

# *Transmotion*

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Special Issue: Ralph Salisbury, guest edited by James Mackay and A. Robert Lee



Ralph Salisbury, Eugene, Oregon, 1972. Photo: Barbara Drake.

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#### CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

*Transmotion* will publish new scholarship focused on theoretical, experimental, postmodernist, and avant-garde writing produced by Native American and First Nations authors, as well as book reviews on relevant work in Vizenor Studies and Indigenous Studies.

The broad use of Vizenor-created theoretical terms in many different academic fields (e.g. law, literature, anthropology, sociology, museum studies, etc.) highlights the fact that Vizenor Studies represents a significant interdisciplinary conversation within the broader field of Indigenous Studies. As such, the editors of *Transmotion* will look for submissions that do any of the following:

- Look at Vizenor's work directly, as well as the work of related authors and theorists in the field
- Employ Vizenor's theory to look at other writers
- Continue Vizenor's project of bringing together traditional indigenous knowledges and Asian or European continental philosophy
- Explore the inter-relation of image and text, art and literature, in Vizenor's work
- Contribute to recent developing conversations in contemporary Native American art and literature, in relation to questions of visual sovereignty, visuality, and ethics.
- Offer innovative, surprising, unexpected and creative critique of American Indian literatures or other creative arts
- Emphasize experimental, theoretical, and avant-garde Native North American work

The journal will also accept creative or hybrid work, provided that such work aligns aesthetically with the aforementioned editorial emphasis. The editors particularly welcome submissions of innovative and creative works that exploit digital media.

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Enquiries regarding submission are welcome and may be sent to the editors at [transmotionjournal@gmail.com](mailto:transmotionjournal@gmail.com). Scholarly articles should be 20-25 pages in length, prepared according to the MLA Style Manual. Creative work can be of any length. We are also very keen for scholars to put themselves forward as potential book reviewers and to volunteer to be anonymous peer reviewers.

Information regarding on-line submissions of full drafts can be found at:  
<http://journals.kent.ac.uk/index.php/transmotion/about/submissions#onlineSubmissions>

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## Introduction: Cherokee Modern

JAMES MACKAY

For the first time, *Transmotion* is dedicating its pages to the work of a single writer. Such dedicated issues used to be commonplace among academic journals with a cultural focus, but are now discouraged: indeed, some literary journals now state outright that they do not accept proposals for such a specific purpose. Undoubtedly there are some good reasons for such a policy. For instance, editors may feel that readers will be put off if they are not aware of or invested in the specific writer's work. Editors and publishers might also reasonably argue that special issues focussed on a philosophical question, an historical moment, or a branch of criticism serve to drive the field as a whole forward. Author-specific issues, in this telling, are at worst irrelevant and at best serve only the sort of canonisation that has proved toxic in Native American literary studies when it results in the same handful of writers being taught on every freshman course, and a small coterie of writers becoming seen as representative.

Yet, at their best, author-specific issues and collections also serve in their own way to drive debates. By allowing for a broad range of approaches to the subject at hand, they bring those approaches into conversation and serve as proof of concept for critical approaches to literatures. They also serve to deepen the general understanding of a writer by pushing readers into thinking through multiple approaches to their work. (I remember, for instance, a special issue on the work of Gerald Vizenor edited by Rodney Simard, now nearly three decades old, and the impact that reading an article on Vizenor's relationship with legal discourse had on my understanding of that writer). And while it is true that an overly narrow focus on a few writers might obscure the wealth of writing that is out there, a focus on a less well-known writer can have entirely

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the opposite result. All of which is to say that my co-editor A. Robert Lee and myself hope that this issue will inspire others to approach this journal with other ideas for single author issues focussed on neglected writers. And the writer that is the focus of this entire issue, Ralph Salisbury, has undoubtedly not received his critical due.

I wished my words were bullets  
when students intent  
in keeping "colored" out  
of public toilets and employment  
and from between white thighs  
made threatening  
to drive "one Niggerloving Cherokee Damyantee"  
out of town their ultimate argument  
in Beginning Logic.

- Ralph Salisbury, "Feeling Out of It" (*Light* 50)

Since some readers may not be fully familiar with Ralph Salisbury's work, some introduction is in order. The career begins with the poem "In the Children's Museum in Nashville," published in *The New Yorker* in 1961. This was a significant breakthrough for a writer placing Indigenous concerns squarely at the heart of his writing, and places him alongside Pauline Johnson, Lynn Riggs or Zitkála-Šá as writers who reached beyond an audience primarily interested in Native themes, well before various media events of the late '60's served to boost an entire generation. Ever since that time and until his death in 2017, Salisbury's voice was raised against racism, injustice, environmental destruction, the nuclear arms race and wars of all stripes. This mission is visible across his eleven collections of poetry, three of short stories, a memoir and, less

directly, in translations of Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, as well as in his service as a long-term editor of the *Northwest Review* and a mentor to many younger writers at the University of Oregon.

In his poetry, Salisbury has a genius at interleaving images in his poems, such as in the poem "Castration of the Herd-Boar Recollected Without Tranquillity, after Nagasaki," where the speaker's thoughts flicker between the memory of a morning on the farm, and the horrors committed by the US army in Asia: "our herd-board struck earth, a three hundred pound bomb's / explosions of dust becoming mud on my tongue" (*Light* 130). Indeed, much of his writing has the quality of a palimpsest, in which memories and reflections constantly change perceptions of the quotidian and everyday, haunted by the poet's knowledge of violence. In "American Suburb, War in Iraq", the handlebars of hastily discarded boys' bicycles become the horns of stags locked in conflict, reminding the speaker of the deaths that are occurring in the US invasion of Iraq, half way around the planet. Though the writing always has a clearly left-liberal bent, there is a complexity of interwoven consciousness and conscience that allows it to escape from any sort of programmatic quality, even when the poems deal directly with war, suffering and capitalism.

And there is also the fact that Salisbury's liberalism and rejection of violence is very far from being elitist or class-based. His hardscrabble rural childhood was, after all, spent in poverty in Iowa, in a family dominated by an alcoholic father unafraid to mete out violence to those weaker than him. In his memoir, *So Far, So Good* (2013), Salisbury sees himself and his eight-year-old brother in a photograph, where they "look like children in Prevent World Hunger posters, not near death from starvation but emaciated from hunger" (92). Later on the same page, he recalls a time when "my drunken father shot at or near my defiant mother," a time in which the nine or ten year



old Ralph had to talk his own father out of murdering his mother. This incident that recurs often in the poetry:

Bullets which splintered floor close to my toes  
when I was four and again as I cringed  
up to the gun to beg for my mother's life when I was ten  
hit home after my father, grown old and gentle, grew too old.  
("Elegy for a Father/Friend," *Light* 168).

As the final line here shows, the relationship softened over time, as the elder Salisbury became a doting grandfather. Much of Salisbury's work is inflected with this possibility of redemption, a lesson learned from the contrast between the happiness he felt as a child and his later comprehension of the violence and desperation in the adult world around him at that time. Equally, his belief in the potential of the State to effect goodness grew from his family's benefitting from the New Deal, while his frequent imagery of bullets, bombs and shrapnel is rooted in a military service during which he only barely avoided active combat between the end of World War II and the draft for Korea.

Much of his writing is also taken up with his consciousness of himself as Cherokee, the descendant of survivors of genocide, and the concomitant need to resist the Euro-American Imperium in all its guises. This self-identification as Cherokee may not sit well with everyone who works in Indigenous Studies, since Salisbury did not take up citizenship in either the Cherokee nor the Shawnee nations, was not close to a specific Native community, and was not aware of his ancestry until already into adulthood. Like N. Scott Momaday's mother Natachee, who had to "[begin] to see herself as Indian" (25), Salisbury identified much more strongly with his Cherokee

ancestry than was common among many people who have a family story of Indian ancestors. In his memoir, he records how this identification underpinned both his anti-racism and his nascent ecological consciousness, while in his poetry one finds frequent reference to Cherokee religious insight and knowledge. Most if not all of this must have come from books – James Mooney makes several appearances – and it is true that one would not study Salisbury for an authentic insider account of Cherokee community. Rather, the power of the poetry comes from hard work at craft, fuelled by a sense of responsibility to his Cherokee ancestors and to a cosmopolitan sense of being an Indigenous citizen of the world.

A Robert Lee begins this issue with a detailed overview of what he terms Ralph Salisbury's "writing-in," that ever inward circling into selfhood that concerns so much of the poet's memoristic work. He is followed up by Eleanor Berry, who in an act of close reading takes on Salisbury's experiments with syntax, demonstrating how the games these allow him to play with time and conscience allow him to create a complex, deeply ethical core to his vision. Next, Miriam Brown Spiers does due justice to the war experiences that so deeply shaped the writer, and the ways that Salisbury's war stories reveal a deep communitism in the work. Crystal Alberts, in a consideration of the earlier poetry, explores multiple resonances with and possible influences from the work of César Vallejo, including the "leaping" of images. Finally, but certainly not least among the peer-reviewed articles, Cathy Covell Waegner brings a transnational focus to the study of this "Indigenous humanist," examining the relationship Salisbury forged from his connections with Germany, the country he had been trained to bomb.

It has always been our intention in putting together such a collection that it would inspire others to further study of Ralph Salisbury. To that end, we are particularly happy to have been able to work with his life partner, Ingrid Wendt, no mean poet herself, to produce a brace of contributions that will prove significant resources for

further scholarship. The first, appearing in our "Reflections" series, is entitled "The Vetruvian Man and Beyond," and it provides an intimate, learned discussion of poetry and spirituality. The second, an interview with A. Robert Lee, is an informative and fascinating inside look at a life well lived. Finally, the issue finishes with a sampler of Ralph Salisbury's poems for readers who have not yet had the pleasure of reading his work.

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This issue also brings some changes in *Transmotion*. We are delighted to welcome Bryn Skibo-Birney onto the permanent team, where she will be taking over from James Mackay as the main book reviews editor. Bryn has been working with us for two years already on academic book reviews, and we're really delighted that she agreed to take on this further challenge. Another new arrival is Matt Kliewer of the University of Georgia, who will be working to improve our coverage of new Indigenous poetry in the book reviews section.

As regular readers may have noticed, we have also changed the font in which the journal is produced. The new font, Avenir Book, is a sans serif typeface that will hopefully improve your reading experience.

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standards: thus all articles are double-blind peer reviewed by at least two reviewers, and each issue approved by an editorial board of senior academics in the field (listed in the Front Matter of the full PDF and in the online 'About' section).



Ralph Salisbury (hiding behind hat on left) with hired man, Cliff Bailey, and siblings Ruth (lying on ground), Ray (standing), Rex (seated) and half-brother Robert (Bob) Wessels (seated on right). Photo taken in the fields of the family farm, Arlington, Iowa, 1933.

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## Electronic Computer and Stub Pencil: Poetry and the Writing-in of Ralph Salisbury

A. ROBERT LEE

On an electronic computer's memory chip I am writing about myself as a writer -- a dog chasing its own tail... Most of my poetry and much of my fiction has been composed with a stub pencil. The pencil a one-legged skater, trying not to stumble.

