

The Art of Hybridization — James Welch's *Fools Crow*

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Recent Native American fiction has yielded a particularly hybrid mode of realism, one fluid and flexible enough to accommodate elements from tribal lore and, in varying modes and degrees, an awareness of the epistemological dilemmas of postmodernism. The injection of tribal elements—shamanism, spirits, witchcraft, charms, love medicines— together with the use of a non-Western (cyclical rather than linear) concept of time, for example, help to account for the vaunted "magical" realism in the work of Louise Erdrich (*Love Medicine* and *Tracks*) or the radically subversive and unambiguously postmodernist revision of American history and Western myth in Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*. As critics have recurrently suggested, Native American fiction which seeks to connect itself to the oral tradition of tribal narrative (as Vizenor in his use of trickster myths and the "stories in the blood") more naturally accommodates itself to a postmodernist approach to fiction than to a traditional realistic one.¹ The oral tradition, then, might be seen as by nature antithetical to realism. As Paula Gunn Allen has also noted, for the contemporary Native writer loyalty to the oral tradition has been "a major force in Indian resistance" to the dominant culture. By fostering an awareness of tribal identity, spiritual traditions, and connection to the

¹ See, for example, Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat, eds., *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), and Gerald Vizenor, *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).

land and its creatures, it has been a source of cultural and existential authenticity as well as a rich storehouse of themes, myths and symbols.²

Contemporary Native American writers have sought to assimilate the oral tradition in sharply divergent ways. Vizenor's explorations of the subversive as well as the healing power of the "stories in the blood" has yielded a searingly comic postmodern critique of Western culture, an exploration of the healing power of tribalism that seeks to assuage the pain of a history of dispossession and brutalization. The fiction of Louise Erdrich, by contrast, is informed with a dual generic orientation: if tribal beliefs make themselves felt in the lives of her characters and an awareness of the oral tradition helps to give shape and structure to her novels (in the orchestration of images, the use of a multiple narrative perspective, and the bringing together of Western and Indian concepts of time), her overall aesthetic commitment is still to mimetic realism. That realism is hybrid or "amphibious," insofar as it seeks connection both to tribal literary forms and to a mainstream American tradition that includes writers like William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and Toni Morrison.³

More even than Erdrich's, the fiction of James Welch has stayed close to a mainstream mode of Euro-American realism, a line which, as Welch granted in a 1985 interview with Laura Coltelli, "differs quite markedly from the storytelling tradition of the traditional Indians."⁴ In his portrayal of contemporary Indian life, Welch has made at best a tenuous use of the oral tradition of tribal narrative. Yet, by choice of narrative structure, theme and language his first two novels, *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979) could still be taken to exemplify a hybrid or amphibious mode of writing, encompassing elements of both realism and tribalism (the fragmentary structure, the surreal imagery, the dazed voice, the "helplessness" of living between cultures, the recovery of a sense of linkage with a lost past and heritage). As Paula Gunn Allen has noted, both novels are deceptively realistic: they are "best understood in the context of the dream/vision ritual structure of

2 Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 53.

3 For a more elaborate discussion of this aspect of Erdrich's fiction, see my "Toward a Native American Realism: The Amphibious Fiction of Louise Erdrich," in: Kristiaan Versluys, ed., *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction (Postmodern Studies 5)* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), pp. 145-70.

4 Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 186.

Plains tribal life, for they are structured along the lines of the vision rather than on the chronological lines of mundane or organizational life, and the structure of the works holds the major clue to the nature of the novels as primarily tribal documents."⁵ In *The Indian Lawyer* (1990) Welch resorted, apparently without ambivalence, to an assimilationist mode of mainstream realism; the novel not only attenuated the tribal motifs of much contemporary Indian writing, it heavily relied for its appeal upon the conventions of a supremely Western fictional genre (the crime or detective novel) to explore the tribulations of a protagonist caught up in the ironic ambiguities of intercultural conflict.⁶

