Palacký University Olomouc

Faculty of Arts

Department of English and American Studies

Place Analysis in Novels by Louis Owens

Doctoral Dissertation

Author: Mgr. Hana Sobotková

Supervisor: Prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr.

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Declaration of Originality

I herewith declare that the material contained in my dissertation entitled *Place Analysis in Novels by Louis Owens* is original work performed by me under the guidance and advice of my faculty supervisor. The literature and sources are all properly cited according to the Chicago Manual of Style.

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To be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have to know your place.
—Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*

I try to tell stories built around characters that I admit have a lot in common with myself ... they inhabit complex worlds in which the overwhelming questions are, Who am I? and How do I live in this place and time?
—Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*

Introduction

In the autumn of 2017 I was travelling home from a conference in Nitra. The bus that I decided to take was almost full and I was sitting in the aisle seat next to an old Slovak man. Shortly before the bus was going to stop at Trnava we started talking. He had spent the last three months at his daughter's house in a distant part of Slovakia helping her with her children and he was excited to be home again. When the bus approached Trnava, his hometown, he asked me if I could smell the odor in the air. He explained that it comes from a sugar factory in the town. Whenever he smells the scent, he said, he is happy, because it means that he is home.

For the man, the odor of the processed sugar beet was something that became bound to the place. It told him that he is in that particular place that he calls home, while I, a person in the same place at the same time saw through the bus window a strange town with narrow streets full of traffic. For the man the town was full of stories. It was familiar—he saw its transformations and knew people who lived and live there. The man knew that place and experienced a profound sense of place.

Place and a sense of place are experiences that are natural for human beings. Critics of Native American literature claim that Native Americans have a special relationship to land and nature and that place is one of the strongest themes in their writings. Louis Owens, a Native American novelist and scholar, incorporated the places that he became familiar with during his life into his literary work from the very beginning of his writing career. His vast experience with sojourns in different environments became crucial to his writing and inspired fiction that is tightly bound to

place. In an interview with A. Robert Lee he said: "I cannot imagine a story without the physical, natural world of which the story is a part. … Stories, it seems to me, come out of the earth."[1]

The understanding of place in my thesis derives from the study of human geography. I chose the approach that Tim Cresswell presents in his introduction to studies of place. In general, he speaks of places as of "all spaces that people made meaningful"[2] and to which they are attached, but further he points out that "place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world."[3] I base my understanding of place on Edward Relph's influential study *Place and Placelessness* (1976), on the works by Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia* (1974) and *Space and Place* (1977), and on Kent C. Ryden's *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* (1993). This perspective expresses the understanding of place as a space invested with meaning and created through experience.

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the literary response to places and their portrayal in Owens's novels. I focus on the specific characteristics and attributes that construct places: the physical descriptions of the environment and their significance, its specific features, the inhabitants, and the social relationships that spring from living in a place. Owens also discusses the concept of home and tries to locate it in a specific material area. Home is approached as a place that generates a strong sense of belonging and where the inhabitants are "relatively free to forge their own identities."[4] Both attachment to place and its impact on personal identity are crucial concepts in his writing.

Owens was of Choctaw, Cherokee, Irish, Welsh, and Cajun origin. He was born in Lompoc, California, in 1948 and died in 2002 in New Mexico. He spent his early childhood in the Yazoo region in Mississippi, but his family soon moved to California. Owens worked as a professor of American literature, Native American literature, and creative writing at several universities: the California State University, Northridge, the University of California at Santa Cruz, and mainly the University of New Mexico where he settled with his wife and two daughters. He also spent seven years working seasonally for the U.S. Forest Service: as a sawyer in a forest firefighting crew in

[1] A. Robert Lee, "Outside Shadow: A Conversation with Louis Owens," in *Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work*, ed. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 39.
[2] Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 7.
[3] Cresswell, *Place*, 11.
[4] Cresswell, *Place*, 26.

Arizona, California, and Washington, and as a wilderness ranger in the North Cascades National Park in Washington. All of those places figure prominently in his writing.

Speaking about his novels, Owens said: "Each one arises out of the places I know, out of the feelings and smells and sounds and tastes of specific landscapes."[5] The descriptions of places in his writing are very definite and particular; as he admits, each of his novels "begins and ends with place itself."[6] Owens wrote five novels: *Wolfsong* (1991) set in the state of Washington, *The Sharpest Sight* (1992) and its sequel *Bone Game* (1994) both set in California and Mississippi, *Nightland* (1996) placed to New Mexico, and *Dark River* (1999) set in Arizona. Apart from the five novels, Owens wrote two collections of essays, memoirs, and criticism, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (2001) and *I Hear the Train: Reflection, Inventions, Refractions* (2001). He also authored a critical study of Native American novels *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (1992), and two critical volumes on the novels of John Steinbeck.

The places that influenced his writing the most are Mississippi and California, which he calls the "two primary places that frame my life in black and white."[7] He also admitted that nearly all of the stories he tells "move on an axis between Mississippi and California"[8] as his family frequently moved between these places. The continuous changing of places is a feature that is often connected with Native American literature. Owens admits that motion is "an image associated profoundly with Indian people."[9] As he also points out, it seems like a paradox, as the importance of place and the strong ties that bind people to it are equally characteristic of Native American life and literature. On the one hand, there is the motion and instability of the marginal culture of those who were forced to leave their homeland by the forces of colonialism, a culture that finds itself in a constant process of redefinition and a need to be redefined. On the other hand, there is the personal experiencing of place that comes from living in certain area and a connection to land. The two forces come together, emphasizing the constant change and movement, yet stressing the importance of place for an individual as well as a community. The existence of the paradox creates tensions that call to be dealt with.

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[5] Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 164–65.
[6] Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 181.
[7] Louis Owens, "Louis Owens," in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, *Volume 24*, ed. Shelly Andrews (Detroit: Gale Research, 1996), 283.
[8] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 164.
[9] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 150.

At the same time Owens claims that places resist definitions. They cannot be "possessed … by mapping through word and measured line in the Western tradition,"[10] as he shows in his essay "Ringtail Moon," which deals with the possibility of capturing a great natural site in appropriate words and measures. Owens claims that places speak for themselves and any attempts to measure and describe them are creating definitions that distract the observer from their real and sincere essence. He continues: "Only the Native holds the measure of the place, because the Native, the Indian, has had many, many generations in which to learn resistance to the jealousy of measure and voice, the futile desire for words to reach up and over."[11]

Questions of identity and belonging are crucial in Owens's works. In *Other Destinies,* Owens demonstrates that the sense of place and identity are mutually intertwined. In his terms, to be integrated into a place means "to be removed from the experience of ephemerality, fragmentation, and deracination … and most significantly, to be determined according the eternal, immutable values arising from a profound integration with place."[12] Through the understanding of place comes the understanding of identity, which taken the other way round, means that there is no understanding of identity without experiencing a sense of place. It is a key problem for Owens's fictional characters—identity and belonging are the major themes in all of his novels.

Another theme that recurs in Owens's work is the fragile relation between humans and the natural world. He was concerned with the human responsibility towards environment. Thanks to this approach Jacquelyn Kilpatrick calls him an "environmentalist of the first water."[13] All of Owens's novels work with the necessity to protect the environment, forbid its further degradation, and achieve a balance in coexistence with the natural world. Lawrence Buell notes the four components that comprise a work which is environmentally oriented. First, in such work the "nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history." The environment does not only serve as the setting of the story, but it is shown as having an impact on the characters and it influences their behavior, emotions, and attitudes. Second, the human

[10] Louis Owens, *I Hear the Train: Reflections, Inventions, Refractions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 71.
[11] Owens, *I Hear the Train,* 68.
[12] Louis Owens, O*ther Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 95.
[13] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, "Introduction," in *Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work,* ed. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 10.

interest in environmental texts "is not understood as the only legitimate interest." Humans are portrayed as part of the environment and their aims are not superior to it. Thirdly, human "accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation," by which Buell points to human responsibility towards the environment. And finally, the environment is at least indirectly portrayed "as a process rather than as a constant or a given."[14] The environment, in other words, is not depicted as static, but as something that develops. Owens's novels meet these criteria as the principles of ethical relationship to the environment are present in them. Throughout my thesis, I refer to the environmental questions that Owens raises. Although these ideas begin to have higher importance in the contemporary world, the main direction that I take remains focused on place.

This thesis consists of six chapters. The first and second chapters are dedicated to the theoretical background needed for the following analysis. The first chapter discusses place as a concept and tries to define place from the point of view of human geography. I explore the distinctions between place and placelessness, place and space, and other related terms. The chapter further examines the relation between place and stories and explores the role of place in literature.

The second chapter is aimed at the role of place in Native American literature. I try to point out characteristics that are held in common by Native American writers and on several examples seek to illustrate their relationship to place.

The following chapters are devoted to the analysis of the role of place and its manifestation in Louis Owens's novels. The organization of the chapters reflects the order in which the novels were published. I start with *Wolfsong*, a novel that is set firmly to the State of Washington. The novel enables to identify several places that distinctly stand out: California, the town of Forks, and the North Cascades National Park wilderness. In the chapter I analyze each of the places successively, leaving space for the discussion of the concept of wilderness as it is the novel's major concern.

The fourth chapter discusses Owens's novels *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game*. I analyze the novels simultaneously because they share the same protagonist and they are set in the same places: Mississippi and California. As these places were formative for Owens and he returns to them repeatedly in his writings, I include their descriptions from his autobiographical essays. I believe that it contributes to the

[14] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 7–8.

understanding of how the places are depicted. I also try to identify a development of the protagonist's perceptions of the places throughout the two novels.

Owens's novels are progressively becoming more violent and more influenced by genre literature. The prominence of the genre becomes obvious especially in his last two novels, *Nightland* and *Dark River* where it adds another layer of meaning that is fundamental for understanding the complexity of place. This is why I decided to include a discussion of the genre in relation to place in the last two chapters.

Nightland is situated to an arid landscape near the city of Magdalena in New Mexico. Unlike in Owens's other novels, the protagonist does not find himself in a new environment, but he realizes that the place where he is situated needs to undergo a transformation. Owens in this novel works with the West as a place in the American imagination and contrasts it with the understanding of West in Cherokee mythology. He structures the novel as a New West novel whose story leads to the survival of the Indian characters who are not portrayed as members of the doomed race.

Owens's last novel, *Dark River*, is set in the fictional Black Mountain Apache reservation in Arizona. It presents a displaced protagonist who is striving to find his place in an unfamiliar community. At the same time, he has to fight for his survival in clichéd action-based plots of the crime thriller. The final scene of the novel deconstructs the genre end and gives the Indian characters a chance to narrate their own story and find their place.

The protagonists of Owens's novels are often positioned on a border between two cultures, the dominant and the other, and they must decide which one to choose. In the end they tend to adopt the position of a mixedblood, as did Owens himself:

> [I]n life's midpassage I have learned to inhabit a hybrid, unpapered, Choctaw-Cherokee-Welsh-Irish-Cajun mixed space in between. I conceive of myself today not as an "Indian," but as a mixedblood, a person of complex roots and histories. Along with my parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, I am the product of liminal space, the result of union between desperate individuals on the edges of dispossessed cultures and the marginalized spawn of invaders.[15]

The understanding of the history of his family makes him realize that choosing one of his ancestors' identities would be limiting as it would omit the complexity of his roots.

[15] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 176.

He says: "I am descended from those people, *but I am not those people*,"[16] which suggests that even though his identity is heavily influenced by the identities of his ancestors and the spaces they occupied, it is not a mere sum of their identities. The complexity of his roots gives rise to a new identity, a mixedblood identity, which avoids simplification and, besides acknowledging his ethnic roots, makes him also an heir of the European intellectual tradition: "I believe I am the rightful heir of Choctaw and Cherokee storytellers and of Shakespeare and Yeats and Cervantes."[17]

[16] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 177, Owens's italics.
[17] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 177.

Chapter 1: Defining Place

The word "place" has many meanings in the English language. The meanings of the word, as David Harvey reminds us, can be used to designate physical location, such as the locale, locality, milieu, or the particular type of places, such as city, town, village, state. Still there are other uses that take into account strong connotations of place: home, community, nation, landscape. The word can be further used in its metaphorical meaning, which suggests that something or somebody is somewhere in place. We can speak for instance about the place of art in social life or the place of humanity in cosmos. Harvey closes his enumeration of the various meanings of place by concluding that "[p]lace has to be one of the most multi-layered and multi-purpose words in our language."[18] Moreover, the physical size of place cannot be determined in general. Place, as Yi-Fu Tuan notes, can be "as small as a corner of a room or as large as the earth itself."[19] Our perception of place varies and it is not always conscious. Edward Casey says that experience of place is "so pervasive and yet so elusive that most of us simply do not notice it."[20] Places, however, are present in our everyday experience, because people cannot be separated from place. In addition, as Edward Relph points out, the interconnection with place in our lives makes it a phenomenon that "precedes all academic concepts and interpretations,"[21] as places will always exist independent of interpretations coming from the academia.

Nevertheless, my purpose in this chapter is to delineate the uses of the word "place" that I will refer to in this thesis. I will start with a brief outline of the role of place in literature. My focus is to work with place as it is understood by human geography.[22] Therefore I will primarily relate to the definition of place from this point of view. I will include the discussion of place and placelessness, describe the difference

[18] David Harvey, "From Space to Place and Back Again," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson, and Lisa Tickner (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.

[19] Yi-Fu Tuan, "Space and Place: A Humanistic Perspective," in *Philosophy in Geography*, ed. Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson (Dordrecht, Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 419–421.

[20] Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 22.

[21] Edward Relph, "Preface to Reprint of *Place and Placelessness*," *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 2008), no page numbers in the preface.

[22] Human geography is the study of "how people make places, how we organize place and society, how we interact with each other in places and across space, and how we make sense of others and ourselves in our localities, regions, and the world." Erin H. Fouberg, Alexander B. Murphy, and H. J. de Blij, *Human Geography: People, Place, and Culture* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), 8.

between space and place, and explain what is understood by sense of place and by attachment to place. Furthermore, I will mention the role of place in stories that are bound to physical landscape, which holds an important position within the literature of Native Americans as they frequently associate certain landmarks with stories. This chapter is concluded with defining the term topophilia, or the emotional response to a place.

Place and Literature

The geographer Jonathan Smith notes that to experience an aesthetic pleasure from looking upon a landscape is a natural desire. One of the aspects of landscape is that it stimulates imagination, as "castles on hilltops are more stimulating than castles in the air."[23] Literature without place would suffer similar loss of stimulation. Eudora Welty notes that "fiction depends for its life on place," because it provides answers to the questions "What happened? Whos's here? Who's coming?"[24] that concern the characters and actions.

Similarly, Stephen Hardy observes that "place is a concept that is of evident significance to writers of poetry and fiction."[25] Writers often begin with place when they are starting their work. They place their characters and their actions in a particular setting. Specific places within a literary text may become associated with certain events, characters, or actions. Setting, furthermore, often carries a larger meaning of what a writer intends to express.

There is a general assumption about the relationship between a writer and a place. Seamus Heaney describes it in one of his lectures that were collected in *The Place of Writing* (1989). In his general conception the writer attains a

> directly expressive or interpretative relationship to the milieu. He or she becomes the voice of the spirit of the region. The writing is infused with the atmosphere, physical and emotional, of a certain landscape or seascape, and while the writer's immediate

[23] Jonathan Smith, "The Slightly Different Thing that Is Said: Writing the Aesthetic Experience," in *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text & Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape* (London; New York: Routledge: 1992), 73.
[24] Eudora Welty, *On Writing* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 41–42.
[25] Stephen Hardy, *Relations of Place: Aspects of Late 20th Century Fiction and Theory* (Brno: Masarykova Univerzita, 2008), 13.

> purpose may not have any direct bearing upon the regional or the national background, the background is sensed as a distinctive element in his work.[26]

This account of the relationship between a writer and a place in fiction focuses mostly on the interpretation and representation of place that becomes a distinctive element of the writing. It implies that certain writers may be considered as speaking for a place, or a region. The region imbues the literary work, although it may be perceived unconsciously. This view of place is valid, yet the discussion requires further attention.

Leonard Lutwack notes that place enters literary work on two levels. On the one hand, as a sum of the author's attitudes about places that come from his or her social and intellectual milieu and own experience with places. On the other hand, it includes the materials that the writer might use for rendering characters, events, and themes.[27] He contends that unlike in poetry or drama, the novelist can freely choose how much place he or she will use in their work, from the barest suggestion to a detailed description, and from geographical verisimilitude to symbolical mention. Novels can be siteless, like Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones,* an example that he provides, or place-saturated, as James Dickey's *Deliverance*. The intensity of depiction of place can differ as well. A psychological novel is interested more in the behavior of the characters than in the setting, whereas a dramatic novel intensely develops a few of its settings. Lutwack concludes that attitudes to places are ambivalent and that place as a formal element does not undergo clear development over literary history.[28]

Furthermore, place in literature has a literal and a symbolical value. It means that it can be used to refer to geographical locations, but its usage may be metaphorical. Lutwack, however, contends that in the end all places that are portrayed in literary texts may be used for symbolical purposes, because frequent association with certain experiences and values may lead to archetypes and place symbolism. Thus houses may be associated with stability and community, forests with danger, valleys and gardens with pleasure, and roads with change and adventure.[29] Archetypes are recurrent narrative designs that include patterns of action, types of characters, and images that are anchored in a variety of literary works, myths, dreams, or ritualized behavior. They reflect universal patterns and elemental mental forms that evoke in the readers a

[26] Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 20–21.
[27] See Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 12.
[28] See Lutwack, *The Role of Place*, 17–18.
[29] See Lutwack, *The Role of Place*, 31.

profound response.[30] Archetypal criticism, however, does not focus solely on place, but also on the patterns of plot or character types. For this reason I did not adopt this approach for analyzing Owens's novels. Furthermore, it is a form of criticism that operates with fixed ideas and may distort perception of place by using predefined concepts.

The discussion about place in literature involves dealing with the term "setting." According to Lutwack, setting "denotes a place of action," but is not adequate to denote places that are not related to action, such as metaphors and evocations of places by characters. These can be found in their speeches and are often triggered by a sight of a person or an object.[31] More specifically, setting establishes the "historical, geographical, and physical location"[32] of a literary work. As such it reflects the when and where the work takes place. Joshua Parker notes that when we speak about setting we are more interested in the action that takes place there, not in the place itself.[33]

Marie-Laurie Ryan describes the "physically existing environment in which characters live and work"[34] as a narrative space, which can be broadly identified as "setting." She argues that the term needs to be refined and defines five categories of narrative space. She identifies "spatial frames" which stand for the actual surroundings of the events, "story space," or the space relevant to the plot mapped by the actions and thoughts of its characters, "narrative (or story) world," referring to the space completed by reader's imagination which includes his or her cultural knowledge and experience in the real world, and "narrative universe" that points to the world that is constructed by text and the characters. She also mentions the term "narrativization" when the space in a fictional text is not described for its own sake, but it is portrayed through action that takes place there and develops as the story unfolds.[35]

What is of high relevance to my thesis is the relationship between the character and the place within a literary text that gives rise to the action that is enacted upon the place. Lutwack notes that "[t]he character of a place is conditioned by the kind of

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[30] See M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993), 224.

[31] See Lutwack, *The Role of Place*, 28.

[32] Laurie G. Kirszner, and Stephen M. Mandell, eds., *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishing, 1997), 141.

[33] See Joshua Parker, "Conceptions of Place, Space and Narrative: Past, Present and Future," in *Amsterdam International Electronic Journal for Cultural Narratology*, no. 7–8 (2012/2014): 76, http://cf.hum.uva.nl/narratology/issue/7/pdf/74-101_Parker.pdf.

[34] Marie-Laurie Ryan, "Space," in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2013), http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Space.

[35] See Marie-Laurie Ryan, "Space."

human activity that is performed there."[36] This Lutwack's statement is in accord with the notion developed by human geographers that place is created through investing it with meaning. Such an approach has seen increased attention across disciplines, and, as Joy Porter mentions, "speaks directly to what many Indian writers and their communities have been saying for a very long time."[37] The following part of this chapter will focus on the understanding of place and related concepts from the point of view of human geography.

Place and Placelessness

The approach to place that I adopt in this thesis centers around what Edward Relph calls a "phenomenology of place."[38] The phenomenological perspective provides Relph with the capacity to see clearly something that is in front of our eyes, without it being veiled by obscuring abstractions.[39] In other words, abstractions may change our view of what we look upon and lead us away from experiencing its complexity. David Seamon explains why human geographers employ this method: "One of phenomenology's great strengths is seeking out what is obvious but unquestioned and thereby questioning it."[40] As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, places are typically perceived subconsciously. The goal of the phenomenological approach is to look upon place consciously and ask questions about the nature of the place, while trying to lay aside attitudes and assumptions that may distort the perception of this phenomenon. Seamon, furthermore, defines phenomenology as the "exploration and description of phenomena." A phenomenon can be anything that humans experience, any "object, event, situation or experience that a person can see, hear, touch, smell, taste, feel, intuit, know, understand, or live through." Phenomenology, in his view, is interested in particular aspects of the experience that it studies with the hope that it will lead to a

[36] Lutwack, *The Role of Place*, 47.
[37] Joy Porter, "Place and American Indian Literature and Culture: Introduction," *European Review of Native American Studies* 20, no. 1 (2006): 1.
[38] Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, (London: Pion Limited, 2008), 4–7.
[39] See Edward Relph, "Geographical Experiences and Being-in-the-world: The Phenomenological Origins of Geography," in *Dwelling, Place, and Environment: Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World*, ed. David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), 15–16.
[40] David Seamon and Jacob Sowers, "Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph," in *Key Texts in Human Geography*, ed. Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine (London: Sage, 2008), 43.

more general characteristics that may shed light on the essential nature of the phenomenon.[41]

From Relph's point of view, places are "fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centers of our immediate experience of the world."[42] Relph observes that describing places in terms of their locations and appearance is rather limited. Places, to him, are a mixture of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, people, personal experiences, and care and concern for home, all of that in the context of other places.[43] Places, furthermore, can be distinguished because we connect them with certain intentions, attitudes, and experiences; they are "essentially focuses of intention."[44]

Relph notes that we recognize the identity of places in the same manner as we perceive the identity of people, plants, or nations.[45] The identity of place, in his view, stands for the sum of the necessary attributes that constitute a place. It consists of its physical setting, the activities of people and their influence on the place, and the meanings and symbols of the place. Meaning of a place is the aspect that is the least easily determined, as it is influenced by human intentions—our plans and desires regarding the place. It can change as people change their intentions and as they gain experience from interactions with the place.[46] Relph claims that "places can only be known in their meanings,"[47] but at one moment for "each setting and each person there are a multiplicity of place identities reflecting different expressions and attitudes."[48] It indicates that every person may have a different perception of the identity of a place depending on his or hers experience and attitude to the place.

Placelessness, in contrast, is the result of making standardized areas that lack its individuality. A placeless landscape is "an environment without significant places and the underlying attitude which does not acknowledge significance in places."[49] Such places are the consequence of development that does not take into account their character. It results in weakening their identity due to mass communication, mass

[41] See David Seamon, "A Way of Seeing People and Place: Phenomenology in Environment-behavior Research," https://www.researchgate.net/publication/29868932. Originally published in *Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research*, ed. S. Wapner, J. Demick, T. Yamamoto, and H. Minami (New York: Plenum, 2000), 157–78.
[42] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 141.
[43] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 29.
[44] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 43.
[45] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 45.
[46] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 46–47.
[47] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 47.
[48] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 62.
[49] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 143.

culture, big business, powerful central authority, and the economic system. They look the same, feel the same, and produce the same experience.[50] Examples of placeless places include landscapes of tourism, administration, entertainment, industry, etc.[51]

Relph admits, however, that since his study was first published in 1976, his notion of place and placelessness has slightly changed. He no longer understands these terms as standing against each other, but he stresses that they exist in a "dynamic balance."[52] Placelessness does not have to be perceived as only negative, because it may generate freedom from place.[53]

Space and Place

Space and place are often addressed together and used to describe each other. Tim Creswell claims that space in contrast to place can be understood as "a realm without meaning."[54] Space becomes place only when people invest meaning into its part and become attached to it. Yi-Fu Tuan describes these concepts similarly. He argues that space is more abstract than place. It cannot be differentiated and turns into place when we deepen our knowledge of it and "endow it with value."[55] He says that "[w]hat begins as undifferentiated space ends as a single object-situation or place."[56]

Relph uses place to describe space in a similar fashion. He claims that "space provides the context for places but derives its meaning from particular places."[57] It means that every place is part of the surrounding space and the nature of space is derived from the places that it contains. Places, therefore, can be distinguished from space that surrounds them while they continue being part of it.

Casey develops a somewhat different approach. He uses the correlation of landscape and body to delineate place. In his view, place is "what takes place between body and landscape."[58] It is bordered by the body on one side and the landscape on the other. Landscape, he argues, is "wherever there is a felt difference unrecuperable by the

[50] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 90.
[51] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 118–119.
[52] Relph, "Preface."
[53] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 140.
[54] Cresswell, *Place*, 10.
[55] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.
[56] Tuan, *Space and Place*, 72.
[57] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 8.
[58] Casey, *Getting Back*, 29.

unusual designators of place."[59] Place, therefore, stretches on the distance between the body and the boundary where undetermined landscape begins.

Sense of Place

A sense of place can be developed when people have dwelled for a certain period of time in a place. In human geography, sense of place is understood as an intense sense of rootedness in a particular location, a sense of identification with the location and developing own identity in relation with that location. It is a sense of membership in a community that gives rise to a common worldview[60] and it is the result of a full awareness of a place as it is, and of a profound identity with a place.[61]

Identity and sense of place are interconnected. Relph notes that when people experience a sense of place, the place influences their identity.[62] People's identities are constructed through their experiences and emotions. These are connected to places and the perceptions of these places help people make sense of their existence.[63] Casey demonstrates how it is possible to be distinguished by place on an example of a living room. The room is a distinguishing mark in an undistinguished world of homogeneous space. It is the place where a person is located, a particular place for living. To be in the living room is "to be subject to its power, to be part of its action, acting on its scene."[64] The same formative aspect applies to larger places: the apartment, the neighborhood, city, and the state. People are distinguished by those places that "implace" them and the places become integral to their identity.[65]

Jennifer Cross identifies two aspects that compose sense of place: relationship to place, which stands for the bonds that people have to places, and community attachment, which takes into account types of attachment to place.[66] Furthermore, she mentions that by a prolonged residence in a place, people learn and create stories about

[59] Casey, *Getting Back*, 24.
[60] See Kent C. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 59.
[61] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 64.
[62] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 66.
[63] See Fouberg, *Human Geography*, 141.
[64] Casey, *Getting Back*, 23.
[65] See Casey, *Getting Back*, 22–23. Implacement, in Casey's work, is the state of being concretely placed somewhere in particular.
[66] She identifies six categories of relationship to place: biographical, spiritual, ideological, narrative, commodified, and dependent; and four categories of community attachment: rootedness, place alienation, relativity, and placelessness. See Jennifer Cross, "What Is Sense of Place?" *Archives of the Twelfth Headwaters Conference*, no. 12 (2001), http://western.edu/sites/default/files/documents/cross_headwatersXII.pdf.

it. Memories and experiences become bound to a place and "become part of a person's individual and community identity."[67]

Sense of place is generally viewed as a positive emotion that one gains by living in a place. Relph claims, however, that "a strong sense of place based on narrow geographical experience is not all sweetness and light; it has a dark side."[68] He explains that dwelling in one place for a substantial part of one's life can result in drudgery. The places to which people become most committed and where they experience a sense of place may become "oppressive and imprisoning,"[69] as they see the same scenes and people and follow the same daily routines. Relph concludes that drudgery "is always a part of profound commitment to a place, and that any commitment must also involve an acceptance of the restrictions that place imposes and the miseries that it may offer."[70] A sense of place may therefore be twofold. It may reward people with positive experiences of place and a sense of rootedness, but it may in return be stifling and restrictive.

Attachment to Place

Despite the fact that dwelling for a long period of time in the same place can result in drudgery, to be attached to a place, or to be rooted in a place, is an important human need.[71] People invest their emotions into the place where they live, be it their home, the neighborhood, or places beyond that. When they are forcibly ordered to leave such a place, they are "stripped of a sheathing," a protection from "the bewilderments of the outside world."[72] Such places secure a point of view to the world. To be emotionally and spiritually attached to somewhere in particular means to understand "one's position in the order of things."[73]

The place where people often experience the strongest attachment is home. Home is a center, "a point of departure from which we orient ourselves and take possession of the world."[74] It is a fixed point that makes people see other places from a

[67] Cross, "What Is Sense of Place?" 4.
[68] Relph, "Preface."
[69] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 41.
[70] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 42.
[71] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 38.
[72] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 99.
[73] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 38.
[74] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 40.

certain perspective and it informs the relationship with the outside world. It is moreover a place where close relationships with people may be developed.[75]

In addition, Cresswell points out that home is a place of rest where people can be relieved from the hurry of the outside world. It is a place where people have a control over their lives and can influence what happens in that place. At home, people can be themselves and they are free to forge their identities. For communities that differ from the mainstream society, such as Native American or African American in the United States, home can furthermore represent a place of freedom and resistance against the oppression of the mainstream society.[76]

Despite this statement, a loss of attachment to home has spread in the modern society as a result of increased mobility of people. The modern man, as Relph points out, is "a homeless being."[77] Without home, he adds, and the relationships that one creates in a place, human existence is deprived of a large part of its significance.[78] Harvey furthermore points at the role of modern industrialization in place making which often prevents people from participating in the process of production of places. Frequently, people are encountered with the environment as a finished commodity. That is, in his view, the final victory of modernity, because it artificially preserves and reconstructs history of places and invents traditions.[79]

Place and Stories

Tuan notes that history is an important element of place and that an awareness of the history of a place contributes to one's appreciation of the place. He uses the example of the non-literate peoples, who express their loyalty to a place also through references to the history of the place. They see history as recorded in the features of the landscape and they understand places as "the handiwork of ancestors from which [they] are descended."[80]

The fact that history, narrated through stories, is tightly linked with place was explored by Kent C. Ryden in his study *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* (1993). Ryden's study examines the invisible landscape which is bound to physical landscape, and which is created by an unseen layer of usage,

[75] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 40.
[76] See Cresswell, *Place*, 24 and 26.
[77] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 40.
[78] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 41.
[79] See Harvey, "From Space to Place and Back Again," 12.
[80] Tuan, *Topophilia*, 100.

memory, and significance. These invisible landscapes of stories are known predominantly to people who are acquainted with the landscape, in other words the insiders who developed a sense of place. They are not visible to a passing observer.[81] In his view, places are not only geographical phenomena, but they are verbal.[82] Stories "of what happened to people in a place, of what they have done with the things that they found there … best reveal the "real geography": geography, that is, experienced and understood as place."[83] The "real geography" serves an important function—it helps people organize their physical surroundings.[84] To walk in a landscape that is covered by an invisible layer of stories is to be reminded of events that are now inextricably bound to the physical phenomena. Telling and hearing stories that are connected to place, according to Jennifer Cross, is a unique process that binds people to those places, as through storytelling people learn about places and develop place attachment.[85]

Ryden identifies four categories that constitute the invisible landscape of stories, ranging from the importance of the material world to the mutual emotional response between place and people. The first category is the local lore, or material folklore, and it signifies the knowledge of the physical properties of the environs. It includes the local names for flora, fauna, and places, and furthermore local legends and tall tales, as they rely on the physical setting.[86]

The second category is designated by the unrecorded history of a place in respect to the things that happened there, often on the personal level. In this category, landscape constitutes a physical context for what happened in the place and caused the remembering. "To live in a place," Ryden explains, "is to see and know what the people who lived there before you did with it … [and] to inscribe deeply on its face the paths, patterns, and events of one's own life."[87]

Ryden determines the third category as "a strong sense of personal and group identity."[88] Identity is bound to the physical components of a place; it includes participation in life within the place and an awareness of a history of the place. At the same time, such place-based identity is relative, as people may feel that they belong to

[81] See Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 41.
[82] See Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 42.
[83] Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 46.
[84] See Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 56.
[85] See Jennifer Eileen Cross, "Processes of Place Attachment: An Interactional Framework," *Symbolic Interaction* 38, no. 4 (2015), 12–13, DOI: 10.1002/symb.198.
[86] See Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 62–63.
[87] Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 64.
[88] Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 64.

more places simultaneously. For example, they may feel that they belong to a particular house, neighborhood, city, country, and continent.[89]

The last category that Ryden identifies encompasses the "emotions which local residents attach to their place and the components of their place."[90] Place shapes people's lives while they project their own feelings on the physical environment, and it establishes the kind of stories that they tell about it.[91] The four levels of the invisible landscape that Ryden mentions become a valuable addition to the discussion of place especially in relation to Native American perception of place and its reflection in their literature. Place and stories enacted in certain places have a strong presence in their literature and I will focus on this issue in next chapter.

Topophilia

Ryden notes that the emotions that people attach to places and the bonds with place that they develop are related to topophilia. Topophilia is an important concept in the study of place that was broadly examined by Yi-Fu Tuan in his study *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (1974). It can be defined as inclusive of "all of the human being's affective ties with the material environment."[92] In other words, topophilia signifies the emotional bond between a person and a particular physical setting.

Such ties can differ in the intensity of feeling and in the way they are expressed. Tuan states that responses to environment may be fleeting or permanent. A fleeting response is produced by the aesthetic beauty and the pleasure that people experience when they perceive a place. More permanent response is given by "feelings that one has toward a place because it is home, the locus of memories, and the means of gaining livelihood."[93] Tuan argues that appreciation of a place is longer lasting and more personal "when it is mixed with the memory of human incidents."[94] Dwelling in a place, therefore, with the experience that people gain from everyday encounter with a place together with the stories of incidents create affective ties with the place. In literature, the topophiliac sentiment can be accurately identified, because it shows how characters respond to places, and it displays their appreciation and emotional bonds with place.

[89] See Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 65.
[90] Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 66.
[91] See Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 66–67.
[92] Tuan, *Topophilia*, 93.
[93] Tuan, *Topophilia*, 93.
[94] Tuan, *Topophilia*, 95.

The purpose of this chapter was to define place and the principal concepts related to place that will be used throughout my thesis. The perspective that I chose is based on human geography and the phenomenological approach that it adopts. This is aimed at a study of place as it exposes itself, as something in front of our eyes, but perceived mostly unconsciously. A place is not only a physically located area; it is created through human interaction which fills it with meaning. The meaning of a place, and its individual character, gives rise to its identity. When the individuality is lost, the place becomes placeless. People's long term experience with places often results in developing a sense of place and an attachment to place. The relationship to place is, however, mutual, so that people and place influence each other.

Chapter 2: Native American Literature and Place

Native American literature is a minority literature in the context of literature written in America. Although Native American writers work within the large background of American literature, their texts remain distinct. According to Laura Coltelli, Indian novelists and poets tell a story of their own, and their story is unparalleled in the world literature.[95] In this chapter I will outline the characteristics of Native American literature that make it distinct within the context of American literature. I pay special attention to themes that recur in Louis Owens's fiction and essay writing, and that are essential for the analysis of his five novels in the following chapters.

Native American Literature

I will start with discussing terminology. There is an ongoing debate among Native and non-Native critics whether it is appropriate to use the term Indian, or whether it is more suitable to use a different word or phrase, such as Native American or the name of the particular tribe the person identifies with. One of the strongest voices in this discussion is that of the Anishinaabe critic and novelist Gerald Vizenor who is very critical to the use of the word "Indian." He points out that the word is a misnomer as it reflects Columbus's confused sense of geography. He calls the *indian*, with small "i" and written in italics, a nominal simulation, because the word is not based on any referent, cultural memories, or native stories that would give the word a foundation. In other words, it does not reflect the people and their experience. Instead, it points to a transposition of culture and to the absence of the Native[96] as a result of using a word with originally refers to people of a different culture. He prefers using the term Anishinaabe to describe his culture affiliation,[97] as it is not burdened by misleading meanings.

Many writers and scholars follow Vizenor's line of thought and use the names of the tribes, or the term Native American, to describe themselves or others. Although Owens views Vizenor's theories with high regard, he uses the word Indian in his texts,

[95] See Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press: 1990), 2.
[96] See Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes and Absence of Presence* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 152.
[97] See Gerald Vizenor, *Literary Chance: Essays on Native American Survivance* (Valencia: Universitat de València, 2007), 11–12.

as well as the phrases Native American, or American Indian. In this thesis, I will use the terms Native American and Indian interchangeably, as it reflects the approach of the author whose work I analyze.

Native American literature has traditionally been oral, and as such includes stories, songs, poems, myths and rituals, legends, parables, and ceremonies.[98] The nineteenth century saw the publication of the first novel written by a Native American. It is John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventure of Joaqín Murieta* (1854). Other works of fiction followed, with such notable works as S. Alice Calahan's *Wynema* (1891), Mourning Dove's *Cogewea, the Half-Blood* (1927), or works by John Joseph Matthews and D'Arcy McNickle, which have remained subjects of critical inquiry until today.[99] Since 1968, after N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968) received Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Native American literature has gained academic and public attention. The development of the literature saw the establishment of canonical authors, such as N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich. In later years the number of widely acclaimed writers increased as other authors began to publish their works. More names were gradually added to the literary canon: Gerald Vizenor, Sherman Alexie, Thomas King, Greg Sarris, Louis Owens, Diane Glancy, Linda Hogan, and others.[100]

Although Native American literature is unparalleled in the world literature, as Coltelli pointed out, it is not easy to come up with a definition. Kenneth Roemer ponders about whether there are some characteristics that would distinguish Native American literature, and he notes that responsible critics have avoided defining it. Rather than producing a list of characteristics, Roemer observes certain attitudes that Native writers have in common. He is able to distinguish common attitude to history, which often challenges how specific events are portrayed in mainstream culture, attitude to loss that stresses survival and hope instead of focusing on Indians as victims, attitude

[98] See Kenneth Lincoln, "Native American Literatures: "old like hills, like stars," in *Three American Literatures: Essays in Chicano, Native American, and Asian-American Literature for Teachers of American Literature*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr. (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1982), 88.