- *So Far, So Good* 186

The merest first reading of *So Far, So Good* (2013),<sup>1</sup> Ralph Salisbury's autobiography deservedly awarded the River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize, can leave little doubt of a life early to negotiate frequent challenge. The tough farm upbringing at the edge of Depression-era subsistence, for him as "third child of an Irish American mother and an English-Cherokee-Shawnee father" (5) and for his siblings in Fayette County, Iowa, meant the very threads of survival—under-nourishment, a dead child brother, winters, devoted parents and aunt but occasional paternal drink and gun violence.

A World War II enlistment in the US air force as specialist gunner, and which he joined under-age, not only promised to expose Salisbury to aerial bombardment of Germany (his war-service ultimately remained that of trainee) but made war a kind of persisting engram for him. The chance mis-registration that saved him from taking part in USAF missions in Korea becomes a related touchstone. An adulthood pledged to peace, Vietnam to Iraq, together with ecological activism, further put him on the line as did bouts with pneumonia and later with cancer and heart problems. Increasingly, the imperative to come to terms with the war and peace within his own life augments into confronting that of the world. But if all these factors situate Salisbury in the one unfolding of his life, so, quite as quintessentially,

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do connecting others. First has to be his "mixed race" (95) legacy in all its Old and New World spiral, its pride and yet vex. Although tribally un-enrolled, Caucasian (a term he favors) in appearance, and small of physique, he returns with self-aware frequency to his situating Native identity. "My immediate family's last-ditch Indian survivor" (242) he designates himself. "We Indians" he says, when writing of the 1992 quincentenary of Columbus's "discovery" of America (267). Yet for all the references to his sunrise prayers or to Cherokee traditions of sacred tobacco and respect for the seasons, and for his ancestral Cherokee grandmother, he has the honesty to ask "Am I still an Indian?" (241). In this he shares status with, say, Louis Owens or Jim Barnes, writers to whom indigenous legacy supplies reference and locale but who remained tribally un-enrolled. In an interview with the Danish scholar Bo Schöler in 1985 Salisbury speaks, if a little tendentiously, of Native "regional" authorship:

Native American writers are part of the new regionalist movement. Thus we will be grouped with, for instance, Scandinavian Americans who are coming up more in awareness of their regional cultures, as are all ethnic groups in America. (33)

The other factor, and that to which this essay gives its emphasis, lies in the call to literary authorship. The recall of boyhood creativity, the jottings and small drawings, point to the eventual larger resolve of "my writer's urge to tell the truth" (196), aided in kind by his Kentucky father's itinerant stories and five-string banjo songs, and by fondest second marriage to his writer-wife Ingrid Wendt. Contemplating the course of this personal pathway in the light of a re-found photograph he observes with some poignancy:

A nineteen-year-old bomber crewman, only a year from beginning his writing career, yields to an eighty-two-year-old writer of poetry and prose. (265)

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Other way-stations related to acts of writing equally feature, whether teacher training at the North Iowa Teachers College, studies on the GI Bill for an MFA in 1951 at the University of Iowa with Robert Lowell as one of his mentors, or the follow-on into different professorships, but, most of all, in English and creative writing at the University of Oregon (1960-1994). Likewise, the Rockefeller-Bellagio award and residency by Lake Como adds its weight, as do Fulbright professorships in Norway and Germany and each further European trip. There can be added the USIS lectureship in India, editorship of *Northwest Review* (1965-70), co-translations with Harold Gaski of the Sami poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, and each public and campus reading.

Computer or stub pencil, prose or verse, Salisbury acknowledges authorial possession of his life's trajectory to have been an abiding impetus. Authorship, even so, was not to mean some mere exercise in self-reflexivity, though there would be self-reflexivity involved. That holds across the eleven poetry volumes, for which *Light from a Bullet Hole: Poems New and Selected 1950-2008* (2009) acts as representative anthology, and the three story-collections for which *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin* (2009) and its title-piece especially provides a trove. Each major fold of event finds address in *So Far, So Good*, but so, inerasably, does the overlap with how and why he becomes the poet and story-writer.

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The process of "re-authoring" the timeline from birth to war marks the very opening page of his autobiography:

Bullet-shattered glass clattering onto my baby bed. I awake and cry, into darkness, for help.

Do I remember this? Or do I remember being told? I will feel it, whichever it is. I will feel it, chill bomb-bay wind buffeting my eighteen-year-old body, a mile above an old volcano's jagged debris; feel it, seeing photos of Jewish concentration camp children, huddled together for warmth, photos



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of Korean orphans, huddled together, homeless in blizzard after American bombing – bombing in which, twenty-five, I had refused an order to join. (1) If the self-queries given here link childhood to adulthood, drive-by Iowa shooting to Nazi camp and wartime Korea, they also reflect the author taking hold of his creative latitudes and longitudes ("Do I remember this... or being told?"). How, runs the implicit accompanying question, to assume authority of word, coordinating literary voice? The issue of the *figura* of Salisbury as the writer behind, and within, his own body of texts, clearly operates throughout, as much his way of situating himself as "mixed" Midwestern farm-boy or airman or even professor. *So Far, So Good*, for all the plentiful life-history it supplies, also incorporates full indication of his literary calling.

Salisbury also registers the detail of his life, especially the emphasis he gives to his boyhood, in terms wholly aware of how life-writing like *So Far, So Good* creates its own kind of fiction. Self-interrogation enters early when he speaks in his Prologue of starting "most days for most of my life... trying to write. Why?" (3). He alleges *So Far, So Good* best be understood in the teasing phraseology of "a hop-skip-and-jumps-and- maybe-some-dancing-memoir" (4). "Imagination" is to be apostrophized as "shield," the solvent for "free association, spontaneity, a wholeness of moment, a union of past and present" (4). In other words, if this is to be a line-graph of actual autobiography it is equally to be responded to for its performative elasticity. The risk could have been of over-consciousness. In fact, it makes for considerable density and layering.

Ruminatively, and with *So Far, So Good* as his "not-too-soon-to-end Cherokee-Shawnee Death Song," he ponders his English name-heritage and pitches himself as "the Shakespeare of pig-food bearers... a post-Elizabethan word magician" (15). As though in ancestral affiliation and a reflection of his own call to word, he equally gives praise to Sequoia for his Cherokee "written symbols" (39). Working repairs to his present-time house cause him to remember the electricity-

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less family farm and the “several books written with pencil” (60) in anticipation of those composed on computer screen. Avian reference, with its implication of literary flight, aligns bird and bomber, air and earth (“I can’t remember when I began to dream of exploring Earth by flying,” 79). He profiles himself as “fifteen-year-old bookworm” (130) whose youth-time rescue of two drowning girls links to “what compels me to write” (133), namely life-saving as though mirrored in their literal and figurative senses.<sup>2</sup>

Even one of his severest dramas, that of the eighteen-year-old armorer precariously helping save fellow crew-members from likely death when an in-flight bomb slips its casing, comes under his self-circling “have I exaggerated?” (163). The question plays into the overall creative awareness of deploying keyboard and pencil:

By now I am so modern I have become addicted to a computer keyboard for creating prose, but for poems, elusive as deer among dawn mists, my rifle is a stub pencil, like those with which I first drew cowboys and Indians and other combatants and like those with which my father recorded the days the bull was observed in the act of creating calves. (240)

*So Far, So Good* gives a full enough repertoire in situating Salisbury within mixed Native and white identity, along with the economics of class, European and Asian war, the university and its customs, peace activism, and always the ancestry of Cherokee and fellow tribes. Markers range from the Sand Creek Massacre to Hiroshima, *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Red Badge of Courage*. These, Salisbury concludes in sum, constitute “my memories of life flowing into the computer screen” (272). They do so, however, in a way such that the overall serial refracts his rite of progression into poetry and authorship, the outrider determinedly written-in by his own insider.

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To turn from *So Far, So Good* to the poetry is to become sharply aware of how much of this pattern of self-figuration inheres for Salisbury, whether in the context of his take on Native identity, or early family Iowa, or war, or ecology, or the role of poetry. The voicing of each, allowing for how they inevitably also filter the one into the other, links always into the image of himself as the writer under near-destined summons. Each poem, in kind with his storytelling, bears this kind of hallmark as if always the writer is, to the one degree or another yet without over-intrusion, writing himself.

Salisbury's Native-white genealogy, incontestably, gives a major pivot to this writing-in, not least when localized in "A Declaration, not of Independence" which opens *Rainbows of Stone* (2000). There he summons birthright in the wryest of terms:

Apparently I'm Mom's immaculately-conceived  
Irish-American son, because,  
Social-security time come,  
My Cherokee dad could not prove he'd been born. (3)

This is Salisbury as mock-Jesus, the bureaucratic de-legitimization of his Native father the quite shrewdest taunt. One suspects, too, the implied wider irony. Tribal peoples unable to offer paper certification of birth obliquely shadows the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 with its almost surreal conferring of their "right" to Americanization. In life and writing, Cherokee signature for Salisbury, whatever the family attenuations and acknowledgement of Anglo and Irish roots, recurs for him as an inescapably situating point of reference. It may well have done so the more given his ability to pass for white. At the same time, and nothing if not again self-situatingly, *So Far, So Good* serves to remind of his insistence on the inadequacy of versions of himself as somehow un-whole: "I am a Cherokee/Shawnee-English-Irish person, not part this part that but all everything, whatever that is" (242).

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"A Declaration" profitably segues into "An Indian Blows Up Mt Rushmore and Indianizes What Cannot Be Resanctified," another opening poem, this time drawn from *Like The Sun in Storm* (2012). The effect conjured is one of the imagined dismantling of each "Father of Their Country" presidential head, carved by Gutzon Borglum, white supremacist Klan supporter in his time, from Black Hills granite. This is settler history's "Rushmore" word-inverted into "Rush Less. Not More" (4) and "Thanksgiving" likewise into "Thanks-taking Day" (4). Jefferson has become "marble-wigwamed," Lincoln emancipated by "Indian-Giving generations" (4). It is also a poet's riposte. Teddy Roosevelt as Rough Rider gives way to Salisbury or his persona as "Rough Writer" (4). If "Vanishing American" pervades, then "Native American" contests, and repudiates, that cliché through "tongue petroglyphs" and "pow-wowing ears" (4). Salisbury manages a deft contra-dance; "Make Peace Not War" (4) becomes his requiem to tribal dispossession in "the shadows of desecrated peaks" (4), and yet at the same time tribal continuance and to which through his own scripts and its reader-listeners he envisages his shared contribution.

The gallery is as various as frequent. "Being Indian" in *Rainbows of Stone* focuses attention on the evolving complication of mixed Native heritage. The opening of "Who we were seemed simple when gun/dropped meat onto plates" (5) yields to the poet's father, provoked into a killing and probable life imprisonment "if a lawyer had not convinced the governor / to pardon an Indian" (5). In turn a personal shelf of memory gathers of a Cherokee "Granny's apples and tales", of "road snow, mud or dust, from my parents' farm," and the library-learning of "colonial tyranny" (5). Each, on the poem's evolving disclosure, has played its part in his mixedblood entry "into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century" (5). Little surprise, perhaps, that Salisbury's closing line asserts "being what I was [was] not ever simple again" (5).