Welch's three novels of contemporary Indian life gain in resonance and depth from being read in the light of *Fools Crow* (1986), the cornerstone work in an interdependent quartet of novels. Unmistakably "amphibious" in its conjunction of realism and tribalism, *Fools Crow* shifts time and discourse to explore the rich but lost inheritance of tribal culture lying behind the condition of disorientation and estrangement of Welch's contemporary protagonists. In *Fools Crow* Welch ambitiously seeks to amalgamate the "Western" traditions of the historical novel, the picaresque or epic quest novel, and the Bildungsroman (episodic, linear, digressive) with the tribal traditions of storytelling, myth, ritual, vision and dream. The result is an impressive feat of cross-cultural hybridization, as Welch has sought to bridge Western and tribal generic conventions, transforming and revitalizing both in the process.

Between the brooding poetic inintensities of his sparse and somber first two books, and the deceptively transparent and unassuming prose of his fourth, *Fools Crow* stands as a formal and stylistic tour-de-force: an exuberantly poetic and expansively rhetorical historical canvas, with a large cast of fully realized characters and a loose episodic structure which accommodates a plethora of subplots and interpolated stories that rarely impede the narrative momentum. Welch, himself part Blackfeet, part Gros Ventre, has written his novel from within the Blackfeet (Pikuni) cosmological perspective to bring to life a whole tribal culture—the camp-life routines of hunting and raiding, of butchering blackhorns and

⁵ Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 93.

⁶ For a fuller consideration of the novel, written in complementary counterpoint to the present essay, see my "The Realism of Difference--James Welch's *The Indian Lawyer*," in: Jean Béranger et al., eds., *Ecrire la Différence/ Interculturalism and the Writing of Difference* (Annales du C.R.A.A., Volume 18) (Bordeaux: Bordeaux University Press, 1993), pp. 187-201.

tanning hides, the repertoire of rituals and ceremonies, the function of vows and visions, the intricate spiritual geography underlying tribal culture. Welch presents that culture both in and on its own terms, displaying it in all its spiritual, moral and psychological complexity (no primitivism here). It is the tragic irony at the heart of *Fools Crow* that we see the Pikuni culture functioning at its most powerful and idyllic, even as we see it teetering on the verge of eclipse. By showing us Pikuni culture at a fulcrum moment in its history—the few years preceding the Marias River massacre in the winter of 1870, when 173 Blackfeet, mostly women and children, were slaughtered by U.S. Cavalry forces in an attempt to put a stop to raidings of white settlers by renegade Pikunis (Owl Child's gang)—Welch is able to both celebrate it and mourn its loss; what we witness is a historic tale of heart-rending sadness, a tragedy of epic sweep and mythic dimension.⁷ Rewriting cultural conflict from the native perspective, Welch subverts traditional Euro-American historiography, *Fools Crow* constituting his literary act of historical revisionism. The novel stands as both a personal and communal act of recovery and remembrance, a symbolic restoration of voice to the voiceless, history to the uprooted, legacy to the lost.

Throughout *Fools Crow* the apocalyptic note swells as white encroachment upon tribal territory makes the imminent destruction of Pikuni culture unavoidable. It seems wryly ironic that the Pikuni themselves are eager to acquire—through trade or raid—the items of white civilization that they believe will give them a share of the enemy's wealth and power, but which in effect signal the subversive infiltration of Napikwan (white) culture: they are ambitious to exchange blackhorn robes for cloth and steel pans, bows and knives for muskets and “many-shots guns,” moccasins for riding boots and leather saddles. Contacts with white traders, if marked by reluctance and distrust, steadily increase, but conflict inevitably escalates, as Owl Child's gang of militant Pikuni raiders, fed up with a history of betrayal by the “two-faced whites, rejects the strategy of moderation counseled by the elders and resorts to downright murder, rape and plunder, thereby setting off U.S. military retaliation. Tribal cohesion is at the point of disintegration, when

⁷ The story of the massacre came to Welch through the stories of his father and greatgrandmother—the latter one of its survivors (she was part of the group of women and children met by *Fools Crow* in the novel)—supplemented by some five historical studies of Blackfeet culture. Cf. “An Interview with James Welch,” in: Ron McFarland, ed., James Welch (Lewiston, Idaho: Confluence Press, Inc., 1986), p. 5.

the Pikuni debate on the response to Napikwan encroachment grounds to "an exhausted impasse"⁸ and the realization grows that "either way" the Pikunis "were being driven into a den with only one entrance" (215-16): between fighting a superior Napikwan force to the death, being wiped out by a smallpox epidemic, and accommodations involving loss of land and culture the Pikunis⁷ days seem numbered.