[99] For a discussion of Native American fiction published before 1968 see A. Lavonne Brown Ruoff, "Pre-1968 Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, ed. Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 161–171.

[100] For an introductory discussion of the authors and their works see James Ruppert, "Fiction: 1968 to the Present," in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, ed. Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 173–188.

to communal identity, to language, time, and place.[101] Coltelli expands these overall characteristics by including the quest for modern identity of the characters of Native American fiction. She labels Native American literature as innovative, stimulating, rich with suggestions, and easily recognizable for its identity.[102]

Louis Owens is concerned with these themes in his work as well. Among the themes that stand out as the most significant throughout his whole body of work are the questions of Indian and mixedblood identity, the portrayal of the Indian in mainstream culture and the ubiquitous stereotypes bound to it, the necessity to contradict the stereotypical notions of Indians in order to survive, and the importance of storytelling. Furthermore, all of his work is affected by his lifelong interest in place. In the following section I will briefly introduce these themes, as they are important for understanding the context of his fiction work.

Owens claims that the theme of identity is the central issue to every contemporary Native American novelist.[103] As I mentioned in the introduction to my thesis, Owens was of mixedbooded origin, and his complicated family background had a strong influence on his literary and critical work. The complex concern with identity springs from the difficult position of Native Americans, and mixedblooded Native Americans, in the mainstream society, their displacement and consequential fragmented identity. Daniel Heath Justice identifies the primary sources of dislocation to be "government policies of removal, land seizure and allotment, erosion of successful indigenous trade networks and sufficiency economies, excessive taxation, termination of government-to-government relationships with tribal nations, boarding and residential schools, disruption of families and kinship communities, forced assimilation and relocation."[104] Many of the causes that Justice lists are related to the loss of land and the people's original places to dwell. Although he relates these issues to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they have an evident impact on contemporary Native population and their sense of identity. Owens labels these processes as "systematic oppression by the monocentric "westering" impulse in America,"[105] by which he points out that the

[101] See Kenneth M. Roemer, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, ed. Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11.
[102] See Coltelli, *Winged Words*, 3.
[103] See Owens, *Other Destinies*, 5.
[104] Daniel Heath Justice, ""Go Away, Water!" Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative," in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, ed. Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 160.
[105] Owens, *Other Destinies*, 4.

recurrent maltreatment of the indigenous people in America is the result of colonizing processes driven by the vision of progress and fortune.

Owens ponders the meaning of Indian identity in *Other Destinies*. He asks what identifies a person as Indian, whether it is blood quanta, being raised in a traditional way and speaking a Native language, or being an enrolled tribal member.[106] The approaches to determine whether a person is Indian are various. Geary Hobson mentions other approaches that may be used: genetics, politics, sociology, culture. Hobson claims that there is no easy answer and comes to a conclusion that "it is not merely enough that a person has a justifiable claim to Indian blood, but he or she must also be at least somewhat socially and culturally definable as a Native American."[107] In his conclusion he understands identity as something that is based both on tangible facts and a felt reality. The nature of understanding identity, therefore, opens space for doubts and uncertainties.

The question of identifying Indianness is further complicated by the fact, as Owens points out, that many people around the world have a "strangely concrete sense of what a "real" Indian should *be*."[108] Owens agrees with Vizenor that the American Indian is an invention of those who colonized America, but he develops the idea, claiming that the word "Indian" stands for a mirror to the colonizers that reflects back their own image.[109] In other words, he claims that the invented "Indian," the product of literature, history, and art, is a vehicle for understanding white society. It discloses their fears and desires and bears little resemblance to the actual Native Americans.[110] In addition, Momaday points out the generalization of the Indian in the imagination of the white man. The Indian, in his words, "has been made to become in theory what he could not become in fact,"[111] as the image that has been imposed on Native Americans does not reflect their actual lifestyle and identities. Consequently, there is a discrepancy between the image of the Indian and the actual Native American whom it should represent. The tendencies to generalize and stereotypize are prevalent in contemporary mainstream culture and Native Americans are forced to resist it.

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[106] See Owens, *Other Destinies*, 3.
[107] Geary Hobson, "Remembering the Earth," in *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, ed. Geary Hobson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 9.
[108] Owens, *Other Destinies*, 3.
[109] See Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 38.
[110] See Owens, *Other Destinies*, 4.
[111] N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages* (New York: San Martin's Press, 1997), 58.

Resistance to stereotypization appears in the work of many contemporary Native American authors who aim to portray actual Native experience. Stereotypical notions show Indians primarily in two ways: as authentic members of a vanishing race, and / or as environmentalists, the ecological Indians who worship the Mother Earth Goddess.

The stereotypical notion of the authentic Indian shows indigenous people as dressed in buckskin, beads, and braids, and living in the traditional way. It is an imagery that is based on the Indian life of the nineteenth century. This image still prevails in literature, film and television, where the Indian characters continue to be portrayed as the Noble Savages, the Red Villains, the Indian Princesses, and the Squaws.[112] Because the model for such characters is the life of the indigenous people whose culture and way of life disappears, they are portrayed as having no place in the contemporary world.[113] Owens furthermore notes that Indians in media, especially in films, are present as props, as means to an end,[114] characters that lack depth and importance and have a genre role. Owens calls these characters absurd, despite the fact that they hold a special place in the American narrative.[115]

Ron Welburn shows how the false image recurring in media may cause confusion concerning identity among Native Americans. In his poem "The Mirror and the Hollywood Indian," he writes: "Into our mirrors we sought / that definition our families claimed / hidden from many of us by snub noses / and rough hair. / We sought the Hollywood Indian / and did not see him. / We refused to see the eagle in ourselves."[116] The image leads Native Americans away from their contemporary identity to the image of the Indian in media, in this case the Hollywood films. As a result, it causes problems with identifying as an Indian. The problem is deepened in cases of mixedbloods, because they are located between cultures. The stereotypical image of the Indian may as a result lead to alienation from both Native and white cultures.

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[112] See Ann Haugo, "American Indian Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, ed. Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 198.

[113] See Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 13 and 104

[114] See Owens, *Other Destinies*, 115.

[115] See Owens, *I Hear the Train*, 218.

[116] Ron Welburn, "The Mirror and the Holywood Indian," in *The People Who Stayed: Southeastern Indian Writing after Removal*, ed. Geary Hobson, Janet McAdams, and Kathryn Walkiewitz (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 43–44.

The image of the Indian as an environmentalist, the apostle of the outdoor in special touch with the nature is, according to Lee Schweninger, a colonial imposition.[117] The stereotype comes from the presupposition that American Indians have a "special and in many instances enviable relationship and understanding of the landscape."[118] This image is again supported by Hollywood which often portrays Indians as living in a pristine natural paradise worshipping the Mother Earth goddess.[119] These characters are considered to have a lesson to teach to the Euromerican society who have polluted and degraded their living space. Further sources of these stereotypical images include popular books, advertisements, but also slogans, such as "The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth."[120] Schweninger points out that the image is based once more on the pre-twentieth century American Indians and that it shows them as ethical land stewards who lack urban, mechanistic lives.[121]

Although Jacquelyn Kilpatrick titles Owens as "environmentalist of the first water,"[122] he frequently comments on stereotypes and stereotypical images of the Indians as "genetically predetermined environmentalists."[123] According to Owens, the stereotype of the ecological Indian is a "historically and culturally inaccurate romanticism"[124] which leads attention away from the actual relationship of Native Americans with land. The actual attitude is often misrepresented, perhaps due to the fact, as Vine Deloria notes, that "[i]t is the outward symbolic form that is most popular."[125] This leads Deloria to urge the public to drop the myth of the Indian that has been prevalent for so long. Instead, he claims, what Native Americans need is a new policy that would acknowledge their right to live in peace, free from arbitrary harassment, and from "experts" on Indians. What they need, according to Deloria, is a "cultural leave-us-alone agreement, in spirit and in fact."[126]

The historians William Cronon and Richard White say that labeling Indians as conservationists is demeaning. It presents them as people without culture and without

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[117] See Lee Schweninger, *Listening to the Land: Native American Literary Responses to the Landscape* (Athens; London: The University of Georgia Press, 2008), 20.
[118] Schweninger, *Listening to the Land*, 29.
[119] See Schweninger, *Listening to the Land*, 16 and 18.
[120] Schweninger quotes John Hitt, in Schweninger, *Listening to the Land*, 36.
[121] See Schweninger, *Listening to the Land*, 26.
[122] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, "Introduction," 10.
[123] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 220.
[124] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 220.
[125] Vine Deloria, *God Is Red* (1973; Golden: Fulcrum, 2003), 41.
[126] Vine Deloria, "Indians Today, the Real and the Unreal," in *American Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. John Hartly and Roberta E. Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 52.

the right to reshape the landscape they live upon. At the same time it demeans the environment that they live in, because it does not respect the relationship between the land and the people that live upon it. This relationship is influential for both participants: the people alter the landscape while the landscape influences the way the people live.[127]

Richard White furthermore points out that the mainstream society's attitude to nature influences their perception of the Indian. He claims that if human beings are evil, they see Indians as violent and cruel, and they identify them with the nature of the howling wilderness. If, on the other hand, humans believe in beneficent nature and good human character, they see them as noble savages that are one with their environment. Cronon concludes that to understand how Native Americans view their land requires moving beyond these stereotypes.[128]

Although Schweninger's discussion overall consists of criticism of the stereotypes that have been imposed on Native Americans, he also admits that "many serious, contemporary Native American writers assert that as American Indians they do indeed maintain a special relationship with the earth."[129] This puts Native American writers into a difficult position. On the one hand they refuse imposed stereotypes and generalizations, but on the other hand they imbue their works with what they consider to be a profound integration with natural landscape and place. Schweninger notes that there are individual members of many tribes that perceive their relationship with landscape in a way that differs from how it is viewed by Euromericans.[130]

If this is the case, what is the nature of the response of Native Americans to landscape? Schweninger refers to Black Elk or Luther Sanding Bear who speak of being related to plants and animals, or of love for nature.[131] To move to the more contemporary works, Vine Deloria observes that "American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind."[132] He links spaces and places with religion, claiming that the religious tradition of Native Americans is "taken directly from the world around

[127] See William Cronon and Richard White, "Indians in the Land," *American Heritage* 37, no. 5 (1986): 2, https://www.americanheritage.com/content/indians-land.
[128] See Cronon and White, "Indians in the Land," 2.
[129] Schweninger, *Listening to the Land*, 29.
[130] See Schweninger, *Listening to the Land*, 34.
[131] See Schweninger, *Listening to the Land*, 34–35.
[132] Deloria, *God Is Red*, 61.

them,"[133] because they link particular places with religious experiences. These places are remembered and they enable people to communicate with the spirits. Such places are present in vast majority of tribal religions. They function as a center, and can be represented by a river, a mountain, a plateau, a valley, or other feature of the natural world. Deloria notes that this view of land and place is the result of thousands of years of occupancy on the American continent.[134]

Similarly, Momaday speaks of a relationship with the land that includes Indian spiritual worldview. He claims that for the Indian there exists an "intimate, vital link between the earth and himself … that implies an intricate network of rights and responsibilities."[135] This view, according to Momaday, is based on the conviction that the earth is alive and that there is a spiritual dimension to the earth. The relationship between people and land involves responsibility as well as a spiritual connection. He continues: "In as much as I am in the land, it is appropriate that I should affirm myself in the spirit of the land … In the natural order man invests himself in the landscape and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience. This trust is sacred."[136] He points to the closeness of the relationship and supports the fact that land and people exist in a reciprocal relationship that creates what he calls a "sacred trust."

The idea of the importance of land is highlighted by Paula Gunn Allen and she posits it on the highest rank within her culture. She claims that "[w]e are the land," and continues that this "is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life and culture of the Southwest."[137] In her view, it is not a matter of a being close with nature, but the relationship determines identity, because the earth, she claims, is the same as the people.[138] Leslie Marmon Silko has a similar view: "Human identity, imagination, and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land." Speaking about her Pueblo tribe, she explains that "[t]he Pueblo people and the land and the stories are inseparable."[139]

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[133] Deloria, *God Is Red*, 65.
[134] See Deloria, *God Is Red*, 66.
[135] Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, 32.
[136] Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, 39.
[137] Paula Gunn Allen, "Iyani: It Goes This Way," in *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, ed. Geary Hobson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980), 191.
[138] See Allen, "Iyani," 191.
[139] Leslie Marmon Silko, "Introduction," in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1996), 21.

Owens demonstrates that sense of place and identity are mutually intertwined. In his terms, to be integrated into a place means "to be removed from the experience of ephemerality, fragmentation, and deracination … and most significantly, to be determined according the eternal, immutable values arising from a profound integration with place."[140] Through understanding of place comes the understanding of identity, which, taken the other way around, points to the idea that there is no understanding of identity without experiencing a sense of place. This is a key problem for Owens's fictional characters and it can be found in works of other authors of Native American fiction.

Simon Ortiz furthermore links place not only with identity but also with the specific language that is used at that particular place. He notes that place "is the source of who you are in terms of your identity, the language that you are born into and that you come to use."[141] Landscape is the source of language, in his view, at the same time that it is used to describe the landscape. Ortiz also considers using English as a non-Native language to describe sense of place experienced by indigenous people. He is not negative as he explains that in the end it does not matter which language is used to describe the place, because the sense of place expressed in the languages is not so different. The importance for him lies in the sensibility to the landscape and establishing a connection with it as with a spiritual source. [142]

The importance of place is reflected in the devastating effects of loss of tribally and personally significant landscape. Joy Porter draws attention to its negative consequences for individuals. She stresses that loss of land does not affect the people only emotionally but may have negative physical consequences and result in a "deprivation of physical strength."[143] Edward Casey shows the emotional and physical effects on his example of the relocation of the Navajo as the result of the Navajo-Hopi Land Settlement Act of 1979. The act separated the communities of the two tribes which had been able to coexist in a mostly peaceful way. In order for the communities to live separately, thousands of Navajo people had to be relocated from the Hopi. The result of the relocation was disastrous. A quarter of the relocated Navajo have died, and there was a spread of alcoholism, depression, and acute disorientation. Furthermore, the

[140] Owens, O*ther Destinies*, 95.
[141] Coltelli, *Winged Words*, 105.
[142] See Coltelli, *Winged Words*, 105.
[143] Joy Porter, "Introduction," in *Place and Native American Indian History and Culture*, ed. Joy Porter (Bern; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 25.

new landscape was affected by uranium mining and dumping nuclear waste products. Casey concludes the example by stating that "to take away the land is to take away life"[144] in its literal meaning.

Craig S. Womack observes that the depressing realities that occur in the lives of Native Americans, such as shorter lives, higher unemployment, younger suicides, etc., have foundation in the loss of land. He asserts that these problems could be solved by return of the land to the communities. At the same time he is aware of the high improbability of such a situation.[145]

Owens also considers the possible solution of the upsetting situation; however, he does not consider the possibility of a return to ancestral lands. His approach is aimed at a recovery and rearticulation of identity through rediscovered sense of place and community. He admits, however, that it is highly demanding.

Nevertheless, Owens's fiction, as well as the works by other Native American authors, is centered on survival. In order to describe precisely how survival is reflected in Native literature, Vizenor uses the term survivance. He explains that Native survivance is more that survival or endurance, or response to the mainstream culture's preconception.[146] It stands for "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories."[147] These stories are renunciations of dominance, of "the unbearable sentiment of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry."[148] Vizenor stresses the need to continue with the stories that portray Native American experience without the burden of the stereotypical notions that doom them to the past and label them as victims. These stereotypes represent the absence of the Native person, because instead of him or her there is a false notion of Indianness. Stories that emphasize survival stand in contrast to imposed images about Indians.

Stories may furthermore reestablish a connection with place and they play an important part in creating a sense of place crucial for assuming one's identity. Paul Shepard summarizes how perception of landscape and creation of places is related to stories in his study *Nature and Madness*:

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[144] Casey, *Getting Back*, 35.
[145] See Craig S. Womack, "A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism between 1986 and 1997," in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, ed. Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 8.
[146] See Vizenor, *Fugitive* Poses, 14.
[147] Gerald Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.
[148] Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance," 1.

> Individual and tribal identity are built up in connection with widely separate place and the paths connecting them. Different places are successively assimilated or internalized. They become distinct, through unconscious, element of the self, enhanced by mythology and ceremony, generating a network of deep emotional attachment that cements the personality. Throughout life, those places have a role in the evocation of self and group consciousness. They are mnemonic: integrated components of a sacred history and the remembered and unconsciously felt past. The whole of the known region or home range becomes a hierophantic map, a repository of the first creation that parallels and overlies individual history.[149]

The landscape can become a map that within a particular culture explains the origin of the people and the creation of the landscape. Places became to be bound with certain stories and they remind people of them. At the same time, stories bound people to certain geographical locations.

Momaday claims that literature in America is the result of human perception of landscape. This statement leads to the importance of stories in Native American cultures. Momaday labels the oral tradition to be the foundation of literature.[150] He explains that within the tradition, words are intrinsically powerful. "By means of words," he says, "can one bring about physical change in the universe."[151] This applies to storytelling, since when one tells a story, "he is dealing with forces that are supernatural and irresistible. He assumes great risks and responsibilities."[152] Owens agrees with this view of the power of language: "According to Cherokee belief, for example, we can form and alter the world for good or bad with language, even with thought."[153] And he is convinced, in agreement with Momaday's view, of the power of stories: "Stories make the world knowable and inhabitable. Stories make the world, period."[154]

Furthermore, Native Authors often refer to the healing power of stories. In the process of telling a story, storytellers, as Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez points out, are "weaving the verbal webs that reinscribe the old words, the old stories, the old ways into retellings that provide new ways of seeing, understanding, and interpreting a world

[149] Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 24.
[150] See Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, 14.
[151] Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, 15–16.
[152] Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, 16.
[153] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 209.
[154] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 210.

in which the old ways are no longer sufficient."[155] She claims that the function of stories is to interpret the world in a way that would guide the listeners to adopt new points of view that are necessary to ensure a secured existence. The stories, the storyteller, and the listeners are intertwined as the story is retold. She also argues that American Indian writers are influenced by the oral tradition in their fiction, as they "invite a more directly interactive participation from their readers"[156] who become more of *listener-readers* (her emphasis).

Stories may be updated when they are told. The storyteller may decide to include different details or characters, or to update the story according to the needs of the present. Marilou Awiakta points out that those changes do not alter the core of the story. She gives an example of using chronologically incorrect object, such as guns, in the traditional Cherokee story of Selu and the origin of corn. When she told the story on one occasion, the listeners asked her how the story could be authentic if there are guns in it. She explains that it is not the facts that are important for the story, but it is the "spiritual base" and the spine of the story.[157] When people listen and understand the story, the teaching that is part of it may lead them into a spiritual revival and personal recovery.[158] In contrast, Linda Helstern states that changes in stories result in additional meanings, if the audience is already familiar with the story.[159]

Storytelling thus becomes a crucial element in fiction by American Indian writers, as it enables the characters to recover and helps them to forge their identities. Owens notes that the attempt to recover and rearticulate identity is "at the center of the American Indian fiction."[160] The following part of this chapter examines how identity is related to place and it focuses on the treatment of place and landscape in works by Native American writers.

Place in Native American Literature

In 2006 a special issue of the European Review of Native American Studies journal was published. The issue was dedicated to place and its significance in writings by American Indians. The dedication of the whole issue to place was the reflection an

[155] Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures & the Oral Tradition* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999), 129.
[156] Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary*, 129.
[157] See Marilou Awiakta, *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993), 15–16.
[158] See Awiakta, *Selu*, 16–17.
[159] See Linda Lizut Helstern, *Louis Owens* (Boise: Boise State University Press, 2005), 25.
[160] Owens, *Other Destinies*, 5.

increased awareness of its importance in the works by Native American writers and of a growing interest in the concept. The issue was edited by Joy Porter who introduced it with the words that place "has always been recognized as being at the heart of Native American life and literature."[161] In her introduction, she observes that place is increasingly seen as "space invested with meaning through lived experience"[162] and that this understanding of place gains more prominence across disciplines. Place is "defined by construction rather than borders," she says, which points to the creation of place by experience that imbues it with meanings rather than by demarcating place by creating borders introduced from the outside. This view corresponds with the notion of place that I referred to in the previous chapter dedicated to defining place.

Robert Nelson, in his study *Place and Vision: The Function of Landscape in Native American Fiction*, argues that physical landscape is an "inviolable referent." He states that landscape has a primary status and its reflection in literature is only derived. Landscape exists prior to fiction and it determines the context where fiction works are set. It is a dependable constant in fiction, as it provides an undistorted referential framework and the "basis for recentering of self-consciousness."[163] In other words, he argues that Native American writers employ geographical realism, as their works reflect faithfully the model landscape. The landscape furthermore enables finding a foothold and looking at oneself from the perspective of standing on the ground. The land, however, does not precede only fiction, but also the existence of a culture. Nelson argues that "[a]cquisition of a "realistic" vision of the landscape is … a prerequisite to the acquisition of a verifiable cultural identity."[164] Realistic view of landscape and its depiction is therefore essential for understanding one's identity. Accordingly, the cure for the frequent alienation of fictional characters "depends on their willingness and ability to enter … into identity with the landscape, the place where the event of their lives happens to have taken and to be taking place."[165] The landscape, in his view, can function not only as a setting for a story, but also as another character in these works. Owens's first novel, *Wolfsong*, is an example of landscape portrayed as a character, as it is integrated to the novel's plot, it is given voice through the behavior of animals and through visions, and the protagonist has to interfere with it in order to survive.

[161] Porter, "Place," 1.
[162] Porter, "Place," 1.
[163] Robert M. Nelson, *Place and Vision: The Function of Landscape in Native American Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 6.
[164] Nelson, *Place and Vision*, 7.
[165] Nelson, *Place and Vision*, 7.

Nelson's study approaches works by the canonical authors N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko. Nelson consciously chooses not to study intensively the cultural background of the individual novels. He clarifies this by stating that the landscapes in their fiction function as

> pre-verbal, pre-conceptual, pre-cultural frames of reference, frames that shape the creative vision and language of these texts in much the same way the language and vision characteristic of the respective tribal traditions must have been shaped. … the landscapes of these texts are themselves living texts and in themselves can be "read" in any language.[166]

This is an interesting point of view, since this reading of Native American fiction does not necessarily urge the readers to inform themselves in more detail about the culture in which the novels are set, which may otherwise uncover different layers of meanings. Nelson understands landscape and place as universally comprehensible and speaking to the Native as well as to the non-Native reader.

However universally comprehensible landscape may be, Louise Erdrich speaks about a difference in attitudes of Native and Westerns writers to place. In her essay "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," she draws attention to Alfred Kazin's observation that "the greatest single fact about our modern American writing" is " our writers' absorption in every last detail of their American world together with their deep and subtle alienation from it."[167] Erdrich explains that the cause of such deep and subtle alienation may come from the progressive movement of the Western culture that does not allow for inhabiting a place until one comes to know it in each particular detail.[168] She furthermore argues that while the American authors name and describe the places that they love, they lose it, as in the progressive movement nothing stays the same, not even the land.[169]

The task of the contemporary Native American writers, Erdrich argues, is to tell stories of survival in the light of the enormous loss that they face, of land, cultures, and languages. They should protect and celebrate the essences of their remaining cultures.

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[166] Nelson, *Place and Vision*, 9.

[167] Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York: Overseas Editions, 1942), ix.

[168] See Louise Erdrich, "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/28/books/where-i-ought-to-be-a-writer-s-sense-of-place.html.

[169] See Erdrich, "Where I Ought to Be."

Accordingly, she claims that the three percent of the U. S. A., which is the approximate amount of land still possessed by Native Americans, is cherished in every detail, informed with the old understandings of the land, and known and used in some cases, changelessly.[170] Although her point of view may be regarded as idealistic, this is the attitude to land that, according to her, should be reflected in Native American artistic works.

Although Erdrich calls upon protection and a sensitive treatment of land, the texts by Native writers are influenced by both traditions of writing, Native and Euromerican. James Ruppert is interested in the writers' position between cultures, and claims that Native American authors "[a]s participants in two cultural traditions … pattern their art with discursive acts of mediation at many levels."[171] By "mediation" Ruppert means "an artistic and conceptual standpoint, constantly flexible, which uses the epistemological frameworks of Native American and Western cultural traditions to illuminate and enrich each other."[172] In other words, he believes that the position of the writers contributes and enhances both cultures. Ruppert, however, contends that it is better to understand the positions of the writers and their works not as between two cultures, but "as participants in two rich cultural traditions."[173] The texts that emerge from such practice are the results of mediation, and they have a disposition to "create a new context for meaning and identity."[174] The treatment of place is influenced by mediation as well. Erdrich shows that she is aware of the approach of Westerns writers to place, and her fictional work can be seen as a response to such rendering of places. Her point of view encourages a deep interest in place within a literary work, such that is distinctive of works produced by Native Americans.

In the essay, Erdrich describes her own sense of place and shows her awareness of the significance of a sense of place for a fiction writer:

> Here I am, where I ought to be. A writer must have a sense of place where he or she feels this, a place to love and be irritated with. One must experience the local blights, hear the proverbs, endure the radio commercials. Through the close study of a place, its people and character, its crops, products, paranoias, dialects and failures, we come

[170] Erdrich, "Where I Ought to Be."
[171] James Ruppert, *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 3.
[172] Ruppert, *Mediation*, 3.
[173] Ruppert, *Mediation*, 3.
[174] Ruppert, *Mediation*, 33.

> closer to our own reality. It is difficult to impose a story and a plot on a place. But truly knowing a place provides the link between details and meaning. Location, whether it is to abandon it or draw sharply, is where we start.[175]

Erdrich highlights that a writer should base his or hers works on those places that he or she is intimately familiar with. Familiarity with place is a necessary condition to understanding the place and therefore conveying the meaning of the place into the fictional work. In her view, this is where authors should start if they wish to write convincingly and credibly. The location with its meanings and particular details is the base of fiction writing, for both Indian and Euromerican authors. Owens holds a similar point of view. He argues that one must have "the greatest possible intimacy and communication with the world one inhabits."[176] Only by that, he claims, people are able to gain the knowledge to survive. Considering the fictional work of Owens, it is apparent that he set his novels into places that he was closely acquainted with. They are always an accurate reflection of his experience with place, which is what makes place such a powerful presence in his writing.

N. Scott Momaday shows how place is related to his fictional work in his essay "A First American Views His Land." He explains his concern with place:

> I am interested in the way that a man looks at a given landscape and takes possession of it in his blood and brain. For this happens, I am certain, in the ordinary motion of life. None of us lives apart from the land entirely; such an isolation is unimaginable. We have sooner or later to come to terms with the world around us.[177]

Momaday is interested in the active perception of places and how people negotiate with place. He shows that place and the perception of place is not a concept that would be detached from everyday experience, and therefore it is wholly justifiable and appropriate to explore the relation between people and places. Characters in his works are strongly influenced by the place they are situated in and are forced to come to terms with the place. The place and their relation with it, either alienated or profound, shape their identities.

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[175] Erdrich, "Where I Ought to Be."
[176] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 227.
[177] Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, 47.

The overall tendency in the novels by Native American writers is toward finding identification with place that enables the characters to realize their identity. Displaced characters find their cultural roots in a place and renew a previously lost close relationship with the place. This process is often labeled as the recovery of the characters. Nelson mentions that this process can be understood as a way of acquiring a cultural literacy, which includes re-learning and re-living stories and lifeways of certain people and which results in the characters' identification with the cultural milieu.[178]

The tendency to portray the process of recovery gave rise to what William Bevis labels "homing plots" and Craig Womack calls the "homecoming" impulse.[179] The impulse represents the tendency to return to home place where characters experience an accommodation of Indian values. They undergo a spiritual and cultural recovery that helps them to define their own identity. The awareness of this impulse was spread by William Bevis's essay "Native American Novels: Homing In" published in 1987. In the essay, Bevis claims that works by Native American writers are ""incentric," centrifugal, converging, contracting"[180] because their protagonists head home, back to the place of their origin. In his view, the place of origin is the "primary mode of knowledge and a primary good."[181] The protagonist can find identity only in his or her society, past, and place, because without this context he or she is utterly lost.[182] Kenneth Roemer notes that the homecoming impulse is an alternative to the "lighting out for the territory" and "frontier" narratives that celebrate individuality, the idea of constant movement, and progress.[183]

Matthew Arnold, however, suggests that in current Native American works the tendency may not be exclusively towards home. In his view, it is not necessary to return home or to the place of origin to recover identity. The concept of home is becoming broader in American Indian fiction and it attains new and alternative meanings in new dwellings and locations.[184] Moreover, the emphasis on past is weakened and the works are oriented more towards future and survival, although characters remain conscious of

[178] See Nelson, *Place and Vision*, 8.
[179] See Womack, "Book-Length," 16.
[180] William Bevis, "Native American Novels: Homing In," in *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 582.
[181] Bevis, "Homing In," 582.
[182] See Bevis, "Homing In," 590–91.
[183] See Roemer, "Introduction," 17.
[184] See Matthew Arnold, *Politics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Native American Literature: Across Every Border* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

the past. In the words of Helen Carr, contemporary works include the "complexity and hybridity of Native American life" and show awareness that there is "no return to a putative authenticity."[185] Through their writing, Native American authors create a sense of place that characters with fissured identities inhabit, "making the unhomely a home."[186] In other words, the importance of return to the home community is replaced by a possibility to establish a sense of place elsewhere. This approach respects the development of the modern Indian society and the fact that over sixty percent of Native Americans live in urban or suburban places, such as New York, Los Angeles, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Seattle, Phoenix, and Honolulu.[187]

Although Owens's novels are not set in places with high concentrations of population that Carr had in mind, the protagonists of his novels show a tendency to establish a sense of place in a land that is not the place of origin of their culture. Tom Joseph in *Wolfsong* acquires a deep understanding of the meaning of wilderness for his tribe, just to be forced to leave home and expand the sense of home-in-the-wilderness to a place across the border; Will Striker in *Nightland* transforms the devastated landscape of his farm into a proper home while respecting that the place traditionally belongs to another tribe; and Jake Nashoba in *Dark River*, alienated from his own community, finds a place and cultural affiliation for himself in the stories of a different tribe.

Craig Womack points out that Owens's special interest in his fiction lies in how Indian identity can be recovered in a world where identities are fragmented and people experience difficulties adjusting to the modern world.[188] The recovery of his characters is usually grounded in understanding the principle of reciprocity with the landscape, which, for Owens, reflects the notion of a profound integration with place. Owens explains the importance of reciprocity by stating that "everything in existence is dependent upon and related to everything else and, while one cannot live without having impact upon one's environment and being impacted by that environment, it is essential that one acknowledge this interdependence and act accordingly."[189]

Reciprocity, Nelson argues, is indivisible from the land, because it has become encoded in the land by a long tradition of attitude to the landscape. Of such a reciprocal relationship speaks Thomas King when he discusses the meaning of the phrase "All My

[185] Helen Carr, "Place and American Indian Literature: Foreword," *European Review of Native American Studies* 20, no. 1 (2006): 3.
[186] Carr, "Place," 3.
[187] See Porter, "Introduction," 27.
[188] See Womack, "Book-Length," 42.
[189] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 225–26.

Relations" for Native Americans: it refers to the relationship of human beings with the animate and inanimate world and encourages accepting responsibilities to live in a harmonious and moral manner.[190]

To conclude, Roemer says that understanding place in works by Native American authors poses a challenge to the audience. He notes that

> [t]he crucial link between landscape and community identity, the postapocalyptic sense of land lost, the spatial emphasis in many Native religions, the organic ties between storytelling and place, and the central belief that the "environment" is not a place way out there but instead a place in the middle, a community home – all these senses of place challenge modern Indian and non-Indian readers to (re)consider their concepts of the American landscape.[191]

The readers of Native American fiction, Native and non-Native alike, are asked to reexamine the meanings and aspects of place, as well as the various ties that bind them to the place where they find themselves. What becomes important is the treatment of the place in the middle—the place where we find ourselves in our everyday lives and that is sometimes refused to be thought of as significant on the larger scale. Or, as Joni Adamson puts it, it is the place where culture emerges from nature.[192] By this statement Roemer formulates what may be considered to be the enriching aspect of Native Indian fiction for Western culture.

American Indian works often portray events or characters that are connected with the spiritual worldview of a particular tribe. An important place in their fiction is given to animals, spirits, and vision. These are often perceived as supernatural aspects of their works. Owens, however, argues that Native American fiction makes no disjunctions between what we consider to be real and what we think of as magical. The magical is not metaphorical and the "sacred and the profane interpenetrate irresistibly"[193] to create reality. He continues that "if the reader acknowledges and accepts this reality, he or she experiences an Indian world."[194]

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[190] See Thomas King, "Introduction," in *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction*, ed. Thomas King (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990), ix.
[191] Roemer, "Introduction," 18.
[192] See Joni Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2001), xvii.
[193] Owens, *Other Destinies*, 165–66.
[194] Owens, *Other Destinies*, 166.

The aim of this chapter was to give a brief introduction to Native American literature, its themes, canonical authors, and goals that the writers pursue. I presented the perspectives of various authors and critics that discuss the attitudes that make this literature distinguishable. From their points of view, place is a concept that is irreplaceable. It is formed by the everyday experience with landscape and it has a formative influence on people's lives and understanding of identities. Living in a place should reflect the ethical behavior and reciprocity of people and nature and the responsibility that springs from that relationship. This is present in Native American fiction writing. Place creates the basis for stories and it can be depicted as a character in a fiction work. The depiction of place in American Indian fiction raises question that are aimed at ensuring survival, of people, nature, and culture. In the following part of my dissertation I will focus on the analysis of place in the novels by Louis Owens, where these ideas play a major role.

Chapter 3: *Wolfsong*

Owens mentioned in an interview with A. Robert Lee that writing is a "heartbreaking thing to stake one's life on"[195] and that he would not encourage anyone to take up writing unless they cannot help it. At a particular moment in his life he destroyed all his writing and decided upon not writing a word more. The only text that was spared was the manuscript of *Wolfsong* which was at that time in New York with his agent.[196] *Wolfsong*, drafted in 1976 and revisited in 1990, was published as his first novel in 1991.[197]

Wolfsong introduces themes that reappear throughout Owens's whole writing career, either in fiction, his autobiographical writing or critical essays. With each novel, however, Owens's principal focus shifted. The most prominent themes that can be identified in this novel are finding an identity that would grant survival despite the loss of culture, land, and voice, finding and defining one's own place within the culture and the environment that would ensure the survival, establishing one's connectedness to a place and the nature of the relationship with the place, and finally the question of wilderness and its degradation and resource exploitation as a result of dominant relationship to nature. Owens mentioned that the issues that he touched upon in this novel are common to Native people all over the U. S. and Canada,[198] yet at the same time, the novel is highly place specific and copes with issues distinctive of the particular region.

My concern in this chapter is to analyze the novel in respect to place: how places in the novel are portrayed and what are the characters' responses to those places, especially the experiences, attitude and intentions of the protagonist. I will focus on the responses of the protagonist to Forks, his home town, and the surrounding landscape, and his response to California, a place that is portrayed in a stark contrast to Forks. Furthermore, I will analyze how he experiences wilderness and compare it with views of the place of other characters. By discussing these aspects of the novel, however, I

[195] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 52.
[196] See Lee, "Outside Shadow," 52.
[197] See Chris LaLonde, *Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 21.
[198] See Blake Hausman and John Purdy, "Widening the Circle: Collaborative Reading with Louis Owens's *Wolfsong*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 17, no. 4 (2005): 55, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20737304?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

must inevitably consider topics that are principal for Native American literature in general, such as the discussion of identity, and with this in mind I will try to comment meaningfully on the related themes and topics.

In *Wolfsong*, Owens tells the story of Tom Joseph, a young full blood Native American of the fictional Stehemish tribe. Tom returns home to attend funeral of his uncle after a year spent at the UC Santa Barbara. He struggles to find his identity in relation to his tribe, the wilderness, the local community and the dominant culture's image of the Indian. He is trying to find a way how to unite with a wolf spirit that his uncle left him after he died. Tom adopts the role of protecting the wilderness area, as his uncle did, and resisting the construction of a copper mine at the heart of the national park. At the end of the novel he dynamites a watertank at a construction site in the wilderness area, which accidentally causes the death of a local developer. Tom subsequently flees from the site toward Dakobed, the mountain that is the center of the Stehemish universe. He is able to establish his identity as a result of his interaction with the environment. He finally acquires his uncle's wolf spirit helper and the novel ends with him heading to British Columbia, seeking a refuge in the vast Canadian wilderness.

The novel is set to the North Cascades, Washington and it accurately depicts the character of the region. Owens's detailed descriptions spring from his intimate knowledge of the region. He used to work as a ranger at the local office of National Forest Service, which included building and maintaining trail through the Mt. Baker/Snoqualmie National Forest and the Glacier Peak Wilderness; as a firefighter, and later as an enforcement officer.[199] In an interview with John Purdy, Owens comments on his starting to work on the novel:

> I began it in my attic room in the Forest Service bunkhouse in Darrington, Washington one fall after the snows came and almost everyone else had left for the year. I wanted, really, to write a novel about the wilderness area itself, the Glacier Peak Wilderness, making the place the real protagonist of the novel and the characters ways of giving the trees and the mountains and streams and glaciers a voice.[200]

[199] Hausman and Purdy, "Widening the Circle," 45.