"A Rainbow of Stone," the collection's near-title poem, brings a yet fuller Native diorama into view, the universe of "Thunder's home" and "Creation" to be remembered against "factories smoking guns... a bomber" (65). One order of

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planetary being has incriminatingly yielded to another, that of "my Cherokee people's buffalo, deer / plantations, even our holy town, / Echota" to "crime, monoxide, disease, and other city uncertainties" (65). If a right balance can be restored, a four-directions-full human ecology as it were, then in the poet's eye "the whole earth will be toe-to-toe / rainbows" (66). Thunder God and "your home" so again can phase into Nature's right equilibrium. The poem situates Salisbury in visionary mode, modern versifier yet also aspiring indigenous seer.

A similar ambition of scale holds for "A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Cherokee Farewell to Arms" (26-7). Child fantasies of becoming a tribal warrior supply a juncture, disconcertingly, with the allied World War II bombing of Dresden and follow-up in atomic Japan. The poem then veers back from what might have been "oxygen" or "cherry blossom," the end to "killing skills" (26) whether past or still in prospect:

the screams of victims to be  
the screams of Cherokee tortured and massacred – and  
of all the people who have ever been or will be  
lovers or killer. (27)

The lines convey Salisbury's wary lamentation born out of his own emplacement within modern war but, quite as equally, within the haunt of Native history.

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The first years of Salisbury's life serve his poems as a form of lattice, not only actual self-history but as the very genesis of his vocation as poet. The Preface to *Rainbows of Stone* (2000) gives a succinct gloss:

I need to recall the vanishing farming and hunting traditions with  
which I was raised. They are the landmarks I need if I am to keep to  
the Medicine Path I feel is mine. (i)

These beginnings supply requisite footfalls and echoes throughout the volume. Alimentation becomes its own drama in "Of Pheasant and Blue-Winged Teal" ("Dad's killed / buffalo, deer and bear, respectfully," 10). Prairie homestead and

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weather presides in "Without Thunder" ("Twelve, I was shocked out of dreams by what / whatever makes thunder had done to the barn," 18). Farm animals and their role are remembered in "Unloading" ("two huge geldings hauling home, easily, the mountain of hay my aching arms had raised," 21). The killing of a predatory weasel presages other and later war-killing in "Frost Baby Harp Seal Pelt" ("blizzard-drift shape I clubbed / And pried out of trap-teeth baited / With guts of victim-chicken," 96). The poetry wholly un-sentimentalizes the legacy. Farming and hunt emerge as indeed the family's spare terms of survival with Salisbury, the real but also figurative presence of the boy-poet, put to steer his way through, and beyond, them.

Quite one of Salisbury's most affecting poems in this regard is to be met in *Rainbows of Stone's* "A Harvesting," with its link between seasonal just-about subsistence and the poet's imaginative crop from his past. Taking its point of departure from an image of growth in the shape of a fern frond "Curling around a finger of air" (117), the poem moves on to the poet's dead musician father "strumming / iced vines above his grave... English, Irish and Cherokee tunes." (117). This is the father whose "trigger-finger" and "hunt / for food, for generations" (117) embodies life-will, the refusal of defeat. One almost thinks of Breugel's "The Hunters in the Snow," dogs, snow, light. For if the lines bespeak a starker world, one of under-nutrition and necessity, they also point to the poet's "harvesting with tongue, then pen" and to "feasting, dancing, courting again begun" (117). The balance is finely struck, the two kinds of crop "harvested" and celebrated with the poet as mediating presence.

Emphasis, however, falls time and again upon remembered eat-or-die survival in the face of odds and which will through the course of Salisbury's writing segue into his anti-war life ethos. A poem like "For my Daughter, 10 Then and Now 11" gives voice to exactly those connections. Set "on this farm / my home / I've returned to" (78) it conjures back from past time "wild dogs tearing sheep / to self-sopping rags / when I was ten" and "our dog fleeing from a rabid skunk / around

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and around our yard / until Dad's shot" (78). The prevailing memory, however, lies in helping birth the calf "I pulled out of the heifer's gene-narrowed young withers" (78). This scene of utter life, even if the obstetric calf is likely destined for the butcher's "no doubt rusted to dust by now blade" and bombers gnaw the air like "enormous rats," links to life's obduracy (78). The metaphor he deploys perfectly encodes this will to life "like leaves of corn / growing towards ripening," (78) whether that of his "safe-for-now daughter" or that of himself (78).

Immediate ancestry finds memorial fashioning in "Family Stories and One Not Told" from the 2009 collection *Light from a Bullet Hole* ("Our Irish mother's tongue," "Dad's... pipe smoke tethering in our ears," "Great Grandmother... her Cherokee-Shawnee braid loosened at last" 29). It does again in "To My Mother's Father" as chronicled by "Your grandson, his family visiting done, / on his way home" (218). "For My Sister," she, too, as he thinks of her at the family homestead in later age, is remembered for "hair gray as the shingles of the farm" (34-5). Whether the voices of family, or scant mealtimes and farm accidents to his brothers, plough horses and seedtime, rabbits and gophers, school-going and winter snow, Salisbury's beginnings press hard. The imaginative force of writing himself in from early family life seized from farm and hunt can be little doubted: it bespeaks the very fibers of his formation as person and poet.

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War and peace, as "Green Smoke" in *Rainbows of Stone* underscores, conjoin in the B-24 bomb episode that continues to haunt him:

And yes, eighteen, I saved eight men.  
 Nine if I count myself,  
 Corraling a bomb banging wild like a colt  
 Against our own bomb-bay, and now I'm a poet  
 And try to save everything  
 I love. (28)

The framing oppositions do immediate figurative duty. "It's World War Two again" is tethered to "now I'm a poet" (28). The black death-threat of the "bomb-bay" grates against the regenerative green growing around the "graves of some friends" (28). The poet, awakened at "six in the morning" by long distance phone-news of a downed crewman who shares his own exact name and who has been saved by The Rescue Squadron, tracks back to his own near-destruction aboard the training plane. The one happenstance meets another. Time-present tracks back into time-past. East Coast Atlantic gives way to Oregon Pacific. The poet, arisingly, sees himself the by-chance rescuer of the living. Humane, custodial, un-clichéd, it can be thought symptomatic of Ralph Salisbury's insistent stance for life over death.

This same event again finds remembrance in "A Bomber Crewman's Dance Around the Dead," one of the highly personal war poems gathered in *Blind Pumper at the Well: Poems From My 80<sup>th</sup> Year* (2008) and whose section-heading Salisbury entitles in upper case: "WAR: DECLARATIONS, EVOICATIONS AND CONDEMNATIONS" (38). The poet's precarious "18-year-old self," dangling "from a catwalk two miles / of freezing air about peaks" seeks to un-jam a wayward shackle with its bomb-load attached (38). The detail is insistently physical, raw hands on steel, the chilled body poised over a bomb that "could instantly kill eight, / including me" (38). Were the "safety wire – a copper cobra" (38) to rip those, too, at ground-level below might die. The task, however, its altitude and daring once negotiated, brings back into view the plane's basic purpose:

...bomb

and bomber were joined in unholy matrimony,  
not to be put asunder, until  
divorce would tell  
a story, with no ending. (38)

Salisbury's metaphor of marital joining and breakage, the prospect of bomb released from bomber, acts as both memory and forewarning. The poet himself may



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well have dangled, but so does humankind in its sundered "story" of quite un-ended warring.

These poems have their company across the Salisbury oeuvre. Family and war have their outlet in "War on, One Brother, Sixteen, and I, Try to Be Men" (82). Harking back to the farm's "corn-stalk-cutting machine," and its ability to "slice me into bacon strips" as he works the land with the brother who will become his "soldier-brother," he creates a contrast of not one but two kinds of machine (82). The earlier, culled from "68 years" of back-memory, invokes "planting," albeit itself dangerous with horse-reins gripped and mud underfoot. The other, with his brother in military service, invokes the un-planting implicit in a "war-besotted world" (82). Both kinds of hazard count but rarely more so than in the willed condition of armed conflict.

If Salisbury queries so-called "Indian Wars" in poems like "Canyon de Chelly," be it in frontier America's "name of civilization" or in conquistador Spain's "name of the Virgin," so his poetry alights on modernity's unrelieved penchant for military violence (48). A quartet from *Blind Pumper at the Well* bid for consideration. "Old German Woman, Some Wars" envisages an aged American poet helping an even more aged German "survivor of bombs" as she descends from a tram (40). The both of them carry war-history: he in his remembrance of bomb revenge for Britain's World War II Coventry, she of the Reich's marching soldiers. He ends literally in askance at his own once-again writing-in ("my fate to live to write to be / ignored, or read, by all / I would love to save," 40). The contrast of two different sites accrue in "A Cherokee Airman Remembers Two Wars" (41); one the Trail of Tears forced removal of the Cherokee in the 1830s and, in a time-leap forward, the bombing of Laos and other Asia in the 1960s. Salisbury writes as though inside his own double or even own double-double, the once tribal warrior of the Mississippi basin, the future high-tech warrior embroiled in the Mekong predations, "the moment's shade," (41).

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"My Country Again Threatening Aggression (This time, for oil in Iraq)" shifts into yet more contemporary terrain (29). "Our crusaders," this time, have become corporate bankers whose Middle East appetite has again led into war and with it the desecration of "the union of women and men – and children – with earth" (29). Natural resources have become unnatural, oil as ultimate "ocean" available only as war currency and to go un-thanked and un-uncelebrated "in cathedral / or temple or mosque" (29). "A Nightmare After 9-11" (46) has the poet indeed caught up in dream-terror, the evisceration of the tribes into "Vanishing Americans" and the act whereby "imperialism's wronged" have "turned planes, and themselves, into bombs" (46). He imagines himself a would-be stay against both "Columbus's invasion" and an inheritor of the "poetry" of moon and tides each in natural motion "aeons" (46) before the New York attack. As war-poet, his span Europe to Asia to the Middle East to the ever-present danger of global nuclear calamity (in "Night Sky, Indian Ridge" he speaks of "our, nuclear target, home," 27), Salisbury gives claim to yet another major writing-in.

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Ecology, manifestly, holds yet another sway in Salisbury's poetry. Rarely can that have been more emphatic than in the four-poem oil sequence in *Rainbows of Stone*, his environmentalist alarm at sheer reckless pollution imaged with characteristic vibrancy. "Around the Sun, the Alaskan Oil Spill" (68), tracing the *Exxon Valdez* calamity in Prince William Sound, Alaska in 1989, opens with the streak as "Space-capsules-globules". Born of ancient evolutionary process ("ghost lizard-birds' coevals"), its modern abuse has led the quest for oil to become the pollutant of seabirds ("re-entering the atmosphere / in the nostrils of terns"). Wings, dark, saturated, have turned into "witch-wings." Nature's balance has been unbalanced. "Each tern is sacred" insists the poem. The oil itself, equally, "formed from the dead – is sacred." Overall, "each moment of life is sacred." This is sun-given-life as the poem's title indicates, a gift of "breath" wholly the opposite of the oil spill and

"not to be wasted" (68). A second stanza links the poet's flow of blood inside his own arteries to the earth's oil ("I understand my blood, / its cargo vegetable and animal"). In self-acknowledging "words" he sees fatal endangerment in either spillage (68).