Against this background of inexorable cultural and human tragedy *Fools Crow* presents the growth of White Man's Dog to manhood and maturity. As we see him pass through the various rituals of initiation that make up the stages of his education—he rises from unpromising beginnings to the status of heroic warrior, medicine man, and future leader of his tribe—he gradually internalizes the range of Blackfeet moral and spiritual values, acquires knowledge of Blackfeet myths and ceremonies, and, in the end, is granted to become a cultural survival hero for his tribe, the symbolic guarantor that the "stories" and rituals will be passed on even against the grain of history. In the process of his young hero's journey of maturation Welch fully brings to life the animist and holistic world view underlying tribal culture, showing by implication that appropriation of tribal knowledge and identity makes for spiritual and moral sustenance (precisely what his contemporary protagonists have lost), a sense of cultural and personal wholeness. As Kathleen Mullen Sands has observed, the protagonist of *Fools Crow* is "part of a continuum of connections between people, animals, mountains, stars, cycles of seasons and ceremonies stretching into a mythical past."⁹

White Man's Dog's growth is measured by the degree to which he is able to appropriate Pikuni values, myths and ceremonies. Thus he learns, through test and trial, the traditional warrior-hunter virtues of courage, strength and endurance. At eighteen, White Man's Dog has "little to show" for himself (3), but his "luck" changes when, on a horse-taking raid against the Crows, he successfully acquits himself of his responsibilities, kills his first Crow, and acquires his reward of twenty horses. Having attained a degree of respect in the tribe, he makes further progress into Pikuni lore when he becomes a helper, then apprentice of Mik-api, the many-faces man; later he will take over the medicine man's

8 James Welch, *Fools Crow* (New York: Viking, 1986), p. 313. All subsequent references to this edition of the novel will be given parenthetically in the text.

9 Kathleen Mullen Sands, "Closing the Distance: Critic, Reader and the Works of James Welch," *MELUS* 14, 2 (1987), 83.

function, independently administering the exhausting and intricate rituals for his tribe. It is Mik-api who guides him towards the next stage in acquiring a full tribal identity, when, dream-instructed by Raven, he sends White Man's Dog to release a wolverine from a steel trap set by whites high up in the Rocky Mountains. In the account of White Man's Dog's expedition the novel effortlessly glides from realism into the "magical" realm of tribal myth, where animals are accorded the status and respect of sacred beings and naturally converse with humans. As a reward for releasing the wolverine from its trap, he is given his animal helper: "Of all the two-leggeds, you alone will possess the magic of Skunk Bear" (58). Shortly after, White Man's Dog is "chosen" to act as a messenger to the other Blackfeet tribes; upon his return he is given the seat of honor next to the Pikuni chief.

White Man's Dog's growth as a Pikuni is directly related to his respectful attention to the many "stories" told by his elders in the chief's lodge or in private: Mik-api's story of how he became a medicine man, the story of the Feather Woman and Scarface, Boss Ridge's story of how he acquired the Beaver Medicine bundle. These stories help him gain the knowledge of Pikuni myth which he needs to interpret correctly and to act responsibly upon the dreams and signs that come to him at crucially formative moments. In Welch's Blackfeet cosmology dreams and signs are directly connected to a person's life or the fate of the community: not only may they be the source of personal and tribal "power," they may also prefigure future events, and be a source of guidance to personal or tribal action. Dreams thus function here as an instrument of characterization and of plot. There is, in the Pikuni world view, no separation between the realm of myth and reality; one flows naturally into the other; both are equally "real."¹⁰