[200] John Purdy and Louis Owens, "Clear Waters: A Conversation with Louis Owens," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 10, no. 2 (1998): 7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20739449?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

The detailed description of the place does not serve only as the setting of the novel, but the place becomes an integral part of the novel's plot, and, as Owens notes, the real protagonist. The place has a major influence on the characters and it impacts the identity of the characters, mainly the identity of the protagonist, Tom Joseph. The characters are not only living *in* the place but *off* the place itself, as they are economically dependent on the logging industry. This gives rise to the ecological concern of the novel, because at the same time that the characters use local natural resources for generating money, they are rather oblivious of the effects of the damage on the wilderness area. Owens rises a question that pervades the novel: "[H]ow do we preserve the earth that is so integral to self-definition and that has been so rapidly and ruthlessly destroyed on this continent?" and once more he specifies that "in my mind the true protagonist of *Wolfsong* is the so-called wilderness itself, a place I felt and still feel that I knew as well as anyone alive."[201]

While the descriptions of the natural landscape are highly accurate, Owens chooses not to use Darrington for the name of the town, but instead chooses Forks, a town of similar size and character located further west on the Olympic Peninsula. Both of the towns are small, logging communities, although, as Owens mentioned, "Darrington may be meaner, at least when I lived there in the 1970s. The first words spoken to me there were by these three loggers who wanted to know if I preferred to have my hair cut off with a chainsaw or burned off with kerosene."[202]

His reasons for choosing to disguise the name of the town may be various. Apart from the obvious to mask the local community, which inspired him to include some of the stories of the residents and to model some characters after local people, the change of the name brings about other meanings significant for the novel's plot. The name "Forks" suggests two ways converging or separating, depending on the point of view, and it indicates that the characters may take a number of possible routes that lead to different ends.[203] The protagonist indeed has to decide which course to take, as well as his girlfriend, and one of the refrains in the novel is that "[p]eople make choices."[204]

Moreover, Chris LaLonde notes that "for all its accuracy, the world rendered is not quite locatable on any map between the Stillaguamish, Sauk, and Siuattle Rivers

[201] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 22.
[202] Purdy and Owens, "Clear Waters," 7.
[203] See Hausman and Purdy, "Widening the Circle," 47.
[204] Louis Owens, *Wolfsong* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 177. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *WS*.

hard upon the Cascade Range and Glacier Peak Wilderness area."[205] He asks questions which refer to the fact that the place becomes displaced: "What is the place-name doing here? Why is this place out of place?" In his view, in order to understand Owens's insertions into the character of the place we need to adopt a different perspective: "Owens imagines a world that blurs the line between the real and the fictive, and in so doing he asks his reader to reconsider the world and how he or she perceives it."[206] He creates a world where the boundaries are fluid—between different places, people and the plants, the organic and inorganic life—until it becomes hard to clearly distinguish one from the other[207] and those who read it are forced to adopt the perspective.

As a consequence, the place Owens creates is firmly based on the existing location, but it is disguised as being someplace else. It allows him to fictionalize the place and gives him certain freedom to shape it. John Purdy comments on this technique stating that it enables seeing the familiar in a new light.[208] Apart from the name of the town, Owens changes other names: the river Stehemish is Snohomish in the real world, and the mountain that Tom calls Whitehorse stands for the White Chuck Mountain. The names of the Stillaguamish and Sauk Rivers are accurate, as well as the towns of Arlington and Everett.[209]

The names of places, however, are not the only elements that Owens changes. For the purposes of the novel, he invents a fictional Stehemish tribe of which the protagonist, Tom Joseph, is a member. The Stehemish tribe is modelled after tribes belonging to the Salish group. As Hausman points out, it is a "composite of Indigenous northwest names like Stehekin, Snohomish, and Swinomish."[210] Owens explains that he wanted to "avoid embarrassing anyone," and although the tribe is fictional, he "took pains to be as faithful to a specific culture as possible."[211]

Critics mention other aspects that Owens may have considered. Housman states that Owens wanted to avoid criticism that would spring from a possible misrepresentation of the tribe, since Owens is of Choctaw and Cherokee origin and these tribes are in Housman's words as indigenous to the place as Norwegians.[212] He

[205] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 22.
[206] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 24–25.
[207] See LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 25–26.
[208] See John Purdy, "*Wolfsong* and Pacific Refrains," in *Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work*, ed. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 191.
[209] See Schweninger, *Listening to the Land*, 116.
[210] Hausman and Purdy, "Widening the Circle," 35.
[211] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 21.
[212] See Hausman and Purdy, "Widening the Circle," 34–35.

adds that by creating a fictional character and a fictional tribe, the protagonist has a composite fictional consciousness and thus invites the readers of this novel into the mind of the protagonist, since otherwise they may feel restrained by a possible lack of knowledge of the Indigenous northwestern consciousness.[213] According to Susan Bernardin, who focuses on the environmental aspects of the novel, writing about a fictional tribe allows Owens to establish a connection between his concern for the environment and his "interest in how questions of Indian identity get entangled with dominant cultural perceptions of the land."[214] The dominant culture perceives the land as being inferior to humanity while Indian identity is largely based on an equivalent relationship with the environment.

Washington, Forks

The opening of the novel determines both the setting of the plot and Owens's attitude to wilderness. It sees the character Jim Joseph, Tom Joseph's uncle, walking through a dense forest in rainy weather. Owens describes the place in considerable detail and the initial image of the place remains constant throughout the novel: the place is wet, rainy, with abounding green and moss, populated by spirits. Its dampness, however, is not discomforting to Tom's uncle:

> The rain fell onto the downswept branches and collected and fell to the hard undergrowth with a steady hammering. The old man climbed slowly down in the near dark, edging thick lug sole into the wet humus, leaning back against the push of the slope to balance the weight of the rifle. 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 on the brush deepened. Then he stopped and frowned as the dancers began moving again in the undergrowth, swaying and stepping, back and forth, watching him (*WS*, 1).

The abundance of water and its permanent presence in the environment, which is typical for the local area, is familiar and comforting to the character. Jim Joseph is described as being a part of the environment. His relationship with the place is close, since it exists not only on the physical level, but on the spiritual as well—he is able to see spirit

[213] See Hausman and Purdy, "Widening the Circle," 36.

[214] Susan Bernardin, "Wilderness Conditions: Ranging for Place and Identity in Louis Owens's *Wolfsong*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 10, no. 2 (1998): 80, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20739453?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

dancers that inhabit the wilderness. The scene follows with Jim Joseph attempting to stop the construction of the road that would bring development into the wilderness area. He is shooting in protest at heavy machines that "had been cutting the mountain" (*WS*, 2) with his Krag rifle to make their drivers, the two local workers, Leroy and Dinker, stop the machines. These characters cannot distinguish where the shooting comes from, as Jim blends in with the environment. Owens gives more descriptions that suggest the prominence of the natural environment in the novel, as well as Jim's closeness with the environment. He emphasizes that the characters is part of the environment: he is sinking into the moss and rotten bark of a tree, including his old rifle that he rests on a log and that "sank into the decay" (*WS*, 2). The connection of Jim Joseph with the environment is also apparent through the water imagery that the characters use to comment on his actions, for them futile and annoying. They are convinced that "[h]e might as well try to stop that river down there as this here road" (*WS*, 9). When Jim is leaving the place after the works have been stopped for that day, he merges with the shadows and disappears.

The roar coming from the heavy machinery on duty stands as a contrast to this place of immediate nature order. Leroy and Dinker's attitude to the place, however, is contrastive. They see the forest as "a black wall, wet and impenetrable" (*WS*, 3). The wet, damp environment is seen as unwelcoming, from the perspective of strangers: one of the characters spits into the rain and their shouts vanish into the "purr of the rain and the river" (*WS*, 3). They consider the wilderness to be a hostile environment and as their voices vanish in the sounds of the rain, their presence is weakened there. For this reason these characters, together with others throughout the novel, use modern technology to adopt a position contrary to the environment that helps them shape it to a form that would evoke a sense of assuredness. Dinker admires the road that they build and for him it is "something to tell the grandchildren about" (*WS*, 11). Leroy, however, is partly aware of the losses to the environment that the development causes, saying it is a "damned shame" (*WS*, 11).

The natural environment represents Jim's home figuratively as well as literally. It is a small camp in a clearing in the wilderness. The importance of the land and of a connection with it comes to him in his reminiscence of his own forced departure to a government school in his youth. This affected significantly his rootedness within the place and the tribal culture. The departure from the place, together with his experience in the government school, leads to a loss of knowledge of the tribal culture and

language. In his view, the school "cut out the tongues of Indians, sewing in different tongues while the children slept" (*WS*, 5) and as a result is own mouth was "swollen and dry with someone else's words" (*WS*, 5). After his coming home from school, he remained silent for a year, listening to sounds and testing the language before taking the courage to speak it again. Gradually, he learned to tell stories in English and most of his own language disappeared. His relocation back to the place that he comes from did not suffice to make him recollect what he lost. Tom, his nephew, is in California to study and so undergoes similar relocation, although not a forced one. Jim contemplates whether he had taught him enough of the way of the Indian people of their tribe and whether his return to the place will make him remember it. Jim at that moment is aware that he will not be able to guide him into the Stehemish world view, because he is going to die. He can see spirits coming to him, dancing and chanting, and he joins their dance while the rain grows heavier. He imagines the sacred place of the Stehemish, the Image Lake near Dakobed, and recalls how he acquired his wolf spirit helper there. The quest for the spirit included fasting and diving in the lake where he saw the vision of the wolf. The wolf "rose on two legs and beckoned, and for a lifetime he followed" (*WS*, 7). After the reminiscence, Jim dies and the wolf spirit is freed.

The theme of the lost language is due to its prominence introduced at the start of the novel. It is principal for the protagonist. Tom lacks the knowledge of the tribal language, the ability to understand and consequently the ability to find words to speak. He remembers few Stehemish words from his uncle's stories. Throughout the novel, he is often found in a situation where he does not comprehend the message that has been conveyed, often by animals or natural phenomena that are bound to the landscape. He lacks the words to express himself. The Stehemish language appears in his dreams, but the "voice sp[eaks] in a language he couldn't understand, a fragmented jumble of distorted words aimed directly at him." When he tries to reply, his tongue is "swollen and he could feel the taste of blood" (*WS*, 41).

Tom's inability to speak and to understand the language is reminded to him by the surrounding wilderness. He is "inarticulate before such beauty, his tongue a heavy, dead thing" (*WS*, 93). In this respect, he is aware that the loss of the tribal language does not concern only him, but also the generation of his uncle, which makes the attempt to regain the knowledge of the language impossible. Momaday notes that the oral tradition "has always been but one generation removed from extinction." It is "neither more nor

less durable than the human voice."[215] As such the stories, together with the language in which they were told, are lost to the present characters. Looking at the peaks of the National Park, Tom contemplates what the real names of the mountains must have been. Without the tribal names for the mountains, he realizes, he and his uncle miss "the proper language of prayer" (*WS*, 94). The imminent sense of loss that Tom experiences is contradicted by the ranger Martin Grider, a character who in Owens's words is more autobiographical than the protagonist. Grider, just as Tom, studied at a college, and he is highly informed about the local area. When Tom mentions to him that his tribe used to call the highest mountain in the valley Dakobed, Grider replies: "Why do you say 'used to'? Don't you still call her that?" (*WS*, 167). Grider's question reveals Tom's focus on the past and his mind-set that has been formed by experiencing a sense of loss of a culture and a community.

In a way similar to his uncle, Tom appreciates the dampness of the place and how the place is permeated by water. When he travels back from California to attend his uncle's funeral, the wetness is once more described as a positive feature of the place. Water becomes the dominant characteristic: the country is under a layer of cloud, the rain is streaking across the bus window where Tom is sitting, and the ocean slashes at the cliffs. Tom feels how the place is defined by water, and his lifetime experience with the place enables him to develop sensitivity for water. He feels power of water in its various states. He is aware of the "vastness of the rain, sense[s] 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 it was all disgorged into the sea and the sea threw it back at land" (*WS*, 13). Tom's thoughts follow the cycle of water in the landscape. He feels the water getting closer to him while the bus is approaching Forks: "the damp has closed in, working its way through the bus till it found him and settl[ed] into his bone and muscle like a contended, wet cat" (*WS*, 13). The presence of water is familiar. It also holds a significant place in tribal stories that spring from knowledge of the place. In the stories, the world is an island in an ocean, and water separates the world of the living and the world of the dead. In addition, the most powerful spirits lived in water (See *WS*, 52).

Water is portrayed positively in all of Owens's novels and it invariably plays an important role in them. Its strong address in *Wolfsong* is established thanks to its

[215] Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, 10.

environmental concerns and the novel's setting in wilderness. Donaldson discusses the attributes commonly ascribed to water: it is a "universal element; mediator between earth and air; ongoing and discernable cyclic process; origin and sustainer of life; cleansing agent, unfathomable deep."[216] These attributes portray the element as a life-giving power that unifies earth and the air, has the ability to cleanse, and keeps an air of mystery. Donaldson claims that in the novel water is a metaphor for the living presence of nature, the unification of the human, the natural, and the spiritual world. In his view it is a metaphor of the "living whole and its power."[217] The dampness, as the prominent characteristic of the place, is a positive aspect of the environment for characters that protect the wilderness and understand the importance of water. For these characters it is an inseparable part of the place. For others, it causes irritation and discomfort. Bernardin furthermore claims that the presence of water in the novel signifies a constant "force of growth, regeneration, and cyclical return, which counters narratives of vanishing and loss."[218] In other words, the regenerative power of water is portrayed in contrast to the widely spread notion of the Vanishing American and the loss of Native American culture.

Forks, and the surrounding nature, constitute the place of home for the protagonist. From his bus window, Tom experiences a "great sense of coming home" (*WS*, 13). He envisions the particulars that form the place in his view: his family, his girlfriend Karen, and "the valley with its timber, the granite and ice, two rivers" (*WS*, 13). He experiences sensation of the local place when breathes in "the dump air with its growth and decay, logging mills and mist, air so thick after Santa Barbara that he felt like a man at the bottom of the sea." His journey home is described as "[d]iving back home, going down and down towards some kind of center" (*WS*, 17).

The detailed descriptions of the land and the natural phenomena are, as LaLonde suggests, depicted using violent verbs: the firs stab the cloudy sky, the road and wind cut into the landscape and the ocean's waves slash against the cliffs. LaLonde contends that the violent verbs link Tom to the violence that he commits later in the novel.[219] It also displays the place as dynamic, without steadiness. The natural forces are all in motion, as well as Tom's bus is moving toward his home. The country is fluid and

[216] John K. Donaldson, "As Long as the Waters Shall Run: The "Obstructed Water" Metaphor in American Indian Fiction," *American Studies International* 15, no. 2 (2002): 74, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41279893?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
[217] Donaldson, "As Long," 83.
[218] Bernardin, "Wilderness Conditions," 87.
[219] See LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 38.

unstable. Similarly, the town of Forks is situated at a place where the Stillaguamish and the Sauk rivers meet and run towards the ocean each in its own course. The two rivers differ in their character, the Stillaguamish being described as "a clear, fast stream from the mountains" and the Sauk a "heavy, green river" with an "impatient stream that cuts its own valley" (*WS,* 22). Yet again they point at the dynamism of the place.

Bernardin comments on the position of Forks in relation to the wilderness and the American settlement. She argues that it is placed "literally at the end of a road and poised on the edge of a continent," and the town, in her words, "signifies the geographical terminus of America's western pattern of settlement."[220] The town is surrounded by forest and located at the border of the wilderness area. It is described in a relationship to the local environment: it "squatted nervously, one eye on the trees left to cut and one on the rivers and rock" (*WS,* 22). The town of predominantly white settlement is depicted as in a state of watchfulness for any sign of a possible threat coming from the surrounding. The threat may come from the natural world, and by extension, as LaLonde notes, from the Indians and what they embody.[221] At the same time, the town with its inhabitants is dependent economically on this environment.

The main source of employment at hand is the logging industry. The large-scale logging in the area is partly the result of the relationship of the inhabitants of the town with the natural environment. They consider nature to be something that can be exploited to their advantage, and through logging, they force a change to the character of the landscape and the town itself. Schweninger explains that the cause of this process lies in the attitude where "only the human being has value, importance, or standing—and only non-Indian human at that … humans and mainstream human enterprises take precedence over all else."[222] The white inhabitants of Forks feel to be superior to the natural world of plants and animals, as well as to the Indians. Their attitude towards the place results in its degradation which became, in Schweninger's words, "an accepted and culturally acceptable commonplace."[223] At the same time the locals are aware that their activities alter the environment and that the forest is diminishing and with it their source of livelihood.

The continuous change of the environment caused by human activity assign the place a different meaning. The deforestation and consequent deprivation of economic

[220] Bernardin, "Wilderness Conditions," 80.
[221] See LaLonde, *Grave Concerns,* 30–31.
[222] Schweninger, *Listening to the Land,* 118.
[223] Schweninger, *Listening to the Land,* 117.

opportunities changed the nature of the place and the intentions of the inhabitants within the place. Bernardin comments on the change by stating that it lost its founding identity.[224] She points out that the old generation of loggers laments the receding wilderness and the loss of the old life-style as frontiersmen who work hard to earn their place in the world. The younger generation of loggers does not share their sentiment and instead focuses on the material advantages that outweigh the nostalgia.[225] As a consequence, the human and the natural environment are further separated.

The character Mad John aptly illustrates the antagonistic relationship to nature. He is a messianic character that develops the topic of separation of the wilderness and the human. Tom describes him as being "all tangled up in a battle between Jesus and the valley's demons" (*WS*, 21). He preaches that the wilderness is the realm of danger and demons. Tom observes that the base of his stories about demons in the wilderness is Indian and he wonders "how the white man had heard those Indian stories" (*WS*, 21). Mad John repeatedly fights the vines and weeds with his machete, as they are a symbol of the advancing chaos and "moral disintegration"[226] that he attributes to wilderness and that threat human settlement and society. According to Purdy the vines provide "a "voice" of resistance for the mountains and forests against human incursions."[227] He states that Owens stresses the idea of humankind at war with the natural world so that the readers of the novel "must acknowledge the convention of demonizing the "wilderness" and shift to valorizing it," as it "exists not as a commodity for use but with a presence that it would be best not to ignore."[228]

Dan Kellar, a character whom the Honeycutt Copper company sent to Forks to persuade the inhabitants to accept the construction of the mine, is surprisingly perceptive about the physical environment that surrounds the town. He is aware of the mountains that circle the town and feels the resistance of the forest that "had crept ever closer to the small cluster of buildings until it stood poised for some kind of dark revenge" (*WS*, 114). Similarly to Mad John, he sees the wilderness as threatening humanity. The emergence of the secondary forest, after the old forest was cut down, is in his view an "[a]ttack of the second-growth" (*WS, 114*). Apart from the observation, Kellar from his position predicts the unhappy economic future of the town and pities the

[224] See Bernardin, "Wilderness Conditions," 81.
[225] Bernardin, "Wilderness Conditions," 81.
[226] Bernardin, "Wilderness Conditions," 84.
[227] Purdy, "*Wolfsong* and Pacific Refrains," 182.
[228] Hausman and Purdy, "Widening the Circle," 49.

people dispassionately. From his point of view of a man who is able to see and evaluate the community from the outside, the only economic future for the town is opening the copper mine, because the loggers "had cut and trucked their futures right out of the valley" (*WS*, 114). The development that his company proposes includes further plans for land use in the region, including a ski resort at the foot of Whitehorse, one of the mountains that circle the town. The changes proposed would dramatically change the meaning of the place.

Tuan argues that visitors are able to spot aspects of a place that are no longer visible to the locals, both favorable and negative.[229] Yet visitors may examine the place and its aspects superficially. Kellar has a clear view of the character of the people of the town. In his college days he would write "a colorful piece about the folk in the valley. Something light for the Sunday supplement" (*WS*, 124). Although he is able to see the people from a perspective of a newcomer, his portrayal lacks depth and is rather sketchy. Tom sees the townspeople from a different perspective. He notices how they are affected by living in the place. He observes

> loggers old and broken, young and tough, loggers' wives wrung out from kids and winters and the early discovery of the solace of Olympia beer, Rainier Ale and Jack Daniels. Winters were cold and the men stayed home when snow covered the mountains. Wives gave birth in the early fall or late September. Now these children scrambled under the bleachers and climbed the metal framework and chased each other (*WS*, 121).

The physical aspects of the place have a far-reaching effect on the inhabitants and they shape their lives. Tom's observation of the community is detached—it is an evaluation of a person whose life is separated from the lives of the townspeople. In spite of that, it is not the same as Kellar's. Owens mentioned that many characters in the novel are inspired by his personal experience with the inhabitants of Darrington and the surrounding areas, "some based quite closely on those people."[230] Such a character is Mad John, as he was a "very real person in and around Darrington."[231]

Visitors, however, are not treated kindly in the small town, and neither are Indians. Vern Reese who employs Tom as logger for a short time describes Tom's

[229] See Tuan, *Topophilia*, 65.
[230] Purdy, "*Wolfsong* and Pacific Refrains," 182.
[231] Purdy, "*Wolfsong* and Pacific Refrains," 182.

position in the white community: "You're kind've an outsider now. It's funny when a guy thinks about it. Your people been in this valley a thousand years maybe" (*WS*, 151). Indians are considered to be outsiders to the community, although historically they have deeper roots in the valley than people that inhabit the town at present. Reese further comments on the difficulty of the position: "You ain't a real logger and you ain't a white man, and the only kind of men in this valley is loggers and white men. If you were at least one of those two it'd probably be okay" (*WS*, 152). Tom does not fit into the community, because of a culturally bound sensitivity to the landscape that prevents him from participating in the exploitation of the wilderness. His displacement leads to a confusion about his identity and he reflects that a "hundred years ago I would have known who I was" (*WS*, 197). When he realizes his displacement, Tom observes that

> [d]own there where the rivers came together and split again, it wasn't his home anymore, not earth-blood and rock, cedar red like blood, rivers cutting at the old ones beneath their stones, a pulse through the mountains like the heartbeat drum at one of the spring dances (*WS*, 143).

In this description Owens alludes to functions of the body—the heartbeat, the blood. The physical constituents of the place are extensions of Tom's body and his ancestry—he mentions the "old ones" beneath the stones that stand for the deceased buried near the rivers. Thanks to that his realization of the displacement is all the more difficult.

Tom furthermore realizes that he knows little about the people in the valley that he works with when he substitutes for his brother Jimmy (See *WS*, 141). It is another sign of his displacement, however, at the town meeting he finds out that "he knew stories about most of them, and they all knew more stories than he did" (*WS*, 121):

> They met in the Red Dog or in homes during the long winters and slandered each one another in rich detail, following ritualized patterns almost the way the Stehemish had once come together in the winters to tell the stories that told them who they were and where they come from, stories of Raven, Coyote, and Fox. For several generations now these intrudes had gathered under the unvarying shadow of winter rain and snow to remind each other of their existences, and their signposts were the same mountains, rivers and forests the Stehemish and Stillaguamish and Skagit had known. The map was the same but the signs pointed in different directions, toward different destinies (*WS*, 121–22).

The place and the landmarks that dominate the landscape have different meanings to the people who inhabit it. Tom points out the differences between the current inhabitants and the Stehemish. Their attitudes and intentions marked the place with different meanings. The white society is portrayed in a negative light. Their presence modifies the environment and as a consequence they determine a different future for the place, especially when Tom compares their attitudes with those of the Indians. In addition, Tom observes that "the weaker minds closed like dark fists" (*WS*, 122) after several winters spent at Forks, which implies that the place has the power to negatively affect the white inhabitants.

Stehemish Places in Forks

Tom and the Joseph family are the only members of the Stehemish tribe in Forks. When McBride, Tom's friend from California, asks him: "Where's all your people?" Tom answers that they are gone, they either relocated or disappeared. Tom becomes, in the eyes of McBride, a "one-man tribe" (*WS*, 195). Even Tom's brother Jimmy considers the tribal way of life to be defeated and he believes that it is necessary to adapt to the new conditions of the place and the society that inhabits it. As a consequence, he chooses the lifestyle of the white society.

The only tribal places that are officially assigned to the Stehemish are small areas called "trust land." Purdy explains that in comparison with Indian reservations, "trust lands" are "small plots of forestlands or homes held in trust by the federal government for Native Americans."[232] They may be separated by miles from each other. In this novel there are two places labeled as "trust lands:" the area around the house of the Joseph family and the old Stehemish graveyard.

The Stehemish graveyard, although it is a place that is Indian, has ambiguous significance. Tom mentions that the tribe originally buried their dead in trees, not in the ground. As that is now forbidden by the law, the Indian characters adopted the Euromerican way of burying the dead and therefore accepted the meaning of the place. During the burial of Jim Joseph, Tom tells the driver of the hearse that he is "in Indian country right now" (*WS*, 49). At a later scene, however, Tom is seen pulling his mother's cross from the grave and throwing it to the river, where he throws the markers of his uncle and fathers' graves as well (See *WS*, 206). Owens explains that "to

[232] Hausman and Purdy, "Widening the Circle," 47.

demarcate the places where we are buried is to reinforce the false and dangerous boundaries. Tom reacts to this intuitively when he tries to eradicate the grave markers. Graves frame the dead, gravestones chain us to particular time and place."[233] Tom in this scene resists the grave markers to free the deceased from being bound to the place and from the imposing culture practices. The Stehemish graveyard, however, still keeps its status as a meaningful place for Tom. In contrast, the white preacher present at his uncle's funeral does not attach significance to the place, either cultural or personal. He is irritated by its remote location and limited accessibility, wondering why the place has to be "so far out in the sticks," a place that "wasn't even really a place" (*WS*, 45). For him the place lacks meaning and represents a necessity to carry out his duty.

The second land trust in the novel is the home of the Joseph family. It comprises of a house and an adjacent lot and it is located on the outskirts of Forks. The physical description of Tom's home is largely dominated by the house, but includes the garden, the surrounding forest, river, and the weather conditions. Tom describes the location of the house after he returns from California:

> When he looked up, the house was there, a block of gray through the dark trees. On one side of the road the abandoned railroad tracks cruised off through salmonberry, blackberry, and wildrose vines toward obscure destination. On the other side a small clearing in the trees exposed the old house, alone in a wet forest at the edge of a town (*WS*, 24).

Tom's description of the place displays a house that is alone in the forest and it corresponds with his perception of the status of his family by the townspeople. His notice of the tracks located nearby the house point at the transience of the place and its possible instability. The condition of the house is further described as rather poor:

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

[233] Purdy, "*Wolfsong* and Pacific Refrains," 192.

The house gives signs of long-lasting neglect. The inhabitants of the house do not defend their home against the forces of nature. They do not rid the house of moss on the roof in the same way that they let their garden become overgrown by weeds and vines that "took care of things quickly" (*WS*, 25) with the help of rain. They do not obstruct the nature from claiming back what was taken from it and establishing a natural order. Owens points here to "the idea of humankind at war with the wilderness"[234] that has been brought to America with the European immigrants, and the contrastive Native American relationship to nature.

Adjacent to the house is a yard with a rusty car wreck and spare parts, old tires, oil cans, and similar items. Tom's perception of the house, however, is not negative, for him it is a place with an important meaning. The place is comforting. He is able to hear the rain and the river which runs behind the house. He notices that "[t]he sliding current softened the sharp edge left from the bus and log truck, and he looked toward the doorway, hoping the fire hadn't gone out in the stove" (*WS*, 28). These familiar sounds refresh him and arouse an expectation of warmth and comfort. The place is viewed in an equally positive way by his friend McBride: "I can tell an Indian house when I see one. It's just like home" (*WS*, 182).

When Tom sees the inside of the house, his view is influenced by his long absence. He notices things that disappear from focus in everyday life. His account of the inside of the house is highly detailed and he is surprised by its bad condition: the furnishings are wobbly, the paint is vanishing. The house, however, is a place of both Indian and Christian tradition, because next to a plastic crucifix, that his mother liked but his uncle hated and took to the woods for a week in a protest, is suspended a cedar basket.

Throughout the novel, the meaning of the place changes for Tom and it is reflected in the deterioration of the house. The house is gradually collapsing throughout the novel as people depart it and its importance for the protagonist declines. The place is marked by the death of his uncle who used to occupy a room in the house and later by the passing away of his mother. Both of them created the place and were strongly rooted in it. Tom and Jimmy are not in the position to create such a place as home. Jimmy's life is limited almost exclusively to logging and drinking in the local pub and he is not able to keep the house that is increasingly becoming part of the surrounding nature.

[234] Hausman and Purdy, "Widening the Circle," 48.

After their mother's funeral Tom feels a "tremendous emptiness" (*WS*, 208) inside the house. Now the "house sat like a fungus amid the brush and vines and weeds, cold and without life" (*WS*, 199). The place of Tom's home changes location—instead of family house of the Josephs it is enlarged to the wilderness area.

In addition to that, wilderness is the place where Tom imagined a dream home with Karen. They both share a strong sense of place in the wilderness. The home would consist of

> a log house at the edge of a meadow. Behind the house, old-growth timber would rise up toward rock and ice, while in front of it spotted horses would graze in a valley divided by a salmon river. They would be self-sufficient, and they would need no one (*WS*, 72).

Tom's image of home includes an idealistic image of a house in the wilderness where the couple would be alone and self-sufficient. The imagined place would stand apart from any other members of the community, yet it would provide them with all that is necessary for sustaining themselves. It is the place for their Indian identities, for Tom, a full-blooded Stehemish, and Karen with her distant Cherokee ancestry. At the same time, it is close to the rock and ice of the mountain, the essential materials that are characteristic of the local wild environment. They imagine the place with a respect for the surrounding landscape and it reflects their taking responsibility for the manner of being in a place. The dream home is never realized, however. Karen becomes pregnant during Tom's stay at Santa Barbara and later marries Buddy Hill, Tom's antagonist and the richest boy in town. She lives in "the biggest house on the prairie" (*WS*, 176), but the marriage is not a happy one.

Santa Barbara, California

California is represented in the novel indirectly, through Tom's reminiscences. In Tom's view it contrasts to his home in Washington. He observes the difference on several levels, stressing the distinctness of the environment and the aspects that constitute it, the behavior of the local inhabitants, and the spiritual dimension of the place.

In Tom's mind eye, California lacks the dampness that penetrates the environment in his home valley. He recollects the "parched landscapes … that hurt [his]

eyes" (*WS*, 14) in southern California which create a contrast to the green forests of Washington. He notices the small square farms that have been cut from former forests to create a room for grazing cattle. Farming and settlement have transformed the environment to such an extent that its original character disappeared and it became a standardized western landscape.

When Tom arrives to Forks, he is aware of the distinction and he feels "as though he were passing from one world to another" (*WS*, 23). He experiences bodily sensations that spring from returning to a place after a long period of time spent elsewhere: he is taking in smells, feeling the characteristic dampness of the place, listening to his boots on wet gravel, feeling the weight of the clouds in the sky. He feels that in this place his body becomes "heavier, more solid, as if he'd stepped out of one of those y-ray machines that made everything a shadowy silhouette of bones" (*WS*, 23–24). He ceases to be a "shadowy silhouette" in Forks, because his body remembers the familiar environment. He knows and is known in the environment. Tom was lacking this sensation in California and was experiencing a displacement.

Tom's girlfriend, Karen, however, received letters in which he was describing his experience in California in a positive light. In the letters, he described the beauty of the physical environment and place specific activities that could not be performed in his hometown, such as swimming in the ocean between classes at the university. Later Tom confesses to Karen that the majority of the information in the letters was invented, since he wanted to reassure her that his stay was without difficulties. He was concealing his feelings of displacement and a yearn to return: "In Santa Barbara I used to think about this valley, and I'd get mad" (*WS*, 73). He was, however, not aware of the exact cause of this feeling. Later he figures that he did not belong to that place: "I didn't fit in down there" (*WS*, 73). He continues with an explanation that explains his displacement:

> "It was like I was too dark—inside, not outside—like maybe I'd been in this valley so long I couldn't stand that much light." His dreams there had been of darkness, of valleys where the air flowed like water through and above the old-growth, of dream salmon slanting through the falls (*WS*, 73).

Tom associates California with light and labels his home valley as "damp darker world" (*WS*, 23). These places stand in contrast. His life-long stay in and around Forks changed his perception of light. His associations are contrary to the mainstream preference of

light over darkness and sun over rain, and the discomfort that relates to dampness and rain. Tom further comments on the fact that people who live in rain never have rain gear, while in Santa Barbara "everyone had umbrellas and it never rained" (*WS*, 50). Apart from contrasting the character of the climate, Tom misses the old forest and the rivers that run through Forks. In California, he used to go the ocean and watch the waves, but he realized that the ocean is not the same, "[i]t didn't flow" (*WS*, 39).

Furthermore, California is viewed as the land of opportunities, a place where Tom may receive education that may provide him with a range of possibilities in his later life. He is encouraged by other characters to return to California to finish his degree. One of them is J. D. Hill, a local businessman and developer. Hill points to him that if he completed his education, he could be of service to local Indians, or Indians in general (See *WS*, 66). Similar advice is given to Tom by his brother Jimmy who suggests that Tom should leave: "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" (*WS*, 38). Jimmy points out the economic decline that occurs in Forks and the lack of opportunity for local inhabitants.

There is another important fact that Owens uses to make Tom look with disfavor to California. The place of the university campus was built on an old Indian burial ground. Tom mentions that he could "feel those people there all the time" (*WS*, 64). Their presence made people living in the place ill without understanding why. As a result, Tom is displaced not only from the place of his home, but he finds himself in a place of Native culture not close to his own, which intensifies his displacement.

Tom meets with Native Americans from diverse cultural backgrounds in California, but he struggles to feel related to them. He meets with McBride, an Indian who grew up on a Flathead reservation, but whose family predecessors are from seven-eighths white. McBride speaks about the two of them being related since both have Salish ancestry. Tom, however, does not feel the relation. He comments on McBride's appearance contrasting his own: McBride has pale skin and light brown hair. For Tom, his only bother is Jimmy, "large and dark and waiting for him upriver" (*WS*, 18) at Forks. McBride, together with other students, leads an active social life and is a part of the student Native American community, while Tom avoids such practices and his place is outside the community.

When Tom returns to Forks after a year at the university, he is aware of the changes that occurred in the place. Relph points out that it is a common sensation to feel

that everything has changed after one returns from an extended stay elsewhere. In his view one can experience this sensation although there may not be an important change in the environment at all. The person acquires the position of an observer, an outsider.[235] Tom does not experience this sensation immediately, but he realizes gradually that there has been a transformation: "A couple of times lately it's seemed like I never left … But then I hear a sound, like the river, or smell something, and it seems like I was gone ten years" (*WS*, 67). Tom's perception of the place changes when he compares it to the place in his memory. When he reveals his impressions to Karen, she responds that he was "gone a hundred years … A thousand, million years" (*WS*, 67). Karen perceives the damage that his departure inflicted on their romantic relationship. She tried to compensate for his absence and felt justified having a temporary relationship with another man. She got pregnant, however, and made a decision to marry the man. She expresses her anger at Tom: "You came back to this valley thinking everything would be the same just because you wanted it that way—the rivers and mountains and me and everything. But things have to change" (*WS*, 75). Karen had to adapt to the new conditions that appeared after Tom's departure, whereas Tom refuses to accept the change and has a tendency to look back.

Tom's leaving the place also changed the way other inhabitants of Forks perceive him. Apart from J. D. Hill who sees the benefits of his education in California, other characters condemn his stay and the education that he received there. Jake Tobin, a local logger, reminds Tom that he had to go "all the way to Califuckinfornia to get hisself educated" (*WS*, 100), pointing out that local schools are not good enough for him. Later in the novel, Jake leads a group of men who attack Tom and his brother. Before a fight erupts, Jake denounces Tom's experience by ordering him to "[s]ay something educated … Talk California" (*WS*, 130).

Tom's uncle did not agree with his studies in California. He was influenced by his experience with white education and he was aware that Tom might lose a connection with the place. Uncle Jim proposed a way to reestablish the connection: "When you come back we'll go for a long walk … we'll walk clear over the mountains to Lake Chelan the way the old ones did, and I'll tell you all the stories. Maybe we'll walk all the way to Canada, and I'll teach you all them things you ain't learned yet" (*WS*, 88). His uncle would assist him in reestablishing a connection by leading him through the

[235] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 31.

old trails in the wilderness and telling him tribal stories. When Tom returns from California, however, his uncle is dead, and it is up to him to reestablish his connection with the place. LaLonde points out that Tom recognizes that he is "unable to see his identity and his relationship to the land so easily as his uncle."[236] Tom makes several trips to wilderness to learn about the place by himself. Understanding the place and experiencing it as the Stehemish is related to his search for Indian identity. Tom's uncle, therefore, articulates the task that Tom has to complete in order to successfully assume his identity.

Wilderness

Wilderness is a place that is distinctly formed and referred to in the novel. Spatially, it is the largest of the places in the narrative and Owens does not mention any boundaries of the place. The wilderness, however, according to the Washington Park Wilderness Act of 1988 covers certain parts of the North Cascades National Park, not the whole park.[237] There are many descriptions of wilderness and of natural phenomena in the novel and the language that Owens uses to describe it is frequently poetic. He highlights the colors, the smells of the environment, the size of the place, and Tom's perceptions of it. Donaldson points out that the poetic passages "reinforce the theme of the unity of all creation" and they are "reserved for the descriptions of the landscape, the Indian background, and for Tom's thoughts and feelings and dreams. The material white world is never described in such language."[238] The white civilized world is thus described in contrast to the natural.

The wilderness is a term that is used frequently in the novel. Owens, however, objected to term repeatedly. He bases his criticism on the definition of wilderness specified in the Wilderness Act. The act was passed by the Congress in 1964 and defines the wilderness, states its uses, and establishes National Park areas. It defines wilderness as an "area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." It further states that land which is considered to be wilderness "retain[s] its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation" and instead it is "affected

[236] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 35.

[237] See *An Act to Designate Wilderness Within Olympic National Park, Mount Rainier National Park, and North Cascades National Park Service Complex in the State of Washington, and for Other Purposes*, Public Law 100-668, *U.S. Statues at Large* 102 (1988): 3961–3968, https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-102/pdf/STATUTE-102-Pg3961.pdf.