"Oil Spills, 1966, 1989" (69)—given over to the *Torre Canyon* reef collision off Land's End, Cornwall, the worst in UK history, and again to the *Exxon Valdez*—connects Salisbury family history to each disaster. The poem looks back to Roman England, where the name Salisbury with its meaning of salt-storage originates, and then sideways to the 1966 of the Vietnam War, Israel's defeat of the Arabs, and the civil war of Biafra. The contrast arises between animal killing "to keep my Indian people from extinction" and the arbitrary killing of habitat and people. Salt-preserved Native-consumed meat invites a truce "with the creatures whose lives we'd made ours" (69). But modernity's glut lies far in excess of required subsistence. The closing stanza acts as summary:

OIL SPILLS, MORE CARS, OIL, WARS  
and SUICIDAL MURDERS'S BULLET HOLES  
IN CHILDREN'S CHILDREN'S CHILDREN'S  
OZONE PROTECTION, our literature  
today, tomorrow's page. (69)

If the mien is sardonic, 1966 or 1989 as a "literature" of crude-oil tanker spill, car, bullet, ozone or child, and with the "page" of the future likely more of the same, then it remains for the poet "fed / by a grant (conceived to prevent poets' extinction)" to issue written and written-in warning.

"Ocean Enough: Exxon's Alaskan Oil Spill" (71) avails itself of more closely Native-referenced bearings. It uses a deft avian contrast, oil-impaired bird, and Salisbury's own possible membership of the Cherokee/Yunwiya "Bird Clan." Reports of "spilled tons" have been accompanied by the headline cant of "THE PRICE OF PROGRESS." The poet thinks back to the extinction of prairie chicken "that / kept

us from starving during The Great / Depression" as necessity but also guilt. He also thinks of Tsk-skwa, the Cherokee for mating, birds sprung from prehistoric pterodactyl but become "ghost-fledgling" in the wake of desecration of ocean and "corpse-poisoned shore" (71).

"Oil Spill Spreading" (72) shares this vision. Time-scale has meant centuries of "oil put under pressure." Opportunism has led to the lure of "Black Gold," a "Siberia" of "imprisoning Indians" and "oil company guns." The upshot, courtesy of *Exxon Valdez*, has been "ink-black / fossil-blood on a white / Alaska shore" (the inserted scriptural trace not to be missed) and yet more ominously under hunger for exploitable resources the "danger of being, forever, / the night of nuclear-winter" (72). The "I" of the poem, Salisbury in persona, gives himself no exemption in the chain of exploitation ("I'm a killer, a carnivore"). His writing-in, albeit minute in scale, so links into the always immensely greater cost, the earth's vulnerability, "hurling towards extinction," (72) in the face of each act of environmental predation.

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Writing and its actuation in its own imaginative right assumes a defining importance throughout each Salisbury poetry-collection. Even so, in "Personal Poem, Perhaps in the Manner of Tu Fu" from *Like The Sun in Storm*, Salisbury is not above affecting the off-hand as though himself the merest good-luck poet:

I drift in a poem an apple tree,  
 Ripening before first frost, throws off,  
 Without apparent thought. (28)

In fact, there can be little mistaking his skills, the fine-tuning of metaphor, the adeptness with periodical line-sentence. Across all the domains which draw him it is always the poetry that dictates, however consequential the matter at hand. "Without apparent thought" may give off an impression of Zen-like osmosis. In fact, it exactly belies Salisbury's summoning of self to craft.

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"Words Concerned with Words," the second poem in *Blind Pumper at the Well*, approaches something of his writer's credo. How best to keep language oxygenated, free of political or other sham? For him the answer lies in literary good-practice, that of the poet above all. To this end he invokes a column of writers whose work has been preserved against odds: the great Jewish Hungarian writer Miklós Radnóti, killed by the Nazis, but whose work was saved by his wife ("The years of love in her husband's words," 4) or the intervention of Robert Bridges in saving the poetry of Hopkins and Max Brod in the case of Kafka and their "lifetimes of words" (4). The final stanza takes its swipe at the pretend-truth of "millions of words / of leaders" as against, in a sharp paradox, "the betrayals of faithful friends, who saved loving and deathless, words" (4). Alluding to the "fidelity" in this respect of his own wife, he looks to his best fortune in anticipating the prospect of so being further written-in.

A whole concourse of similar writerly self-allusion invites notice. In "For Years and Years," a poem given to dreams of death by accident, the first of them in childhood recalls himself with "legs no longer than pencils" (114-5). "Slitting the Tongue, so That Crow Should be Parrot," Salisbury's remembrance of cutting his wounded crow's tongue in the name of having it "sing," he links it to his eventual bardism as "age bends my trigger-finger on pen" (137). "Caring for the Soon to Be Born," self-glossed as "a final heartbeat likely to leave / grandchildren and poems not yet formed," offers the very synopsis of the poet at work with "stub-pencil sharpened on trigger-finger nail" and bound "to scribble the times / of destinies, which would – war not yet nuclear – be born" (140).

Salisbury's fellow-writer tributes and affinities each add to the writing-in, whether "For Octavio Paz" ("This magician" 63), "Jim Barnes, Choctaw" ("Jim Barnes is trading the world" 81), "For Simon Ortiz" ("his words circle the world" 78), or "Two Poems in Memory of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää" ("remembering the Chernobyl disaster year, when Nils-Aslak and I first exchanged poems" 65-6). Perhaps verse

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like "Green Cows" (71) serves to draw the threads together. Late-written, aware of pressing mortality ("Alive, still"), Salisbury gives thanks for maple trees and their leaf-sugar ("seventy foot tall green cows") and beech trees (their squirrels and the gathered nuts "to bag and crack"). These are trees that yield "Growth ring / on growth ring – a poem" (71). The allusion commands attention. It would be apt to think of Salisbury's lifetime writing-in as his personal species of growth-ring, the poem within his poetry.

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### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> This episode is again summoned in "Swimming in the Morning News." The lines read of his awakening and remembering "the day I awkwardly swam/and saved two young women from drowning," as against "today, the somber wing of poetry so many's / sole chance to survive." (*Like The Sun in Storm* 65).

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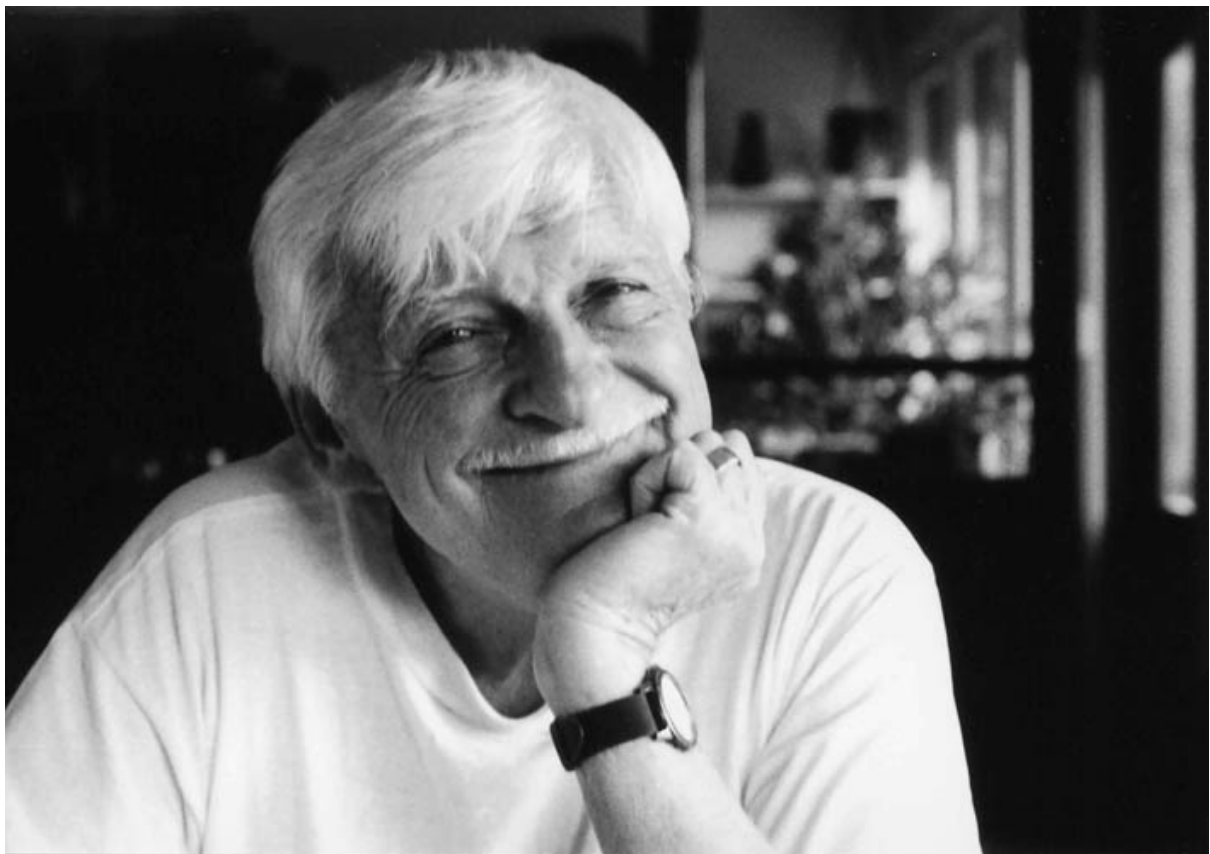
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Ralph Salisbury, Eugene, OR, 2006. Photo: Ingrid Wendt.



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## The Poetry of Ralph Salisbury: Syntax as Vehicle for Conveying an Ethical Vision

ELEANOR BERRY

The opening poem of Ralph Salisbury's *Rainbows of Stone*, published in the first year of the present century, articulates and embodies a central theme of his poetry—the interconnection and inter-relatedness of all creatures, times, things. It is, as its title puts it, "A Declaration, Not of Independence" (3).<sup>1</sup>

This "Declaration" opens conversationally, but the seemingly casual tone quickly turns devastatingly ironic:

Apparently I'm Mom's immaculately-conceived  
Irish-American son, because,  
Social-Security time come,  
my Cherokee dad could not prove he'd been born.

He could pay taxes, though,  
financing troops, who'd conquered our land,  
...

The conversational style soon shifts into something hardly sayable. The bulk of the poem consists of two long, curiously complex sentences. Here is the first:

Eluding recreational killers' calendar's  
enforcers, while hunting my family's food,  
I thought what the hunted think,  
so that I ate, not only meat  
but the days of wild animals fed by the days  
of seeds, themselves eating earth's  
aeons of lives, fed by the sun,  
rising and falling, as quail,  
hurtling through sky,

fell, from gun-powder, come—  
as the First Americans came—  
from Asia.

Eased into the poem by the conversational style of the opening, readers may stumble repeatedly as they attempt to negotiate the syntax of this sentence. The subject is deferred by two participial phrases, one nested with the other—"Eluding ... while hunting..." The object of the first participle is modified by two possessives, "killers' calendar's," one likewise nested within the other. This is difficult to process—and made more so by the dense texture of sound repetition. The poet is obstructing readers' movement through the poem, slowing us down, and we would do well to attend not only to his words but to his constructions and to what these constructions, by their very nature, convey.