White Man's Dog's growth and stature in the tribe depend on his mounting capacity to read his visions right. Thus, early on, his unwillingness to reveal an imperfectly understood dream of sexual attraction to a white-faced girl in an enemy *tipi* makes him feel partly implicated in Yellow Kidney's mutilation and ensuing misery. But later, when he acts wisely upon the dream of the wolverine, his totem animal, he is rewarded with a power song and an increase of responsibilities in the

10 As Sands pertinently suggests, what non-Native critics are inclined to call "magical" realism is more properly understood as "tribal realism," reality being naturally imbued with myth and magic. Kathleen Mullen Sands, "Closing the Distance," p. 84.

tribe. Conversely, the failure of his friend (and foil) Fast Horse to fulfill a vow made in a dream and to act respectfully in accordance with Pikuni lore leads to a loss of "power" and, eventually, the loss of a sustaining belief in Pikuni myth or medicine. He ends up in cultural exile, committed to the pursuit of individual freedom and "easy" wealth, a member of Owl Child's gang of militant murderers and marauders. When, at long last, he does accept responsibility for personal failure, he has reached the point of no return: "a solitary figure in the isolation of a vast land" (330), his fate prefigures the alienating loss of tribal connection of Welch's contemporary protagonists.

White Man's Dog, by contrast, loyally keeps the vows he makes, even if they demand great physical pain and suffering. Thus, at the Sun Dance he acts out his vow to sacrifice to Sun Chief in a ritual dance of physical torture; as a reward for enduring this initiatory "ordeal," he is granted his wolverine power song and the talismanic white stone which he will carry in his war pouch as a safeguard of strength and courage (117-119). Shortly after, during the war raid on the Crows, he is given the honor of striking the enemy first: he is hit, seems dead, but, in a dazed reflex, manages to kill the Crow chief, and for this reputedly sly act of "fooling" the Crow earns himself the name of his manhood. (151)

To be a full-fledged tribal member involves a balanced pursuit of personal and communal interest; only in perfect integration with the tribe can individual action be meaningful or personal happiness attainable. When he is in pursuit of Fast Horse, Fools Crow realizes that what attracts his friend to running with Owl Child is precisely a "freedom from responsibility, from accountability to the group" (211), and he relates the suffering of the Pikunis to the breakup of communitarianism and the pursuit of individual freedom. Unlike Fast Horse, Fools Crow scores high on tribal solidarity: he hunts and provides food for the aged Mik-api, is generous beyond his own needs, and in marrying Red Paint takes upon himself the responsibility for hunting for an extended family-in-law. When he is ordered by Raven to perpetrate an overtly symbolic act—he is asked to kill a white hunter who is roaming the mountains, senselessly killing off animals and leaving a trail of destruction in his wake—Fools Crow carries out the command, if with great difficulty and at risk to himself and his wife (who is used as sexual bait), thus making personal interest subordinate to the larger issue of cultural conflict.

As the threat of catastrophe rises—the Pikuni medicine is powerless to stop the advance of the white-scabs epidemic, and Napikwan military action is imminent—Fools Crow feels "the impotence that had fallen over his people like snow in the night," and he doubts the value of his own power if it cannot help to preserve communal cohesion and ensure the salvation of his tribe: "What good is your own power when the people are suffering, when their minds are scattering like horses in the four directions?" (313-14). Significantly, at this point, when he has committed his personal powers to the cultural and psychological survival of his tribe, he is granted a visit by Nitsokan, the "dream helper," who instructs him to go on a dream quest to find "a direction or a sign" for his people.

Fools Crow's minutely detailed vision-quest is both an enactment of Blackfeet tribal myth and a variation upon the "Western" quest or grail-motif. His journey of three days and nights is a trial of strength and endurance, as he is led through dangerous enemy territory, through magical dreamscapes familiar yet strange, through many moments of self-doubt and terror. At crucial moments, he is helped by animals: his horse crashes through a patch of red willows blocking the entrance to a canyon, and later a freckle-faced dog and his wolverine animal helper show him a crevice past a huge boulder blocking his way. Crawling through a narrow tunnel, he is born into a summer landscape, an "amphibious" realm of transcendence, between myth and reality, where linear time is suspended, and hunger, shame and guilt do not exist. In this "green sanctuary between earth and sky" (360)—halfway between human reality and the sacred realm of the Above Ones—he meets a woman in a white doeskin dress, her hair close-cropped as a token of mourning, and he is forced to confront the psychological terror of future Pikuni suffering, as the shrill voices of thousands of winter geese pass overhead and the wailing woman's eyes bespeak "a grief so deep it would always be there and no words from him could help." (337)