[238] Donaldson, "As Long,"83.

primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable."[239] The Act defines wilderness in relation to the presence, or rather absence, of people. It is a place where people do not stay, live or belong, so that they cannot alter its character and inflict damage on it.

The definition of wilderness is based on the opposition of the wild and natural with civilization created by human beings. Tuan notes that "the raw nature or wilderness … stands at the opposite of the totally man-made city."[240] He points to a binary opposition of the two places and how the perception of the wilderness was developing on the American continent. For the Puritans, the wilderness was an environment that enabled their reformed Church to bloom. It was a place of hard labor, and became a place of temptation and the realm of the devil. The Pioneers viewed wilderness as an obstacle to gaining livelihood. The Romantics developed a sensibility for the wilderness and saw it from their position of people based in the city and enjoying temporary stays in the wilderness. It was associated with the sublime, which provoked a form of religious ecstasy, and it was related to the frontier life that gave rise to the American qualities, individualism, toughness, and virility.[241]

William Cronon points out that the sublime and the frontier myth are two important cultural constructs that altered how wilderness is perceived today. The result of the constructs is the idea that wilderness is a place of freedom and authenticity where we see the world, and ourselves, as it really is. Cronon points out how the idea of pristine wilderness is troublesome. The trouble is that when we confront wilderness we "imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires."[242] In his view, it is a mirror that reflects our problematic relationship not only to the wilderness itself, but also to the civilized world. He continues with a commentary on the issue of human presence in wilderness, claiming that if "nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall."[243] In other words, he draws attention to the preconception that our presence in the wilderness destroys the authenticity of the place. At the same time, he

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[239] *An Act to Establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the Permanent Good of the Whole People, and for Other Purposes*, Public Law 88-578, *U.S. Statues at Large* 78 (1964): 891, https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-78/pdf/STATUTE-78-Pg890.pdf. It is often referred to as the "Wilderness Act."

[240] Tuan, *Topophilia*, 109.

[241] See Tuan, *Topophilia*, 110–111.

[242] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *American Environmental History*, ed. Louis S. Warren (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 214.

[243] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 225.

argues, labeling areas as wilderness makes the space where we live seem artificial and unworthy of care and respect, because it results in a neglect of our immediate surroundings where the wilderness has already been despoiled. These conclusions, he claims, deepen the problematic relationship with the environment that our culture adopted.[244]

Owens advocates a similar perspective. He states that what the American government calls wilderness, a place "untrammeled by men," has been inhabited by Native Americans for thousands of years. These inhabitants had a strong impact on the landscape and they altered it significantly. The examples that he gives include burning forests to create pastures, domesticating animals and plants, or demarcating important places in the landscape and routes how to reach them.[245] The idea of an opposition of civilization and wilderness forms a mutually exclusive relationship which further excludes indigenous inhabitants and their dwellings from wilderness. Owens stresses that humanity forms a natural part of the landscape and that ideas that displace humans from nature make room for few untouched spots in the landscape, while the rest is left to be despoiled,[246] a point of view that corresponds with Cronon's perspective. Cronon moreover refers to the forced removal of Indian people from the areas that were to become national parks, because their uses of land were labeled as inappropriate and illegal.[247] To conclude, the idea of a wilderness untouched by humanity is, according to Owens, a "romantic European notion."[248] What we label as wilderness is an "absurdity, nothing more than a figment of the European imagination. An "absolute fake"."[249]

The character that pronounces this point of view in *Wolfsong* is the protagonist's uncle Jim. He describes the Native American attitude to the natural world before the arrival of the white settlers:

> When our people lived here long ago, before the white folks came, there wasn't any wilderness and there wasn't any wild animals. There was only the mountains and river, two-leggeds and four-leggeds and underwater people and all the rest. It took white people to make the country and the animals wild. Now they got to make a law saying it's wild so's they can protect it from themselves (*WS*, 81).

[244] See Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 214.
[245] See Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 224.
[246] See Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 225–226.
[247] See Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 223.
[248] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 225.
[249] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 217.

The Indian people perceived the landscape as it was, with its natural features and inhabitants. Uncle Jim points out that before the colonization of the American continent there was no wilderness and the land was occupied by people living in and with the environment. From this point of view, nature and humanity are not mutually exclusive. He also alludes to the destruction of environment by human activity and the need to save fragments of the environment so that it could not be destroyed. Wilderness in the novel, however, tends to be understood as not only the areas demarcated by law, but as landscape that keeps its natural character.

Owens wants to avoid oppositions in *Wolfsong* and instead writes about a world "with no binaries."[250] This principle applies to how wilderness is portrayed in the novel and it is expressed through its characters' view, interaction and appreciation of the wild areas. There are characters whose attitude to wilderness is indifferent. The attitude is however, not determined by ethnicity. For instance, many white inhabitants of Forks who participated in deforesting the landscape and developing it regret its gradual disappearance. One of them is Floyd, a local plumber, who remarks on constructing roads and "putting that blacktop over all creation" (*WS*, 60) in the town and around it. Ab, an old logger, says that once the place "was the finest danged country a man could lay his eyes on" (*WS*, 185). While he regrets the deforestation and the loss of the wild nature, he is aware that it was him and his colleagues who have participated in exploiting it, so that soon "there won't be nothing left" (*WS*, 185). Similarly, Tom has a temporary job as a logger filling in for his brother with a local company, although his aim in the novel is to protect the wilderness and not to participate in destroying it. His motive for this work is the lack of other possibilities to gain income in the area. This ambiguous view of wilderness may come from the fact that Owens worked in the North Cascades National Park and took part in exploiting the wilderness through logging and adopting the landscape, and was aware of the effect it had on the wild nature.[251]

Despite his temporary job, Tom is a character who advocates preservation of wilderness in the novel. His attitude to wilderness is a reflection of an indigenous relationship to landscape, appreciation and intimate knowledge of the place. His knowledge of the area, as other characters often point out, is unrivalled by others, the only characters who can match it are Sam Gravey, his uncle's old friend, and a seasonal ranger Martin Grider. Tom's acquaintance with the area has developed since he was

[250] Hausman and Purdy, "Widening the Circle," 57.
[251] See Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 210.

a child. His uncle took him on extensive trips on foot throughout the wilderness. They walked "every trail and places where there were no trails, searching out the remote ridges and hidden basins" (*WS,* 82). At that time, led by his uncle, he perceived the wilderness as a boundless place. When he was

> stepping in the bootprints of his uncle, … the wilderness had been enormous, boundless world of meadows and waterfalls, silver lakes, granite and ice. But as he'd grown, the wilderness had shrunk, and he'd come, finally, to know the smallness, the delicacy of the place, a fragment of what had once been, with everything connected so carefully like strands of a spider's web across a path at sunrise (*WS*, 82).

With Tom's becoming an adult, he realized that what he considered to be a vast stretch of landscape is a small area compared to the civilized world. He became aware of how easily wilderness could be destroyed by human activities and started to understand the necessity to protect its delicacy. In this quotation Tom also alludes to the principle of relatedness of all beings and things in the Indian worldview. He realizes that within the wilderness all creatures are closely related and depended on each other, and that the delicacy of the relationship deserves protection.

Owens describes the natural world as full of life. It is a dynamic landscape "all movement, all flux" (*WS*, 160). Tom perceives the land as alive and without boundaries between what is alive and what is lifeless. When he sees roots of a tree growing through a crack in a rock, he comes to a realization that "[t]here was no demarcation, no place where he could say, "[t]his is alive, this is not."" (*WS*, 83). For him, living and nonliving elements of nature are intertwined and constitute one organic whole. Moreover, as Tom develops his sensitivity to the place, he is able to identify voices coming from the natural environment: "the mountains drummed and the streams sang in rhythmic voices" (*WS*, 228). He hears the river calling his name and when he pronounces the word "Stehemish," the river echoes the identity back to him (See *WS*, 159–60).

Not only the place is alive with forces of nature, places are given consciousness in the novel. Tom's uncle mentions that some places "are friendlier than others" (*WS*, 108) in the sense of welcoming the visitors of the place. Other places, however, like the Snowking Lake in the wilderness, are "never happy people when people visit" and the place evokes in Tom a heavy feeling as he senses "the black air weighted with

something" (*WS*, 108). With what it is weighted is not specified, but it indicates that it does not come from the human interaction with place, but from the place itself.

Both Tom and his uncle Jim are able to perceive spirits in the wilderness. Purdy claims that in the wilderness "despite dramatic change, spirits still dwell."[252] Tom learns that a spirit "was a difficult thing" and that "there were many spirits and many ways and times to find one" (*WS*, 85). Tom's uncle Jim acquired a wolf spirit helper in his youth. He is associated with the animal himself, as he used to be called Wolf when he was younger (See *WS*, 34). After Jim dies, he wills the animal spirit helper to Tom. Although Tom is in a deep need of a spirit that would guide him into understanding own identity and culture, he is not privy to the ways to call the spirit and unite with it.

Finding a way to approach the spirit becomes one of the prime concerns of the novel. Tom is, however, in a situation where there is nobody who could give him directions how to achieve it. His uncle died before he could pass the necessary knowledge on him. His brother Jimmy is favoring the way of life of the white society and his attitude to wilderness is passive and influenced by his economic needs. The difference between the brothers and their approaches to landscape is illustrated in a scene when Jimmy "stayed on the other side" (*WS*, 158) of a fence circling the wild areas while Tom slid around. The fence literally divides the brothers in their approach. Jimmy does not wander the wilderness "without a reason," and will enter only after the wilderness will have been made approachable by building a road: "When they get this road through I can drive on it" (*WS*, 157). Jimmy stays in the safe region as he does not venture to cross the line. At the same time it shows Jimmy's reluctance to step into the region of the Indian. Tom crosses the boundary to take responsibility for how the natural environment is treated and by that signals his acceptance of the Stehemish cultural heritage. Bernardin argues that Tom must "turn to the land and stories for reflections of his culture"[253] in the situation that he is faced with.

Tom's quest for identity is reveled to him in a dream while he sleeps in his uncle Jim's bed. He sees his uncle firing from his rifle in the dream, at something that Tom cannot yet understand. Later in the novel the sight of the landscape damaged by the construction site of the mine makes him understand that the shooting is an act of resistance against the development and destruction of the landscape (See *WS*, 169). The dream further sees Tom climbing an ice wall in moonlight while hearing a rising howl

[252] Purdy, "*Wolfsong* and Pacific Refrains," 183.
[253] Bernardin, "Wilderness Conditions," 88.

of a wolf (See *WS*, 41). It is a foreshadowing of the ending of the novel where Tom is trying to escape to British Columbia from the reach of his pursuers. He does not understand the dream at the beginning of the novel. He is being warned, however, that adopting the Indian point of view and his search for the spirit wolf might be dangerous. One of the people who warn him is his mother; another warning comes from Mad John: "It was demons got your uncle, and now they're calling you. I hear 'em ever night, howling out there in that desert waste" (*WS*, 147). Mad John is referring to the spirits that populate the wilderness and that were present in the scene of Jim's death.

These warnings are meant as distractions that discourage him from pursuing his aim. Other distractions include the false images of the Indian that he is faced with, such as the image of an Indian as a feathered warrior on a horseback in the light of the sun, and that do not fit the reality of the life of the Stehemish tribe. The Stehemish were living in cedar-slab houses in the dim and wet forest, clothed in woven cedar bark (See *WS*, 55 and 83). Furthermore, he is offered jobs that contradict his convictions about how to treat wilderness, such as j. D. Hill's offer to work with the development company, or an offer to work as a wilderness ranger. He is many times recommended to return to California to finish his studies.

But Tom is pursued by the presence of the wolf throughout the novel. He encounters the wolf the first night which he spends at Forks, although the animal is considered to be extinct in the area. In that scene he stares at the wolf with a rifle in his hands (See *WS*, 42). Pierotti explains that "[t]he wolf was an important link to the natural world for Owens" [254] that connects the protagonist with the landscape. Owens supports this view when he states that apart from being the most powerful animal helper a hunter can have, the wolf is "a kind of metaphor for the resilience of the natural world and of the Native people"[255] in the novel.

David Brande shows that the wolf in this novel is associated with other meanings than those coming from the western cultural tradition. Here the wolf is "neither the "lone wolf" of the Euramerican cultural mythology nor the embodiment of

[254] Raymond Pierotti, "Connected to the Land: Nature and Spirit in the Novels of Louis Owens," *Indigenous Nations Studies Journal* 13, no. 1 (2002): 80, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/41126727_Connected_to_the_Land_Nature_and_Spirit_in_the_Novels_of_Louis_Owens.

[255] See Hausman and Purdy, "Widening the Circle," 53–54.

raw, uncivilized nature."[256] According to him, the wolf stands for "a system of reciprocal exchange between human and non-human nature."[257] He stresses the fact that separating nature and culture does not lead do survival, as nature and culture are inseparable, but that there is an ongoing mutual relationship. The wolf spirit "draws Tom to follow his uncle in somehow resisting the mine" that is so threatening to the hard-learned balance. Pierotti concludes that the wolf is a symbol of Indian survivance in the novel,[258] as it guides the protagonist to understanding his relationship with the environment, to a reunification with the environment and uncovering the Stehemish relation to the place that constitutes wilderness. This enables Tom to comprehend his identity and eventually it leads him to survival.

The way to acquire the wolf spirit requires Tom to be deeply immersed in the place. The process includes acceptance of the natural world as alive and populated by spirits, and a realization that it has its own character and voice. When Tom accepts this premises his relationship to the place changes. Subsequently he undergoes a process of purification that is a prerequisite for an encounter with the wolf spirit. Afterwards he enters the Image Lake, one of the sacred places of the Stehemish, to look for the spirit in its depths. When he is under the water, however, Tom realizes that he lacks the power to return to the surface:

> "This is what it is like to drown," he thought. And then he saw the shadow moving towards him from far away and below, from the deep center of the lake. When his muscles tensed to fight to the surface, the figure retreated. He turned to look for it and realized that he did not have to struggle, that one need not fight at all. That, he knew at last, was the key. The secret was to merge with the blue darkness that was lifting him now and moving him in a delicate current to the center. And out of the depth again the shadow approached, and he tried to call it, to ask the question, but he knew no language (*WS*, 164).

The key, as Tom learns in this scene, is to merge with the natural forces of the environment, to become a part of the sacred place. This connection would lead him into the Stehemish understanding of the world. When Tom stops fighting, the spirit appears.

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[256] David Brande, "Not the Call of the Wild: The Idea of Wilderness in Louis Owens's *Wolfsong* and *Mixedblood Messages*," in *Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work*, ed. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 212.
[257] Brande, "Not the Call of the Wild," 212.
[258] Pierotti, "Connected to the Land," 92.

He is, however, not unified with the spirit in this scene. Luckily, Tom is saved from drowning by ranger Grider. When he later looks to the depths of the lake, he cannot see anything, because "the shining image of the white mountain across the drainage blocked his attempt to see into the deeper water" (*WS*, 165). The view of Dakobed in the lake is a reminder that his search for the spirit helper and identity is incomplete without including the sacred mountain of the Stehemish.

Owens writes that Dakobed means "something like Great Mother" to the local Suiattle Indians and explains her importance to the tribe—they see the mountain as a "place from which they come, the place where they were born, the mother earth."[259] It appears in their stories as a place to which they are related, a point of orientation in the environment as well as a stable point by which they define their relation to the world. As Tom approaches Forks on his way from California, the view of the mountains circling the town opens up to him. He quickly recognizes them and lists their geographical names for himself: Whitehorse, Skullcap, Stujack, Three Fingers, Pugh, and Sloan. He is trying to recollect their Indian names, but is only able to recall the name Dakobed, his tribe's name for the Glacier Peak.

In the novel, Dakobed is the place of origin of the ancestors of the Stehemish tribe. It is given high significance in the tribal stories and its function is linked to life: it "gave life and gathered that life back into herself" (See *WS*, 160). Tom reflects that the tribal people

> "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 be reckoned with upon the earth. Away in the four directions the world streamed, and Dakobed was the center, 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" (*WS*, 93).

Mountain tops are thought to be "ladders to the sky, the home of the gods"[260] by different cultures, and they are sites where the spiritual merges with the natural. Mircea Eliade notes that such sacred places are "fixed point[s]" and that they embody "the central axis for all future orientation"[261] for people of the same religion. In a similar

[259] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 211.
[260] Tuan, *Topophilia*, 118.
[261] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959), 21.

fashion, Dakobed represents a center that informs the members of the Stehemish tribe where they are situated in the world, physically and spiritually, and it is incorporated into their stories. It is a landmark that dominates the physical environment. Tom observes that "all trails [lead] directly to her, from all directions" (*WS*, 222), its locations being "miles from the nearest road or world of men" (*WS*, 35). It is a place that Tom often regards from distance with admiration and that is his point of orientation. When the mountain is hidden in mist, Tom feels alone, "only a distant speck in the whirling world" (*WS*, 163). At the slope of the mountain he feels the "eternal quality of a world stripped to essentials: rock with a thin layer of earth and plant, rock and ice rising together to Dakobed and the night sky" (*WS*, 227). It is a world that is made up by the basic elements that can be found in the nature and that give shape to the mountain that towers "intensely white" (*WS*, 227) above him. Furthermore, Tom observes the crevasses of the mountain that "gaped at him like mouths" (*WS*, 228) as if they wanted to communicate a message to him.

Dakobed is the setting of the final scene which portrays Tom's unification with the wolf spirit. Tom is running from his pursuers after he dynamited a water tank at the mine construction site and unintentionally caused the death of the developer J. D. Hill. Tom strives to climb the mountain and escape to the wilderness in British Columbia through one of its passes. He hopes that "[t]hey would never find him in the deep creases of the mountains" (*WS*, 222). Before he reaches Canada, however, he has to climb over a place where he would be "silhouetted for an unavoidable instant against the horizon" (*WS*, 230). Near the pass of the mountain he hears the howl of the wolf and realizes that he dreamt about this scene on his uncle's bed. He starts to chop his way up the glacier with the use of his knife, although he becomes an easy target the moonshine. The sound of the howl of the wolf "flooded through him" and the "moon framed him against the glistening wall and glinted off his black hair, and inside him the song grew louder" (*WS*, 248). Tom's identity is now established, it is as sharply defined as his body against the white wall. When he reaches the edge of the mountain, he runs

> 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 hurtling his shadow northward before him, listening the rising howl of the wolf that went on and on until the night seemed ready to burst (*WS*, 249).

At the top of the mountain, Tom is unified with the wolf spirit that his uncle left him after his death. It is the place where he discovers his location in the universe and gains understanding of the journey that he had to take to unify with the wolf spirit and find his position within the culture of the tribe. The novel ends there, with Tom running north toward Canada. Owens uses the place to show its centrality for the tribal world view of the Stehemish and for stressing the importance of the sacred place for the development of the identity of the protagonist.

Once Tom is aware of his place in the Stehemish understanding of the world and once he understands the delicacy of the indigenous relationship to environment, it is ironic that he is forced to leave his home valley and journey further into wilderness. Wilderness, on the last pages of the novel, is portrayed as a refuge, a place stripped to essentials where Tom can realize his identity. Donaldson notes that now that Tom becomes a fugitive he has to live as his ancestors did, "off his wits and off the land." He argues that from the Indian point of view, his leaving the valley is only the beginning.[262] Schweninger, furthermore, points out that the unification with the spirit results in Tom's spiritual growth and together with the wolf spirit they "transcend place."[263]

Although Tom's intentions are not disclosed in the novel, it is probable that he will return to a place in British Columbia where he underwent an intertribal sweat ceremony with McBride earlier in the novel. Brande supports this fact as he notes that Tom "will find sanctuary with a small intertribal community he has visited earlier in the story."[264] At the ceremony, Tom refines his relation to the natural world. Tom is initially reluctant to participate in the sweat. Although he observes that the place is Indian, it evokes a strange and foreign feeling in him, it is not familiar (See *WS*, 189). Other participants come from different Native cultures and they pray in Lakota, Navajo, English and Spanish. They pray for all that constitutes the world, the earth, people, animals, and the situation in the world. Tom suddenly realizes that "he understood it all" (*WS*, 191). When it is his turn to pray, he expresses thanks for "the rivers and streams and mountains, for the trees and rocks, for the people of the water and the earth and air" (*WS*, 191). His prayer is aimed at the natural world that he feels related to. The

[262] See Donaldson, "As Long," 85.
[263] Lee Schweninger, "Landscape and Cultural Identity in Louis Owens's Wolfsong," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 10, no. 2 (1998): 106, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20739454?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
[264] Brande, "Not the Call of the Wild," 197.

tension that he originally felt vanishes and he experiences a great relief, one that he has not felt since childhood.

Aaron Medicine, the Indian who runs the sweat, comments on how contemporary Indians view wilderness: "Too many Indians don't know shit about nature anymore. They're living in places like L. A. and Vancouver and sticking needless in their arms, and real nature scares the shit out of them" (*WS*, 193). Modern experiences, he says, like watching Superbowl on TV, are part of contemporary life, but people should not lose connection with the natural world. He points out that the aim of their community is to help people "find out who they are" (*WS*, 193). In his view, developing a relationship to nature that is based on familiarity and understanding is what helps people with the task.

Aaron also expresses his anger at the destruction of landscape, especially in places of Indian communities:

> Sometimes I think we ought to get up a war party and take this country back, all of it that's left. Stop 'em from cutting down all the trees and dumping radioactive trash all over our land. The Russians spewed pieces of radioactive satellite all over Indian land way up north of here, and the good U. S. of A. is killing all the lakes with acid rain. Down in New Mexico there's a whole town on one of the pueblo reservations that's contaminated with radiation. They put a uranium mine in and just flushed the tailings out on the pueblo land. Babies are born all messed up and people can't drink the water (*WS*, 194).

Aaron alludes to the maltreatment of the landscape by the mainstream American society and how it affects Native communities. Joni Adamson notes that marginal societies are greatly affected by maltreatment of environment, as they are the most vulnerable. She call this practice "environmental racism," since race has been found to be the major factor in the location of hazardous waste coming from commercial activities.[265] Aaron, however, concludes on an optimistic note, not giving up a positive view of the future of wilderness: "There are grizzlies in those woods, man, real bears. And sometimes at night out there you hear wolves. They don't know it, man, but we're coming back. All of us. Every damned one of us" (*WS*, 194). Bernardin, furthermore, points out a positive

[265] See Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, xv.

didactic aspect of *Wolfsong* as it presents its readers the Euroamerican attitudes towards the land and shows them an "eco-centric, sustained commitment to land."[266]

Bernardin moreover focuses on the effects of land dispossession in America. She argues that *Wolfsong* "traces the ecologically and spiritually devastating consequences of America's inventions of the wilderness for the Euro-Americans and Native Americans alike."[267] In her view, Owens scrutinizes the American myth of nation-building, which is grounded in the "violent appropriation of land and dispossession of Indians,"[268] and as a reaction to these processes, the novel "confronts and reconfigures the historically entwined tropes of the vanishing wilderness and vanishing Indian."[269]

Owens uses the construction of the mine on the sacred land of the Stehemish, a disturbing reality in the area, to communicate themes of destruction of the natural world. The construction of the mine would change significantly the identity of the place. The sacred landscape of the Indian tribe would become a placeless landscape of industry, as modern mining obliterates places, and creates standardized sites that are independent of location.[270] The place would be ridded of its meaning and of the way people experience the place. A new meaning would be assigned to it whose aim is economic and responds to industrial needs. The landscape would be developed with a new housing that does not adjust to the character of the place and to how people experience and live in it. Tom, in consequence, fights against placelessness in the wilderness and strives for keeping the essence of the place.

This view is in accord with Owens's environmentalist beliefs that he develops in his essays. In "Burning the Shelter," he notes that

> [u]nless Americans, and all human beings, can learn to imagine themselves as intimately and inextricably related to every aspect of the world they inhabit, with the extraordinary responsibilities such relationship entails—unless they can learn what the indigenous peoples of the Americas knew and often still know—the earth simply will not survive. A few square miles of something called wilderness will become the sign of failure everywhere.[271]

[266] Bernadrin, "Wilderness Conditions," 91.
[267] Bernardin, "Wilderness Conditions," 79.
[268] Bernardin, "Wilderness Conditions," 79.
[269] Bernardin, "Wilderness Conditions," 79.
[270] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 109–110.
[271] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 217.

Tom adopts such a relationship in the novel. He makes a choice and accepts responsibility for the future of the wilderness, the place that he inhabits at the end of the novel. Owens, when asked about the possible sequel of *Wolfsong*, mentioned that it would see Tom as an old man who made peace with his anger and returned to his home valley, because "he could not live apart from those rivers and those mountains where the stories of his people live."[272]

[272] Purdy, "*Wolfsong* and Pacific Refrains," 187.

Chapter 4: *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game*

This chapter focuses on Louis Owens's novels *The Sharpest Sight*, published in 1993, and its sequel *Bone Game*, published the following year. The novels' plots center about the same protagonist, Cole McCurtain, and they are based in the same setting: Mississippi and California. Thanks to that I decided to analyze the novels together.

Mississippi and California are influential places for Owens and he frequently uses them as the setting or a reference point in his novels. In *Wolfsong*, Owens's protagonist Tom Joseph returns to Forks, Washington, from his studies at a university in California. In *Dark River*, Mississippi represents the cultural background of the protagonist, although the plot of the novel is set in New Mexico. It is, however, in *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game* that the places are developed the most: Mississippi is the place of origin for the protagonist and California the place where he lives. In this chapter I analyze how the places are portrayed and what is their significance for the protagonist. By discussing the two novels at the same time it is possible to see the development of the protagonist's perception of the places and a change of his attitude towards them.

As in *Wolfsong*, Owens draws heavily from his own experience with the places. He spent significant parts of his life in both and explains his relations to Mississippi and California in his autobiographical writing, especially in the essays published in *Mixedblood Messages*: "Blood Trails: Missing Grandmothers and Making Worlds," where he discusses his Cherokee roots and mixedblood origin, "Motion of Fire and Form," which describes his childhood in Mississippi and the travels of his family to California, and "Water Witch," where he explains the origin of his fascination with water that seeps through his fiction work. The descriptions of Mississippi and California in his autobiographical writing shed more light on understanding the places in *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game*, and they illuminate the characters' attitudes to them, as well as the distribution of the violent characters within the novels.

As Eudora Welty notes, place has a significant role in influencing the quality of a writer's literary work. She mentions that "place is where he has his roots, place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of

reference; in his work, the point of view."[273] Owens projects his knowledge of the places into the two novels and compels his protagonist to learn to know them, and to learn how he is situated in the places. For this reason, I start this chapter with an analysis of how Owens characterizes Mississippi and California in his autobiographical essays. The subsequent part focuses on their depiction in *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game,* with the emphasis on how the places are perceived by the protagonist and how his perception of the places develops.

The novels bear other autobiographical elements apart from descriptions of the places and their perception. Some characters that Owens develops are modelled after his family members, for instance his father or grandfather. He also fictionally reenacts real events from his life, such as his childhood memories from Mississippi. Owens furthermore explores issues that he feels affected by, most notably the condition of the mixedblood or Indian survival in everyday experience. His work, he admits, cannot be separated from his experience: "I cannot deny the fact that "I" am one of the principal subjects of those books sometimes disguised in varying levels of fiction."[1] It is thanks to the similarities that the author bears with the protagonist that Pierotti argues that Cole McCurtain is Owens's most autobiographical character.[274]

Mississippi and California in Owens's Autobiographical Writing

Louis Owens was born in Lompoc, California in 1948. Shortly after his birth his family moved to Mississippi, where they stayed until he was seven years old. Owens does not mention the exact location of his family's residence in Mississippi during his childhood; he merely states that it was in the region along the Yazoo River: "Our cabin stood a couple hundred yards from the river, facing the same mud road we were driving, with a big pecan tree across the road before the river jungle began."[275] After the age of seven, his family moved back to California, where they stayed in Delano in the Central Valley, in Paso Robles, Shafter, Atascadero in the Salinas Valley, and at a solitary house in the Santa Lucia Mountains.

Owens's earliest memories are from Mississippi, a place "where everything begins" (*MM*, 167):

[273] Welty, "Place in Fiction," 40.
[274] See Pierotti, "Connected to the Land," 82.
[275] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 168. In this chapter cited parenthetically in the text as *MM*.

> Mississippi to me was a world comprised of a little cabin on short legs, a shed where coon skins were nailed up, cotton fields on three sides bordered by tall, dark woods, and on the fourth side a narrow, junglelike forest that opened to the deep, black Yazoo River. No people beyond my parents, grandparents, and brothers and sisters make significant appearances in those memories. There was a black holy-roller church somewhere along the dirt road where in passing I would sometimes hear beautiful wild singing, and sometimes people materialized out of the woods in one form or another, but those people are all just shadows of memory.[276]

In this memory the Yazoo country of their residence is a solitary place distant from other settlements, with their cabin located separately in the country among cotton fields and woods: "I cannot recall any other houses or buildings except those we would pass miles away on the school bus during the long morning and afternoon rides."[277] However, he describes the life by the Yazoo River as having "a fantastic wealth of images and impressions."[278]

> [M]y brother and I were allowed to run wild in those woods all day long as soon as we could walk. We would swing in the muscadine vines, climb trees, catch snakes, sneak into the wire-sided cotton trailers, to jump until chased out, and do whatever we wanted from daylight to dark. … The world was rich with smells, from the dense odor of fermenting mud and dead fish along the river to the kerosene and carbide in our cabin. The river itself was deep and dark, impenetrable to sight, with a hungry current, or many currents. There were alligators that we'd sometimes see and always hear at night, along with snapping turtles and water moccasins and catfish reputed to devour careless dogs and children. Across the bottomless, dangerous water we played and fished alongside was an even stranger world of thicker, blacker woods and swamps.[279]

Despite the danger, the solitude of the place, and the economic situation of the family, he describes this part of his life as happy and the place as a true home. The vivid imagery he uses in this passage points to the importance of the place. There is however a contrast to his memories of living on a "Hog Ranch" in Mississippi, in which the depiction of the place is reduced to "a single image of a gray winter day and a mule with

[276] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 34.
[277] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 34.
[278] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 32.
[279] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 32–33.

his head down against a muddy barn" (*MM*, 174). Mississippi, for Owens, is therefore represented by the area of his early home near the Yazoo River, which he describes as dark, impenetrable, and bottomless.

It is in the Yazoo country of his childhood that he starts to develop a close relationship with nature and respect for it. From the Yazoo River he learns to "feel water as a presence, a constant, a secret source of both dream and nightmare" (*MM*, 186) that results in his fascination with water and its subsequent presence in all of his novels. He compares the character of the Yazoo with the Salinas River in California, which appears in *The Sharpest Sight*. Compared to the Yazoo, the place where Salinas flows is "a daylight world of hot, white sand and bone-dry brush," where "death and the decay seemed unrelated things" (*MM*, 186). What he highlights about the Salinas is its seasonal change. The dry bed of the river is flooded in winter and brings destruction to the close area. After that, it would recede again to a thin stream. In Owens's imagination the river is clean and forms a cold stream on the white sand. This image is the complete opposite of how he perceives the Yazoo in Mississippi.

Owens grew up disconnected from the reservation life: "In Mississippi we didn't live close to the Choctaw reservation (created shortly before my birth) and had no contact with that cultural center."[280] The reservation he refers to is the Choctaw Indian Reservation in Mississippi, established in 1945 around the Choctaw communities already existing in the area.[281] The brief association with other indigenous people and the corresponding Native American cultural background had an influence on the formation of his identity. As a child he understood that "Indian was something we were, not something we did or had or were required to prove on demand" (*MM*, 176). Although at that time he was comfortable with his and his family's identity, later in his life he started to become aware of the need to redefine his identity, especially as a result of the frequent moving of his family and his gradual maturing.

His family moved several times between Mississippi and California before they left Mississippi "more or less for good" (*MM*, 172). Mississippi was where his father's family came from, while his mother was from California. The abrupt changes of residence between those two states were dictated by the economic situation of the family, as well as by the environment. Owens said to A. Robert Lee:

[280] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 30.
[281] Mary B. Davis, *Native America in the Twentieth century: An Encyclopedia* (1994; London: Routledge, 2014), 112.

> Mississippi must have been unbearably hard for our mother out there in the middle of nowhere with no electricity, running water, or much of anything except too many children. At one point, in what was undoubtedly a terrible desperation, she tacked up tar paper inside the cabin to keep the wind from coming through the cracks in the board walls. As a result, we lived in a home of looming black walls, and I remember the strange light cast on those dark paper walls by kerosene lanterns at bedtime. When she couldn't stand it any more, she forced our father to move our family back to California in an old wreck of a car carrying canvas water bags from every projection.[282]

Although for Owens the life in Mississippi was a "happy time,"[283] he is aware of the fact that life in that area was a hard. At this point California represents an opportunity for improvement, and every motion from one place to another is accompanied with hope, as the relocation brings about an opportunity for a higher living standard. Owens calls motion "the real American dream" (*MM*, 161–62), as it is related to gaining freedom and breaking free from roots and responsibilities. However, he labels the dream as destructive and the individualism that is a part of it as damaging. He explains it by referring to the colonization of America, which represented freedom for the European colonists but resulted in a loss of land and displacement for the indigenous inhabitants (*MM*, 161–63).

In California, the family often stayed at the edges of towns or in other remote areas. At first they settled in Delano, a small town in California's Central Valley, where they lived in a tent on the outskirts of the town. Later, they lived in a small house in the Santa Lucia Mountains near Paso Robles, where Owens especially appreciated the natural surroundings: "I remember that place with a feeling I can only define as love—remember the texture of the dry earth and rustle of prickly oak leaves, the heat of summer on wild oats and manzanita, the taste of a spring hillside when the world seemed startled with new grass" (*MM*, 172). He describes the place as a "secure and private world" (*MM*, 175). However, the family only spent a couple of months in Paso Robles, living in a house that was part of the housing project; their low-income apartment "was surrounded by a paradise of mown grass and wild children." Of that experience he also says that it way "a very happy time" (*MM*, 174).

Despite his positive attitude to the place, his view of California is tainted by feeling of not belonging.

[282] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 33.
[283] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 33.

> [T]he primary impression I remember was feeling extraordinarily different from everyone around me. I lived in California almost constantly from age of seven through college, and that feeling never really left, even as I also lost the vestiges of Mississippi childhood. It was in effect like losing one sense of self, for the most part a quite happy one, and finding nothing to replace it except uncertainty. Although I came to love deeply the oak trees and oat hills and dry creeks of California, I never adjusted to people there, always felt myself and my family to be outsiders just barely tolerated on the edges of society very satisfied with itself.[284]

It is in California where Owens starts to notice the differences within the society, between the poor and the rich, and the presence of other cultures. "In Mississippi and even at first in California, our only or best friends had often been Black, or, more rarely, Indian."[285] He recalls his father being called a "goddamn Indian" (*MM*, 173), as well as the embarrassment coming from his family's difference and poverty, which gave rise to feelings of uncertainty. The contrasts and barriers within the society had never been so visible in his native region, which poverty and isolation made homogenous.

> In Mississippi I was no criminal. With my brother I wandered a humid, immaterial paradise, innocent, naming a dark, damp world of wonders, owing nothing and desiring little. In California, after age seven, I learned criminality, to invade and violate others' lives, to bear away others' possessions, to lie, pervade, hide. I became predacious, understood the world as made of removable objects and obdurate enemies. In Mississippi the Indian and Black people around us possessed little to be desired unto oneself: a new cotton sack for picking, a head scarf, a broken-bladed pocket knife, a hound pup. Things that anyone might possess and no one would dispute, at least seen from childish eyes. California, I saw at once, was made of desirable objects and those who possessed those objects.[286]

In his view, California contrasts with Mississippi's "immaterial paradise" in its diversity, which creates a desire to own. Although Owens often refers to the scenic beauty of California, it is populated by "obdurate enemies," which give the place an undertone of hostility.

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[284] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 35.
[285] Owens, *I Hear the Train*, 4.
[286] Owens, *I Hear the Train*, 77.

The representations of Mississippi and California in Owens's autobiographical writing are often complementary. Mississippi represents a place that is wild and dangerous, but at the same time it stands as a respected place of origin, natural order, and freedom. California, on the other hand, is defined by Owens's feelings of otherness, insecurity and imbalance, although the natural environment is described favorably, which creates a sense of ambiguity. The ambiguity is also noticeable in his statement in which he puts the "comforting darkness of Mississippi" in opposition to the "bright light of California, a place where [he] never stopped being a stranger" (*MM*, 143–44). Owens explains this distinction by pointing to a difference between an inner perception of place and its external appearance. He claims that by moving to California the "outer darkness of Mississippi was exchanged for an inner darkness, the inner light of the Yazoo country traded for the externally sunlit hills of the Salinas Valley."[287]

Even though Mississippi represents a place of origin, Owens's understanding of home and its physical location develops beyond both the Yazoo country and the regions of his residence in California. His frequent extensive trips to the wilderness and his childhood spent outdoors had a fundamental impact on his understanding of home. While collecting ideas for his first novel *Wolfsong*, which, as it was intended, would be set in the North Cascades, Washington, he stated: "Alone, as I would continue to be for the next ten days, thousands of miles from the Yazoo and Salinas Rivers, I had never felt so at home in my life. Home had become a much bigger place" (*MM*, 181). Owens later assigned this perception to the protagonist of the novel. He nevertheless refuses to connect his relationship to the wilderness with the presumptions that Indians should feel at home in natural surroundings. In his view, it is rather a matter of habit and lifestyle:

> The textures and smells and hues of the outdoors are more familiar to me than any other aspects of the physical world. I am at home there. I imagine that I would feel the same way about pavement and brick and steel and the sounds and smells of traffic had I been raised in Manhattan or the Chicago Loop.[288]

Owens perceives the wilderness to be his home since he spent his formative years in rural areas in both Mississippi and in California. At the time when *Mixedblood Messages* were published, he stated that he only spent two years living in a truly urban

[287] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 35.
[288] Lee, "Outside Shadow," 37.

area. He calls that experience "so terrible that [he] decided to abandon academics" (*MM*, 152) and apply for a program in forestry. He nevertheless did not enroll at the program and continued his work in academia.