Deferral of a subject by modifiers signals that the subject cannot be understood apart from particular circumstances. Nesting of elements emblemizes the containment of one thing within another. Both of these features together suggest that nothing is simple, nothing is unto itself.

Once we reach the subject, "I," the predicate, "thought what the hunted think," follows immediately in the same line, but then the sentence is extended by a result clause, "so that I ate ...," which is itself extended by multiple nested modifiers of the verb's object:

the days  
     of wild animals  
         fed by the days  
             of seeds,  
                 themselves eating earth's aeons  
                     of lives,  
                         fed by the sun,  
                             rising and falling,  
                                 as quail, [...]

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hurtling through sky,  
 [...] fell,  
 from gun-powder,  
 come—  
 as the first Americans came—  
 from Asia.

Each modifier is itself modified through ten layers of elaboration, and each of the last two modifiers is interrupted by an internal modifier. This structure is a veritable embodiment of dependence.

After this breath- and brain-taxing sentence, the syntax briefly relaxes into a simple clause with a compound predicate and minimal modification—until a “but” launches a second independent clause:

but, with this hand,  
 with which I write, I dug,  
 my sixteenth summer, a winter’s supply of yams out  
 of hard, battlefield clay,  
 dug for my father’s mother, who—  
 abandoned by her husband—raised,  
 alone, a mixed-blood family  
 and raised—her tongue spading air—  
 ancestors, a winter’s supply or more. (3-4).

The crucial information is arrived at only by digging down through layers of syntax. The clause is repeatedly interrupted by modifiers of various types—prepositional phrase, relative clause, adverbial phrase, participial phrase, absolute construction. The poet’s paternal grandmother makes her appearance only as the object of a prepositional phrase, but this deeply subordinate grammatical element becomes the tail that wags the dog of the clause. The grandmother’s agency asserts itself as forcefully and surprisingly for readers of the poem as it evidently did for the 16-year-old future poet. The main clause elements are simple: “I dug ... a winter’s supply of yams out of hard,

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battlefield clay..." But that is not all there was to it. Coming into the knowledge of his Cherokee ancestry was not simple for this young man, and the syntax the mature poet has found to convey that experience embodies its complexity.

Such use of syntax is pervasive in *Rainbows of Stone*, but it was already a significant element of Salisbury's poetry two and even three decades earlier. In *Pointing at the Rainbow* (1980), a one-sentence poem, "Family Stories and the One Not Told," deploys several of the poet's characteristic constructions to tell of his family's concealment and his own "spading" up of one previously unacknowledged Native American ancestor (*Light from a Bullet Hole* 29).

"Our Irish mother's tongue would stitch / wool glowing needles of the wood stove wove," the poem-sentence begins, straightforwardly enough in the first line but already obstructing our parsing in the second. The monosyllabic noun "wool" is followed, without any relative pronoun, by a relative clause with a long noun phrase as subject of the monosyllabic verb "wove," and the dense weave of assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme not only imitates what it describes but also makes the underlying syntactic structure harder to discern. We are prepared for a poem of dense entanglements.

The first independent clause is then followed by a second: "and there was bread and milk hunger made us / lovingly recite[.]" Again a straightforward assertion is complicated by a relative clause following the complement without a relative pronoun. The complexity then deepens, as the sentence is extended by a subordinate temporal clause, interrupted by another contact relative clause, then further extended by a series of absolute constructions. Lineation and syntax come into phase at the end of the ninth line, and there, except for a telltale comma, the poem seems momentarily complete:

while the rattle of fast freights, empty bottles  
recalled, sped Dad

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north, his pipe smoke tethering in our ears  
Great Grandpa's mules  
no Yankee patrol could tell from grime,

But the absolute construction conjuring an ancestor-subject of the father's family stories is then followed by another, conjuring another ancestor, this one not present in those stories: "Great Grandmother locked / behind a tobacco-browned stockade, / to keep the word 'colored' from her kin[.]"

The poem doesn't let us stop here, even momentarily. Instead, it launches, with the monosyllable "one," following "kin" at the end of its line, a long relative clause:

... one  
of whom would spade  
with his tongue enough earth  
out of his brain to raise  
her coffin to blaze like a meteor,

Though the sentence is again potentially complete at a line-ending, the poem continues past that boundary to enact, in a final absolute construction, what the lines just quoted have described:

her Cherokee-Shawnee braid  
loosed at last  
to spread black sunshine  
on a snow horizon.

The characteristic usages of Salisbury's poetic syntax seem to have emerged as means for carrying out the moral work of recovering suppressed family and cultural history. There are precedents for doing such work in poetry and for developing a syntactical style peculiarly fitted to do it. An important one can be found in the work of Robert Lowell, who was Salisbury's teacher at the University of Iowa. Salisbury received his MFA from Iowa in 1951, and Lowell taught there from 1950 to 1953. At that time, Lowell was between the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lord Weary's Castle* and the

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breakthrough *Life Studies*, which would win the National Book Award and become a classic of what would be known as confessional poetry. He was working on the long dramatic narrative "The Mills of the Kavanaughs," continuing to write a taut metrical verse while on the brink of shifting into a looser, but still densely textured non- or quasi-metrical verse (Mariani 190-91). In a 1985 interview, Salisbury recalls that he had started out writing free verse,

but then I began studying with Robert Lowell, and he was doing end rhyme patterned verse. For me this probably connected with having grown up hearing my father sing old Kentucky hill country songs which were end rhyme patterned.

Anyway, I started writing end rhyme patterned poems (Schöler 31).

It is hard to imagine a greater cultural distance than that between this teacher, a Boston Catholic patrician CO, and this student, an Irish-Cherokee veteran raised in rural poverty. That the young Salisbury would associate Lowell's metrics in *Lord Weary's Castle* and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* with "old Kentucky hill country songs" is a measure of that distance. In the 1985 interview, Salisbury implies that Lowell's influence on his work was limited to versification:

Gradually I moved all the way back to free verse because it was the natural way for me to grow, but I still value my imitation Lowell period, because it gave me some insights into musicality (Schöler 31).

Perhaps, though, the term "musicality," as Salisbury uses it here, should be interpreted more broadly.

I suspect that imitating Lowell gave the young poet a sense of the possibilities of non-standard syntactical structures, together with dense sound textures, and of their value for conveying an ethical vision otherwise all but inarticulable. In passages from "The Mills of the Kavanaughs," like the following, supposed to be spoken by the character Anne Kavanaugh to her dead husband, Salisbury might well have seen how

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syntax could embody complexities of heritage and history. I have boldfaced the conjunctions and relative pronouns launching the clauses that repeatedly extend the sentence at deeper and deeper levels of subordination.

“Our people had kept up their herring weirs,  
Their rum and logging grants two hundred years,  
**When** Cousin Franklin Pierce was President—  
Almost three hundred, Harry, **when** you sent  
His signed engraving sailing on your kite  
Above the gable, **where** your mother’s light,  
A daylight bulb in tortoise talons, pipped  
The bull-mad june-bugs on the manuscript  
**That** she was typing to redeem our mills  
From Harding’s taxes, **and** we lost our means  
Of drawing pulp and water from those hills  
Above the Saco, **where** our tenants drilled  
Abnaki partisans for Charles the First,  
And seated our Republicans, **while** Hearst  
And yellow paper fed the moose **that** swilled  
Our spawning ponds for weeds like spinach greens (Lowell 82).

The sentence refuses to end until it has gathered into itself all the actions and situations, occurring at different times in the past, that the speaker feels to have bearing on the present.

Besides Lowell, there is another writer whose work may have shown Salisbury possibilities for making syntax a vehicle for embodying the bearing of ancestors’ lives and historical events on the present. William Faulkner’s late novel *Requiem for a Nun* was published in 1951, the year Salisbury received his MFA degree. There he may have read the now-famous declaration, “The past is never dead. It isn’t even past” (46). There and in Faulkner’s novels and stories of the previous two decades, Salisbury may well have read and contemplated the power of the extraordinary, page-long sentences

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in which are interleaved events of different eras, including "the simple dispossession of Indians," the building of the courthouse, and the inexorable development of the town:

the hands, the prehensile fingers clawing dragging lightward out of the disappearing wilderness year by year as up from the bottom of the receding sea, the broad rich fecund burgeoning fields, pushing thrusting each year further and further back the wilderness and its denizens—the wild bear and deer and turkey, and the wild men (or not so wild any more, familiar now, harmless now, just obsolete: anachronism out of an old dead time and a dead age; regrettable of course, even actually regretted by the old men, fiercely as old Doctor Habersharn did, and with less fire but still as irreconcilable and stubborn as old Alec Holston and a few others were still doing, until in a few more years the last of them would have passed and vanished in their turn too, obsolescent too: because this was a white man's land; that was its fate, or not even fate but destiny, its high destiny in the roster of the earth)—the veins, arteries, life- and pulse-stream along which would flow the aggrandisement of harvest: the gold: the cotton and the grain (Faulkner 5; 25-6).

Reading such sentences (the passage above constitutes no more than about a third of the sentence from which it is drawn), he may well have been struck by the possibility of forging a syntax capable of embodying the dispossession of Native Americans, the obsolescing of "wild men," from the point of view of a descendant of those dispossessed and rendered obsolete.

Salisbury was using syntax for such complex, morally charged articulations at least as early as 1972, when his first collection, *Ghost Grapefruit*, was published. "Boyhood Incident Recollected in Tranquility" is a confession of a crime and an unfolding of the retrospectively recognized nature of that crime (*Light from a Bullet Hole* 16). The poem runs for 19 irregular-length lines before it reaches a period. Before



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that, major syntactical boundaries are marked by em-dashes and colons, punctuation that signals not only reaching a boundary but continuing beyond it. The first three lines deliver a complete independent clause, but with the normal order of clause elements inverted and with the object disproportionately elaborated: "A snake with the head and foreflippers of a frog, / a frog with enormous snake stern—a boy / at the brink of Eden stoned[.]" Reading, we, like the boy, are first confronted with the image of the apparent snake-frog in all its monstrosity. Syntactical expectation is then for a verb, with the elaborate noun phrases as its subject. But the verb is deferred; another and contrastingly unelaborated noun phrase intervenes: "a boy." Thus, the syntactical and phenomenal monstrosity is not to be the subject of the still-awaited verb, but its object. And then the verb is further deferred by an adverbial phrase, "at the brink of Eden," lifting the scene to the level of myth and conveying that the anticipated action will be determinative, will constitute a fall into knowledge. So long deferred, the single monosyllabic verb, "stoned," has all the force of the action it names.

Deferral of clause subjects and/or verbs is a common usage in Salisbury's poetry, and it does far more than enhance the textural interest of language. It enables readers to experience aspects of the meaning viscerally as well as cognitively. Here, the long-deferred verb is followed by a dash and a line-break, marking an end that is also, crucially, a precipitant of further development—which will turn out to be one of understanding. Through the syntax of the rest of the poem, we, as readers, participate in the emergence of that understanding.