The woman reveals herself as Feather Woman, whose story of "transgression" (a Blackfeet mythical parallel to the biblical eviction-from-paradise tale) is one of the founding myths of Pikuni lore.¹¹ It is

¹¹ Married to Morning Star, Feather Woman had been granted to live with Sun Chief and Night Red Light (moon) in the sacred realm of the Above Ones, until one day she violated her promise not to dig up a forbidden sacred *turnip* (an *image* given sexual connotations) As she watched her people on earth through the hole in the sky, she grew homesick and eager to rejoin earthly life, but as punishment for her "sin" (Welch's word) was

Feather Woman who grants Fools Crow a vision of the future fate of the Pikunis. On the magically shifting designs which she has painted on yellow skins Fools Crow sees a chilling chain of disasters falling on his people: the white-scabs epidemic causes death and agony; countless armed "seizers" (Napikwan bluecoats) march against the Pikunis in winter; the prairies have been emptied of the blackhorns, depriving the Pikunis of their economic foundation and causing massive starvation. As Fools Crow sinks in "hopeless resignation," knowing he is "powerless to change" the fate of his tribe, he is granted a last "design" prefiguring the marginalization and dispossession of future generations: a Napikwan school ground holds a group of white children laughing and playing, while a small band of Pikuni children, dressed in Napikwan clothes, stands by "on the edge," watching, on a fenced-in playground beyond which looms the rolling prairie. (354-59) Against his sense of powerlessness Feather Woman offers him the consolation of a new and responsible function as guardian of tribal heritage:

I grieve for our children and their children [says Fools Crow], who will not know the life their people once lived. I see them on the yellow skin and they are dressed like the Napikwans, they watch the Napikwans and learn much from them, but they are not happy. They lose their own way.

'Much will be lost to them,' said Feather Woman. 'But they will know the way it was. The stories will be handed down, and they will see that their people were proud and lived in accordance with the Below Ones, the Underwater People—and the Above Ones' (359-60).

As Nora Barry has noted, though he does not return from his vision-quest with a new ritual, Fools Crow brings back "the spiritual tools of cultural survival,"¹² the guarantee that the rituals, ceremonies, myths and stories of tribal culture will be passed on, so that they can continue to function as a source of spiritual sustenance to the Blackfeet.

Welch is cautious not to sentimentalize or romanticize this possibility for tribal survival. Rather, he severely qualifies whatever hopefulness it might suggest, showing Fools Crow increasingly troubled by the inexplicable cruelty and injustice of the Above Ones, both in allowing

evicted from the sky and, upon her death, withheld the consolation of reunion with her people in the Sand Hills. Instead she was banished to this in-between realm, doomed to mourn perpetually the loss of her husband Morning Star and her son Poia or Scarface. Though Scarface is much honored among the Pikuni for having given them the rituals of the Sun Dance ceremony, Feather Woman is held accountable for bringing them "sickness and hunger, Napikwans and war." (350-52)