Mississippi and California in *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game*

Owens's novel *The Sharpest Sight* and its sequel *Bone Game* introduce a mixedblood protagonist, Cole McCurtain, of a Choctaw, Cherokee, Irish, and Cajun descent. Linda Lizut Helstern describes them as thrillers infused with a spirit of comedy,[289] thanks to Owens's frequent tendency to ridicule and humor. Owens stresses a different point of view—he labels them as "stories of survival" (*MM*, 164), as they focus on regeneration and renewal.

In *The Sharpest Sight*, Cole McCurtain, an eighteen year old, tries to resolve the death of his older brother Attis, a Vietnam veteran. A local deputy, Mundo Morales, spots Attis's dead body in the flooded Salinas River, but the body is not found and the authorities refuse to pronounce him dead and investigate the case. Cole starts to search for his brother's body to bring home his bones, and gradually understand that to be able to fulfill the quest he has to find his own mixedblood identity and a balance in a world where his brother was driven to madness and destruction (See *MM*, 182). The novel is set near Amarga, California, with a parallel plot being set in the vicinity of the Yazoo River in Mississippi.

Bone Game takes place twenty years later. Cole works as a professor of Native American Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is married and has a daughter, Abby, but lives alone. Cole finds himself situated in a vague space between the mainstream and the marginalized culture. Even though he teaches the writings of indigenous authors, he has paradoxically lost his connection to his Choctaw cultural background. He once again feels uncertain about his identity, as "certainty is not a condition mixedbloods can know" (*MM*, 182). Throughout the novel, there is a series of murders on the university campus and Cole and his daughter find themselves woven into the course of events. By trying to solve the mysterious murders Cole arrives at a better understanding of his identity and undergoes a personal and cultural regeneration. At the end of the novel he returns to his New Mexico home where he used to live with his wife and daughter.

[289] See Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 35.

In both *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game* the conflict is bound to California; it emerges and needs to be resolved there. In *The Sharpest Sight*, California is the place where Cole's brother is shot and his body is drifting in the Salinas. The place hosts violent acts of the novel's characters, including sexual violence, and ends with the death of Jessard Deal, the novel's most pronounced villain. Pierotti claims that the main theme of the novel is "the social forces that lead to violence, and the consequences of violent acts to surviving family members and their community."[290] To survive in the violent place Cole is equipped with his dead brother's jacket with "I shall fear no evil, for I am" (*SS*, 10) written on the back. The writing anticipates the requirement to find out what the "I" represents for Cole, as it is the necessary condition that enables the protagonist to navigate in the violent place. In *Bone Game*, California is the setting of the series of murders. The novel draws from the serial murders that appeared in Santa Cruz in 1970s and refers to an Indian uprising against a local mission that occurred two hundred years before the novel's story.[291] Despite the portrayal of the place as particularly violent, Pietorri notes that the novel became a bestseller in Santa Cruz as the local inhabitants "were thrilled with Owens' effective evocation of local place … even as it indicted their history and way of life."[292] In both novels, Mississippi balances the violence in California and represents the cultural center and regeneration for the protagonist and his family.

In both novels the natural environment is dominant and plays an important role in the story. In *The Sharpest Sight* the dominant part of the environment is the Salinas River. This is how it is perceived by Mundo Morales, the local deputy sheriff and a friend of Cole's murdered brother Attis:

> It was an underground river, the largest one in California, the largest in the country, maybe in the world. Most of the year it was nothing, like the people who had come to live along its banks, just a half-mile-wide stretch of sand and brush and scattered trees. But in the winter and early spring, when the rains came pounding down out of the coastal mountains, the river rose out of its bed and became huge, taking everything in its path.[293]

[290] Pierotti, "Connected to the Land," 82.
[291] See Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 14.
[292] Pierotti, "Connected to the Land," 85.
[293] Louis Owens, *The Sharpest Sight* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *SS*.

The river is described as a force that is dormant for most of the year, but when it awakens, it dominates the environment and brings changes to the lives of people. Mundo has accepted the nature of the river and has grown "to love with a kind of ache the seasonal violence when the river tried to destroy everything within its reach" (*SS*, 6). The destructive force of the river is not natural, though. Cole's grand-uncle Luther says that "the whites have broken it so that it runs only underground except when the big rains come. Then the river grows angry and when it is strong enough it rises up to revenge itself" (*SS*, 26). In his opinion its destructive power is an answer to disrespectful human behavior towards the environment that altered the river's course unnaturally.

Cole is portrayed as a character who is highly conscious of the river and its presence: he can "feel the river at his back" (*SS*, 15) when he turns around. His perception of the natural environment is acute; however, he has not developed a deeper relationship to the near town of Amarga. He mentions that the town "wasn't much" (*SS*, 16) and throughout the ten years that he has been living in its vicinity he has not learned to appreciate the place. Cole's father, Hoey, remarks that the land used to belong to the Chumash people, but "now there ain't no Chumash here at all, and we're here" (*SS*, 19). Hoey wonders at tribes in Arizona and New Mexico which have been occupying the same places for a long time: "Some of them people live in houses a thousand years old …You imagine how that must feel?" (*SS*, 19). Like many other Indian people in America, Hoey and Cole are displaced from the land of their ancestors so that living in such a place and the nature of the relationship that springs from it is for him unimaginable.

Bone Game is set in Santa Cruz, where the dominant feature of the environment is the redwoods surrounding the university campus. Owens refers to them as being "thick with shadow"[294] and "crowding [Cole's] small house" (*BG*, 8). Cole is reluctant to walk in the forests:

> It was true that he didn't know the woods around his home, that he hadn't ventured beyond the big oak that marked some kind of boundary for him. He'd never lived anywhere before where he didn't know the terrain of his existence. But he had avoided

[294] Louis Owens, *Bone Game* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *BG*.

> the forests of the Santa Cruz Mountains staying within the clearings where the sun and the stars, even veiled in fog, were constant markers (*BG*, 211–12).

The forests are sinister and Cole keeps away from them. He feels that entering them might cause something unpredictable to happen. When he finally does venture into the redwoods, he has visions—of a bloody rain, of dead children. He walks through the forest in his dream,

> *touching the bark of redwoods and calling to owls with their own words. His cheek lay close to the streams, and he felt the decay that covered the earth. Curled in the knuckled hollows of roots, he heard the songs of the ancient forest. He felt the weight of his lives. Deer moved beside the stream, their eyes sharp and painful stars, their antlers rocks of flame that burned into the sky. Death prowled the ridge, and winter kept no warmth*. *The ocean beat at night from the west, violent against the land* (*BG*, 77, Owens's italics).

In this dream, he is aware of the decay and of the past, which is not forgotten but is a part of the present. Again, as in the case of the Salinas River, he is confronted with a natural force that holds uncontrollable power and plays an important role in the story. Owens chose the redwoods as the setting of the most violent scenes of the novel, including the final scene in which Cole kills, in defense of his daughter Abbey, Robert Malin, a Ph. D. student at the university and his teaching assistant, who turns out to be a serial killer who is responsible for murders of several women at the university campus.

The Yazoo region in Mississippi is also portrayed as potentially dangerous in the novels, but Cole's understanding of the place gradually develops. At the beginning of *The Sharpest Sight*, Hoey advises Cole to escape the draft to Vietnam by going to Mississippi to Uncle Luther. He says to Cole: "ain't nobody going to dig you out of that Yazoo country" (*SS*, 23). Cole remembers the place vaguely. He recalls the prevalent rotten odor and the closeness of the river full of dangerous hidden things, and Uncle Luther resembling a swamp ghost. When Cole is coming back to Mississippi after years, he sees the land as veiled in fog, the woods are growing "thicker, darker, impenetrable looking" (*SS*, 69), the Yazoo River smells of "wet and rot and musty earth" (*SS*, 73), and his guide is only "a suggestion in the fog, a darker shadow" (*SS*, 60). The river is a continuous presence in the background. In his initial perception Cole sees the place as intensely disturbing. His view of the place changes as he meets Luther. Luther lives in

harmony with the place and represents order in the seemingly disorganized environment. Owens describes him as "solid as the pecan tree in the yard" and Cole speculates that he "could have been one of the hidden things from the river" (*SS*, 23). Luther is portrayed as a character which is strongly rooted in place. Cole initially thinks of Luther as living alone in the dark woods, which is an idea influenced by the stereotype of the vanishing Indian portrayed as someone whose fate is to "wither and die under the impact of the European civilization."[295] Later Cole understands that Luther is remote to the prevailing image. He is portrayed as an energetic character accompanied by Old Lady Blue Wood, with whom he leads discussions about literature and Native American issues. Both are, as Helstern points out, "simultaneously sources of wisdom and humor" and "frankly sexual and pointedly funny."[296] Luther subsequently leads Cole into knowledge through the means of intuition and dreams, remembrances of the past, and what is felt, rather than the objectively recognized. Owning to Luther's help, Cole becomes aware of the hidden order of the place, and he starts to realize his identity.

Luther and Onatima are characters that Owens modelled after his family members. Owens uses the name of his own grandfather, Luther, for the fictional Cole's grand-uncle. Onatima is modelled after what Owens remembered and imagined about his grandmother, although the name itself is invented. Other characters, although not bound to Mississippi, also resemble his family members. Owens uses his father's name, Hoey, as the name of Cole's father. Most importantly, he bases the character Attis on his brother Gene who returned from Vietnam with a severe trauma and disappeared temporarily from the family's reach (See *MM* 182).

Owens describes the forests in Mississippi and California in similar, sometimes even the same words—both are, for example, "veiled in fog"—and in both Cole is reluctant to enter them. In Mississippi, Cole has learnt to adapt to the place and the forest with the assistance of Uncle Luther. In *Bone Game*, Cole speaks of an estrangement from Mississippi, mentioning that he was "just a visitor down there" (*BG*, 47), although his family and the place are still very dear to him. When he rents a house located near the redwoods, he starts to notice their sinister nature and becomes aware of the wall they create near his house. He does not venture to the forest partly

[295] Brewton Berry, "The Myth of the Vanishing American," *Phylon* 21, no.1 (1960): 53, DOI: 10.2307/273734.
[296] Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 34.

because it is the district of Malin, his antagonist, but also because they remind him of Mississippi; he observes that the "shadow world [of Mississippi] was threatening to subsume the life he's constructed [in California] out of books" (*BG*, 93). In other words, the Mississippi forest is manifested through the Californian redwoods in order to awaken Cole from the lethargy he has fallen into and bring him back from his separation. When Cole enters the forest and saves his daughter's life, he once again becomes aware of his roots and identity.

In *The Sharpest Sight*, Owens depicts the Yazoo country as follows:

> Outside the cabin, the fog had slid down toward the river and hung in a thin line over the muddy Yazoo. Around the cabin a half acre had been cleared and was littered with dried cornstalks and melon and squash vines. On the back side of the coon shed a fat Plymouth Rock hen was scratching her way out through a hole in the wire front of a chicken pen (*SS*, 72).

The image of the place resembles Owens's description of the Yazoo country of his youth in his autobiographical writing. Similarly, Cole starts to recall the place from his childhood memories. He recalls the cultural background that it represented, a place where there is no need to define oneself, and once again accepts it. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick points out that in *The Sharpest Sight* Owens "'writes back' to the center,"[297] and the return to the place that represents his cultural background eventually enables the protagonist "to come to terms with loss, gain remembrance, and recover identity."[298]

The Yazoo country is also portrayed from the perspective of characters not belonging to the place. Owens uses the perspective of two FBI agents coming to Mississippi in search for Cole who is avoiding draft. After three hours spent in the immediate vicinity of Uncle Luther's cabin, they get lost in the dark, damp wood. They cannot distinguish between what is solid and liquid in the place and they perceive it as full of danger—coming from the wild animals and the environment itself. Owens shows that Uncle Luther has been manipulating their journey through the environment to make it "an interesting experience" (*SS*, 114). They go through severe hardship, and at the moment when they are close to a breakdown, Luther appears with Cole to lead them

[297] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, "Taking Back the Bones: Louis Owens's 'Post'-Colonial Fiction," in *Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work*, ed. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 56.
[298] Kilpatrick, "Taking Back the Bones," 56.

into safety. Helstern points out that in this scene Owens changes the image of the Indian as a trustworthy guide to the wilderness.[299] Although Luther rescues the agents eventually, he "takes inordinate pleasure"[300] in their getting lost and they understand that Luther cannot be fully trusted. Similarly, they cannot trust their compass which confusedly shows only the needle spinning very slowly. One of the agents realizes, as Luther informs them casually that their guns will not work, that the old man has influence over their journey and the place. Thanks to that, and as he sees Attis's ghost in Luther's cabin, he says: "I don't intend to spend any more time here than I have to" (*SS*, 127). To compare, California is also portrayed as a place where supernatural events occur. In *The Sharpest Sight*, ghosts appear to Mundo to help him find Attis's murderer. Mundo, however, is a Spanish Catholic, and the ghosts that he is able to see—his grandfather and the Mondragon sisters—are Catholic ghosts. Owens portrays the two supernatural worlds, the Indian and the Catholic, as standing apart without one interfering into the other. Luther observes that he can see the ghost of Mundo's grandfather, but cannot communicate with him: "There's a world between us" (*SS*, 225). Mississippi, therefore, is not the only place where supernatural events occur—they are bound to California as well. It shows that any place can host supernatural forces in these novels, but in Mississippi they are always connected with the Indian. Luther demonstrates the displacement of the agents by addressing them "whitemen" (*SS*, 122). It reflects that the dominant presence in the place is held by the Native American and not by members of the white society. In Mississippi it is the marginal that is given space and control of events bound to that place.

The residents of Mississippi are able to watch over and influence the line of events in places other than Mississippi. Uncle Luther and Onatima are keeping an eye on Cole's life in California through dreams and visons. They are trying to influence the story in a desirable way when things are "going haywire" (*SS*, 215). In this sense Mississippi becomes a place of control where the characters either gain strength and knowledge, as Cole does in *The Sharpest Sight*, or become active in influencing other people's destinies, as is the case of Luther and Onatima. Pierotti argues that Luther, Onatima, and even Hoey, are characters who to control the story "draw their strength from their understanding of the land." He contrasts them with white characters whose attempts to control situations result in "provoking violence and destroying their own

[299] See Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 45.
[300] Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 45.

need for peace."[301] In both novels the Choctaw elders, including Hoey, represent characters who are tightly connected to place. Onatima demonstrates it at the end of *Bone Game* when Abby asks her to stay with them in New Mexico. Onatima replies:

> We have our own worlds, Granddaughter. We carried our people's bones a thousand days just to find a home. When so many were removed, we stayed behind. So how could we leave now? Who would talk to them out there at night if I never went home? And how would I find the path so far away? Who would tell them of their granddaughter in these strange, lightning-struck mountains? … Luther and I have our tasks back there … So the crux of the matter is that we have to go home (*BG*, 242–243).

Onatima refers to the ties that Luther and she have to the place. The Yazoo country is where their ancestors are buried and she points out the responsibilities that she has towards them. Furthermore, it shows that Onatima and Luther are the descendants of the Choctaws who did not leave during the removal of Choctaws east of the Mississippi river to its western bank which resulted in what came to be known as the Trail of Tears.[302] Some of the Choctaws refused to leave their ancestral lands and escaped to the backwoods of Mississippi.[303]

There is a sense of distance between California and Mississippi in the novels. California represents "the furthest point of the world" (*BG*, 20) and, thinking about his life there, Cole perceives Mississippi as "a world so different it was beyond imagining" (*BG*, 9). The contrast between the two places is also illustrated by the attitudes of other characters. Cole's friends and the members of his family refer to Santa Cruz as a place of violence: for example, Cole's cross-dressing Navajo colleague Alex Yazzie describes the region as dangerous (See *BG*, 131), Cole's daughter admits that she "is frightened here" (*BG*, 205), and Uncle Luther points out that "California is a lot of trouble" (*BG*, 85), even though Hoey says it "used to be awful nice place" (*BG*, 85). In contrast, the Yazoo country is where Uncle Luther can hide young Cole when he is being drafted, and it is referred to as home at the end of *The Sharpest Sight* (*SS*, 263). However, other characters label Mississippi derogatorily as "some place down south" (*SS*, 24), and even the "asshole of the world (*SS*, 120).

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[301] Pierotti, "Connected to the Land," 84.
[302] See Robert J. Conley, *A Cherokee Encyclopedia* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 184–85.
[303] See Carl Waldman, *Atlas of the North American Indian*, 2nd ed. (New York: Facts on File, 2000), 207.

In both novels, the characters that reside in California tend to be more violent. In *The Sharpest Sight* the most violent character is not Attis's murderer, Diana Nemi, a girl avenging her sister accidentally killed by Attis. It is Jessard Deal, a local barkeeper and ex-convict. Deal is a strong intelligent person who constantly endeavors to show his superiority over other characters. He is convinced that human beings "are all essentially and fundamentally evil," and although they are born innocent, they "must grow into [their] evil" (*SS*, 212) to fulfill their existence. "Most men … lead life of quiet respiration" (*SS*, 150), he claims as he smashes down his home with a sledgehammer, leaving only a pile of books. He desires power over others, and to demonstrate it he rapes Diana who orchestrated Attis's death. Deal believes Amarga is an evil place where people are in the process of becoming their evil selves (See *SS*, 212). His bar, the Tiptoe Inn, is the place where the climax of the novel takes place. It witnesses the fight between Deal, Diana's father, the local deputy Mundo, and Hoey, in which Diana's father dies. Hoey puts an end to the thread that Deal represents by shooting him dead, stating that "he would have killed everybody" (*SS*, 250). Helstern argues that Owens refers to the traditional tribal notion of justice served in a roundabout way. Diana is not directly punished for her crime and the murder of Attis is atoned by a death of a member of her family, in this case her father. Nevertheless, Hoey is compassionate towards Diana and does not seek to avenge his son's death. Instead, he conducts an impromptu sweat for her after she is raped. This change in the pattern of the revenge, according to Helstern, shows the complexity of the concepts of good and evil in Owens's novel.[304]

The violence of the place is represented also an old infirm farmer who does not want to give up his passion for hunting:

> He got himself one of those little airplanes they call an ultralight. He rigged up an attachment for his oxygen bottle. Now he goes flying over his ranch in that little thing with a two-twenty-two rifle, shooting at coyotes and squirrels and just about any goddamn thing that moves. You should see that scrawny old sonofabitch hanging up there in the sky with his gun and his oxygen bottle and tubes coming out of his nose. It's one of the goddamenest scariest things I ever saw. It looks like death (*SS*, 199–200).

[304] See Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 27–28.

In this context, LaLonde points out that in *The Sharpest Sight* Owens stresses the white society's interest in death, which eventually results in "devaluing of life."[305] He calls it a "romance with death" as the white characters in the novel focus rather on death and the past than on regeneration and the future.

In *Bone Game*, the murders committed at the university campus in Santa Cruz are finally discovered to be the work of two unrelated characters, not only Malin, but also Paul Kanter, a student in Cole's class. Kanter, an ex-soldier who was on active duty in Nicaragua, develops a fascination for literature. He favors Robert Frost's poem "Design," in which a moth is devoured by a spider, and he identifies with T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock. Kanter explains his fascination for the poem: "I mean it's like that Eliot poem, what if nobody understands you? I do not think that they will sing to me, he says, and he's right. They never do. They never, ever do" (*BG*, 23). Although Kanter is a brutish and undeniably unsympathetic character from the very beginning, the one who represents evil most prominently in the novel is Malin. He resorts to violence on two levels: through the series of murders at the university campus and through his misunderstanding of what it means to be Indian. Although he, a Caucasian, possesses a vast knowledge of Native American cultures and is fascinated by them, in his misapprehensions he is a similar character to Jessard Deal's from *The Sharpest Sight.* Unlike Deal, however, he is striving for redress and is convinced that the earth's suffering can be remedied. The remedy is sacrifice, as the agony of sacrifice is the "most valuable, most precious, most perfect" (*BG*, 237) emotion and one which, because of its purity compensates for the evil that is present on the earth. Thus for him, healing can be achieved only through violence. He claims: "If I had not sacrificed thirteen times, we all would have tumbled into the trenches of the molten sea, like Lemuria, the lost continent. It is our responsibility" (*BG*, 237). He accepts the responsibility for ensuring the continuation of the earth's existence, because he considers himself to be the one who is able to see through the designs on the earth and understand that "creation has always existed in a matrix of pain" (*BG*, 102). In his opinion, a Native American should understand it and therefore asks Abby for confirmation of his beliefs. She tells him, however, that his views are like "Black Elk and the Old Testament stirred together" (*BG*, 103). On the other hand, he is the one who

[305] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 75.

is able to deliver to students in Cole's class the book *Black Elk Speaks*[306] in a way they expect, giving them "the Black Elk they want and need … the tragic visionary of doom" (*BG*, 19). For Helstern Malin also embodies "the stereotype of the Ecological Indian"[307] who possesses a deep bond with nature. He is acquainted with the area of the university campus and the adjoining landscape in great detail, being "the Natty Bumppo of Santa Cruz" (*BG*, 206),[308] as Cole labels him. The ultimate point that Malin fails to understand in the novel is that healing is accomplished through regeneration and recreation and not through destruction. Helstern observes that "the most obvious environmental spokesmen in Owens's later novels are not Indians but wannabes."[309]

The conflict in *Bone Game* has a strong relation to the violent history of Santa Cruz. As Melanie R. Benson points out, the colonists established a mission in the local area where Padre Quintana, a tyrannical Spanish missionary, was murdered by the Indians. The murder was an act of brutality but it answered the violence performed by the forces of colonialism against the Indians.[310] The Indian murderer of the missionary is an Ohlone spiritual leader, Venancio Asisara, whose young Indian wife the missionary abuses. The spirit of Venancio awakens by the acts of violence committed by the two murderers so that, as Pierotti argues, the violence in the past attracts more violence in the present.[311] Venancio, the only Native Californian in the novel, as Helstern notices,[312] is the ultimate villain who wonders at the changes in the place and seeks revenge for the cruelty inflicted on the Ohlone. He haunts Cole' dreams and demands "his world back" (*BG*, 225). Cole is disturbed as a result and he thinks that even after moving a thousand miles "to hide away from people" (*BG*, 12) he cannot escape dreams and the Indian part of himself. At the end of the novel Venancio forces Abby to gamble with him for her life and is driven away by Cole pronouncing his full name. Onatima later praises Cole for having the courage to address him, while Cole is

[306] *Black Elk Speaks* is a complex narration of the life story and world views of Nicolas Black Elk, of the Lakota. It was recorded by John G. Neihardt, who edited it and organized it for publication. In became popular among non-Indians, who took it as a record of a vanishing culture and as account of pan-Indian spiritual and world views. See Hertha D. Sweet Wong, "Native American Life Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, 135–36.

[307] Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 46.

[308] Natty Bumppo is the protagonist of James Fenimore Cooper's novels that are part of The Leatherstocking Tales series. He is a romantic white man who lives in accord with nature, a great scout and a hunter. Malin adopts the same sentiment and in Cole's words wants to be a "white Indian" (*BG*, 206).

[309] Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 44.

[310] See Melanie R. Benson, *Disturbing Calculations: The Economics of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912—2002* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008), 174.

[311] See Pierotti, "Connected to the Land," 84.

[312] See Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 45.

convinced that it is what the spirit desired all the time, as if he demanded the acknowledgement that the Spanish colonizers "eran muy crueles" (*BG*, 241)—were very cruel—since it took only one generation of the Ohlone to be wiped out from their homeland. Helstern claims that it shows that "words may have more power than violence itself."[313] They save Abby from the gambler, but on the other hand they do not banish the spirit from the place or appease him. Venancio stays bound to the place, his "shadow falls across the town and bay, undulating with the slow waves" (*BG*, 243), his presence reflecting the unresolved past.

Melanie Benson claims that "Mississippi and California are compatible sites of colonial trauma … of westward removal and colonial expansion" and that "*both* the South and Santa Cruz are microcosms for American imperial violence against Indians."[314] The Indians of Mississippi were "[p]ushed decisively and persistently to the margins of the South's biracial economy,"[315] made unseen and ignored. Cole's father comments on the status of Indians in Mississippi by saying that being an Indian was "almost as bad as being a nigger" (*SS*, 58). In Benson's view, in *Bone Game* the trauma is expressed through Cole, who "becomes a storehouse for this long trajectory of imperial cruelty and personal tragedy across centuries and regions."[316]

The colonial trauma, which the protagonist experiences, makes him uncertain about the location of home and about his roots and his cultural background. Here Owens brings up another issue that needs to be dealt with—the question of how to define a Native American and how to cope with the stereotypical notions that come with it. Cole's father observes that "one drop of colored blood makes a white person a nigger. But … it takes a hell of a lot of Indian blood to make somebody a real Indian" (*SS*, 58). Still he has no problems with self-determination and declares that he has a right to choose his identity. Cole is not so certain about it. "I'm not an Indian, I'm mostly white" (*SS*, 21), he thinks at the beginning of *The Sharpest Sight* and in inner monologues he reassures himself of being the "meanest motherfucker in the valley," a mixedblood who stereotypically "can't be trusted, is a killer, a betrayer, a breed" (*SS*, 10–11). His view of himself is the reflection of the mainstream image of mixedblood in popular culture and the fact that California does not provide him with sufficient cultural background that would make him aware of his true identity. He finds

[313] See Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 29.
[314] Benson, *Disturbing Calculations*, 174.
[315] Benson, *Disturbing Calculations*, 165.
[316] Benson, *Disturbing Calculations*, 175.

such a background in Mississippi, a home that is, in LaLonde's words, "fundamental to identity,"[317] and, as a consequence, he starts to identify with his Indian roots.

In *Bone Game*, Cole questions his identity once more. In this novel, Cole is aware of the collision between the dominant culture's expectation of him as a Native American and the actual image of Native Americans. He claims that he teaches "amidst madness" (*BG*, 17) at the university and describes his students as Indian wannabes who imagine themselves being the "reincarnations of Crazy Horse and descendants of Indian princesses" (*BG*, 21). Helstern points out that through his protagonist Owens "emphasizes the isolation of minorities in academia,"[318] but Cole's isolation from the mainstream culture reaches beyond the university and has a great effect on his personal existence.

In California, when Cole starts looking for a solution to his problem with self-determination, he begins to consider the concept of home. LaLonde points out that the "homing in" motif plays an important role in both novels, as home "is the last word in *The Sharpest Sight* as Hoey and his teenage son Cole drive east from California to Mississippi to the waiting Luther Cole and Onatima; [and] it is what an older Cole McCurtain needs to see and understand twenty years later in *Bone Game* (1994)."[319]

However, there is a difference between how home is represented in *Bone Game* and *The Sharpest Sight*. In *The Sharpest Sight*, home is clearly associated with the Yazoo country and it is physically present in that place. In *Bone Game*, the concept of home develops, resulting in the fact that Mississippi becomes rather an ideal of home than its actual location. Cole likes to think about the place and the cultural significance it carries for him, as well as about those who reside there, the "people who loved trees and shadows and went afoot, at home in a world they had found and claimed with stories and bones of ancestors" (*BG*, 9). He admits:

> I used to pretend I might go back to live in Mississippi where my father and grandmother and great uncle are. I'd go around saying the names myself. Yazoo, Bogue Chitto, Bogue Homa, Red Water, Standing Pine, Conehatta, Pearl River—all those wonderful names. But I was just a visitor down there (*BG*, 47).

[317] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 7.
[318] Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 33.
[319] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 6.

Mississippi still operates as the cultural background, but it loses the attribute of home for the protagonist, who has undergone development since *The Sharpest Sight*. At the end of *Bone Game,* Cole returns to New Mexico to live in his house in the mountains with his daughter and her partner, the trickster character Alex Jazzie. Helstern claims that leaving California is the only possibility how to avoid the "recurrent violence of the place."[320] Cole understands his identity and realizes that his place as a mixedblood is not bound to a specific location, but it is at the "frontier," an idea that Owens develops in his non-fiction (See *MM,* 42–47). Owens describes the frontier with reference to Mary Louise Pratt's term "contact zone," which refers to "the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict."[321] It is the result of an encounter of heterogeneous cultures that may result in unequal relationships between members of these cultures. Owens, however, considers the mixedblood's position at the frontier to be positive. In *Mixedblood Messages* it is a "shimmering, always changing zone of multifaceted contact within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated, all referents put into question" (*MM,* 26), in *Bone Game* a place that prefers "infinitions to definitions" (*BG,* 46). The frontier is a dynamic place that is constantly examined and consequently continually changing. The mixedblood who occupies this place cannot be defined, since his or her "irrefutable presence" blocks the attempts of the dominant society to appropriate them and put them into a category.[322] For Owens, it is a place of resistance where the mixedblood dances "trickster-fashion through all signs, fracturing the self-reflexive mirror of the dominant center, deconstructing rigid borders, slipping between the seams, embodying contradictions, and contradancing against every boundary" (*MM,* 41). This, Owens argues, is the development of the concept of frontier determined by Frederick Jackson Turner. The frontier is moving again, although instead of receding from East to West it is reimagined as an unstable, multidirectional zone of the mixedblood and the Indian that disproves cultural impositions (See *MM,* 41).

As such, it is not related to any physical location, as all the other places in the novel are, but it becomes an abstract space that is given by the social interactions and

[320] Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 15.
[321] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 8.
[322] See Owens, *I Hear the Train,* 101.

human relationships. In a way Cole experiences a sense of place without ties to a specific area. As this is the place where the mixedblood has the dominant position, it is impossible for Cole to move back to Mississippi once he finds his identity between cultures. Still the idea of returning home is "exciting" (*BG*, 205) and he leaves California for New Mexico, where he used to live with his daughter and his wife. New Mexico, subsequently, becomes the setting of Owens's following novel, *Nightland*.

Chapter 5: *Nightland*

Nightland was first published in 1996 in Dutton Signet in New York, and it is the only novel that Louis Owens published outside the University of Oklahoma Press. After its publication, Owens returned gladly to the UOP, which had published all his previous work, because of the heavy editing process of the commercial press and its focus on sales. He recalls his experience with the press as "singularly the most unpleasant experience I have had as a writer."[323] He explains that the people from the publishing house knew Indians from westerns and romance novels, as dead or self-destructive, and they sought writings with "ridiculous, comically self-destructive Indians, mystical shaman-warriors, breathless and precious prose about imploding Indian communities and idiotic love affairs."[324] In other words, they sought works that comply with the Euromerican invention of the "Indian" that replaced the indigenous inhabitant of the Americas.[325] Eventually, *Nightland* was a successful novel and received the American Book Award in 1997.[326] It does not, however, incorporate schematic characters, and although Owens draws from the genre Western in the novel, it does not follow the typical plot of the genre. Linda Lizut Helstern calls *Nightland* an "updated ranch western,"[327] because Owens re-writes the typical scenario of the genre and the role that the Indian characters acquire within the genre. In this chapter, I analyze the notion and function of place in *Nightland* and its relation to the genre Western, which plotline it revisits. Throughout the chapter, I will try to show that the notion of place and the importance of acquiring a sense of place is central to the novel and crucial for the protagonist's survival, and that it plays a significant role in developing the story.

In *Nightland*, Owens keeps distance from clichéd characters and instead creates characters that are complex and avoid imposed fixed roles. Being set in New Mexico in the early 90s, the novel follows a story of two friends who are as close as brothers, Will Striker and Billy Keene, both mixedblooded Cherokees, and nearly a million dollars of stolen drug money. The two characters are hunting in the Cibola National Park when they see a man falling from the sky and being impaled on a top of a tree. As they come

[323] Ray B. Browne, *Murder on the Reservation: American Indian Crime Fiction: Aims and Achievements* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press, 2004), 19.
[324] Browne, *Murder on the Reservation*, 19–20.
[325] See Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 70.
[326] See Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 16.
[327] Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 16.

to the place of the accident, they find a suitcase full of money. They decide to take possession of it, despite Will's initial reluctance. Will is aware of the danger and violence that the decision may bring upon them. Yet the characters see it as a chance to acquire resources that would enable them to rebuild their neighboring ranches. These have been suffering due to long years of drought and generated little income. Billy and Will gradually adopt different attitudes towards the usage of the money: Billy starts spending the money immediately, while Will, the protagonist of the novel, hides them, not wanting to attract attention. Nevertheless, the owners of the money follow the tracks that lead to the two friends and in a short time they have to face the Pueblo drug lord Paco Ortega and the traps of an Apache woman, Odessa Whitehawk, the sexy and manipulative villainess whose aim is to run away with the money to South America and establish a new existence.

Apart from being the only novel that Owens published with a commercial press, *Nightland* is also unique within the context of Owens's literary work in its focus on Cherokee mythology. He explains the reasons that lead him to explore his Cherokee roots and background in *Mixedblood Messages*:

> In 1996 I published a fourth novel, *Nightland*, a work written for my mother, who had died five years before, and about whom I have never been able to write. … I realized then with some guilt that I had written about the Choctaw side of my inheritance, my father's side, but not about my mother's Cherokee roots. By traditional values, of course, I would be identified matrilineally as Cherokee although I had not gown up among any Cherokee people other than my own family. Thus I wrote *Nightland*, a novel set in New Mexico but woven out of the specific fabric of Cherokee mythology and history.[328]

Choosing to write from the perspective of his Cherokee inheritance enables Owens to contrast notions that are different in the Cherokee and Euromerican worldview. He creates a stark contrast between the notion of the West in the mainstream Euromerican understanding and the idea of the West in the Cherokee mythology, as the place called Nightland.[329] He creates a place which is complex in meanings and enables him to alter the plotline of the Western and the role of its characters. Responding to a reviewing critic who complained that Owens threw some low blows to the white man who reads

[328] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 182–83.
[329] Owens, *I Hear the Train*, 153.

the novel and looks for action and thrills instead of morality, Owens wrote that "being more than half "white man" myself, I must be throwing some low blows to the part of me who invaded "my" country. One should begin to suspect the complexity at work here."[330]

Helstern points at the complexity of Owens's work as well. Apart from considering his mixedblooded background, she claims that it is important to think of Owens as of a New West writer, since he had experience with living not only in New Mexico, but also in Arizona, Washington and California and his writing focuses in turn on all these places.[331] Helstern points out that his writing explores issues closely associated with the New West:

> His creative oeuvre explores in depth three issues at the heart of New West writing: the relationship between peoples of different racial and ethnic origins in the context of specific western places; the need for a truly respected relationship between human being and the natural world; and a reconsideration of male and female gender roles in the very region where traditional American notions of masculinity were defined.[332]

These themes can be found in *Nightland* and they are given prominence. Owens's characters are not restricted to Indian and white. He avoids the dichotomy by creating characters that are both. At the same time, he revisits the gender roles that women were ascribed in the traditional Western scenario. He is also concerned with the relationship of the characters to the land and how that relationship informs their ability to survive in a place. In an interview with Ray B. Browne, Owens notes that his aim was to write novels that his brothers and sisters would like to read and that would keep intellectual and technical complexities as well. In the end, his novels resulted in a combination of intellectual writing with allusions to other literary works, page-turning action plots based on a tribal mythology, or as he said, "books that have layers."[333]

Owens spent several years living in the state of New Mexico and its landscape plays a vital role in the novel. He first settled there with his family in 1984 when he was offered to teach literature and creative writing at the University of New Mexico.[334]

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[330] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 73.
[331] See Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 6. Helstern does not list Mississippi here—a place where Owens spent his early childhood and where he partly set his two novels, *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game*.
[332] Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 7.
[333] Browne, *Murder on the Reservation*, 226.
[334] See Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 12.

Between 1989 and 1994 he moved to California to teach at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He returned to New Mexico again, settling east of Albuquerque in the Manzano Mountains.[335]

The Ranches

The principal setting of the novel is created by two adjoining ranches belonging to Billy Keane and Will Striker. They are located near the city of Magdalena. The ranches extend on landscape that is shown as barren, suffering heavily from a long period of drought. The heavy storm clouds that appear on the sky do not bring any relief and the earth continues to degrade, being "as blistered and dry when the storms passed as it had been before they came."[336] The land's economic value has decreased with its degradation as well: "The land that had been worth three dollars an acre in the thirties was virtually worthless sixty years later—too far from civilization to be developed, too dried-up and dead for ranching and farming. And it wasn't just the water. It was as if the force had gone out of the earth" (*NL*, 30). Arturo Cruz, the ghost of the man whom Billy and Will saw falling from the sky, observes that the place "doesn't look quite bad enough to be hell, [but] it sure isn't heaven" (*NL*, 63). Owens, however, indicates that the drought is a condition that developed in recent decades and that in the past the land used to be fertile. Will Striker, the protagonist, notices that the land lost some of its quality. He sees that the place cannot sustain him or his friend Billy any longer. Nor can the condition of the land sustain the local people who depend on the land economically and now lack the resources to sustain themselves. As a result of the degradation of the place, the local people are changing, growing bitter and tight-mouthed (See *NL*, 30).

The drug money that Will and Billy find brings new opportunities to them and to the place itself. They intend to develop it with the newly acquired resources. Billy feels that the suitcase with the drug money changed his perspective, remarking that "[p]roportion and dimension had changed; relations had changed" (*NL*, 69). He believes that this new perspective will allow him to rebuild his ranch and re-establish his life in the place.

It is crucial to note that the area where the novel is set is not the ancestral home of the two characters. Their families have been living in the area for a relatively short

[335] See Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 15.

[336] Louis Owens, *Nightland* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 46. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *NL*.

time interval—their parents purchased the land in the 1930s and settled there after leaving Oklahoma. Despite the fact that it is not his ancestral land, Will develops a strong connection with the place. Owens frequently associates this character with the landscape. Jace, Will's wife who has fled to Albuquerque to pursue her career and lead a better life, observes:

> From the beginning she'd felt that the man she married was but the frontispiece to something else, that behind the gentle, serious man were landscapes she couldn't conceive of, canyons to which there were no maps. She has always thought of that region as Indian in some vague and perhaps romantic way, a place requiring a map she would never have (*NL*, 128).