Understanding is developed through an attempt to re-see from different perspectives and, accordingly, to re-name, what the boy saw and to comprehend the action he took in response to the sight. This process is enacted by the syntax. The fourth line of the poem gives the first re-naming: "Stephen-Saint—snake-frog—God." Who or what was stoned? Stephen, who was martyred by stoning and made a saint.

The awkward compound "Stephen-Saint" suggests a peculiar composite being, as does, of course, the compound "snake-frog." Following another dash in the same line, "God" at first seems another name for the victim of the stoning, but as we round to the next line, we're led to re-interpret it as the subject of the verb "saw." God's vision of the victim is described as one might an artist's depiction of a saint: "a halo of red rim / stretched jaws, sash black-speckled green and whitish middle." That is one version. The next line introduces another version, another clause: "human scientist in that instant verified:.."

The object of "verified" extends over the remaining 12 lines of the poem, beginning with a string of three noun phrases, the last of which is elaborated by a relative clause and then extended by an absolute construction, containing a gerund that itself is followed by a string of three more noun phrases as its object, the last again elaborated. In its multiple extensions and elaborations, the syntax embodies the monstrosity, the monstrousness, of what the words seek to name. Here is the whole heavily right-branching clause, formatted to show the layers of subordination:

human scientist in that instant verified:

murder of fellow fauna two-fold,  
a hunt without appetite blessed with success,  
empty belly balked by a rock,  
    that rules so much by ignorance and monstrous fear of what seemed  
monstrous ...  
    boy-man, man-woman in dread of the hand's doing, cringing from knowing,  
simply:  
        the size of a snake's mouth,  
        the size of a frog's waist,  
        the appetite of the world's meat  
            so much more than the mouth can ever encompass  
            although compelled by emptiness to try

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As in the later “Family Stories and One Not Told” and the much later “A Declaration, Not of Independence,” the crucial recognition is arrived at only in a deeply subordinate syntactical element. It is there that, through reading and parsing, we arrive at the knowledge the boy came to through the act of stoning and the reflection it occasioned.

In the 1985 interview, when asked about his use of enjambment, Salisbury spoke of it as helping to give “a sense of voice driving at something, speaking, or with inner voice thinking, very passionately and intensely” (Schöler 31). It is not so much occasional instances of enjambment as it is the whole syntactical style of his poetry that creates the sense of an “inner voice thinking, very passionately and intensely.” The poem “Out of the Rusty Teeth,” published a couple of years before that interview, in the collection *Going to the Water: Poems from a Cherokee Heritage*, invites readers to follow, through a syntax of piled-on appositives and absolute constructions, a train of impassioned thought.

Trigger for this urgent meditation is a quoted phrase, “Trapped in dark corridor,” which opens the poem and is repeated twice in the succeeding lines’ associative reflections (*Light from a Bullet Hole* 43-4). The thinking recorded in, and enacted by, the poem proceeds by fits and starts, through passages both separated and connected by dashes. The poet is considering whether, and, if so, how, the phrase “Trapped in dark corridor” might apply to him.

The syntax is dominated by absolute constructions—most free-floating, apart from any associated full predication—and by noun phrases in apposition to one another—again mostly free-floating fragments. In such a syntax, actions are conveyed as compact with, folded into, states of being: events are never over, but embodied or, perhaps more accurately, encysted. These encysted events insist on being recognized, as the phrase “Trapped in dark corridor” insistently repeats itself in the poet’s mind.

So who and what is he that this phrase should concern him? There is the matter, laid out in the poem's first verse paragraph, of his name—"family name / from earldom and bishopric near Stonehenge, sun- / worshipers built"—and his face—"my face like that / of the late nineteenth century / 'lesser star' Cherokee shaman Herr Olbrechts captioned 'J'"—and of their incongruous association.<sup>2</sup> Such a name with such a face, such clashing yet peculiarly related inheritances (the "earldom and bishopric" of the poet's family name is located "near Stonehenge, sun- / worshipers built," as the "Cherokee shaman" whose facial features he shares was presumably, in a phrase that appears later in the poem, "a New World sun- / worshiper"), might indeed constitute a sort of entrapment in history's "dark corridor."

"Trapped in dark corridor," the poem repeats at the beginning of its second verse paragraph. Now, though, the poet refutes the implication that the phrase applies to him. Appropriately, he does so in the only full independent clauses in the poem:

but my steel traps caught  
fur coats for the rich for years,  
and all I am  
caught by, really, just now, is  
time and the urge to leave a few words  
other than my names  
carved in stone—...

Even in the defiant assertions of these two coordinate independent clauses, however, the matter of the poet's name insistently comes up again, and the second clause (more specifically, a post-modifier of its object) is extended by a linked pair of absolute constructions that spell out its meaning—the meaning not only of his family name, but also of his given one: "the last meaning 'Salt Town', / 'Wise Wolf' the first, in languages mostly lost—[.]"

With its first line—“‘Wise Wolf Salt Town’—” the third verse paragraph picks up on the names in their recovered earlier meanings, then, in a pair of appositional noun phrases, each modified by a relative clause, riffs on the surname “Salt Town,” derived (as the poem’s opening passage has told us) from an English “earldom and bishopric,” in terms of the poet’s personal history and present stance:

Lord Salt Town who  
salted down bloody pelts, to save them from spring sun—  
“The Bishop of Salt Town”  
who preaches the saving of skins and words,  
words, words, words, like “Trapped in dark corridor”—

With the object of the prepositional phrase that ends this verse paragraph, we are back to the phrase that has set the poem in motion.

In this third utterance, the phrase conjures a vision, articulated in two parallel absolute constructions, of Christian soldiers and Cherokee warriors confronting one another by the light of tapers and torches in what is evidently a dark, narrow space:

tall tapers throwing my cruciform shadow onto onrushing  
brilliantly emblazoned Cherokee priest-robos  
and naked muscles red-painted for war,

pine torches hurling my Cherokee foetal death-curl-  
silhouette onto crosses on armor  
advancing to expunge a New World sun-  
worshiper, his name on three children,  
less durable than stone,

...

In this vision, the poet-speaker casts two shadows, a cruciform one onto Cherokee garments and bodies, a fetus-shaped one onto Christian soldiers’ armor, as the two opposed groups advance toward each other. In this confrontation where a pagan Native American is defeated, his name expunged, the poet’s younger self fights on

both sides, as the next two lines make explicit in another absolute construction: "a battle of shadows joined / in the skull of a boy..."

The poem does not end with this articulation, in fitting syntactical form, of past violence inflicted and suffered by ones "trapped in dark corridor" as replayed in the mind of a boy who would become its poet-author. Instead, it continues, through an extended relative clause, to render the actions of the boy, himself a trapper:

... who ran on the sun  
on snow, frost white as whiskers of weasels in his nostrils,  
to take, out of the rusty teeth of his traps,  
common brown mink and, one time,  
from the gleaming jaws of a dream, a glittering black glory  
the glittering heavens may  
not ever flesh again.

From the poetry of his earliest collections to that of his most recent, Salisbury, perhaps spurred by Lowell's and Faulkner's examples, shapes syntax into an adequate vehicle for conveying the presence of past violence and the speaker's at least partial complicity in it. The poem "Canyon de Chelly," set in the Anasazi ruins at that site, is a later example of this, included in *Rainbows of Stone*. Like the early "Family Stories...", it is a one-sentence poem.

The poem-sentence opens with a locative clause that identifies the setting in terms of two past instances of violence against its Navajo inhabitants:

Where Americans, in  
the name of civilization, and  
Conquistadors, in  
the name of the Virgin,  
massacred Navajo braves in  
the womb... (48)

Only after establishing this context does the poet name the subject of his sentence—"Anasazi walls"—and then he interrupts the subject-verb-object sequence, first with a

participial phrase modifying the subject, then with an adverbial clause modifying the verb. Both modifiers defer anticipated sentence elements with references to the site's heritage of violence from outsiders:

... Anasazi walls, echoing centuries-  
ago-forgotten Athabaskan invasion, repeat  
and repeat, as if to learn by heart—  
for future warning or welcome—

Only then is the deferred object named—"footbeats"—the noun preceded and followed by modifiers that associate it with both recent and remote instances of nations' violence against other nations: "Japanese-shod footbeats of / an Irish-English-Cherokee survivor of nuclear war[.]" Thus, halfway through the poem-sentence, in the object of a prepositional phrase modifying the object of the main clause's verb, we arrive at the principal focus of the poet's concern here—himself, with his particular heritage and personal involvement in history.

The second half of the poem elaborates on that heritage and involvement through two phrases in apposition, both heavy with modifiers. A reformatting of the lines shows the layers of grammatical subordination:

a brother,  
    in prayer,  
    in blood  
    and in hours lived  
        learning the generations  
            of brick upon brick  
                set about Kiva, kitchens and beds,  
involuntary countryman  
    of those invading [...] Vietnam  
        this time,  
    and of "J.W. Conway ... Santa Fe ... 1873,"  
        boast carved into wall  
            surviving as a confession  
                which could have been mine

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more times than one,  
that being is not belonging

Characteristically, the poem's crucial moral recognition appears only in a deeply subordinated syntactical element of a sentence repeatedly extended beyond where it is potentially complete. It then continues for another two lines—an absolute construction that constitutes an ironic mini-coda: "the home he desecrated / one victor's grave stone."

Part of the work done by the syntax of Salisbury's poetry is to articulate relationships between visually similar phenomena from different realms. The poet's visual imagination brings them together, and his moral intelligence makes connections between them. There are several instances of this in the poems examined above. Sometimes they contribute to the poem's texture; sometimes they are central to its structure. "Wild Goose, Eaten, and Owl, Knitted to Hang on Wall," a poem in Salisbury's 2006 collection *War in the Genes*, is one that takes shape from a series of yokings (or, to borrow the poem's principal image, knittings) together of phenomena normally regarded as unrelated (42).

Beginning with a metaphor conveyed by an appositive—"Gray petal, soon to fall from crimson dawn, / a wild goose"—the poem proceeds through three sentences broken over five line-groups to connect the goose, in its hunger and in its "migrant's flight," to the poet-speaker; in its ceaselessly moving wings, to the speaker's mother, with her ceaselessly moving knitter's fingers; and, in its visual appearance as a petal against a contrasting background of sky, to blossoms against a contrasting background of branch in the wall-hanging that the mother has knitted.

As in the early "Boyhood Incident Recollected in Tranquility," the opening line and a half of the poem present a striking visual image of conjunction. Here, the conjunction is metaphorical and syntactically conveyed by apposition. The basis of the



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connection between petal and goose seems purely a matter of visual resemblance. However, as the clause continues over the rest of the opening four lines, and as then the compound-complex sentence extends through a second independent clause in the second, longer line-group, a dense weave of more conceptual connections is created.

...  
a wild goose, hearing me imitate a call  
to join a gaggle of strangers for dinner is met  
by flocks of shot,

and life, which flew thousands of miles  
through air, shared with words, stills  
between teeth, retriever, resolute  
as poet, struggling against  
the current to bring the dead  
back to the living's need.