12 Nora Barry, "'A Myth to Be Alive': James Welch's *Fools Crow*," *MELUS* 17, 1 (1991), 4.

Feather Woman to suffer so persistently and in visiting afflictions on a loyal and obedient people. Upon his return, indeed, Fools Crow learns soon enough that Feather Woman's words offer at best a consolation against the cruel odds of history, as reality acts out the harrowing future glimpsed on the skin designs. It is a measure of his heroism that, knowing the future in store, he persists in the fight for survival, offering help and comfort where he can, all the while knowing that "any decisions would be puny in the face of such powerful designs." (372) When the white scabs hit the Pikuni tribe, he faithfully goes round performing healing rituals, even as he understands that "the ceremonies were futile—the healing and purifying were as meaningless as a raindrop in a spring river." (367) When, as prophesied, the seizers slaughter Heavy Runner's camp, he offers help to a lone band of survivors, even as on a sickening visit to the holocausted and scorched camp he realizes the futility of anger: "Even revenge had been slaughtered." (382) As he gropes for words of consolation for the survivors, he thinks back on the final design he had seen: "He saw the Napikwan children playing and laughing in a world that they possessed. And he saw the Pikuni children, quiet and huddled together, alone and foreign in their own country." The fortifying words he subsequently speaks—"we must think of our children"—sound hollow against the sudden realization that these survivors "had no children" any more. (386)

Welch offsets the darkness of this vision by an upbeat coda, as he shows the Pikuni tribe, diminished but alive, emerging from a traumatic winter into spring, gathering to prepare for the Thunder Pipe ceremony. The promise is held out that, shortly, Fools Crow will take over Mikapi's role as "many-faces man." With his new-born son present at the ceremony as a sign that tribal heritage will be passed on, and with the Pikuni tribe dancing in unison to the drums in a ceremonial procession, Fools Crow feels "a peculiar kind of happiness—a happiness that sleeps with sadness," while the memory of his vision sustains his hope for survival: "For even though he was, like Feather Woman burdened with the knowledge of his people, their lives and the lives of their children, he knew they would survive, for they were the chosen ones." The final image offered implies an affirmation of continuity and acceptance: the Pikunis are feasting, the spring rains fall, the children play (and being Pikunis they play "hard"), the blackhorns have returned—"and, all around, it was as it should be." (390-91)

Nora Barry has argued that "by being scrupulously fair to the whites in his novel and by placing the burden of events on the mysterious cruelty of the Above Ones, Welch also moves toward acceptance of the past. He balances sorrow with survival."¹³ As we have seen, even in the novel itself hope for tribal survival is considerably darkened by its damocletian projections of the future. As we know from Blackfeet history, *Fools Crow's* faith in the future, expressed anno 1870, would be sorely tested in subsequent episodes of conflict. Most eloquently and searingly, Welch himself has qualified that confidence by his portrayal of his contemporary Indian protagonists—the nameless narrator of *Winter in the Blood*, the dazed and alienated Jim Loney, Sylvester Yellow Calf of *The Indian Lawyer*—whose struggles with the ambiguities of intercultural conflict painfully illuminate the fallacy of facile hope. In the end it is *Fools Crow* itself which, as a vademecum of Blackfeet tribal lore and a symbolic act of cultural remembrance, will do most to fulfill the promise that the rituals, myths and stories of Blackfeet culture will be "handed down," a source of spiritual and cultural sustenance for all those of tribal descent who, like the Pikuni children in *Fools Crow's* vision, mostly find themselves "alone and foreign in their own country."

Just as *Fools Crow* is an "amphibious" protagonist able to move freely and fluidly between historical reality and mythical vision, so *Fools Crow* is an "amphibious" novel seeking to straddle Western and tribal conventions of language and genre. Generically, it is a "hybrid" book, as Welch seeks to engraft elements from tribal culture onto a realistic stem. Welch's realism is flexible enough to accommodate, seemingly without strain, the power of dream and vision, of medicine and story. The Native belief in the mythical resonance and medicinal power of the word, the tribal necessity to define the identity of self and community in and through storytelling, myth and ritual performance—such are credibly and beautifully dramatized in the plethora of stories Welch has incorporated in the novel. As Nora Barry has shown, *Fools Crow's* story itself displays significant parallels with the Scarface myth of Blackfeet tribal lore.¹⁴ As noted above, the psychological and spiritual impact of dreams is such that, in narrative terms, they function both as an