Jace describes his character with the words that are used to describe physical features of the earth: landscapes, canyons, and region. By that she links him with the place and identifies him as a part of it. At the same, she calls a part of his character an "Indian region" to which she does not have a map, as she is not Indian herself. It points to a possible lack of understanding of a part of his identity. Jace also does not come from the area and does not share his connection with the land. She is not aware of the layer of usage and significance that the landscape has for Will.

Another example of Will's connection with the land is the existence of a link between the character and the drought that affects the land. Jace observes that the drought has a strong impact on Will. He is disengaged in his actions and acts as if he was asleep all the time. Will is conscious of the impact of the drought on his character. He feels that he dries up with the land (See *NL*, 31), emotionally as well as physically, including a lack of desire to make love. Will Wright claims that in the genre Western, "the land is the hero's source of strength, both physical and moral; he is an independent and autonomous individual *because* he is part of the land."[337] The protagonist of *Nightland* is a part of the land, but the land is not his source of strength. On the contrary, the character reflects its aridity and a lack of energy, and as a result finds himself in a state of dormancy.

The land also stands as a parallel to the problems of identity identification of the two characters. Will and Billy are both mixedblooded and they are faced with a choice

[337] Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c1975), 189.

between the white and Indian word. Both characters, however, have different attitudes to developing their identity. Will is ready to listen to the old stories. He is interested in the Cherokee world view, in its land ethics, and develops a connection with the place. In contrast, Billy does not pay attention to the Cherokee stories and ignores others' encouragements to listen to them. His relationship with the place is weakened. Grampa Siquani,[338] possibly a several hundred years old Cherokee man who lives in a trailer on Billy's ranch, is humorously referring to the issues of identity. When Billy states that he is half-white, Siquani asks:

> Which half you think it is? … If you was lucky, the bottom half would be Indian, because us Indians is the best lovers. … If you was unlucky, it'd be the top half, because then you'd be always thinking about how Indians got everything stolen. If you was white on top and Indian on bottom, your top half could steal everybody's money and your bottom half could steal their women (*NL*, 43).

When Billy replies that the division is "right down the middle, top to bottom," Siquani replies: "That's a shame, Grandson, because that way a man's just fighting with himself all the time" (*NL*, 43). Billy's confusion about his identity corresponds with his relationship to the land. He is disconnected from it, and both the disconnection and confusion about his identity cause his displacement. Later in the novel Billy states that identity is a matter of choice for him. He clarifies that he has never wanted to be like his Indian parents and that he has decided to be white (See *NL*, 111). That, however, changes when he meets the Apache villainess Odessa Whitehawk and falls in love. Thanks to Odessa he becomes ready to embrace the Indian part of himself and settle down with her.

Of the two characters only Will is perceptive towards the place. His sensitivity towards the land makes him realize that there is something wrong with it. He feels fire in the earth when he takes it in his hand (See *NL*, 111). To understand the problem, Owens gives explanation through Grampa Siquani. When Siquani moved to the area from Oklahoma with Billy's parents, he found out that the earth was full of death (See

[338] Linda Helstern, referring to a personal interview with Owens, points out that the name Siquani "echoes the name of the contemporary Cherokee storyteller Willie Siquani" whose stories were published in *Friends of the Thunder: Folktales of the Oklahoma Cherokee* (1964) by Jack and Anna Kilpatrick, with his name spelled Siquanid'. See Linda Lizut Helstern, "Re-Storying the West: Race, Gender, and Genre in *Nightland*," in *Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work*, ed. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 121.

NL, 35). He tells a story of bones buried by the spring that provides water for Will's and Billy's ranches. The people buried in the land stopped the water from flowing, drawing it so deeply that his Cherokee magic was unable to reach it, and by that caused the drought that spread in the area. Nevertheless, Siquani also mentions that the dead may relent and "let go" of the water (*NL*, 36) so that the land may be healed.

Siquani is not the only character who refers to the story of the dead. It is referred to by Mouse Mélendez, a descendant of the Spanish who were given the land by the King of Spain in the 18th century. He offers a more in-depth account of the past event. The land was originally home to an Apache tribe. When the Spanish gained rights to the land, the Apache people refused to leave and stop hunting in the area. As a result, the Spanish, including Mouse's direct ancestor, massacred an Apache group that consisted of whole families and buried them by the spring. Prior to this incident the land was fertile and abundant in water. It was possible to "dig a hole anywhere and find good water" (*NL*, 90) and the land was full of cattle, with grass "up to a man's waist" (*NL*, 90). After the massacre the water started to disappear and the land degraded. Mouse's grandfather used to hear screams of the killed Apaches and wanted to dispose of the land, but there was nobody who would want to buy it. The local inhabitants were familiar with the story of the killed Indians and feared a curse when they saw the land degrade. When Will and Billy's fathers appeared, "two ignorant Injuns from Oklahoma" (*NL*, 90), they were not familiar with the story and bought the land to settle there. When Mouse finishes the story, he concludes that "[t]his was all Indian land." Realizing, however, that similar land dispossession processes occurred in the whole country, he adds "[o]f course the whole fuckin' country was Indian land once, wasn't it" (*NL*, 89)?

By referring to the massacre of the Apaches, Owens points to the fact that the violence and injustice brought upon the ingenious inhabitants have become bound to the place and have changed its quality. The place acquired a new meaning and it became associated with the story that reflects the event. Ryden argues that stories "are inextricably linked with landscapes, overlying them snugly, bound to them and coloring them like paint on a barn wall."[339] Stories in this novel have the power to contribute to the meaning of the place. It is, however, the violent event itself that is the cause of the physical changes in the landscape and that lead to degradation of the human and non-human life in the area.

[339] Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 56.

Apart from Will, Billy, and Grampa Siquani, Owens introduces two other Native American characters, Odessa Whitehawk and Paco Ortega. Both characters are strongly negative. Odessa is a character who uses manipulation and cold-blood violence to secure her own goals, while Paco Ortega, her ex-lover, is the boss of a drug selling gang of which Odessa is a member. Independently through dialogues with other characters, they refer to an anger that built up in them as the result of a confrontation with the white Euromerican society and its treatment of American Indians. Helstern observes that these characters represent American Indians' anger and greed as the legacy of the colonial processes of America.[340]

Odessa shows her perspective in a conversation with Billy. She refers to the frequent allocations of uranium mines to Indian country and the lethal damage that it causes to the place and its inhabitants: "It's like Indians had their own Hiroshima right at home, except that it's taking more time" (*NL*, 118). These places are highly industrialized zones that cause great damage to the environment due to the exploitation of water and mineral resources. People living in the vicinity of these areas, or "sacrifice zones,"[341] are in constant exposure to pollution and contamination. Odessa likens the poisonous effects of land exploitation with its impact on the local Indians to the effects of cultural disintegration. She considers herself to be the poisonous outcome of these processes. She says to Billy: "Do you know what they call elements released by the breakdown of radon? They're called radon daughters. Maybe the breakdown of cultures releases the same kind of poison. Maybe I'm a radon daughter, Billy. Perhaps it took five hundred years to create me" (*NL*, 118). When she was young, however, her attitude was not so radical. Her aim was receive education within the white educational system which would enable her to fight back the dominant society. She graduated as a Doctor of philosophy from U. C. Berkley where she studied American Indian religion and law. After that she realized that what she studied was a Ph.D. in genocide and it made her change her opinion. She claims that she "was stupid. Now … I'm going to have the American dream" (*NL*, 79). In order to change her role from the oppressed to the dominant, she develops a masterplan how to acquire wealth and power. She plans to rob Paco Ortega of the money from the suitcase and fly to South America. She perceives South America as a place which would enable her to live as a rich Yankee woman among Native peoples. In this place her position would be reversed to what it is in the

[340] See Helstern, "Re-Storying the West," 120.
[341] See Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, 66.

U. S. A. She would become a rich and independent woman and she would finally know who she is (See *NL*, 210). Thanks to the drug money she would assume an identity of a member of a dominant society. According to Helstern, Odessa is "the ultimate genre Western savage."[342]

Paco Ortega's place in society is similar to Odessa's. Unlike Odessa, he does not plan to escape to a different country where he could achieve a different social status and claim a different identity. Instead, he comes up with a plan how to undermine the dominant society's position. He builds up a drug business and sells drugs to white people, while his Indian employees have to stay clear of the drugs. He sees irony in the fact that the origin of the drugs that he sells can be traced to the plants that the Spanish conquerors stole from the Incas (See *NL* 143). Arturo Cruz, the man who fell from the sky, was one of Ortega's employees. Talking to Siquani as a ghost after his death, Arturo recalls how Ortega urged them to learn how to use the white man's weapon—money—against him. Arturo now understands that it is "part of [the dominant society's] plan to make us kills each other" (*NL*, 93) and condemns Ortega's plan.

As Ortega and Odessa begin their search for the drug money, the ranches start to attract more violence. Ortega's men track Will and attack him when he is pondering the damages of the drought near the dry spring. Will kills them in self-defense and buries them in the ground, linking more violence to the landscape. He is wondering at their commitment to their cause and at "whatever it was that could make a man that desperate" (*NL*, 58). When he reaches his home, he finds out that the place has been invaded and thoroughly searched, finding among the scattered books and clothes his seriously wounded dog. Billy's ranch, on the other hand, is threatened by Odessa who slowly works to gain Billy's favor and trust and makes him fall in love with her. Her influence on the place is harder to discern, as her motives are concealed.

Billy's trailer home becomes the site of the final confrontation of Billy with Ortega and his subordinate Duane Scales. As the gangsters are about to shoot Billy who refuses to disclose where the money is, Odessa suddenly appears and kills the gangsters. At this moment Odessa reveals her true motivation. She admits that it was her who pushed Arturo from the plane with a suitcase full of money and caused his violent death. She demands the money for herself. Billy understands that Odessa's next stop is Will's farm and refuses to cooperate to protect him. In reaction to that she kills him.

[342] Helstern, "Re-Storying the West," 126–27.

She drives to Will's farm where she pretends to be the witness of the killing and not the killer. During a stormy night that follows, she seduces Will to learn about the location of the money. Will, however, realizes that it is her who killed Billy and that she is going to kill him as well. When she admits it, she explains that one of the causes that drove her actions is Billy and Will's presence in the place. Originally, it was the land of her ancestors:

> You deserve everything that's happening to you, you know. This land was the home of my ancestors. They never pretended to own it, but their bones are in the earth you call yours. You and Billy aren't supposed to be here. You're not better that the whites. You let them push you off your own land in the east and march you into the homes of other Indian people in that so-called Territory, and you became just like them. You let them fuck your women and create half-breeds like you. Westering, it's called by white historians. That's what your families did. You came here and became part of the whole pattern. You live on top of my people's bones now (*NL*, 209).

The place has different identity to Odessa and to Will and Billy. For the two friends the place represents home after their families left Oklahoma. Odessa, in contrast, claims the place as the ancestral land of her Apache tribe and she declares that Will and Billy are not entitled to inhabit the place. She accuses Will of unentitled entering the land and of adopting the ways of the white society that dilute his cultural tradition. Odessa's attitude towards the land, however, does not lead to the recovery of the land and to redemption of the violence that is imbued in the place. On the contrary, she adds to the land another story of violence that comes to be bound to it. Her attitude towards the land is evasive and not constructive, as she plans to escape to South America. This relation to land, however, is not supported in the novel. Will kills her in self-defense while he is himself seriously wounded. This scene draws attention to the historical complexity of similar places in America that were affected by violent removal of the original inhabitants. At the same time it condemns approaches to place that are not constructive and lead to destruction.

Survival in the novel is bound to the characters' ability to live meaningfully in the place. It presupposes the character's rootedness within their cultural tradition and adopting corresponding land ethics. Although Will and Billy live in a place that has identical natural conditions, they endow it with different meanings. Will lives in an old

adobe house which his father built and where he used to live with his wife and children before everybody but him left. There are still some cattle running wild on his ranch and he continues to keep a small garden of corn, just "enough so the earth wouldn't forget" (*NL*, 102). Corn is associated with renewal in Cherokee mythology, as Selu, the Corn Woman, grows and dies each year with the corn harvest. Marilou Awiakta notes that corn has been "formally recognized as a teacher of wisdom" by Native American people for thousands of years. Its spirit is "inseparable from the grain," and "[t]hrough corn's natural way of growing and being, the spirit sings of strength, respect, balance, harmony. Of adaptability, cooperation, unity in diversity. Songs of survival."[343] By the end of the novel, the corn in Will's garden is ripe, having "[s]even of the biggest ears you've ever seen" (*NL*, 215). Siquani grins widely when he sees that Will acts in accordance with the Cherokee tradition and that by planting corn on his garden he understands the importance of ensuring continuance.

The place where Will lives has not lost its purpose as a farm. Billy's ranch, and the land on which it stretches, however, does not serve its function. The family house that his father built burned when Billy was young and with it all that tied him to the family and to the place. He has given up farming and lives in a trailer, which, standing above the ground, once more points to Billy's disconnection from the land. The women that he meets in the city and brings to his barren place leave shortly after they get bored by the empty land. The devastation of their family house as well as the degradation of the land due to drought changed his perception of the land. The impossibility to gain livelihood from cultivating the land has made him detached and as a consequence he spends a lot of time away. Moreover, Billy is not able to listen either to Siquani's traditional wisdom or his own intuition, which results, according to Siquani, in his taking the path to the darkening land (See *NL*, 108).

Siquani explains the importance of a continuous relationship with the land and how a change of this relationship affects people. He mentions: "Cherokee people like that boy don't remember where they come from or how to talk right. The stories tell them of those sacred places, but they only see those places in the stories. And they stop listening" (*NL*, 92). Siquani speaks of a need to listen to the land and to remember the stories that are bound to it. According to him, it is important to be able to see sacred places in the place where people live. If people refuse to do it, they struggle to keep a

[343] Awiakta, *Selu*, 9.

reciprocal relationship with the land and the stories of those places lose their importance. The stories explain the nature of the relationship to the land as well as the history of the people and their worldview. Helstern argues that the quest to attain an ethical relationship to landscape and its inhabitants is present in all of Owens's novels. She states that his novels "demonstrate a careful attention to and respect for the nonhuman world, leading to an ethics of reciprocity as the basis for all life on earth."[344] Billy, who feels more white than Indian, does not understand the character of the relationship to the landscape. Nor does he take Siquani's remarks into consideration. He does not ascribe the land a deeper meaning. In the end, while Will partakes in healing the land, Billy is involved in the scheme that leads to the end of his life.

Healing the land is achieved by releasing the curse that has been bound to the land since the massacre of the Apache Indians. The curse can be undone by negotiating with the dead buried in the land. Siquani and the ghost of Arturo Cruz watch the development of the story and help to prepare the grounds for recuperation of the land. Arturo observes that the surrounding "earth is broken" (*NL*, 91) and agrees with Siquani that there are more bad things approaching (See *NL*, 91). Arturo's part in the story is vital, since he is culturally related to the massacred Apaches. Arturo speaks about how his culture treated the deceased. He explains that "it was the job of the dead to bring rain. We would dress them up like rain clouds when we buried them and sent them on their journey with prayers" (*NL*, 63). Siquani collects Arturo's bodily remains and buries him by the spring where his Apache ancestors were massacred in a cotton sheet that reminds Arturo of a cloud (See *NL*, 174). When he is almost finished, a big raven lands on one of the nearby trees and Arturo's ghost disappears as the bird flies into the risen sun.

Siquani and Arturo both partake in negotiations with the dead. After Siquani buries Arturo, he performs a ceremony at the spring during which he sees a tiny deer. The deer leads him through a vision. He sees a long procession of people marching and hears the dance of the bones of the dead. When the vision is over, the sound of rustling of cornstalks comes to him from the west (See *NL*, 174–176). The appearance of the deer is not accidental, since it is of strong importance to the Cherokee. Awiakta notes that the Little Deer, Awi Usdi, is a "guide along the path to Selu,"[345] the Corn Mother, and to balance. In addition, he relates to the reciprocal relationship, embodying "the

[344] Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 47.
[345] Awiakta, *Selu*, 33.

sacred law of taking and giving back with respect."[346] The sound of rustling of cornstalks coming from the west points at a reconciliation with the dead who, according to the Cherokee world view, abide in the west. After Siquani's vision is over, storm clouds appear and the sky breaks with a clash of thunder (See *NL*, 177). It starts raining heavily, the pounding rain uncovering the bones of the massacred Apaches.

The development of the story has an impact on the place and affects its physical conditions. The place resembles a character that is a part of the story, similarly to *Wolfsong*. It is not static, but it evolves and contributes to the advancement of the story, influencing reciprocally other characters.

The end of the novel sees Will recover from his wound and find Jace, his wife, beside his hospital bed. Jace decides to return to the farm from the city to stay with him. After his recovery, Will searches the well on his farm where he hid his part of the drug money. Instead of the money he discovers that the well is full of water. The clear water "seemed to reach forever towards the center of the earth" (*NL*, 217) which points to reconnecting Will and the place with the cultural center. While inspecting the well, Will sees the Apache people buried in the land:

> As he stared into the water, the reflection of a man rose and hovered just below the rippling surface, the image wavering and breaking apart before merging once more. He knelt in the cold water, and in the deepening well a crowd of faces began to rush upward only to shatter and flutter downward and then rise again with the motion of leaves in a fall wind. (*NL*, 217)

The dead Apaches still populate the place. Although they had let go of the water and enabled the regeneration of the landscape, they had not disappeared from the place, as their lives and stories continue to be connected with it.

It becomes apparent that the initial plan of Will and Billy to re-establishing life and place with the drug money is not possible to put into effect. The money has an "evil power" (*NL*, 159) that instead of bringing a positive change brings destruction. At the beginning of the novel, Will says that "[i]f he went far enough down to free the waters trapped in the earth, he really could make the ranch bloom again. It was just a question of money and technology" (*NL*, 55). Similarly, Billy claims that all that it takes to restore the ranches is money (*NL*, 112). In spite of their conviction the money does not

[346] Awiakta, *Selu*, 32.

bring the two characters what they strived for. The place could not be restored by money, but by human activity and story. A change in the environment can occur only after the money disappears. Similarly, Owens shows that the way Ortega and Odessa fought back the dominant society does not lead to their survival.

The West Reworked

Chris LaLonde, in his analysis of *Nightland*, argues that Owens in the novel reformulates the trope of the frontier.[347] The novel is "a hybrid text, one that incorporates elements from both Cherokee and Euroamerican traditional tales."[348] Linda Helstern implies that by using *Nightland* as the title of the novel, Owens writes about the West from the Cherokee perspective. Nightland is the Cherokee term for the West. LaLonde notes that it is a place where the dead journey and where danger comes from.[349] He also finds allusions to a Cherokee origin story in the novel. In this story, the waterbeetle brought mud from the bottom of the ocean. The mud became the land and when Buzzard flew over it the places where his wings struck the ground became mountains. The frequent references to Buzzard together with the reformulation of the West lead LaLonde to a conclusion that the story of the novel "speaks to the nature of the earth, its inhabitants, and that which threatens both."[350] This part of my chapter about *Nightland* centers on the meaning of West in Cherokee mythology and in popular imagination.

The West in the Cherokee world view represents the place where the dead dwell. It is also the home of the Thunder. The Thunder is a positive deity and Helstern points out that it "has remained the guardian of the Cherokee people."[351] James Mooney notes that "[t]he great Thunders above the sky are kind and helpful" and that the Great Thunder and his two sons, the Thunder boys, live "far in the west above the sky vault."[352] Helstern compares the mythical story with the story of *Nightland* and sees Will and Billy as the embodiments of the Thunder boys. In the myth, the two boys find a hungry snake while hunting one day:

[347] See LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 146.
[348] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 175.
[349] See LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 146–147.
[350] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 147.
[351] Helstern, "Re-Storying the West," 122.
[352] James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (Nashville: Charles Elder, 1982), 257.

> They keep it well-fed until the day they find it coiled around the powerful Thunder, who reminds them that he always helps them. Indeed, even when the snake is dead, Thunder continues to help them, protecting them from its toxic fumes even as he reaffirms the importance of helping and protecting one another until the world ends. … the snake is Odessa White Hawk, an Apache woman who wants all of the drug profits stashed in the suitcase and knows how to use her sexuality to get what she wants.[353]

There are references to Thunder throughout the novel, the characters often hear its rumbling in a distance and they are aware of its presence. The storm that finally brings rain is abundant in thunder and it is over only when Odessa, the snake in Helstern's view, is dead. The allusions to the story of the Thunder boys point at the centrality and importance of cultural mythology for the understanding of the novel.

The West, however, has different connotations in popular imagination. As Frederick Jackson Turner stated in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History,"[354] the West in America stands for a place of a continuous progress and cultivation, a place that changed the European emigrant into the American, and where the Indian was a common danger that required a united action. His portrayal of the West takes part in creating the myth of the West that still prevails in popular culture and imagination, although the time period that inspired the formation of the myth was relatively short. As Wright notes in his study, "the entire period of western settlement lasted less than fifty years."[355]

There have been efforts to change perspectives based on Turner's formulations since they simplify and reduce this part of the American history. Susan Rhodes Neel notes that "Turner's frontier thesis seems to tell us more about the ambitions and anxieties of his own age than about the realities of Euro-American settlement or, more specifically, about that region we now call the West."[356] The frontier, she explains, "has always seemed more mythic that real, not a place but a process so sweeping in effect and occurring in so many places that it defies substantive or specific description."[357] The western landscape was not seen as beautiful and awe inspiring as it was later

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[353] Helstern, *Louis Owens*, 42.

[354] See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 15, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22994/22994-h/22994-h.htm.

[355] Wright, *Six Guns*, 5.

[356] Susan Rhodes Neel, "A Place of Extremes: Nature, History, and the American West," in *A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West,* ed. Clyde A. Milner II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 108.

[357] Neel, "A Place of Extremes," 108.

imagined or portrayed, but, in Wright's words, as "a useful resource and a stern antagonist … The pioneer primarily wanted wealth; he hoped to turn the West into a copy of the East—civilized, sophisticated, genteel. The ruggedness of the land was something to be overcome, its vastness something to be populated, its beauty something to be ignored."[358]

The idea of the West underwent a development that corresponds with its model only remotely. This is reflected by Thomas J. Lyon who claims that there exist two kinds of West in western literature. One of them is "immediately and deeply persuasive, the second more complex in its intentions and effects."[359] The first West that Lyon refers to is the image commonly found in popular culture. The second one, being more complex and diverse, has been gaining ground since 1970 "with the general expansion of environmental awareness in America and a beginning recognition of minority and alternative views."[360] Texts of ethnic writers helped the diverse West to surface within the western literature, so that there appeared a West that is different from that of the mainstream writers.[361] Owens's novel brings to light another kind of the West, one that differs from the mainstream "supernarrative"[362] that shapes the popular imagination.

The West that is part of the supernarrative is, according to Russel Martin, folkloric and formulaic, and "was nothing more than a wistful set of stories." He notes that the "mythic West was just an ideal to be dreamed about and to be emulated at weekend rodeos and in booze-bred confrontations in dank and depressing barrooms."[363] The West, in his words, captured "the imagination of the American public with depictions of a strange, primeval place where bravery and rough living were the rule, and where lives were lived on the keen edge of adventure."[364] It was a combination of romance and myth that became part of the national culture.[365] As Clyde A. Milner II

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[358] Wright, *Six Guns*, 188.

[359] Thomas L. Lyon, "The Conquistador, the Lone Ranger, and Beyond," in *The Literary West: An Anthology of Western American Literature*, ed. Thomas L. Lyon (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

[360] Lyon, "The Conquistador," 3.

[361] See Lyon, "The Conquistador," 12–13.

[362] The term is used in William Deverell, "Fighting Words: The Significance of the American West in the History of the United States," in *A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 32.

[363] Russel Martin, "Introduction," in *Writers of the Purple Sage: An Anthology of Recent Western Writing*, ed. Russel Martin and Marc Barash (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), xi.

[364] Martin, "Introduction," ix.

[365] See Thomas L. Lyon, "The Literary West," in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 708.

states, "[t]he American West is an idea that became a place."[366] Martin notes that independently of what the real nature of the West may be when it is stripped of the myth, writers use the landscape in their work as a backbone, carving the stories "directly out of the lodgepole pines and rocky arroyos, always meticulously anchoring their tales to terrain, defining their characters, in part, by describing the land that surrounds them."[367]

Nightland's plot draws from the stories of the mythic West to an extent that allows Owens to work with the formula. At the same time he uses the plotline and characters to reformulate it. Owens reshapes the literary portrayal of the West that centers on the stories of individualistic brave men as heroes of western stories. Such a hero, as R. W. B. Lewis states in *The American Adam*, is

> an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. … The world and history lay all before him.[368]

Owens shows that existence isolated from history, either personal, family, or local, does not exist. At the same time he shows the naivety of the premise. The landscape portrayed in *Nightland* is not a virgin land, but there has been a history of white-Indian relations which is imbued in the landscape. And just as the land is not a blank space, Owens's protagonist is not "a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history."[369] On the contrary, Will is a man with complicated cultural background, a person that does not belong to the area he lives in and whose possibilities are greatly limited as he is dependent on the decaying land that he owns. Furthermore, he becomes involved in a criminal plot from the first pages of the novel. Will understands that one's existence cannot be separated from history. He realizes that the past still resides in the landscape as a residue from the era of the Spanish conquistadores. He cannot be an individualist, because he has to take into consideration

[366] Clyde A. Milner II, "Introduction," in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.
[367] Martin, "Introduction," xvi.
[368] R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 5.
[369] Lewis, *The American Adam*, 1.

the past of his family and the tribe, such as the stories of his parents coming to the place and the Trail of Tears, as well as the past that is related to the place. Will has to be aware of all the relations. As LaLonde puts it, "losing an awareness of connections and the importance of reciprocity leads both to a loss of harmony in the world and to a loss of self."[370] The survival is dependent on "listening and seeing well, interpretation, sacrifice, and reciprocity."[371] Billy, in contrast, resembles a classic Western protagonist, the man-in-the-middle who is both involved and alienated from society, who stands between the old and the new.[372] Owens introduces other characteristics of the man-in-the-middle in the novel: unclarified identity, rootlessness, and displacement. But in this novel such a character cannot be the protagonist, as Billy's position in-between, together with his inability to escape this role, is another reason why he does not survive.

Furthermore, Leslie Fiedler notes that at the "heart of the Western is not the confrontation with the alien landscape … but the encounter with the Indian, that utter stranger for whom our New World is an Old Home." Fielder argues that "it is the presence of the Indian which defines the mythological West."[373] Although the West as a mythological place is defined by the Indian and a confrontation with him, it is the hero of the westerns stories who is given prominence. The Indian's place in this West is unstable and he is doomed to become extinct. As Owens writes, while the American hero is "saved from civilization, always moving across the border, always lighting out for the territory ahead of the rest," the Indians of the western stories "fade into the landscape with which they are associated, indices of the place called America with no role in "civilization" and no place across the border."[374] The role of the Indian, however prominent his presence for the genre Western may be, becomes simplified and reduced. The Indian "is valuable as a bit of color, as an invaluable link to the stolen landscape of America, as an index to the Euramerican's lost "mystical" self."[375] Owens refers to the films starring John Wayne as an example. He claims that the Indians' portrayal in these films is limited to moving targets whose role was "to ride wildly in circles on painted ponies while sturdy white men crouched behind covered wagons and shot the Indians

[370] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 166.
[371] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 169.
[372] See John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art Popular Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 248.
[373] Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), 21.
[374] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 104.
[375] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 70.

off their horses, one by one, to protect white women and children."[376] Although there was an occasional "passing nod to their humanity," the Indian was limited to genre role and he "was just a colorful residue of the past."[377] John G. Cawelti argues that the Indian in Westerns became a "narrative convenience,"[378] especially in dime novels. He states that the crucial element in the formula is the inevitable clash between the Indian and the white that produces violence.[379] Later there appeared two story formulas: the elegy of the Vanishing American and the tragedy of the white man who loves an Indian maiden. The hero of these stories may see Indians as living a fulfilling life in harmony with nature and through his involvement with the Indians the hero is regenerated.[380] In *Nightland,* Owens reshapes the formula in a way that the Indian and the mixedblood come into prominence.[381] The mixedblooded protagonist is engaged in survival, of his own person, the culture that he belongs to, and the place where he lives. The novel represents Owens's answer to the many depictions of the Indian as a doomed genre role.

The Frontier Myth and the West are often defined by bravery and rough living. They are contrasted to civilization. Richard Slotkin comments on this opposition, emphasizing an existence of a border. Crossing the border that surrounds civilization means engaging with a set of primitive conditions that enable purification of the social values of the city. Slotkin describes the role of the white hero and the hero's interaction with the environment:

> The moral landscape of the Frontier Myth is divided by significant borders, of which the wilderness/civilization, Indian/White border is the most basic. The American must cross the border into "Indian country" and experience "regression" to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of the "metropolis" can be purged and a new, purified social contact enacted. Although the Indian and the Wilderness are the settler's enemy, they also provide him with the new consciousness through which he will transform the world. The heroes of this myth-historical quest must therefore be "men (or women) who know Indians—characters whose experiences, sympathies, and even allegiances fall on both sides of the Frontier. Because the border between savagery and civilization runs through their moral center, the Indian wars are, for those heroes, a spiritual or psychological struggle which they win by learning to disciple or suppress

[376] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 100.
[377] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 100.
[378] Cawelti, *Adventure*, 223.
[379] Cawelti, *Adventure*, 238.
[380] Cawelti, *Adventure*, 258.
[381] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 146.

> the savage or "dark" side of their own human nature. Thus they are mediators of a double kind who can teach civilized men how to defeat savagery on its native grounds—the natural wilderness, and the wilderness of the human soul.[382]

Slotkin points at different issues that helped to shape the aspects of the genre Western and the Western hero. The hero's task is to cross the established borders and undergo "regression." It is a process of healing in which the hero is immersed in the natural country and communicates with its primitive inhabitants, only to make a return to civilization, where he enables a purification of social order that leads to a renewal. The purification is not related only to the outside world, but also to the hero's inner character.

Establishing a border between wilderness/civilization and between the Indian/white does not apply to *Nightland*. These concepts either overlap or not exist in Slotkin's understanding at all. The protagonist belongs to both worlds, Indian and white, and he represents both the farmer and the Indian. The struggle of the protagonist, and also of other characters, is more enacted in their understanding of their own identity and their ability to grasp it. The landscape, which is typically Western, does not help the protagonist or other characters to regress to a more primitive natural conditions. On the contrary, the characters have to struggle in order to bring the land to its former abundance and fertility. The land is not the virgin land of the Frontier myth that has to be civilized—it has already witnessed violence brought by civilization. The process is reversed in the novel, as Will, originally a farmer who wants to develop the land and earn his living from it, becomes engaged in its restoration to its former quality. At the end of the novel, when the past is appeased and water is brought back to the land, Will decides to quit rearing cattle, sell his heavy machinery, and take up trout fishing, so that the place can develop freely. Civilization does not triumph over wilderness in this novel, but the land is allowed to return to its former state before civilization affected it through violence. Furthermore, the "safety valve" that Slotkin mentions in his study, representing a place where the characters find hidden refuge or a general social renewal, is not realized in the novel. Instead the protagonist comprehends that he lives in a place that witnessed a conflict and now calls for resolution. When the conflict is solved, the protagonist acquires a personal balance in the same place. The land undergoes a process

[382] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 14.

of recovery along with the protagonist. Will's wife finally returns to the farm from the city and her city-based career, and Will is told of a child that their daughter is about to give birth to.

Helstern points out that Owens's intention is to rewrite the Western formula in *Nightland* and to reconfigure its typical setting and types of characters:

> Confidently appropriating the conventions of the genre Western and juxtaposing them against elements of Cherokee and Pueblo myth and ritual, Owens reconfigures the mythic West of cowboys, Indians, and frontier justice as postcontact Indian Country inhabited by a cultural mix of Anglos, mixedbloods, fullbloods, animals, and ghosts. Here Indians are not only cowboys, they are distinct individuals with differing perspectives on tribal affiliation and traditions.[383]

Owens places elements of Western and Cherokee culture side by side and populates the landscape with characters that do not act according to the Wester genre roles. *Nightland*, however, still keeps its genre, as it includes the basic aspects of the Frontier myth. Despite the fact that these elements are present in *Nightland*, Owens shows the prominence of the Cherokee in the novel. He highlights Indian perspective and practices in general and modifies the genre formula accordingly.

An example of highlighting the Cherokee point of view is apparent in how Owens works with the division of West and East. The characterization of the West and the East in the novel is reversed. In the Cherokee mythology the West represents the darkening land, where shadows walk, and it stands in opposition to the Sunland in the East. While East, as Awiakta notes, "is the heading for hope and determination and life,"[384] nothing good ever comes from the West (See *NL*, 41) and it is taken literally in the novel. Birds flying from the West are to be taken as a warning, the dead man falling from the sky appears from the Western direction, the cattle and other animals on the protagonist's farm do not move west where there is more rain, but stay in the dry land instead.

Will has an attitude toward the West that reflects his cultural affiliation. At the climax of the novel while it is raining intensively, Will senses the

[383] Helstern, "Re-Storying the West," 119–20.
[384] Awiakta, *Selu*, 16.

> dark motions of the sky that poured like a flood out of the west. He imagined lightning that walked with violence across the land. For the first time, he realized that the blades of lightning didn't stop at rock and tree but must reach down deep into the flesh of the earth and lay a pattern there (*NL*, 208).

From the West come "dark motions" as well as the Thunder who walks across the land. Its lightning blades reach deep into the land and inscribe a new pattern in the land. The pattern represents a new meaning that becomes bound to the place, one of survival and continuance.

The moment it starts raining, Owens comments on how the West affects the place. He writes that "[d]eath had come out of the west and was pounding the resilient earth, and with it the Thunder Boys had come, too, carrying new life. Out of the earth, ancient bones began to emerge, washed with harsh rain from the edges and sides of arroyos" (*NL*, 195). The West has an important function in restoring the place. It enables purification of the land and brings new life. The water is surging "in every crack and fissure, joining and swelling toward the plains and further valley … until the surface of the earth seemed to be a single flow [as the rain] beat down the grasses and carved free the roots of piñon and cedar" (*NL*, 195). As Arturo says, the dead bring the rain clouds, which appear from the West and the water sweeps the surface of the earth and cleanses it. The land is freed from the curse. The dead, however, have not departed. Will notices that they have grown into the land, "piñon and grass seeds falling to burrow and sprout in flesh, tree roots reaching and twinning through the eyes of the dead, stitching them to the ageless earth" (*NL*, 216). The healing process of the land could not eradicate the past. The dead, and the past, remain part of the place.

Chapter 6: *Dark River*

Dark River, published in 1999, is Louis Owens's last novel. He noted that the novel is "very similar" and "very different" at the same time from what he had published before. In the novel, he wanted to overturn many conventions and "disrupt stereotypes in comic and violent ways."[385] This novel is interwoven with more violent scenes than his previous works. The violence, however, has "almost a slapstick quality to it, disturbing and comic at the same time."[386] It springs from a considerable variety of characters located in the same place, but having different aims within the story. Owens contends that his strategy was to "[s]tick them all in one place and see what happens."[387] The novel is at the same time exploring the theme of survival in a strange place. John Gamber argues that Owens's novels are centered on characters who have to deal with new places, and "who, having moved, stay in their new locations."[388]

Dark River is a novel that employs strategies of the crime fiction genre. I have already discussed the use of a genre in Owens's previous novel *Nightland*, where he works with the mythical West and the role of the Indian in Western literature. In *Dark River*, the genre is more prominent. Owens follows the rules of the genre to break them purposefully towards the end of the novel. This is foreshadowed at the beginning of the novel when the protagonist observes that "[e]verything was unpredictable except the daily afternoon thunderstorm."[389] The complexity of the final scene evades predictable endings and stereotypical roles of characters typical of crime fiction. Chris LaLonde claims that *Dark River* "will not tolerate a simplistic reading of the end"[390] as it embodies the clash between the inevitability of the genre development, where the Indian character perishes, and the contradictory Native American perspective that stresses survival of the Indian characters. The discussion of the genre is needed for understanding the place of the protagonist in the novel, as well as the place of Indian characters in the genre.

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[385] Purdy and Owens, "Clear Waters," 12.
[386] Purdy and Owens, "Clear Waters," 13.
[387] Purdy and Owens, "Clear Waters," 13.
[388] John Gamber, "Tactical Mobility as Survivance: *Bone Game* and *Dark River* by Louis Owens," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 223.
[389] Louis Owens, *Dark River* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 6. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *DR*.
[390] LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, 182.

Dark River is set in the fictitious Apache Black Mountain reservation in Arizona, and it tells the story of the Choctaw-Irish protagonist Jacob Nashoba.[391] It begins with a violation of law. Jake, who works as a tribal gamekeeper, chances upon an illegally killed elk while patrolling the Apache tribal wilderness area. The discovery leaves him puzzled, because the "eight or ten thousand bucks" (*DR*, 11) worth of elk rack was left on the spot while the meat was taken away. The mystery leads him into tribal politics, and he ponders what to do, since "[n]o politics in the world were as complicated as tribal politics" (*DR*, 10). He soon learns that the kill was an act of demonstration committed by the tribal storyteller Shorty Luke and his friend Avrum Goldberg, a Jewish anthropologist who is living as a traditional Indian outside the tribe. Their motivation was to point out that the tribal chairman, Xavier Two-Bears, has been selling illegal permissions for hunting on the tribal grounds to rich whites and keeping the profits. When Two-Bears begins to suspect that Jake knows information that would lead his disclosure, he discharges him from his post and orders him to keep silent, stressing that from now on he is forbidden to patrol his district, including the canyon of the Dark River. Jake, however, disobeys the chairman's orders and goes into the canyon to look for Alison, a sixteen-year-old girl whom he regards as his granddaughter. While searching for Alison in the wilderness, Jake encounters a group of ex-soldiers and military enthusiasts who are taking part in paramilitary training. During the training they unintentionally kill the trickster figure Jessie, which crime is witnessed by Alison. The antagonist and the leader of the military training, Lee Jensen, launches a hunt for Jake and Alison as the witnesses of the crime. The following part of the novel is full of violent scenes in which Jake, a veteran from the Vietnam War, fights the members of the militia group. In the end he is shot and tumbles into a large hole in the ground. He dies at the end of the novel while Shorty Luke starts to tell Jake's story.