The gray-petal goose is now understood as a fellow creature, impelled by loneliness and hunger "to join a gaggle of strangers for dinner." The retriever that swims against the current to bring the shot goose to the hungry human trickster-shooter-poet is conceived as doing work equivalent to the poet's—"to bring the dead / back to the living's need." Wild, domesticated, and human are conjoined by shared needs and traits. These morally significant connections emerge gradually through layers of syntactic modification, becoming fully apparent only through the absolute construction, "retriever, ... struggling ... to bring the dead / back to living's need," which ends the long sentence. This syntax both embodies the complexities of connection that it articulates and takes readers through a correspondingly complex process of parsing to grasp them.

The relatively short sentence that forms the group of three lines in the middle of the poem offers readers a bit of rest as the poet delivers a somewhat self-deprecating and jocular reprise of the difficult articulation just made: "No phoenix flight of trilling

syllables, / my feeding-call's honks lured meat / for Mother to cook, for our family to eat."

"Mother," introduced in the role of family cook, is no sooner mentioned than, in the poem's final sentence, shown to have been active in other ways—ways that connect her to the migrant goose with its "ceaseless ... wings." Her poet son, the poem's speaker, in his poem-making activity, is connected to both the mother who knitted and the goose whose flight was directed toward its kind's warm wintering grounds. All these connections are articulated in a single sentence extending over a seven-line group and a final couplet.

Her fingers, as ceaseless as wings  
seeking sufficient summer, wove red yarn  
into blossoms on a bough an owl's black  
prey-piercing claws above me clutch, while,  
stark winter years to endure, I try  
to make my pen knit  
another migrant's flight,

warm Gulf, ancestors' nesting place,  
a future to hope for, though far.

Interposed between the subject, "Her fingers," and the predicate, "wove ...," is the long adjectival phrase implicitly linking her to the goose migrating south for the winter. Her weaving has produced a work of art, a wall-hanging showing red "blossoms on a bough an owl's black / prey-piercing claws above me clutch." The visual image of red knitted flowers on a bough recalls the image of the goose as a gray petal against a crimson sky that opened the poem. The knitted owl's "prey-piercing claws" recall the retriever's teeth between which the shot goose stilled. The strained syntax—a contact relative clause with a heavily premodified subject and a preposed adverbial phrase delaying its monosyllabic predicate—slows reading and makes these details obtrude.

The sentence, potentially complete, is then extended by a temporal clause, whose subject, "I," is deferred by an adverbial infinitive phrase with inverted word order (the object placed before the verb). With his mother's woven work hanging on the wall above his head, the poet-speaker, now in the "winter years" of his life, seeks to do his own knitting with words, to make with words his own "migrant's flight."

With that phrase, the sentence is again potentially complete, but again it is extended, this time after a line-group break and with an absolute construction. With the words of this final couplet and this final sentence element, the poet conjures the hoped for destination of his flight—his "ancestors' nesting place"—and completes the poem's web of connections.

Over the long span of his writing career, Ralph Salisbury has employed in his poetry a distinctive syntactical style that serves the essential function of conveying his moral vision. Through nesting of possessives and relative clauses, he represents the containment of one thing within another, often its opposite. Through the use of absolute constructions rather than full subordinate clauses, he gives a sense of the actions they designate as entailed in, rather than separate from, the fully predicated action(s) of the sentence. Through apposition as a means of presenting metaphor, he equalizes the prominence of the items linked. Through omission of a relative pronoun before relative clauses, he promotes the contents of the relative clause to near equivalence with that of the clause modified. Through reduction of the copula to an easy-to-miss sibilant, he brings subject and complement close to parity. Through repeated deferral of anticipated sentence elements, he intimates how much is bound up with, and contributive to, what each deferred element presents. Through all of these usages in combination, he embodies the interrelatedness and interdependence of all Earth's peoples and creatures, alive and dead, and all the elements of their environment.

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*Notes*

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<sup>2</sup> "Herr Olbrechts" is Frans Olbrechts, a Belgian-born ethnographer who studied under Franz Boas at Columbia and in the 1920s did field work among the Cherokee.

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Ralph Salisbury, Akumal, Quintana Roo, Mexico, 2012. Photo: Julie Bray

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## Communities of Grief: Surviving War in the Fiction of Ralph Salisbury<sup>1</sup>

MIRIAM BROWN SPIERS

In *That the People Might Live*, Jace Weaver explains that, “[t]he Cherokee can never forget the Trail of Tears—not because of some genetic determinism but because its importance to heritage and identity are passed down through story from generation to generation... Such cultural coding exists finally beyond conscious remembering, so deeply engrained and psychologically embedded as to be capable of being spoken of as ‘in the blood’” (8). Later, he argues that “[i]n the case of Native Americans... grief can never be finally ‘abolished.’ Any Native scholarship or intellectual work must, however, take the ongoing and continual healing of this grief... as both a goal and a starting point. It must expand the definition of liberation to include survival. Natives engaged in literary production participate in this healing process” (Weaver 38). Weaver’s argument draws a powerful connection between historical trauma and the role of literature in documenting, exploring, and resisting that trauma. These claims are easily borne out in many works of Native literature—such as Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* or LeAnne Howe’s *Shell Shaker*—which tell the stories of traumatized characters who, by the end of the novel, have acknowledged and begun to process those traumas through the support of their communities. Silko’s Tayo, for instance, receives guidance from two medicine men, Ku’oosh and Betonie, while Howe’s Auda Billy draws on the strength of her extended family, including her ancestors, to resist Redford McAlester, the greedy and corrupt Chief of the Oklahoma Choctaws.

But it is perhaps more difficult to understand how Weaver’s claims can apply to works of Native literature that seem to tell less uplifting or empowering stories—works

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like Cherokee writer Ralph Salisbury's last collection of short stories, *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin*. As the title indicates, these stories focus primarily on the experiences of Native soldiers and veterans; although Salisbury's characters suffer from traumas similar to those in other works of Native literature, very few of them achieve any resolution. Salisbury wrestles with the continual grief that arises not only from the stories of Removal and colonization that have been passed down through generations of Cherokee relatives, but also from the experiences of war shared by those same relatives. This grief, too, lives "in the blood," where it is passed down to the soldiers' children and spread to their wives and widows, ultimately infecting not only the veterans, but also the families who struggle—and often fail—to heal their fathers and sons, their cousins and nephews, their uncles and brothers.

To understand how stories that depict such hopeless cycles of violence might contribute to the project of literary production as a healing process, we might turn to Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice's discussion of Indigenous literatures. Building on Weaver's concept of communitism, Justice argues that Indigenous people's

stories have been integral to [our] survival—more than that, they've been part of our cultural, political, and familial resurgence and our continued efforts to maintain our rights and responsibilities in these contested lands. They are good medicine. They remind us of who we are and where we're going, on our own and in relation to those with whom we share this world. They remind us about the relationships that make a good life possible. (*Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 5-6)

In Justice's conception, the very existence of the stories, regardless of their content, also serves a purpose. So, while Salisbury rarely offers the kind of roadmap that we find in *Ceremony* or *Shell Shaker*, the stories themselves are a reminder of Cherokee presence, and they are built on a foundation of Cherokee values. Specifically, they

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reinforce the importance of community and storytelling. As a result, *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin* works to build relationships and, thus, to construct multiple communities: first, a community of characters who appear and reappear, in slightly varied forms, from one story to the next; second, a community of warriors and veterans whose experiences, shared within and between stories, become the first step in the healing process described by Weaver; and third, taken as a whole, the book joins an ongoing conversation among other Native writers, such as Silko, Jim Northrup, and William Sanders, who tell the stories of Native veterans surviving American wars.

Given that many Native men of Salisbury's generation served in the U.S. military during World War Two, it is unsurprising that the men at the heart of his work are often soldiers and veterans. As Alison Bernstein explains,

When Japan made its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, there were 4,000 American Indians in the military. By war's end, approximately 25,000 Indians had served... These figures represented over one-third of all able bodied Indian men from age 18 to 50, and in some tribes the percentage of men in the military was as high as 70 percent. (40)

These incredible rates of participation necessarily led to equally high rates of impact in Native communities, both during and after the war. Bernstein also notes that "[t]he number of Indian deaths and casualties [in World War Two] easily equaled and probably exceeded those of whites and other minorities as a proportion of the number who fought" (61). Thus, regardless of their geographic and temporal distance from the battlefield, Salisbury's stories are nonetheless shaped by World War Two and the wars that follow—in Korea, Vietnam, and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East—which together form the backbone of modern American history. In *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin*, those wars are completely immersive: although the stories rarely describe



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scenes of active duty, each conflict remains alive as the protagonists tell war stories and struggle to return to civilian life.

Stories about wounded veterans are a prominent part of the collection: an early story, "Bathsheba's Bath, Bull Durham Bull, and a Bottle of Old Granddad," introduces Cousin Kenny, a World War Two veteran in his early twenties who "had been sent home missing one eye and missing part of his mind" (Salisbury 16). Later, "A Vanishing American's First Struggles against Vanishing" follows another World War Two veteran, Dirk Dark Cloud, as he fights his war "again and again when memories, buried like land mines, exploded in [his] alcohol-addled mind" (Salisbury 123). Even in stories that are ostensibly about other themes, the aftermath of war looms in the background. "White Snakes and Red, and Stars, Fallen," is the story of eight-year old Seek Ross, told through the disagreement between Seek's white teacher and his father, a Cherokee veteran of World War Two, over how to respond to Seek's story about being chased by three wild dogs. At the beginning of the story, the two adults are already at odds with each other: the teacher has attempted to raise money for a "new, rust-proof flagpole, whose shining height would... show that all she'd endured in this cultural badlands had been for the nation defended by her dad, killed while invading Algeria" (Salisbury 6). Seek's father sees the new flagpole as "useless," an attitude that may contribute to the teacher's refusal to believe Seek's story, as well as her decision to confiscate the pistol that Seek's father allows his older brother to carry for protection (Salisbury 10). Thus, although the story takes place in a rural American town several years after the Second World War has ended, its presence still looms.

These two characters' personal experiences also highlight the extreme contrast between people living in the same small town. The differences in gender, race, and class that divide Seek's father and his teacher repeat often throughout the collection, largely because Salisbury's characters tend to live away from reservations and outside

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of Native communities. This, too, may be attributed to the Second World War, which “reduced the cultural and physical isolation of thousands of Indians from the mainstream” and represented “the first large-scale exodus of Indian men from the reservations since the defeat of their ancestors” (Bernstein 171, 40). Many American Indians had a relatively positive experience during the war, where they were fully integrated into white units and “found that they could participate with whites on what they considered to be an equal basis” (Bernstein 136). As a result of those experiences, many Native veterans chose “to seek employment off the reservation after the war” (Bernstein 148). This attempted integration into mainstream American society, though it often failed, is responsible for some of the racial intermarriage that we see in Salisbury’s stories. In many cases, members of the same family are racially and ethnically mixed: in addition to Seek’s Cherokee father and white mother, the Dark Cloud family, who are the focus of nine interconnected stories, includes a Cherokee father and his German-American wife, whose first husband, a fallen soldier, was Lakota; in “Bathsheba’s Bath, Bull Durham Bull, and a Bottle of Old Granddad,” Lack and his cousin Kenny have a Cherokee grandmother and a white grandfather; in “Ival the Terrible, the Red Death,” Ival’s “real father” was a member of the Ioway nation, and his mother is “a half-blood widow” whose second husband is non-Native; in “A Volga River and a Purple Sea,” we learn that Sy, an Arapaho teenager destined to serve in World War Two, will later marry a “blond, hero-worshipping wife” (Salisbury 39, 41, 34).