13 Nora Barry, "A Myth to Be Alive," p. 16.

14 Barry, pp. 3-21.

instrument of characterization and as a motive force in the plot. Welch accommodates the visionary aspect of tribal culture in a twofold manner: mostly, dreams or myths are reported as stories by a range of narrators; less frequently, but no less essentially—as in *Fools Crow*'s meetings with Raven or his elaborate journey to Feather Woman's "green sanctuary between earth and sky"¹⁵—the realistic narrative effortlessly incorporates a mythical dimension of supra-realism, as humans converse with animals and are allowed to visit the mythical habitat of sacred spirit-creatures. Landscape, too, throughout the novel functions in a manner different from the conventionally realistic: as Kathleen Mullen Sands and John Purdy have noted, personal and tribal identity is to an important degree established in significant and signifying interaction with the landscape.¹⁵ Landscape, thus, is more than mere setting: as Sands has noted, *Fools Crow* gives the Montana landscape "mythological depth of time" by making it a "repository of the past," a spiritual and animist geography "alive with signs and sacred beings."¹⁶ The novel thus beautifully enacts the holistic connection between reality and myth, history and vision underlying tribal culture.

In accommodating such tribal dimensions Welch has significantly enlarged the boundaries of traditional realism and injected it with magic, vitality, and mythical resonance. Yet, his recreation of the Native world view remains largely within the generic parameters of the Western "realistic" or "historical" novel, the Bildungsroman, and the epic-quest novel. Critics have argued that there may well be limitations to such realism's capacity to accommodate tribal elements in an authentic Native fashion. Thus, in Paula Gunn Allen's reading, many of the narrative traditions of white Western culture—rooted in a linear concept of time, chronological, episodic and often subjectivist in emphasis or perspective—are at odds with the characteristics of tribal narrative: rooted in "circular" or "mythical" time, its structure is often non-linear and based on the motions of ritual, while its perspective tends to be communal.¹⁷ Arnold Krupat has likewise emphasized crucial and perhaps unbridgeable differences:

¹⁵ Kathleen Mullen Sands, "Closing the Distance," pp. 73-85; John Purdy, "'He Was Going Along': Motion in the Novels of James Welch," *American Indian Quarterly* 14, 2 (1990), 133-46.

¹⁶ Sands, pp. 83, 85, 81.

¹⁷ Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 79 and passim.

Traditional Native-American literatures distinguish themselves from modern Western literatures in terms of their modes of presentation and their functionality. They are, that is to say, not *littera*-tures at all, inasmuch as literature refers to culture preserved and presented by the technologies of alphabetic writing. The problematics of a performative literature, what some have urged we call orature, involve a privileging of the voice over the text, of presence over absence, of process over product; and the expectation of a prepared, and participatory receptivity on the part of one's audience, are very different from the problematics of a textual literature for which writing, absence, and an anonymous audience of receivers define the literary act.

From a functional point of view, Native-American song, story, and oratorical performance were and continue to be communitarian rather individualistic, working, that is, not to express the original "genius" of the performer but, rather, creatively to represent the shared world view of the group.¹⁸

Measured by such dichotomous definitions, Welch would appear to have only partially and selectively succeeded in finding a literary form that can accommodate the oral and performative dimensions of tribal culture (song, dance, dress): he has tried to present tribal "*orature*" in terms of Western "*littera-ture*."

Has Welch, then, written an incongruous book, in which form belies theme? In theme *Fools Crow* is a novel about inexorable cultural conflict, an apocalyptic depiction of the unavoidable submergence of the Native cosmology as a result of white encroachment, even as it articulates the necessity of keeping the heritage alive in stories and remembrance. In terms of form and language, however, *Fools Crow* seems an accommodationist novel: it brings to life an entire Native/animist geography, but does so in literary terms that situate the book in a white Western tradition of epic, historical narrative. Thus considered, it may appear ironically incongruous that a novel which, in content, can be regarded Welch's act of historical revisionism, in form assimilates to the traditions of a dominant culture whose Euro-American historiography about the Native past it seeks to subvert.