The most prominent place in the novel is the canyon of the Dark River where most of the violent action is set. Other important places apart from the canyon are Black Mountain, Jake's ancestral home in Mississippi, and the tribal casino and resort hotel. This chapter also incorporates a discussion of the genre, as it is crucial for examining

[391] Bernardin points out that the novel is set in a "precisely imagined, albeit fictionally renamed, place: The White Mountains in eastern Arizona, homelands of the Western Apache." It is a similar approach that Owens employed in *Wolfsong*. Susan Bernardin, "Moving in Place: *Dark River* and the "New" Indian Novel," in *Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work*, ed. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 105.

the place of the Indian in the novel. Through his work with the genre, Owens ensures that the Indian characters in the end survive.

Black Mountain

Black Mountain is located on the Apache reservation in Arizona. Jake describes this place as a "little outpost on the reservation, not a real town, just a plaster-and-plywood jumble of poorly insulated, wood-heated HUD houses bulldozed through the trees and inhabited mostly by his relatives through marriage" (*DR*, 20). Jake describes the scene as a small-scale settlement with a low level of development, a scene that is frequent in the portrayal of life on reservation. He also explains that his arrival to the community was the result of a marriage with a local Apache woman, Tali. He met his wife in a bar in Phoenix where she worked as a dancer and whom he defended in a bar fight. It happened about a month after he returned from his duty in Vietnam (See *DR*, 34).

Despite the description of the settlement as ordinary and mundane, Jake wonders at the beauty of the place for the thousandth time (See *DR*, 49) when he observes the surrounding country. He has been appreciating the beauty of the landscape since the first time that he saw it when he arrived there with Tali. The physical injuries that he suffered after the bar fight did not prevent him from perceiving the landscape and appreciating it. Looking "from beneath bloody bandages and a crushing pain that veiled his head, even then he couldn't believe the beauty of the land" (*DR*, 49–50). The character of the country surprised him, as he had not expected this country, and he soon learns to call it home. He reflects that prior to his arrival to Black Mountain he felt "a vague yearning to go home, but he couldn't locate that place on all the maps he bought and hoarded" (*DR*, 50). Jake was dislocated before coming to the community thanks to his insufficient links to the place of his origin, his mixedblood identity, and his traumatizing war experience. He found home in Black Mountain and the surrounding country, although it is not the land of his ancestry. John Gamber regards the ability to be attached to other places than one's home country as a positive feature within the Native American diaspora. He notes that the "abilities to adapt and to show the fluidity of communal, personal, tribal, and national boundaries resist static notions of Native peoples."[392] In this manner Jake resists the stasis that threatens Native American survival. His relationship with the community, however, is not without difficulties. Despite his calling the place home, he

[392] Gamber, "Tactical Mobility," 222.

is not accepted by the local community in a way that would be appropriate for such a place.

Jake contrasts Black Mountain to the place of his birth in Mississippi. In both environments, a river has a dominant presence—it is the Dark in Black Mountain and the Yazoo in Mississippi. Jake compares them for himself, as well as he compares the character that they impart to the places. Instead of the dark "impenetrable rivers" in Mississippi, in Black Mountain "the streams were fast and clear, hiding nothing." He continues with the description of Black Mountain: "The air was clean and cut through him like medicine, the delicate shadings of gray and green in the shorter forest rising to the green-black of the lodgepole and big ponderosa pine forests higher up" (*DR*, 50). The openness of the Black Mountain landscape gives him the impression that it can be easily grasped and that it does not conceal anything. Such idea is appealing to him. Bernardin, however, points out that Jake's persuasion about the openness of the country is an illusion and a "cold comfort of inaction,"[393] because he is not able to interpret the landscape correctly. This is supported by Owens's comment that Jake fails to understand the significance of the dark forests in the mountains above Albuquerque when he is passing through them (See *DR*, 49). He points to the fact that the protagonist lacks the ability to distinguish significant places and is not easily able to discern that there is more to them than their physical representation.

Similarly to Black Mountain and the forest above Arizona, Jake does not understand a desert environment when he encounters it. He considers it to be charming, although he admits its deadly character:

> Dessert had appealed to him as the furthest thing he could find from where he had been. And the smell of desert air just before dawn had felt like the finest dream he'd ever had. But he's been foreign and strange in the desert. There weren't enough shades there. At noon between Tucson and Phoenix he'd pulled his truck over and stood on the barren shoulder of the highway while cars raced past, watching his shadow pool at his feet and the open land seemingly gutted by the killing sun (*DR*, 49).

The desert is the most contrastive environment to his shaded and wet home in Mississippi. The barren landscape without shadows seems to be uncomplicated and easily graspable even to a stranger in the environment. As a consequence, he does not

[393] Bernardin, "Moving in Place," 108.

have to feel guilty when he observes the place without the awareness of its significance. The desert, furthermore, reflects the state of mind of this character. He searches for uncomplicated solutions, but at the same time, does not fully grasp his identity, just as he does not understand the desert environment,

His fascination with the country around Black Mountain drove him to a desire to familiarize with it profoundly. Soon after he arrived there, he "walked among the trees around the little town where Tali lived, reaching his hand down to dig beneath the pine needles into the black earth, and touching everything" (*DR*, 50). His digging signals the desire to get underneath the surface of the place and comprehend it. In a similar fashion, he bought maps of the region and tried to acquire as much information about the place as he could from the people from the Apache community. The members of the tribe, however, were reluctant to share knowledge with a stranger, so that the information about the place was willingly hidden from him. He learnt only a fragment of what they knew about the place. Tali explains to him that in the community there are stories "about every place and everything you see," but "[n]obody's going to just tell such things to a stranger" (*DR*, 50). Although he personally senses that the place does not hide anything, as he noted in his earlier description, the people are hiding information about the landscape from him, rejecting to reveal the invisible landscape that is associated with the place. The people are therefore not as open he expected, which undermines his conviction about the clarity and the openness of the place itself. His efforts to familiarize with the place have led to an intimate knowledge of its physical features and as a result his knowledge of the place is largely limited to the surface.

Jake is portrayed as an isolated character. His marriage to Tali was short-lived. It was affected by Jake's inability to overcome the trauma that he suffered in the Vietnam War. Despite Tali's attempts to help him recover, Jake continued to be afflicted by the war trauma and his constant struggles with identity. When the couple separated, his status of an outsider in the community became more obvious. This is, to a large extent, due to the fact that Jake has intentionally kept boundaries between himself and the tribe. He has refused to learn their stories, which would provide him with an understanding of their cultural background. The reason for his status of an outsider comes, therefore, from both sides, from the community as well as from the protagonist. The community has not accepted him and after twenty years he still remains a stranger to the tribe, and as he notes, to his wife (See *DR*, 50). He feels "every bit an outsider without the right to know" the information about the place and community.

At the same time, he is disconnected from his own Choctaw cultural background and only has a "shadowy notion of what it means to be Choctaw" (*DR*, 37). Some community members call him the Lone Ranger, or L. R., by, especially the trickster character Jessie. Jake's surname means "wolf" in Choctaw (See *DR*, 13) and it points to the "lone wolf" of the Euromerican cultural mythology.[394] In Owens's novels, however, the wolf is frequently associated with the hunter and it emphasizes the link to the natural world.[395] In this context, Jake's assignment to the job of the game warden reflects both his closeness with the natural environment and his isolation, since the tribal leaders wanted to ensure that "he was isolated as much as possible from human beings" (*DR*, 46). His presence made people around him uneasy. Paradoxically, Jake finds content in the wilderness, where he spends considerable time by the Dark River, until people begin to suspect that he "fell in love with the river" (*DR*, 45).

Mississippi

Similarly to *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game*, in this novel Mississippi represents the cultural background of the protagonist. Mississippi is the home of Jake's Choctaw family, with two characters that reappear from Owens's previous work, Luther Cole and an old lady who resembles Onatima Blue Wood. Jake reflects that he "had been born and lived by a deep brown river" (*DR*, 53), which is again the Yazoo River.

The place has a modified meaning for the protagonist compared to Cole McCurtain. While in *The Sharpest Sight* it represents home for Cole and later in *Bone Game* it enables him to realize that his place as a mixedblood is not bound to any specific location, the protagonist of *Dark River* is completely disconnected with it, more than Cole McCurtain has ever been. The disconnection of the protagonist corresponds with the Dark River disconnected from the sea by a series of dams. There is no possibility of return for Jake, as there is nothing to return to due to a loss of his relatives.

When he thinks about the place, nobody comes to his mind, as "[n]o one he remembered was in either place" (*DR*, 95). Later the face of the character Luther Cole appears in his mind, an old man living near the Yazoo River who invaded his dreams. Jake is sure that Luther is still alive, and that "if he could find the exact spot again the old man would be waiting" (*DR*, 95). Jake considers him to be his grandfather, although

[394] See Brande, "Not the Call of the Wild," 212.
[395] See Pierotti, "Connected to the Land," 80.

there is not a direct family connection. His own grandfather had died long ago, and then also his father, who died "of something simple, the kind of thing Indians and black people around them died of every day" (*DR*, 109). Shortly after that, when he was five, his mother took him to California and they broke every connection with their Choctaw background. He only vaguely remembered that he was half Choctaw when he was growing up and did not understand what it meant. He remembers the attention that his darker skin and black hair attracted at school. In the course of the novel, he does not give a deeper account of his life in California. He always touches on this topic only lightly and does not develop it.

Jake feels an unspoken promise to return to the place of his origin and realizes once again that he lives in a community not of his own. On one occasion he makes an immediate decision to leave Black Mountain for his home in Mississippi: "To hell with Black Mountain and all of them; they were as strange to him and he to them as people could be. There wasn't any such thing as an Indian" (*DR*, 95). He becomes aware that the term Indian is a general label and that it does not reflect the variety of nations and affiliation of the Native American people. It does not matter that Jake is an Indian, what matters is that he is Choctaw and not Apache. The general term "Indian" does not make the Black Mountain community accept him, although they are Indian as well. Jake therefore repeatedly considers a return "back where he'd come from … to that other river" (*DR*, 107). He, however, never leaves the Black Mountain community.

Jake reflects on the differences in the physical appearance of his home in Mississippi with the landscape in Black Mountain. He notes that there "was no sky in the world like that above the Black Mountain range" (*DR*, 108) and contrasts it with Mississippi where the sky was hidden by thick vegetation. He recalls trying to climb toward the sky, but falling down to the "decaying ground in curtains of thick vine" (*DR*, 108).

Similarly, he sees the difference in the nature of the rivers that dominate each environment. While the Dark River is described as fast and clear, the Yazoo is a "lighter brown portion of the earth itself set into reluctant motion" (*DR*, 108). It is "mean looking" in Jake's memory, "inviting children to tumble into his dark mouth" (*DR*, 52). Jake, as a fisherman, takes into consideration how these rivers can be fished. In the Dark he can use a "delicate fly" that would be useless in the Yazoo. Fishing there granted different experience, as men "tied entails of large animals onto great treble hooks … hoping for a gut-tightening struggle with whatever huge thing sucked that carrion into

itself" (*DR*, 108). His characterizations of the two places and how they influence the life of the people bound to those places reveal that he associates Black Mountain with light, as a place where things are clearly seen, and his home in Mississippi with danger, struggle, gloom, and decay.

His comparison mainly includes the physical appearance of the places and the emotional response that the places awaken in him. Both the physical location and the emotional response of the observer are sufficient components that constitute place. Nevertheless, Jake reflects only briefly on the stories of the community that participate in creating a deeper sense of place. When he recalls Mississippi, the stories that come to his mind are frightening, like the story when his grandmother cut a man with a razor or the story about the place where bad Indians went—a place portrayed in a similar fashion to how he describes his Mississippi home (See *DR*, 52). Despite his negative associations with the place in present, Jake remembers that as a child he appreciated it. He realized during his childhood that the place made him terrified not because he would be afraid of it, but as he was aware of a "feeling so much like love that he feared that he would be drawn into that world forever" (*DR*, 109). Ironically, in Black Mountain Jake encounters a place that he is prepared to be drawn in and is willing to learn stories about. There is, however, a barrier coming from the community.

The anthropologist Keith Basso studied the significance of place for the Western Apaches. He argues that their "constructions of place reach deeply into other cultural spheres, including conceptions of wisdom, notions of morality, politeness and tact in forms of spoken discourse, and certain conventional ways of imagining and interpreting the Apache tribal past."[396] Place reflects a shared set of values and customs, including a view of the past. Basso illustrates the importance of learning stories about place on the learning process of children. When the Apache children

> do not learn to associate places and their names with historical tales [they] cannot appreciate the utility of these narratives as guidelines for dealing responsibly and amicably with other people. Consequently, such individuals are more likely than others to act in ways that run counter to Apache social norms, a sure sign that they are "losing land."[397]

[396] Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1996), xv.
[397] Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 62.

Although Jake is not a child, he has a status of someone who has a lot to learn about the place and the community. His interest, however, is aimed at the stories about the land, not at the stories about the tribe, which he has refused to learn. It has led him to a disconnection from the tribe and behavior that counters the norms of the society.

It is not the status of an outsider that prevents a person from being told the tribal stories. The character Avrum Goldberg is an example of a person who was able to cross the boundary of the community. Goldberg is a Jew who came to study the Apaches from New York. He became accepted over the years that he spent living in the vicinity of the community, and he was able to learn their stories and lifeways.

The Electric Sign

The electric sigh, a beer advertisement, was present in Owens's previous novels and reappears even more importantly in *Dark River*. It is hanging on the wall in Jake's office in the tribe's game and fish department and it displays a white man in a canoe "paddling endlessly through an infinity of electric ripples" (*DR*, 12). Although it does not stand for a place with a physical location, it is of crucial importance to the protagonist.

Jake was given the sign as a present from a Choctaw man in a bar in Albuquerque, who claimed that "[i]t's a symbol, Cousin" (*DR*, 12). Jake likes the sign, "the still white man, the eternally raised paddle, the half-risen fish." At the same time, he does not comprehend the meaning of the sign: "What was it about the man in a boat in constant motion that never went anywhere people found so attractive?" (*DR*, 48–49). Susan Bernardin notes out that the sign reflects Jake's stasis and reveals that similarly to the man in the sign, Jake is stuck while moving in place: he "cannot seem to move toward any sustained relationship with the community, with his wife, or with the stories peopling the land."[398] The sign is a symbol of moving in a place without the ability to realize the nature of the place, which results in the protagonist's stasis. This attitude rids him of the chance to be attached to the place and experience a sense of the place, and therefore of the possibility to live a meaningful life in that place.

Jake's stasis is accentuated by the fact that the first time he plugged the sigh in, it broke. As a result the sign is a piece of "cold plastic," and the man "didn't move, the waters didn't flow, the grass on the island didn't grow" (*DR*, 12). Jessie proposes to repair it, but Jake likes the sign as it is, with the man not moving. When Jessie inspects

[398] Bernardin, "Moving in Place," 108–109.

the back side of the sign, he sees a big spider weaving a net. It is a reminder that while Jake is static, the story progresses to inevitably force him to deal with his stasis. The sign starts to function later in the novel without Jake's awareness of how it happened. The man starts to paddle, but still he is "never going anywhere," moving in the same place endlessly. It is an "action without effect, motion removed from time, a man in unceasing movement going nowhere beautifully. Even alive, the grass didn't grow, the water didn't flow" (*DR*, 94).

The Casino and the Hotel Resort

The tribal casino and the hotel resort rise to prominence as places that enable the economic survival of the tribe within the economy of the dominant society. As Helstern shows, Owens was inspired by real events when he constructed these places. She refers to a Mescalero Apache leader, Wendell Chino, who established a tribal casino as a means of generating profit for his tribe, by which he linked "casino capitalism and tribal sovereignty."[399] Owens shows that these places raise further concerns. They are recreations of the dominant society's exploitative practices aimed at people and environment. At the same time they represent places where the white man does not have a dominant presence. In the discussion of the places, Owens addresses and develops both issues.

In the novel, the casino was established four years ago and it is located on the tribal grounds miles from any Indian community. Jake observes that it was built in place of a reservation forest that had been cut down to make space for it. The casino is run by the tribal chairman, Xavier Two-Bears, who earned a MBA degree at Harvard. Jake admits that however Two-Bears is not a character that he would trust, his efforts are helping the tribe. The business is described as very profitable and the tribe is "making a bundle" (*DR*, 53).

Nevertheless, Jake observes the stark contrast in which the casino stands to the surrounding landscape. He describes it as a building blazing in pink, green, and gold, "the lights like ax blades against the surrounding pines" (*DR*, 51). He has never seen the casino not blazing, as its business is running incessantly every day and night. People are flowing in and out of the casino in streams: "Rivulets of people merged at the edge of

[399] Linda Lizut Helstern, "Trickster Chaos in Turbulent Flow: Louis Owens's *Dark River*," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17, no. 2 (2010): 5n, https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isq030.

the parking lot into a stream that flowed from lot to casino and back again, blue hair, baseball caps, and bald heads shining like various stars. After the dull colors of the fish and game office and houses in Black Mountain, he felt blinded by the casino" (*DR*, 51). Jake notices that the casino is a totally different place on the reservation. He feels "blinded" by its lights and colors that in this environment seem unnatural. It is a busy place abounding with people from a range of other places: "Buses brought the old ones from places like Phoenix or Scottsdale, Paradise Valley and Mesa where they'd gone to die," while others arrived there to "dump retirees from New York and Kansas right into the tribe's lap" (*DR*, 53). Apart from the retired people, others are coming: small-town farmers, ranch hands, storekeepers, layed-off loggers, and employees of Forest Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (See *DR*, 53). Jake's view of the visitors is unfavorable. Inside the casino, the visitors

> would be crowding the slot machines, feeding the tokens in with dexterity that belied their arthritis and bursitis and osteoporosis, smoking and breathing through clear plastic tubes out for each nostril, pulling oxygen canisters on little carts. The interior lights turned their skin a lifeless gray, and young expressionless Indians would be circling endlessly with trays of tokens and change (*DR*, 53).

The place is described as artificial, lacking life, and aimed at profit through deadening commerce. Its character is created by the people who visit it and their intentions and expectations. Jake understands that this place, created artificially and then filled with meaning by its gambling visitors, is where he feels out of place. He went inside only once, and "had been forced back by the evil of the place" (*DR*, 51). The Indian employees are affected by the place as well: they are portrayed as lifeless and expressionless. Nevertheless, they contribute to the negative character of the place by attending to the visitors. The place resembles casinos which can be built anywhere and produce the same experience. Apart from the fact that the casino was built on an Apache reservation, it represents a standardized area lacking individuality, a place that Relph considers to be placeless.

There are aspects that make the casino a significant place for the tribe. On the one hand, it is a money-spinning business that helps the tribe financially. Although Jake is repelled by "the evil of the place," he is aware of the profitability of the enterprise and its consequential benefits for the community. Its profits are used in medical centers on

the reservation, retirement care, prenatal counselling, college scholarships for young Indians, housing, and investment (See *DR*, 54). On the other hand, Jake notes that by running the casino the tribe is "doing to the white world what that world has always done to Indians" (*DR*, 53). The casino is profiting from the misfortunes of the members of the dominant society and investing the money in its own affairs. The intention of the tribal chairman is to pay back to the white man: "Two-Bears wasn't one to forget or forgive. Indian retribution was slow but inevitable" (*DR*, 66). In Owens's novels, the theme of retribution and paying back to the white society first significantly appears in *Nightland*. In that novel, the Indian character Paco Ortega, who was repaying the society through selling drugs, did not survive in the novel's course. Compared to Ortega, Two-Bears' casino business is legal and his payback is more indirect and less violent.

Another business that the tribe set up is the resort hotel. Situated at the lakeshore, it has been built only recently and designed to resemble a big ski lodge. Compared to the casino, this place gives a less artificial impression, although it is built to resemble hotel resorts elsewhere. The aim of the hotel is similar to the casino: to generate money for the tribe, in this case by offering charged services to rich white people, such as selling trophy fishing permissions.

The hotel represents a place where Indians take advantage of the white society by presenting them with the image of the Indian that they wish to see. The Indians do not oppose these false notions of Indian identity and authentic appearance. The hotel is full of objects and images that promote Indians and their art. To give the dominant society the Indian that they imagine, the tribal chairman permitted the anthropologist Avrum Goldberg to represent the tribe as an authentic Indian. He makes an appearance dressed as an Indian from the stereotypical mainstream imagination: in a traditional breechcloth and Apache leggings, moccasins, cotton shirt and vest, and a blue headband. He is called by the name Gold Bird. Jake observes his stolid expression that suggests wisdom and resignation (See *DR*, 61) that complies with the notion of the Vanishing Indian who looks at the loss that befell him. He takes the role to represent the tribe when the *National Geographic* is there to film a confession by an authentic Indian (See *DR*, 64). The members of the tribe perceive the scene with humor and later Two-Bears appreciates Goldberg's effort and thanks him for being Indian that night, saying "[y]ou were good, real good. I don't know what we'd do without you" (*DR*, 71).

Shorty Luke notes that the attention aimed at Goldberg is beneficial, as it prevents the whites from being interested in their tribe and its affairs: it "keeps white folks out of [the tribe's] hair" (*DR*, 64). Jake compares Shorty with the notion of the authentic Indian presented by Goldberg. Shorty has a crewcut of gray hair and is dressed in denim overalls, flannel shirt, and work clothes. He shouts at the people from the film industry Italian phrases that he learned in Hollywood studios from Italian actors playing Indians. In response to their astonishment that there is an Italian at the Apache reservation, Goldberg remarks that Shorty is a "demented tribal storyteller" (*DR*, 62). Shorty, however, represents the contemporary Apache living on a reservation and a character freed from burdening stereotypes. As Jake tells Shorty, the "white people won't believe you're Indian … You're Sicilian to them, Mafioso for the casino. You're not a very marketable Indian" (*DR*, 65).

The hotel represents a place where the Indians are in focus of attention. The roles of the Indians and the whites are inverted. During a reception, the Indians are being served by college boys that Two-Bears chose himself, taking them for granted and accepting food from them with little attention to the service. One tribal matron, for instance, "held a stuffed mushroom with her pinkie finger extended," (*DR*, 65) although she lives in a house without electricity and running water. Jake observes that Indians are playing the white man in this scene, and that everybody is enjoying the pretense. It was a "subtle and satirical amusement on the reservation" (*DR*, 65). Furthermore, Two-Bears claims that the white college boys working in the hotel as waiters need to learn their place, and inverts the perspective again by saying "[k]ill the European to save the man" (*DR*, 56).

At a tribal meeting at the hotel, Goldberg and Shorty propose another possibility to earn money for the tribe. Goldberg says that "there's a cultural cost involved in such enterprises" (*DR*, 71) as running a casino and a hotel, because the actual Apache experience is overshadowed by marketable Indians. Instead, Goldberg comes with the idea of developing a tribal theme park. It would encompass disposing of all modern conveniences and a subsequent return of the whole tribe to living in a traditional way, as an eighteen-hundred Apache community. The place would be rid of the casino, the hotel, as well as the government houses that the community lives in. It would return to former state before it was developed by civilization. As long as they would stay authentic in their way of life, the tribe would receive grants that would support them. Tourists would come in high numbers, because there is no other place in the U. S. A.

that would rival it. Goldberg's idea, however, is not accepted by the tribal members. They do not wish to return to the way of life of their ancestors, nor do they see the advantages of earning in Goldberg's words millions of dollars when they would have no opportunity to use the money. The proposal is in the end condemned by Tali who is a respected woman in the community. Her easy laugh dooms "Goldberg's insane plan more effectively than any argument would have." Two-Bears responds to their plan by telling them to "go get some sense" (*DR*, 74).

The idea to turn the place into a living historical museum would lead to losing the identity of the place. The place would turn into what Relph calls an "idealized Historyland"[400] that is created by a process of "museumisation."[401] Places like this are carefully preserved, but at the same time they are subject to idealization, because they present the place as a dream image. They are a tourist attraction and due to this succumb to the general demand for historical atmosphere and as a consequence the individual character of the place is overwritten.[402] Moreover, the tourism that would increase significantly would contribute to the destruction of the original place. Goldberg mentions that "there's a cultural cost involved" in building a casino and a hotel on a reservation, yet he proposes marketing the image of the Indian that is based on the past and that complies with stereotypical notions of Indians. His proposal would inflict a cultural cost on the tribe instead of providing a way to survive in contemporary world.

The Canyon of the Dark River

The canyon of the Dark River is located about thirty miles from Black Mountain. At the beginning of the novel, it is portrayed as a peaceful place empty of any human presence. The only character that enters the place is Jake. He considers the canyon and its surrounding area to be his favorite place. When he saw the canyon for the first time, he experienced "a kind of exultation … [and] an astonished sense of having arrived somewhere at last" (*DR*, 51). The landscape was familiar to him, as he notes that he already "knew the length of the river, every bend and pool, better than anyone" (*DR*, 51). Pierotti notes that the canyon and the river that flows through it help Jake survive psychologically.[403] The canyon becomes a place where he feels freed from his war trauma and where he can sleep at night for the first time since returning from

[400] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 95.
[401] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 101.
[402] See Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 101–103.
[403] See Pierotti, "Connected to the Land," 90.

Vietnam. As a consequence, Jake spends in the canyon "every minute that [he] can" (*DR*, 161). In reaction to his profound knowledge of the place, better than anyone else, Sam Baca offered him the job of the tribal game warden, which made him responsible for the canyon and the surrounding area.

Jake describes the canyon of the Dark River as a rough place that is not easily accessible and people do not attempt to enter it:

> The canyon walls were mostly vertical, broken masses of granite and volcanic debris with only a few creeks making passable folds into the depths. If you didn't know the creeks you could be in serious trouble … He didn't know a single Indian who liked putting a heavy pack on and walking through neckbreaking terrain, and white people wouldn't venture into a part of the reservation without trails (*DR*, 47).

The rugged terrain of the canyon with no touristic trails makes it a place that is considered to be dangerous for someone who is not familiar with it. To the contemporary Indians living on the reservation, the place is of lesser importance, as they do not enter the canyon. In the past, however, the canyon was a source food for the tribe. The berries that they picked there and dried formed a part of their diet. In their contemporary way of life there is no need to continue this practice. The place is left to exist as it is without interventions from whites or Indians. The isolation of the place is another aspect that the protagonist appreciates.

The Dark River embodies the center of the canyon. Despite its name, the river is described in a positive way and evokes positive associations. Stroud, a character who is in charge of the militia training, observes that "the Dark was as perfect as a river could be" (*DR*, 112). It is clear, fast, abundant with fish, and it provides life for the surrounding environment. It is a dominant presence in the canyon and influences the atmosphere of the place, "overlaying the whole scene with [its] smooth sound" (*DR*, 112). At the end of the novel, Tali is able to sense the river in a similar way to Jake and understands how it attracts him. She ponders that the river "laid claim to all of the land and the people" (*DR*, 263) and that it enables Jake to be connected to something. The connection, however, is problematic. Tali knows that Jake grew up near another river and that he does not know the stories about the Dark. As a result, he "didn't understand how to live with what the river meant" (*DR*, 263) and did not belong nonetheless. Bernardin claims that the affection that he felt for the canyon paradoxically

"strengthens his sense of distance from the very people whose stories make the land fully intelligible."[404]

Jake has walked the course of the river several times since he moved to Black Mountain. Despite the natural character of the river in the canyon, Jake is aware of the artificial alterations of the river course further downstream. Fifty miles from the canyon the river enters water reservoirs above Phoenix which disconnect it from the sea, "the mother water itself" (*DR*, 8). Jake describes it as the death of the river and notes that it has serious effects on the environment, such as the disappearance of the salmon from the river. He likes to imagine that the fish are still present in its waters, "slipping through the desert streams toward the far mountains … drawn by memory as old as the desert and mountains themselves" (*DR*, 8). He wonders what it must have been like before the human interventions altered the river. It leads him into thinking about dynamiting the dams and freeing the river so that it could run down "its ancient path toward the ocean" (*DR*, 8). He is convinced that the patterns of natural order are still present in that place and in the memories of animals, so that if the dams were removed, the eagle, the deer, the puma, and the jaguar would return. The two or three generations of human interventions in the environment that caused the disappearance of the river in the dams were, according to Jake, "not even a blink of a deer's eye" (*DR*, 8).

He furthermore comments on other uses of the river, with an unmasked anger as a result of altering the course of the river: "He had sat on the red rock outcropping and imagined using a sniper scope to kill every single one of the flaccid people on houseboats that floated above a dead river" (*DR*, 7). Despite his anger, his ideas are never enacted, since he admits that he would never do that—he "was adjusted" (*DR*, 7). The ideas show Jake's sentiment about the current state of the natural environment and about the negative alterations of the place. He wishes for a return to the condition of the place before the artificial changes of the modern society.

The character of the Dark River in the canyon forms a stark contrast with the near White River. The White flows through Black Mountain and it is polluted by waste from the Indians' reservation homes located upstream. Jake describes the river as a shallow stream polluted by garbage, and when he crosses the bridge over the White, he avoids looking at "the dirty and exhausted river" (*DR*, 9) even when it is night. He thinks that it should be cleaned, but considers it to be futile, as the garbage would be

[404] Bernardin, "Moving in Place," 106.

back in the river in a short time. Better, in his opinion, is to let it be washed away by the high waters that occur annually and move the garbage downstream.

This shows Jake to be a character that "adjusted" to the common practices on the reservation, and although he does not consent, he has a passive attitude. It also presents the Indians on the reservation as polluters who are responsible for the degradation of their immediate environment. It is a view that is contrastive to the stereotypical notion of the Indian as the worshipper of the Mother Earth goddess. Owens's environmentalism in this novel is therefore not directed only at whites destroying the environment, but also at Indians.

Throughout the novel, the canyon becomes associated with two uses of place that defy its meaning as a natural place. It becomes a place of business and a place of crime and violence. The two uses are interconnected, as the burst of violence set to the canyon is the result of attempts to profit from the place.

The place is connected with business through Sam Baca, Jake's superior in the fish and game office, and the tribal chairman Two-Bears. The two characters are secretly selling illegal trophy elk hunting permissions to white hunters and keeping the profits for themselves. In reaction to that, Shorty Luke and Avrum Goldberg take actions to prevent them from profiting from the tribal grounds in this manner. They intend to hunt the big trophy elks themselves so that there was no possibility to sell the hunting permissions to rich hunters who destroy the herds. As a result, the herds will have a chance to be left alone to prosper without interventions from the outside (See *DR*, 67).

Another inappropriate use of the place springs from enabling a group of ex-soldiers and military enthusiasts to use the canyon as a training ground. This use of the place is once more illegal, but consecrated by Two-Bears and Baca, who secretly permitted their stay. Stroud considers the canyon to be the perfect place for the training course (See *DR*, 112), as it is far from any settlement and not visited by tourists. Two-Bears forbids Jake to patrol the canyon and both he and Sam expect that nobody else would enter it.

The group of military enthusiasts, as Owens points out, was inspired by his personal experience. He remarks that he "ran into them when [he] was backpacking on a reservation. They were wearing camouflage uniforms, out practicing war. Disneyland with weapons."[405] Similarly in the novel, the place becomes a training ground to

[405] Purdy and Owens, "Clear Waters," 12.

practice military skills. The characters who participate in the course are rich white people who pay for experiencing a real life battle with live cartridges. Stroud describes them as "gung ho types" who "had watched too many John Wayne and Rambo movies" (*DR*, 113) and wanted to experience the life of a warrior. Some of the participants are Vietnam veterans, and these characters are looked upon with great respect. The characters who did not participate in the war are shown as not grasping the real experience, and they connect the place with meanings that overwrite historical facts. They consider the Vietnam War to be a place in history that is reserved for male heroism and daring deeds. Jake points out the tendency to fail to remember history in a dialogue with Stroud. When Stroud is asked how many people he killed in the war, he refuses to answer and replies that it was "another time and another world," hinting at the fact that now he lives a different life in a different place. Jake contradicts his attitude, saying that there "aren't any other times or worlds." In his view, such ideas are responsible for "how everything gets messed up" (*DR*, 167), as there is only one time and one world that people inhabit. Jake also claims that the ghosts of people that they killed in the war are still with them: "You think they are just dreams, but they're not" (*DR*, 167). For Jake this results in a ghost sickness that he has not been able to deal with.

Vietnam as a place receives more attention throughout the novel. Jake often returns mentally to his experience as a soldier. Although he calls it a white man's war, he claims that the war was determined by the people living in the place and by its physical properties. He recalls the "small brown people" who "dictated the kind of war it would be" (*DR*, 110). The place is portrayed as belonging to other foreign culture and Jake stresses the spatial inappropriateness of those Americans who fought in the war. Furthermore, the place and the manner in which the war was lead had a strong effect on the soldiers. They brought back an experience that induced trauma. In Jake's view, it was the result of dreams of the Vietnamese: they dreamt of ghosts and nightmares and their dreams haunted those fighting in the war.

Jake considers the role of the Indian soldiers in the war. Due to the nature of the fighting this war was more familiar to Indians than to the white American soldiers, although it was without honors and, as he says, without meaning. The Indians were those who were the most affected by the trauma. Jake saw many Indian casualties in veteran centers and it led him to comparing himself with them. He realized that "he wasn't like them. He wasn't really an Indian, or really anything else" (*DR*, 111). Although he is affected by the war and is still recovering from the trauma, he feels that

he is going through a different experience than those Indians. It points once more to his problems with self-determination.

The areas controlled by enemy in the war were called "Indian Country." Jake recalls that the Indian Country was "always out there somewhere, beyond law, and whatever somebody did out there didn't come home with them" (*DR*, 106). The place was freed from responsibility and accountability for crimes committed there. Jake has a sense of injustice both regarding the name of the place and the exceeding violence that was aimed at local inhabitants. He mentions that the term "Indian Country" was used in the Iraq war as well, and seeing photos from the war, he recognized "rigid remains of dark-skinned human beings left from a massacre by the U. S. military once again" (*DR*, 107). It reminded him of the bodies of Indians left after the massacre at Wounded Knee. The place called Indian Country is therefore associated with a place of the enemy to the U. S. military forces. Ironically, many of the soldiers on the side of the U. S. A. in Vietnam were Indians fighting against enemy in the Indian Country.

Owens situates many characters within the canyon as the story evolves. When the characters arrive, a conflict escalates and the characters form sides. Jake comes to the canyon to look for Alison who is undergoing a vision quest to find her animal spirit. They meet with Sandrine Le Bris, a French woman also pursuing a vision quest. Sandrine is a character who has studied Indian cultures and would like to gain a genuine Indian experience. For that reason she paid the trickster character Jessie to provide a vision for her, which is a service offered by his company *Vision Quest Enterprises*. To grant the vision for his customers, Jessie leads them into wilderness where he leaves them alone. After a couple of days, he dresses in a wolf costume and appears to the customers as their spirit helper. Jessie says that it is "kind of like Disney World except when my customers go away their lives are changed for the better" (*DR*, 27).

By using the expression "Disney World," Owens draws a parallel between providing visions and granting a real life battle experience, both in exchange for money. Both practices use the place to generate experiences that are not characteristic of the place. The participants of the military training course imagine the place to be a battleground and consequently project on in their ideas and expectations. Similarly, vision quests are not traditional for the Apache culture, a fact that Jessie and Alison are aware of. It introduces to the place new practices that are out of place in that environment. Alison, however, sets off to the canyon pursuing the quest in earnest, as

she is convinced that she could "learn from [her] native brothers and sisters in other tribal cultures" (*DR*, 26).

When the participants of the military training meet with Jake, Alison, Jessie, and Sandrine, a conflict arises. Jessie, while providing vision to Sandrine in a wolf costume, is shot by the military enthusiasts who mistake him for the real animal. The guilt for the death of the young Indian drives the participants of the course into a fight against Jake, Alison, and Sandrine. They seek to eliminate the witnesses of the crime. The place, then, obtains another meaning, as the place of the burst of violence and a place where the Indian is forced to fight for survival. The canyon becomes a place that has attributes of the Indian Country. It is the place of the enemy for the white American characters, who are driven to eliminate the Indian witnesses of the crime, together with Sandrine. The focus of the novel, however, is on the Indian characters that are fighting for their survival, and not on the members of the dominant society.

The Place of the Indian

To understand the place of the Indian in *Dark River*, it is necessary to discuss the genre of the novel, as Owens uses it to contradict the predictable scenarios and expectations of the genre. The fight for survival of the Indian characters parallels with the Owens's aim to release the Indian from fixed genre roles that lead to destruction.

Jennifer Andrews and Priscilla L. Walton describe Owens' novels as variations on the hard-boiled detective genre.[406] They refer primarily to *The Sharpest Sight*, claiming that Owens does not follow the typical hardboiled scenario, but "epitomizes some of his key reformulations of the hard-boiled detective genre, by employing the language of the tough-talking detective but rejecting the logical and chronological patterns of traditional hard-boiled novels and creating a protagonist who does not view himself as a lone hero, womanizer, or redeemer."[407] Instead of being a redeemer, the protagonist has to deal with his own identity in order to solve the crime and he works with intuition, dreams and visions. Owens employs similar scenario in *Bone Game*. In *Dark River*, however, he modifies the scenario and the genre inclines more towards the crime thriller.

[406] See Jennifer Andrews and Priscilla L. Walton, "Revisioning the Dick: Reading Thomas King's Thumps DreadfulWater Mysteries," in *Detecting Canada: Essays on Canadian Crime Fiction, Television, and Film*, ed. Jeannette Sloniowski and Marilyn Rose (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014), 105.

