede the novel’s end, it is possible to see the promising finale as an imperative, a challenge for “those who come after”, a notion complementing Schweningen’s point on how Owens seems to draw the reader into the equation with a challenge of “making your own story”. From this angle, the ending of *Wolfsong* stands out as mainly having a *symbolic* or *mythic* significance. Owens’ point seems not to be whether it appears *realistic* or *credible* that Tom manages to physically escape, but rather the fact that in the novel Tom makes his own story, as he succeeds in becoming “the Indian hero of other destinies, other plots.” (“Other Destinies, Other Plots”, 18). In accordance with Schweningen (104), it must then be argued that the novel itself takes the form of a myth. It tells the story of Tom Joseph, a story that others can identify with and use on their way toward finding

themselves or their “guiding spirit”. Owens challenges the reader to accept that Tom’s story is a story of success as he overcomes the many pitfalls that may suggest a tragic interpretation.

CONCLUSION

A culture in which the members base their understanding of existence on a close relationship with nature is naturally quite likely to develop a perception of the world as ecosystemic. In *Wolfsong*, Tom's ancestors are described as having derived their understanding of the world through their relationship with nature, and first and foremost the Dakobed peak. This constitutes the basic knowledge that Tom had acquired through the stories from his uncle and his mother. Thus Tom understands that in order to form what Momaday terms *man's idea of himself* (*The Way To Rainy Mountain*, 4) he must reenact his ancestors' engagement in a close relationship with nature and place in the valley. Through his journeys in the wilderness Tom learns to understand that all life, both animate and inanimate, is interconnected. Both in the novel and in his theory, Owens appears to point out that it is this *epistemologic* that assigns to Native Americans a land ethic which is based in qualities of reciprocity and sustainability.

As return and regeneration appear to be inherent in the Native American ethos that is depicted by Owens both in the novel and in his literary theory, *Wolfsong* seems to herald a return of the protagonist Tom Joseph and everything that he represents, in spite of the ambiguous ending of the novel. In his theoretical approaches, Owens stresses that from a Native American perspective man is an inseparable part of the ecosystem, a view also highly noticeable in the novel. There is an extensive use of imagery that connects Tom, as well as everything that can be regarded as "Indian" in the novel, tightly to nature and place, suggesting that Indians are integral parts of the environment in the valley. As Tom and "Indianness" are identified with nature in the valley, the imagery of the novel further connects them to cyclical return or regeneration – spanning from the references to the rain and the river, through the

attack of the second-growth, to the vines that overgrow the Joseph property. Furthermore, as the thesis has tried to show, nature is central in Tom's process of understanding that there are no fixed borders between the realms of existence, between what is physical and what is spiritual, between what is dead and what is alive. Tom's relationship with other characters who share his view of nature as well as spiritual matters also gives the impression that there is a future for Tom within a wider community than his lonely valley. As discussed in Chapter Four, characters such as McBride and Aaron Medicine along with the Josephs who in spite of difficulties have survived and adjusted serve to repudiate the notion of American Indians as being dysfunctional in a modern society, and to prove that "real" Indians still exist. Owens' repudiation is reflected in the novel in Tom overcoming the stereotypical perceptions of what a "real" Indian is.

The influence of Aaron Medicine and McBride as well as the forest ranger Grider and Sarah Joseph makes Tom realize that in order to create a future for himself he must change. Tom's dependency on nature becomes apparent as he has to "consult" the landscape in order to understand his own self. Tom must see this pattern of change confirmed in nature and place simply because it is the knowledge and experience of landscape and place that provide his fundamental structure of understanding. Tom finally realizes that also nature is constantly changing, and realizes that also he must be dynamic. His new openness to change and transcultural influence strengthens the impression that there is hope for a future community with people such as McBride and Aaron Medicine's group. And further, his new understanding enables Tom to merge with his guiding spirit – the final evidence that he has become a "a pure" man, relieved of false notions, and that he has chosen another destiny than becoming the Vanishing Indian.

As argued particularly in Chapter Two and Five, nature plays an important role as a propulsive force or agent in Tom's education. Along with the trickster figures taken from Native American oral tradition, nature both physically and spiritually helps Tom on his way toward his merging with the wolf-spirit. Tom, a true-to-life Indian in Owens' sense – not the one riding a spotted pony while chasing buffalo across the prairie centuries ago – has through his choice of being open to change become a “real” surviving Indian who takes part in what Owens would term “dialogics in transcultural zone” with representatives of other perspectives and views (“The Song is Very Short”, 54-55). The novel gives the impression that engaging in these “dialogics” is a prerequisite for Tom in order to receive his wolf-spirit. As the discussion of the ending of the novel demonstrates, the fact that *Wolfsong* also stands out as a trickster discourse or narrative, makes it challenge Western static perceptions and dogmas. In such a narrative, characters daring to engage in the exchange of ideas and opinions return strengthened and with a truer insight that enables them to become the hero of their own story. Thus the wolf-spirit would not have given itself to Tom unless he was willing to engage in such a dialogue and let go of his false perceptions. It is also Tom's belief in nature's spiritual dimension that is the key to his ultimate triumph.

Mirrored in Tom's survival and promise of return are the gloomy prospects for the white community in town. In contrast to Tom, the younger generation in Forks is unwilling to change their ways. In spite of warnings from the elderly people, they repudiate Indian claims to the land as sacred, and moreover they deny the existence of “real” Indians. While Tom is willing and able to be open to change and dialogue, the younger Euro-Americans in the valley remain static. The imagery in the novel suggests that each and every one of these characters is trapped in a system of resource

depletion that they cannot reverse. Whereas Tom, literally or symbolically or mythically, is seen to escape over the Dakobed with a promise of return, to the white people in Forks, the town settled on the western terminus of America, the same mountain appears to represent a dead end.

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