Such hard-edged dichotomizing, however, fails to do justice to the novel as an act of cultural, generic and linguistic translation. Instead of faulting the novel for being incongruously accommodationist, one might more properly appreciate Welch's achievement by considering the degree to which *Fools Crow* manages to bridge the traditional bound-

18 Arnold Krupat, "Multiculturalism, Native Americans, and the 'American Scene,'" in: Hans Bak, ed., *Multiculturalism and the Canon of American Culture* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993), pp. 110-11.

aries of Western and tribal generic and linguistic conventions, in order to create a new cross-cultural and transgeneric middle-space, where realism and tribalism are negotiated dialectically and made to work on each other in a playful and creative fashion. Seen thus, *Fools Crow* exemplifies an intercultural *art of hybridization* which not merely subverts but, by opening up the way for interaction and negotiation, transforms and revitalizes conventional categories of form and genre. Welch's search for a linguistic and generic middle-space, moreover, in itself enacts (to borrow John Scheckter's words) "a subjugated people's need to translate and adapt the terms of the victors into the violated remnants of their previous conceptual framework—to find, that is, a middle ground where survival is possible."¹⁹

Literary re-appropriation of history and culture is foremost a matter of language, of re-naming the specifics of place, person, environment, historical event. In *Fools Crow* Welch has given us a full-scale linguistic recreation of the Native spiritual geography—this is a world of Sun Chief, Night Red Light, Cold Maker, of Raven and Skunk Bear, of "many-shots guns" and the "ground-of-many-gifts," of "two-leggeds," "bighorns," "wags-his-tails." The speech of his Indians, likewise, is typically hybrid or amphibious: shot through with animist images and allusions to tribal myth, and occasionally incorporating the incantatory rhythms of ritual performance, it is also persistently correct in grammar and syntax. Welch's Pikunis are masters of fluent and polished English, their speech "different" enough to give a sense of Native authenticity, yet no so different or exotic as to estrange the non-initiated reader. In *Fools Crow* Welch has thus re-inscribed the tribal past into transcultural linguistic and generic terms. Whether Welch's "translation" of a Native world view into English terms is historically and linguistically accurate or rather an artistic "approximation,"²⁰ is ultimately less important than whether it is convincing enough for the reader (Native and non-Native) to suspend disbelief and accept the recreated world as authentic. In this respect John Scheckter has pertinently observed how

19 John Scheckter, "Now That the (Water) Buffalo's Gone: James Welch and the Transcultural Novel," in: Thomas E. Schirer, ed., *Entering the 90s: The North American Experience* (Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan: Lake Superior State University Press, 1991), p. 104.

20 The word is Robert F. Gish's in his "Word Medicine: Storytelling and Magic Realism in James Welch's *Fools Crow*," *American Indian Quarterly* 14, 4 (1990), 350.

Welch's consistent use of substitutions and near-translations pulls the language away from its standardized center and forces a non-Indian audience to accept the tribal world literally on its own terms. Welch is [thus] freed from the existing terms of cross-cultural depiction which, no matter how sympathetic they may be, are almost entirely dominated by a history of White perceptions, expectations, and narrative strategies. By presenting his vision in uncustomary terms, Welch obtains a position to examine the emotional and spiritual conditions of the Pikuni with reduced interference from the body of White mythology which remained from the start a staple of American literary depiction of Indians.²¹

In *Fools Crow* Welch posits his reclaimed cultural world as a self-contained geography of meaning, knowledge and sustenance. The Pikuni world is seen as a richly spiritual and moral universe which is implicitly held up as a judgment of Western history and culture. As such, *Fools Crow* can be seen as fulfilling an important function in what Arnold Krupat has referred to as the multiculturalist "project of anti-imperial [cultural] translation." Such a project, writes Krupat, "asks no less than for the dominant culture to allow itself to be powerfully altered by the foreign [culture], by values and attitudes it had defined as other and sought to engage only by means of domestication, by translation in the imperial sense."²² In its presentation of the Blackfeet cultural and spiritual values—the high premium placed on wisdom and generosity, on hospitality and tolerance, on moderation and humility, on respect for the environment and its animal creatures, on community over self—*Fools Crow* may well be deemed worthy of affecting and even powerfully altering a dominant culture marked by technological consumerism, ecological disrespect and ethnocentric intolerance.

21 Schechter, "Now That the (Water) Buffalo's Gone," p. 106.

22 Krupat, "Multiculturalism, Native Americans, and the 'American Scene,'" pp. 108-9.