[407] Andrews, "Revisioning,"105.

John Scaggs notes that the central aspect of the crime thriller is its focus on the crime rather than on the investigation. The detective may be absent in such novels or has a secondary role. Additionally, the plot of crime thrillers "emphasizes present danger rather than reflecting on, or investigating, past action."[408] It indicates that the focus is on the ongoing events and not on what happened in the past, which is typical for the detective genre. The main interest is directed at the present behavior of the characters, their psychology and their motivation for violence towards others. Crime thrillers also develop a social perspective by commenting on or questioning certain aspects of society. Furthermore, the setting becomes a central point: it significantly contributes to the atmosphere of the story, and it is often connected with the nature of the crime itself.[409]

Authors of Native American crime fiction use the genre to show the viewpoint of the Natives, not of the members of white culture. Ray B. Browne points out that the genre "necessarily incorporates new materials and people in their own setting and cultures. Thus it is a new and different total environment for the age-old treatment of crime and punishment."[410] Native American crime fiction follows the traditional genre plots and developments, while at the same time includes new characters, cultures and settings, and thus creates a new environment in which the narratives are set.[411] Apart from that, the genre is stylistically less self-consciously literary, more frank and realistic, more open in depicting violence and sex scenes, and more straightforward.[412]

Owens's *Dark River* is a novel that meets Browne's characteristics. While employing the genre, it is infused with Native American viewpoints, culture, and setting. The Apache mythology forms an important aspect of the story, as the fight between the protagonist and the antagonist is a parallel to the Apache Monster Slayer Story.[413] The novel furthermore makes use of ghosts and animals that appear to its characters to help them, and information is passed to the characters through dreams and intuition. Owens, nevertheless, is not the only Native American author whose work draws from crime fiction genre at the same time that his work is set in Native

[408] John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 107.
[409] See Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 107–108.
[410] Browne, *Murder on the Reservation*, 3.
[411] Browne, *Murder on the Reservation*, 3.
[412] See Browne, *Murder on the Reservation*, 6.
[413] See Gretchen Ronnow, "Secularizing Mythological Space in Louis Owens's *Dark River*", in *Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work*, ed. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 140 and 142.

background. Browne claims that "[i]n the rapidly developing field of literature by and about Native Americans, ethnic crime fiction is a vigorous genre."[414]

Jake does not actively investigate a crime, therefore his role in the novel is not that of a detective. Instead, the attention turns to the characters' motivation for violence, to its escalation, and to the themes that occur throughout the novel: stereotypes, storytelling, mixedblood identity, alienation, survival through stories and survival *per se*. The social perspective of the novel and its interest in the characters' psychology are typical characteristics of the crime thriller which often closely reflects society's illnesses. *Dark River*, however, does not address only issues that are connected to the Native American experience. Its social commentary covers themes ranging from paranoia, extreme right-wing philosophy and terrorism, to America's involvement in the Vietnam War and the conditions of war veterans.

The setting of *Dark River* differs to a certain extent from what is typical for the crime thriller. Scaggs points out that the setting of crime fiction in modern novels is usually the modern urban city. It is "a dark, brooding place of threatening shadows and old buildings, a contemporary wasteland."[415] For Scaggs, it is a parallel to the landscape of the Gothic novel with its wild mountainous locations, ruined castles and hidden passages. The criminal action that unfolds in *Dark River*, however, is set on the reservation. It is the wilderness of the canyon that sees the escalation of violence between the characters. The characters are fighting predominantly at night, and although the physical environment differs from what is typical for the crime thriller, the setting does resemble the "dark brooding place" that Scaggs mentions in his delineation of the genre.

During the fight between the characters in the canyon, a contrast is developed in how they perceive the place. The white characters are strangers to the environment. They regard the place with a feeling of alienation and animosity, yet as a place where their fantasies may materialize and, in case of the antagonist Lee Jensen, where it is possible to satisfy their desire for violence. The Indian characters, on the other hand, are familiar with the land and they are aware of its significance. The land does not represent a piece of alienated space for any of them. Not even for Jake, whose cultural roots can be found elsewhere.

[414] Browne, *Murder on the Reservation*, 3.
[415] Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 17.

In the canyon, Jake is forced into a fierce fight for survival by the antagonist and his supporters. They organize a hunt for him and the violence in the novel escalates while Owens follows a familiar genre scenario. After Jake defeats most of the enemies, he is shot and ends up lying seriously wounded in a hole in the forest ground. He becomes a passive character who cannot participate in the development of the plot, as he is not able to move and only observes what is happening around him. As a consequence the novel's fast pace slows and another character, Shorty Luke, becomes the protagonist of the story. Shorty, however, assumes the role the protagonist without the violence that is attached to it. In the following scene Owens develops an ending that defies the genre scenario and that does not result in the destruction of the Indian characters.

Shorty Luke is the tribal storyteller and a story thief who knows every story and makes himself the protagonist of each story that he tells. He is deeply familiar with the physical dimension of the place and with what constitutes the place—the people and their culture. In this aspect he stands as a contrast to Jake. His intense awareness of the place enables him to be aware of his position within the place: "He knew how to get any place anyone might want to go, and he knew every story associated with every place" (*DR*, 48). Compared to him, Jake has but a limited knowledge of the place that does not include the invisible layer of stories.

Shorty's ability to tell stories is commented on by Mrs. Edwards, a powerful and feared old lady who is "the center of the Black Mountain community, an important person in politics all across the reservation and beyond" (*DR*, 43). She observes that "Shorty Luke knew every story and therefore understood how almost everything began and ended. And Shorty took every story into himself and made it new each time" (*DR*, 269). His ability to mold stories into new forms at the same time that he makes himself their protagonist entitles him to acquire major role in shaping the development of the plot when Jake is not able to perform the role of the protagonist. Jake's replacement is indicated at the beginning of the novel when he notes that "someone else would have to tell the whole story" (*DR*, 29) since he is unable to tell the story himself.

Although Jake is not familiar with the stories of the tribe, Owens relates his story to Apache mythology. Since Jake came to their tribe, Shorty and Mrs. Edwards have watched his life on the reservation and recognized the familiar patterns of the Apache Monster Slayer story.

> [Mrs. Edwards] had watched [Shorty] take Jake Nashoba's story from her and begin to knead and work it as he came to know the stranger, recognizing the shadows and forms of old stories in this one. And when she felt Shorty had worked his strong hands deeply into the story she invited him to coffee, where they tried to comprehend how the story might conclude this time (*DR*, 269).

As they notice the similarity with the story, they are concerned with its development. Shorty is the only man Jake admires on the reservations (See *DR*, 66). As the two characters became friends, Shorty is considering changes to the story, as "change is traditional, too" (*DR*, 213). He discusses the ending with Mrs. Edwards. She suggests that this is not the first time that this story is unfolding. She refers to the Native belief that "[h]uman beings bore an insubstantial form that might shift and change as what white people called time turned and crawled back inside its own coils. Jacob Nashoba had come many times to Black Mountain, and time and again the old lady had worried his story within her hands like a wet clay pot" (*DR*, 269). In her view, stories may repeat over time. Jake has returned to the community repeatedly and Mrs. Edwards has tried to influence his story each time. In this unfolding of the story she receives the assistance of the tribal storyteller.

At the moment when Shorty acquires the role of the protagonist, all characters become conscious of the fact that they are taking part in a story, and that they can influence its development. Their aim is to avoid and deflect predictable scenarios and, as Shorty says, "cleeshayed plots" (*DR*, 212). All characters are given space in a discussion how to finish the story, including the antagonist Lee Jensen and other negative characters.

When the discussion opens, it becomes apparent that the characters have to deal with the theme of stereotypes and the stereotypical roles that are assigned to Indians. In his critical essays, Owens often thoroughly explores the role of Indians in films, noting that Indians

> have a long and unhappy history in Hollywood films. Indians in movies have always had two roles: bloodthirsty savage or noble companion. In both of these roles, the one unchanging obligation of the Indian is to die by the movie's end. These three expectations—savagism, nobility, and death (with none of the three mutually exclusive)—delineate neatly the role of the indigenous Native in the Euramerican imagination, and they are expectations founded upon a metanarrative that insists upon

> the mythic and tragic "otherness" of Native Americans. Above all, the media have always been careful not to portray the Indian as a living, viable inhabitant of contemporary America.[416]

While the films that Owens analyses in his essays[417] focus on the limited portrayal of Native Americans as people that are bound to vanish, *Dark River* offers a point of view that stresses survival. Owens often alludes to the film industry in the novel, especially to films in which the Indian is showed as a reduced, shallow character whose purpose is to play a genre role. The character who frequently remarks on the role of the Indian in Hollywood films is Shorty Luke. He used to work in Hollywood as "an extra hired only to ride and die like always" (*DR*, 270). He mentions that the role of the Indian in the films was unchanging and points out the inaccuracy of such a portrayal: "[I]t was always the same old thing. You'd think the guys who wrote the scripts would worry about it. They should have had the white man scalping the Indian the way it really was and falling off his horse, since Indians didn't fall off horses too much" (*DR*, 212). Alison is another character who is aware of the false image of the Indian and who alludes to clichéd plot scenarios, hoping that "this isn't going to be one of those stories … where the white person comes and saves the Indians" (*DR*, 222). The trickster character Jessie develops another point of view, and instead of trying to fight against the stereotypical images of Indians in films, he teaches the tribal youth to be conscious of the role of the Indian and to accommodate to it: "I'm just trying to make sure the kids know their roles, develop their sense of irony so they'll know how to function" (*DR*, 31). Jessie's idea stresses the necessity to adapt to the conditions in the society in order to survive. Jake, nevertheless, does not accept his point of view at the beginning of the novel, and neither do the other characters in the final scene who are trying to break free from the roles that are imposed on them.

The stereotypical roles of characters in films are favored by Jensen. He represents an opposition to the Indian characters, and gradually acquires an extreme attitude that reaches beyond stereotypes, as he wants to avoid "the predictable Stallone chase sequences, where the good guy runs, struggles, lots of camera close-ups, seems about to succumb, and somehow, someway manages to … destroy his pursuers" (*DR*, 183). His proposed way of ending the story defies stereotypes, but at the same

[416] Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 117.
[417] See Owens, "The Invention of John Wayne" and "Apocalypse at the Two-Sock Hop: Dancing with the Vanishing American," in *Mixedblood Messages*.

time is unacceptable to the Indian characters. He suggests destruction that would include everybody but himself: "How about if I shoot you all? … Nobody would expect that … the bad guy just killing everybody and going home … The good guys all dead as hell and the bad guy unpunished. You've never seen that on television" (*DR*, 282). Jensen's suggestion, however, already operates with the Indian characters as with positive ones, whose triumph he wants to prevent. In reaction to his proposal, other characters, both Indian and white, form an opposition. They call for such an ending that would defy the roles expected from Indian characters and ensure their survival. The surrender of the antagonist, however, and his subsequent arrest seems to be a rather simplistic way of ending the story. Similarly, when the tribal chairman Two-Bears finally appears in the scene and shoots Jensen, Shorty says that this ending is "[t]oo predictable … everybody knew it would happen" (*DR*, 282) and the story returns to the time before that event.

Shorty finally finds a way to end the story: "The earth opened up, two enormous mandibles framed by spider legs reached out and seized Jake. In a moment he was gone, dragged into a hole that closed at once" (*DR*, 284). The characters agree that it is a good ending, and the novel closes with Shorty starting to tell Jake's story: "It is said that Jacob Nashoba went home" (*DR*, 286).

The motif of the spider occurs frequently in the novel as a reference to the process of creating stories. Helstern argues that the spider's belly is "the place where stories give life to people" so that Jake "will forever be at home in the stories of the fictional Black Mountain community … Tribal survivance and Jake's own, finally, are assured in the memory of telling of the stories."[418] By taking hold of Jake, the spider incorporates him into the story that Shorty eventually tells. The story forms a part of the Apache culture, which enables Jake to acquire a place in the community. By that, as Bernardin notes, he finally establishes his identity.[419]

Furthermore, Bernardine claims that by choosing such an ending to the novel Owens "refuse[s] narratives of closure, stasis, [and] immobility that have proved so threatening to American Indian survival."[420] Owens uses the genre to strengthen the theme of mainstream American culture's stereotypization and misapprehension about the Indian. The protagonist's genre role, founded on individualism, did not enable him

[418] Helstern, "Trickster Chaos," 345.
[419] See Bernardin, "Moving in Place," 110.
[420] Bernardin, "Moving in Place," 104.

to become integrated into the tribe. On the contrary, it led to his destruction while he was operating within the formula. Owens dissociates himself from the genre scenario at the end and builds the climax of the novel in a way that the necessity for cooperation stands out. The Indian characters contradict the individualism of the protagonist at the same time that they disagree with the myth of their extinction.

The place of the Indian in this novel is not the doomed realm of the genre role in which the Indian faces destruction—either through immediate death or gradual disintegration of culture. The Indian characters are made prominent and they are given the chance to form the story and the right to make decision about their fate and consequentially about the ending of the story. After the ending is resolved, they ponder what to do next. In that instant, Alison states: "Now we go home" (*DR*, 285). Through this statement she acknowledges the survival of the Indian characters that return to their contemporary lives, placed in their tribal culture and not imprisoned in narratives of the dominant society.

Although the theme of survival is developed in all of Owens's novels, in *Dark River* it is built up to the most powerful effect. The novel's final return to the theme of home mirrors the ending of *Wolfsong*[421] where Tom Joseph heads to the wilderness that he has learned to understand as his home. Tom is, however, portrayed as a character that does not have the possibility to return to his home community, as all its members left or disappeared. Jake's family disappeared in history as well, but Owens shows a more positive approach in this novel. Despite the fact that Jake lives in a foreign tribe, it is possible for him to be accepted into the community and find his place there. He achieves it with the assistance of other tribal members through one on the most powerful means in tribal universe, through stories.

[421] See Helstern, "Trickster Chaos," 345.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I used the theoretical background of human geography to identify the functions of places and their significance. This approach understands place as space created through experience and imbued with meaning. The presented analysis also shows that such approach can be efficiently applied to literature, as it enables to explore places and analyze their representation in fiction.

The analysis indicates that there are attributes regarding place that Owens's novels share. The first such aspect is the accuracy of depiction of place. Owens sets all his novels to places that he had immediate experience with. His portrayal of the landscape is realistic and as a result the places are rooted in the physical world. At the same time, in two of his novels there is a tendency to modify names of existing places. In *Wolfsong* Owens uses the name Forks, a town located on the Olympic Peninsula, for Darrington, and he changes the name of the rivers important for the novel. Similarly in his last novel, *Dark River*, there is no Dark River on the map of Arizona, and neither is Black Mountain. Instead we can find the Black River near the White Mountain Apache Reservation.

There are two places that repeatedly appear in the novels and that have a prominent position in Owens's writing: Mississippi and California. His autobiographical essays show that the importance of the places comes from his personal attachment to them. Owens was born in California and until the age of seven his family frequently moved between these two places. In his novels, Mississippi is portrayed as the cultural background for his Choctaw protagonists who perceive it as a true home. It is depicted as dark and humid, with the impenetrable Yazoo River flowing through the center of the place. California, on the other hand, is portrayed as a dry, open place full of light. The protagonists do not develop a deeper attachment to the place. In *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game*, California is connected with danger and violence and the protagonist retreats to Mississippi to draw his strength to be able to face its dangers. In *Wolfsong*, California is portrayed as an entirely different world to the protagonist's home in Forks, Washington. It is a place where he feels estranged and where he does not fit. Although he is encouraged to go back to California, he does not have any intention to return.

The analysis shows that places have powerful presence in the novels. It is achieved through detailed description and character interaction with place. This is especially evident in *Wolfsong* where Owens portrays place as another character with a distinct voice. Tom Joseph, the protagonist, develops a deep awareness of the wilderness and learns to comprehend its delicacy and the messages that it conveys. It leads him to a struggle to protect the wilderness against development that would be devastating and would induce placelessness. In *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game*, the place that is portrayed as the most powerful is Cole McCurtain's former home in the Yazoo region in Mississippi. Its quality is reinforced by the presence of two traditional elders, Onatima Blue Wood and Uncle Luther, who live in close touch with the place and represent the principle of reciprocity. *Nightland* sees the protagonist and the place interconnected from the beginning of the novel. They influence each other and the protagonist reflects the lack of life of the place. Finally, in *Dark River*, the protagonist falls in love with the river which lays claim to the surrounding land and people.

One of the most significant elements found in Owens's novels is the constant presence of water. It is mostly represented by rivers. In each of the novels there is a river that dominates the environment and that has a role in the story. It is the Yazoo River in Mississippi that gives the character to the surrounding environment. In California it is the Salinas River which is dry most of the year—an underground river, as Owens calls her in *The Sharpest Sight*—and which once a year floods the area and cleanses it with a substantial force. In *Dark River*, set in Arizona, Owens works with two rivers, the Dark and the White. The White River flowing through the reservation is polluted and damaged, while the Dark is a fast and clear stream running through the wilderness. The setting in *Wolfsong* is affected by the constant rains in the North Cascades National Park. Again Owens integrates rivers into the narrative: The Stillaguamish and Sauk Rivers. The protagonist often alludes to them and comments on their character. The rivers are used as a means of giving the wilderness a voice. They call the protagonist by his name and assist in guiding him in his search for his Stehemish identity. The only novel in which Owens does not work with a river is *Nightland* which is set in the dry landscape of New Mexico. The end of the novel, however, sees a heavy storm that cleanses the place and helps to restore the land to its former quality. *Nightland* is, at the same time, Owens's only novel where he works with his Cherokee ancestry.

All Owens's protagonists are portrayed as displaced characters struggling with their identity. Owens shows that identity and sense of place are intertwined and that one cannot exist without the other. It is the quest of the protagonists to establish a sense of place, or to update it, and assume a Native American identity. Tom, in *Wolfsong*, realizes that through understanding the wilderness and establishing a sense of place there he can reunite with his spiritual guide, the wolf spirit. Cole McCurtain finds at the end of *Bone Game* that his place is at the "frontier" which Owens understands as the place of the mixedblood, and which is constantly changing and being redefined. Will in *Nightland* adopts a Cherokee point of view of the land based on reciprocity and with it the Cherokee identity. In *Dark River*, the mixedblooded Choctaw protagonist Jake Nashoba struggles with his identity and with developing a proper sense of place in an Apache community. With the help of other Indian characters, he identifies as an Indian and becomes part of the Apache stories of the place. In the final scene, he is literally part of the place when a giant spider draws him into the earth. By that Owens demonstrates that characters do not have to return home to realize their identity. Nevertheless, his novels show that their protagonists find it increasingly harder to establish a sense of place.

Experiencing sense of place also affects character's actions. When there is an absence of the link to place and the Indian characters are not trying to establish it, they tend to be misguided. Such characters are Billy Keen, Odessa Whitehawk, and Paco Ortega in *Nightland*. Billy, Will's closest friend, is portrayed as detached from the place. He refuses to learn about his Cherokee background and the tribal relationship to land and consequently he identifies with the white part of himself. When his attitude changes, it is too late and it cannot avert his destruction.

Establishing a sense of place and finding one's identity is related to home, an important place in all of the novels. Home is portrayed as a positive place, but the protagonists have to rearticulate their relationship to it, as all of them are more or less displaced from home. Only Will in *Nightland* finds home in the same place that had to be transformed and it leads him to a new way of occupying the place. In the rest of the novels, home is transplanted to another place. At the end of *Wolfsong*, Tom's home in Forks is disintegrating. After he finds his Stehemish identity he realizes that home for him becomes a bigger place that extends to the wilderness and is not limited to his former home in the valley. Home for Cole McCurtain is represented by the Yazoo region in Mississippi. His link to home is weakened after his long absence, but he

reattaches to this home at the end of *The Sharpest Sight*. In its sequel, *Bone Game*, he finds home in a different place, in New Mexico, accompanied by his daughter and her partner. And finally, Jake feels removed from his home in Mississippi in *Dark River*, but in the end finds his home in the stories of the local community.

Owens also takes into account the history of place, as it contributes to its character. This is especially observable in *Nightland* and *Bone Game*. Both novels are set in places that witnessed colonial violence. In *Bone Game*, the violent murders of females on university campus awake the spirit of the Ohlone Indian Venancio Asisara who was killed for the murder of a Spanish missionary tormenting local Indians. Although Venancio is recognized by the protagonist, and so the injustice inflicted upon the Native inhabitants is acknowledged, his spirit does not leave the place and keeps referring to the cruelty of the colonists. In *Nightland*, Will is able to sense violence in the earth when he touches it and simultaneously learns of a group of Apache Indians massacred by a nearby spring. Although he helps to appease the dead Apaches who were buried in the land, the dead do not leave the place. Owens shows in these two novels that although the past was acknowledged, it is still bound to the place.

Thanks to that Owens demonstrates that places have effect on his characters not only as locations with physical properties, but as places filled with meanings. The Indian characters are often portrayed as having the ability to "feel" the place—their character, their past, and their significance. Apart from the violence in the place that Will and Cole are able to perceive, Jake in *Dark River* feels the evil of the casino build on the tribal grounds and is repelled by the place. Furthermore, Tom in *Wolfsong* realizes that the university campus in California where he studies is built on an Indian burial ground. He notices that the dead Indians wish not to be disturbed and that they make the people staying in the place ill. At the same time Tom recognizes the significance of the sacred mountain of his tribe that informs the tribal members about their position in the world.

The last attribute of place in Owens's novels is its relation to survival of the Indian characters. Owens portrays his protagonists as Native Americans who are not doomed to past or disappearance. Their survival is always connected with their ability to live meaningfully in a place and their ability to understand that places are never pieces of a virgin land, but that their past may influence their contemporary lives. In order to survive, the protagonists have to overcome their individualism. This theme develops since *Wolfsong* where Tom is "a one man tribe" and has to rely solely on himself. In his

later novels, Owens demonstrates that in order to survive the protagonists have to move from individualism to reestablishing relationships with their family, community, and the environment. Owens advocates reciprocal relationship with the environment that is based on respect towards the natural world. His characters realize that places need protection against ruthless damage and that their survival depends on how they act in the places where they live. This is another aspect of Owens's fiction that leads the protagonists into understanding their place in the world.

Resumé

Tato práce se zabývá analýzou místa v románech amerického indiánského autora a literárního kritika Louise Owense (1948–2002). Cílem práce je identifikovat a popsat klíčová místa, se kterými Owens ve svých románech pracuje. Owensovo dílo se pohybuje na rozmezí mezi indiánskou literaturou a literaturou Euroamerickou a díky tomu čerpá z obou literárních tradic. V jeho chápání místa však převažuje indiánské pojetí, ve kterém se projevuje nadpřirozeno a které chápe místo a člověka jako neoddělitelné části. Každé takové místo má význam pro jedince i pro komunitu, do které patří.

Jako teoretické východisko pro zkoumání místa jsem zvolila pojetí kulturní geografie, ve kterém jsou místa utvářena lidskou činností a jsou centrem bezprostřední zkušenosti se světem. Místo není určeno pouze svojí lokací a fyzickými vlastnostmi, ale je výsledkem vlivu prostředí, zasazení do krajiny, lidskou přítomností a vztahy, které lidé vytváří mezi sebou a k danému místu. Místa jsou jedinečná díky svému spojení s určitými lidskými záměry, postoji a zážitky. Ovlivňují člověka a člověk zpětně ovlivňuje místa svojí činností a svými postoji. Důležitý je význam místa pro jedince („sense of place“) a jeho vztah či příslušnost k místu („attachment to place“). Místa mohou být spojována s konkrétním příběhem, což ve větším měřítku dává vzniknout jakési neviditelné mapě příběhů, která se ke krajině váže a která je často postřehnutelná pouze těmi, kdo na určitém místě prožili delší část svého života. Znalost těchto příběhů přispívá k prohloubení vztahu k místu a jeho významu pro člověka. Toto pojetí místa má blízko k chápání místa americkými Indiány. Příběhy jsou důležitou součástí jejich kultury a umožňují jim porozumět vlastnímu místu na světě.

Ačkoliv se Owens považoval za Indiána, jeho původ byl smíšený. Mezi jeho předky patřili Čerokíové, Čoktóové, Cajunové, Walesané a také Irové. Owens ve svých románech vždy vychází z vlastních zkušeností s místy, ve kterých se pohyboval, a proto bylo nutné představit autorovu biografii. Owens se narodil v Kalifornii v roce 1948, ale krátce po jeho narození se jeho rodina přesunula do Mississippi, odkud pocházel jeho otec. Do svých sedmi let se s rodinou často pohyboval mezi Mississippi a Kalifornií, a to převážně kvůli nedostatečnému materiálnímu zázemí v Mississippi, nedostatku finančních prostředků, pracovním příležitostem pro jeho otce a úniku před věřiteli. V Owensových sedmi letech se jeho rodina usadila v Kalifornii více méně trvale. Obě

tato místa, Mississippi a Kalifornie, značně ovlivňují Owensovu prózu a objevují se takřka ve všech jeho románech. Mississippi je zachyceno jako zázemí či domov, kam se hlavní hrdinové vrací načerpat síly a uvědomují si vlastní indiánskou identitu. I když je toto místo fyzicky popisováno jako tmavé, zarostlé a provlhlé přítomností kalné a pomalu tekoucí řeky Yazoo, je spojováno s vnitřním světlem. Kalifornie s tímto místem kontrastuje. Owens ji zobrazuje jako otevřené, suché místo plné světla, ale často jej paradoxně spojuje s násilím. V Kalifornii se jeho hlavní postavy musí vzepřít zlu, které je v tomto místě přítomné. Zároveň Kalifornie působí jako katalyzátor, který nutí jeho postavy najít identitu.

Owensův první román, *Wolfsong* (1991) je zasazen do amerického státu Washington. Román pracuje s několika důležitými místy: městečkem Forks, Kalifornií, domovem a divočinou. Zásadní roli zde hraje divočina Národního parku North Cascades. Divočině Owens v románě propůjčil hlas a vykreslil ji jako důležitou postavu. Pro účely románu Owens vytvořil fiktivní indiánský kmen „Stehemish“, který je založen na kultuře Selišů. Do tohoto kmene patří také hlavní postava, Tom Joseph. Tom se snaží zabránit stavbě dolu uprostřed divočiny, protože divočina je posvátným místem jeho kmene. Tom zároveň přestává vnímat rodné údolí jako domov, což je zobrazeno postupným rozpadem domu Tomovy rodiny. Dům se postupně sesouvá a dává prostor divočině, aby si zpět vzala místo, které dočasně obývali lidé. Díky pobytu v divočině Tom pochopí vlastní příslušnost ke kmeni, vlastní identitu, a také to, že pravým domovem je pro něj právě tato divočina, která je zobrazena jako plná života. Skrze postavu Tomova strýce Luthera Owens poukazuje také na nevhodné oficiální vymezení divočiny v americkém právu. To definuje divočinu jako místo, kde člověk dlouhodobě nepřebývá, ale pouze ji krátkodobě navštěvuje. Toto pojetí nepočítá s přítomností Indiánů, neboť ti tato místa obývali již před začátkem kolonizace a divočina pro ně představovala přirozené místo k životu. Ve svých esejích na téma divočiny se Owens také zamýšlí nad tím, že vytvořením zákonem chráněné divočiny člověk přestává dbát o místa, ve kterých žije, protože již pro něj ztratila atribut čistoty a neposkvrněnosti. Dále ukazuje, že společnost staví divočinu a místa obývaná a užívaná člověkem do opozice, jež neprospívá ani jednomu z těchto míst. Owensovy eseje tak doplňují románové sdělení.

V následujících dvou románech, *The Sharpest Sight* (1992) a v jeho pokračování *Bone Game* (1994) se objevuje tatáž hlavní postava, Cole McCurtain, a romány se odehrávají převážně na stejných místech v Kalifornii a Mississippi. Cole je Owensova

nejvíce autobiografická postava a i pojetí míst v těchto románech do značné míry odpovídá autorovu vlastnímu vztahu k těmto místům. Oblast řeky Yazoo v Mississippi odkud pochází Cole, je zobrazena jako zázemí a jako místo, kde mají Indiáni rozhodující vliv. V Kalifornii se Cole setkává s násilím, které ohrožuje na životě přímo jeho nebo jeho dceru Abby. Je to místo, kam je v obou románech zasazen konflikt, i když konkrétní místa jsou jiná. V *The Sharpest Sight* se děj odehrává v blízkosti města Amarga, zatímco v *Bone Game* Cole pracuje jako profesor literatury na Kalifornské univerzitě v Santa Cruz, stejně jako autor. Jedním z úkolů, které Cole v obou románech má, je porozumět vlastní identitě, protože jeho kořeny sahají do různých kultur. Na konci románu *Bone Game* Cole zjistí, že se nejlépe může ztotožnit s místem hranice („frontier“) mezi indiánským a bělošským světem. Toto místo se neváže na žádnou konkrétní fyzickou lokaci a funguje jako myšlenkový konstrukt, jenž dokáže vystihnout jeho komplexní původ. Je to pohyblivé, dynamické místo, vyžadující neustálé redefinice. Zároveň se pojí s komplexní indiánskou identitou, kterou Owens označuje termínem „mixedblood“. Člověk s touto identitou je nedefinovatelný díky svým komplexním indiánským, bělošským, či dalším kořenům. Owens tím vyzdvihuje výhodnost pozice na okraji více kultur, ve kterých se člověk dokáže orientovat a podílet se na nich.

V následujícím románě, *Nightland* (1996), v jako jediném Owens pracuje se svými Čerokézkými kořeny. Děj románu se odehrává ve vyprahlé krajině Nového Mexika na dvou sousedících farmách Willa Strikera a Billyho Keena. Důležitým aspektem románu je postoj těchto postav k místu, který se odvíjí od pochopení tradičního kmenového vztahu k zemi. Will je ochoten naslouchat vyprávění čerokézkých příběhů a moudrosti stařešiny Siquaniho a díky tomu v průběhu románu dokáže tento tradiční vztah pochopit. Naproti tomu jeho přítel Billy se identifikuje s bílým světem a o tento vztah se nestará. To nakonec vede k jeho smrti, zatímco Will je schopný bránit se intrikám a manipulacím Owensovy nejnebezpečnější indiánské hrdinky Odessy Whitehawkové a v sebeobraně ji zneškodnit. Owens zobrazuje postavu Willa jako úzce spjatou s místem již od začátku románu. Místo jej fyzicky ovlivňuje. Will ztrácí díky dlouholetému suchu vitalitu. Jeho úkolem je pomoci obnově tohoto místa, což se mu nakonec s pomocí ostatních postav podaří a dovede ho to i k uspořádání jeho osobního života. Owens v románě také rozebírá otázku historie tohoto místa a označuje jeho současnou degradaci za důsledek násilí, které se na místě odehrálo. Will se dozvídá o masakru skupiny Apačů španělskými dobyvateli blízko

místního pramene. Po tomto incidentu z okolí začala mizet voda. V průběhu románu postavy zjistí, že mrtví Apači jsou pohřbeni u pramene a vodu zadržují. Jejich usmířením dochází k regeneraci místa. Přesto však zůstávají s místem spjati, čímž Owens poukazuje na fakt, že historie místa nemůže být odňata a nadále zůstává s místem spojená. V románě se Owens také zabývá zobrazením amerického Západu ve westernu a nesouhlasí s pojetím Indiánů jako národem odsouzeným k zániku. Zároveň redefinuje zobrazování amerického Západu jako místa bez historie.

Poslední Owensův román, *Dark River* (1999), se odehrává ve fiktivní apačské komunitě Black Mountain ve státě Arizona. Hlavní postavou je Jake Nashoba, postava, se kterou se Owens vrací zpět ke kultuře kmene Čoktóů. Tato postava je však ještě více vykořeněná než všichni Owensovi předchozí hlavní hrdinové. Jake je vzdálen svému domovu v Mississippi a žije na okraji komunity Apačů, která ho mezi sebe nepřijala. Ve svých postojích je pasivní a nevyvíjí snahu poznat více než jen fyzickou stránku místa. O příběhy Apačů, které se k místu váží, se nezajímá. Díky tomu zůstává oddělen od místa i od lidí, kteří v tomto místě žijí. V průběhu románu se Jake dostane do konfliktu se skupinou mužů, kteří bez povolení pobývají na chráněném území kmene a účastní se nelegálního polovojenského výcviku. Owens v tomto románě opět pracuje s žánrem a staví se proti žánrovému předurčení indiánských postav k záhubě, ať již okamžitou smrtí či postupným vymizením. Jake musí bojovat o vlastní přežití, i přežití dalších postav. Na konci románu je Jake vážně zraněn. Leží nehybně v otvoru mezi kořeny stromů, a ačkoliv nepozbývá vědomí, ztrácí možnost ovlivňovat vývoj děje. Jeho roli přebírá kmenový vypravěč příběhů Shorty Luke. Shorty má v komunitě Apačů pověst lupiče příběhů, protože se vždy stává hlavní postavou příběhů, jež vypráví. Díky tomu Jakeův příběh dokončí a zároveň mu umožní stát se součástí kmenových příběhů spjatých s místem. Tím Jakeovi pomůže integrovat se do místní mytologie. I v tomto románu tedy dochází k integraci hlavní postavy. Owens dále ukazuje rozdílnost pohledu na místo indiánských postav a bělochů. Postavy bělochů jsou místu odcizené a často na něj pohlíží s nepřátelstvím. Do místa promítají nové významy hrou na válku a realizací sklonů k násilí. Naproti tomu indiánské postavy místo důvěrně znají. Pro ně nepředstavuje odcizený prostor, a to ani pro Jakea, který pochází z jiného kmene. Jejich schopnost přistupovat k místu konstruktivním způsobem a jejich respekt k místu přispívají k vymanění se ze stagnace, která je jim připisována. To je nakonec dovede k přežití.

V Owensových románech můžeme sledovat určité tendence v pojetí místa. První z nich je Owensovo realistické přistupování k vykreslení místa. Ačkoliv ve dvou románech (*Wolfsong* a *Dark River*) používá smyšlené názvy pro reálně existující místa, jejich zachycení je věrné. Owensovy popisy zároveň odráží jeho vlastní zkušenost s těmito místy, kde pobýval v různých etapách svého života. Zachycuje Mississippi a Kalifornii, kde prožil mládí a později působil na univerzitě v Santa Cruz jako profesor, dále stát Washington a Arizonu, kde sezónně pracoval jako dřevorubec, hasič lesních požárů a ranger národního parku, a také Nové Mexiko, kde se usadil s rodinou a přednášel na univerzitě v Albuquerque.

Znakem Owensovy prózy je také počáteční odcizení hlavních postav od místa a jejich průběžné hledání identity, což jsou dva aspekty, které dává do souvislosti. Jeho postavy musí najít takový vztah k místu, který je dovede k jejich indiánské identitě. Díky tomu dokáží lépe pochopit význam míst a najít domov, ať již se jedná o konkrétní místo, jako například Mississippi či Nové Mexiko, nebo ideovou pozici, jíž je hranice mezi kulturami. Jeho postavy dokáží také pocitově vnímat aspekty místa, které nejsou fyzicky postihnutelné. Dokáží vycítit, že místo je zlé, nebo že se k místu váže nějaká minulost. Stejně tak vnímají významnost jiných míst, jako jsou například posvátná místa, nebo čistá místa v přírodě.

Důležitou součástí jeho románů je práce s vodním elementem a přírodním prostředím. Voda je důležitá pro všechny jeho hlavní postavy, ať již v podobě řeky anebo deště, a udává ráz místu, kterým prostupuje. Owens také ve všech románech pracuje s otázkou životního prostředí a lidského přežití ve společnosti, která nechápe svoji závislost na přírodních zdrojích a na zemi. Místo respektu k tomu, co umožňuje život, Owens ukazuje, že lidé v moderní společnosti žijí životem odcizeným od přírody a nevšímají si, že její postupná devastace představuje zkázu i pro ně samotné.

Owens ve svých esejích tvrdí, že v jádru jeho prózy jsou dvě zásadní otázky, na které se snaží najít odpověď: *Kdo jsem?* a *Jakým způsobem žiji na tomto místě?* Jeho hlavní postavy se snaží odpovědět na tyto otázky svojí smysluplnou existencí na určitém místě, která je dovede k přežití v současném světě.

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Anotace

The aim of the present dissertation is the analysis of place in novels by the Native American writer and scholar Louis Owens. The thesis starts with a theoretical discussion of the term "place" as it is understood by human geography. Place is defined as space that people made meaningful through their existence and experience. This notion of place corresponds with how places are understood in the life and literature of Native Americans. The exploration of place includes their physical location as well as character interaction with the places. The analysis indicates that place and sense of place play a major role in establishing identity of the characters, and that their ability to forge their identities in relation to place leads to their survival in the contemporary world.

Key words: place; sense of place; home; identity, Native American Literature; Louis Owens

Tato práce se zaměřuje na analýzu místa v románech amerického indiánského spisovatele a literárního kritika Louise Owense. První část práce vymezuje pojem „místa" z pohledu kulturní geografie. V tomto pojetí se místem rozumí prostor, který získává význam díky lidské činnosti a zkušenosti. Toto pojetí je v souladu s porozuměním místu americkými Indiány. V práci následně analyzuji Owensovy romány *Wolfsong* (1991), *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), *Bone Game* (1994), *Nightland* (1996) a *Dark River* (1999). Cílem analýzy je zjistit, jak autor pracuje s místy a zda se v jeho románech vyskytují společné tendence v přístupu k místu. Analýza se soustřeďuje na fyzická umístění míst stejně jako na vztah postav k místu. Z analýzy vyplývá, že místo a jeho význam pro jedince hrají zásadní roli v pochopení vlastní identity. Schopnost postav najít vlastní identitu ve vztahu k místu vede k jejich přežití v současném světě.

Klíčová slova: místo; význam místa; domov; identita; literatura amerických Indiánů; Louis Owens