The fact that these characters live away from and marry outside of Native communities does not suggest that they or their children are any less Native, a theme that is repeated throughout Salisbury’s work. Arnold Krupat’s introduction to *Light From a Bullet Hole*, for instance, cites Salisbury’s own claim that “I am not part Indian, part white, but wholly both” (73). The attitudes of Salisbury’s protagonists reflect this

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claim, as they rarely hesitate to identify themselves as "Indian," despite being repeatedly mistaken for members of some other ethnic group. Those who served in World War Two are often mistaken for "the enemy," like the Cherokee narrator of "Some Indian Wars, Some Wounds," who describes "having been despised back home as the supposed son of some Italian immigrated to build railroads, bridges, and cities," or like Dirk Dark Cloud, who is assumed to be Italian by an American sergeant who "wouldn't let me carry my rifle until he'd emptied it" (Salisbury 114, 165). In the much more serious scenario depicted in "A Volga River and a Purple Sea," Sy is shot "by a buddy who'd mistaken Sy's Arapaho face for Japanese" (34). Non-Native veterans also bring their prejudices back home, so that a soldier turned milk truck driver sees a Cherokee child by the side of the road and honks his horn in the "World War Two code 'V' for 'Victory, [the boy's] skin a reminder of Japanese" (34, 3). Perhaps the most unexpected example of mistaken identity occurs in "The New World Invades the Old," which tells the story of Sher, a Nez Perce man working as an Army translator in Greece. He is approached by a Greek woman who asks him to impregnate her because her sterile Greek husband nonetheless expects her to produce a child. As the woman explains to Sher, "'to save my marriage I must have a son, and you are dark like a Greek, dark like my husband'" (57).

In each instance, non-Native people's inability to recognize Native identity reinforces the idea that American Indians are "Vanishing Americans;" though Salisbury wryly suggests that they have "been vanishing for approximately five hundred years" (121). This comment, together with the stories themselves, make it clear that American Indians very much exist in the present—and also throughout American history—but *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin* nonetheless depicts the sense of isolation that individual American Indians experience as they are repeatedly misidentified. Because the Native character in each story is so frequently the only one in a given scene, there

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is almost never an opportunity for two Native folks to exchange a wry glance, to laugh at Euro-American ignorance, or to find solidarity in a shared experience. When several of Salisbury's protagonists stand up to the strangers who misidentify them, the non-Native characters simply respond with a different set of insults. The Cherokee narrator of "Some Indian Wars, Some Wounds" explains that he is "not Italian, I'm Indian," to which one of the drunken soldiers harassing him responds, "[a]nd another redskin bit the dust" (116-17). Racist encounters like these are not limited to the military, either. In "Losers and Winners: An Ongoing Indian War," one of the few stories with a female protagonist, a Cherokee poet named Irene has a brief relationship with her older—and married—creative writing instructor. While still in her bed, Irene's professor tells her that, "yours must remain a one-term try at writing [because] you're shy, Irene, like most of the Indian women I've taught" (95-96). Irene's story is an effective reminder that the military is hardly the source of racist attitudes; Native people encounter casual racism in a wide variety of circumstances.

They may first be isolated by these experiences, but most of Salisbury's veteran protagonists also remain trapped within their own grief and suffering due to the trauma experienced during their military service. Most obviously affected are the veterans themselves, who come home mentally and emotionally as well as physically damaged—like Dirk Dark Cloud, who can no longer tour the country as a professional banjo player after losing part of a finger in World War Two. Even this relatively small injury has a huge effect on Dirk's life, but Salisbury also tells the stories of men who have lost far more, like Whippoorwill Willis, who returns home blind in one eye and with a "bullet-shattered foot" (110). Serious as the physical injuries are, they are frequently overshadowed by the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that many of Salisbury's veterans suffer. Dirk, for instance, drinks "kill-all spirits... to drive off spirits

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he'd killed in World War Two," while Cousin Kenny drinks to escape the nightmares that keep him awake (122).

Though Salisbury draws a clear connection between his characters' military service and their alcoholism, Bernstein notes that,

In the absence of reliable statistics, it is difficult to know whether alcoholism among Indian veterans rose as a result of their service experiences. A more likely explanation was offered recently by a former Navajo Code Talker. This veteran admitted that among his thirty buddies, he alone had become an alcoholic, but that several other veterans had taken to drinking only after they failed to find work back on the reservation." (136)

The Code Talker's observation echoes some of Dirk Dark Cloud's experiences: after his banjo-playing career comes to an end, he marries a German-American widow and settles in the border town of Custer, South Dakota, where he works as a factory janitor and "spend[s] his once-a-month disability check to get insanely, violently drunk in Custer's Bottomless Keg, the bar whose topless waitresses would serve Indians" (Salisbury 129).

Dirk's reliance on alcohol is compounded by his feelings of frustration and inadequacy when he is unable to provide for his family. He complains that "[b]anks make a man feel damned small. My word ain't good enough. They got to have this goddamned paper a man can't understand except where to sign it. I'll work, work, work and starve till I drop, and there's nothing I can do about it—NOTHING—not a goddamned thing—NOTHING!" (Salisbury 125). Although Salisbury does not go into detail about Dirk's financial situation, it is likely that his frustration stems from a maddening experience shared by many Native veterans: after World War Two, these men were entitled to loan programs set up by the Veterans' Association (VA), but

most banks did not extend credit to Indian veterans since they assumed that the

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government provided support for these 'wards.' As a result, Indians had difficulty securing business loans and could not get credit to purchase livestock, equipment, or lands outside the reservation. (Bernstein 145)

Thus, although Dirk has taken ownership of his wife's small farm—land that presumably belonged to her first husband, a Lakota soldier who died in the war—and although he is entitled to support as a veteran of that same war, inaccurate assumptions about American Indians prevent him from taking advantage of the resources he has rightfully earned. Like the veterans described by the Navajo Code Talker, Dirk uses alcohol to cope not only with his traumatic wartime experiences, but also with the continued systemic racism that he has encountered since returning home.

In both Dirk's and Kenny's stories—as in many others—the veterans' families struggle to care for these men upon their return home. Although Dirk's wife and Kenny's aunts understand that the soldiers' injuries are the result of their experiences in combat, they have a limited capacity to provide for the men's needs or heal their wounds. Concerned about protecting her own children, Kenny's aunt threatens to banish him from her home if he continues to drink, while Dirk's wife, though not a devout church-goer, resorts to asking the local priest to convert her husband "from a once-a-month drunk Indian to a once-a-week Christian Indian" (Salisbury 19, 138). Neither response is particularly effective, but the families have few other resources available and are otherwise trapped in the cycles of violence that the veterans bring into their homes. Ival recalls "drunken whippings he and his half brother had suffered in childhood" at the hands of his step-father, an "old marine" who likely also bullied Ival's dying mother "into not seeing a doctor until it was too late" (Salisbury 40). In "Bathsheba's Bath, Bull Durham Bull, and a Bottle," it emerges that Cousin Kenny, who comes home to find his mother dying of cancer, may have shot her to end her suffering. Although we do not see that scene directly, we follow Kenny's younger

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cousins as they discover feathers swirling above the trash-burning barrel; upon closer inspection, the cousins "sift charred pillow-case remnants among subsiding flames. Risen from a bullet hole, centering a blood stain, white ashes had swirled away on shrieking wind" (16). The discovery helps to explain why Kenny spent the night after his mother's funeral lying "'by [her] cold grave, a carryin' on so mournful he set all the hounds to howlin' with him'" (16). In the story of the Dark Cloud family, which is explored extensively in Part Three of *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin*, Dirk terrorizes his son, Juke, when he has been drinking: "Juke and Ann, his sister, would gleefully bleat, 'Baa, Baa, Beah, Beah,' scrambling and gamboling over tobacco tins tacked flat to cover holes that months back, Pa—drunkenly yelling, 'Durned little nigger-skinned Indniun'—had shot around Juke's feet" (Salisbury 122-23). It is here that we also learn about Juke's "first warrior deed:" at nine years old, he intervenes in a fight between his parents and charges his gun-wielding father to prevent him from shooting his mother (127).

The concept of veterans suffering from PTSD is not a new one, of course, but in Salisbury's stories it counterintuitively becomes the framework through which community is established. Weaver argues that "Natives define their identity in terms of community and relate to ultimate reality through that community," an idea echoed by Justice in his discussion of Cherokee nationhood (Weaver 35). According to Justice,

[C]ommunity and its web of social relationships are the structural foundation of Cherokee life... it is in relationship with the tribal nation that the individual Cherokee is defined, whether one is fullblood or mixedblood, raised as an outlander or rooted in the soil of the ancestors, conservative or accommodationist or on any point of the spectrum between. (*Our Fire Survives the Storm*, 23)

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Thus, despite these characters' position as "outlanders," estranged from Native and non-Native communities, from their own families, and even from themselves, they are nonetheless defined by their relationship to their tribal nations. Moreover, the arrangement and collection of their stories, literally bound together and symbolically connected through repeated patterns and shared experiences, establishes another kind of community. Not only does Salisbury trace individual characters and multiple generations of the same family across stories; he also builds a community of Native warriors and veterans whose experiences, shared within and between those stories, emphasizes their relationship with and responsibility to one another. As Justice argues,

Disconnection is cause *and* consequence of much of this world's suffering. We are disconnected from one another, from the plants and animals and elements upon which our survival depends, from ourselves and our histories and our legacies. When we don't recognize or respect our interdependencies, we don't have the full context that's necessary for healthy or effective action. (*Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 4-5)

Through the form of a short story collection, Salisbury allows his characters—and his readers—to reconnect, discovering commonalities and reconsidering individual experiences within their broader historical and cultural contexts.

One clear cause of these characters' isolation is the fact that, in order to survive war, they have had to kill. This fact is sometimes casually acknowledged, as in "A Way Home," when Whipp recalls his friends saying, "'[s]orry 'bout that,'... to joke away the killing they had had to do" (111). Elsewhere, Ival remembers "the first German [he] had killed, [who] had been hunched into bushes beside his truck" (41). In "White Ashes, White Moths, White Stones," twelve-year old "Lack's kind, gentle big brother Wulf [was] killing people in unthinkably distant, unreal Europe" (28). Juke, the son of Dirk Dark Cloud, grows up to become a soldier and is "awarded two medals for killing



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strangers" (127). As these details echo across stories, readers can realize what individual characters rarely do: their experiences, however terrible, are also common. And, while their commonality does not make them any less awful, it does offer a path out of isolation. If these experiences are not unique, then it becomes possible to form a community of other veterans who share similar struggles.

In addition to forming a community among veterans, military service has also forced these men to engage with the processes of imperialism and globalization. One certainly unintended consequence of this experience is that many Native soldiers begin to build community with "the enemy." Sher Sheridan, in "The New World Invades the Old," "witnessed the torture of an elderly Filipino tribesman and, sickened by the sight of knives moving over skin as brown as that of his father, wished it was U.S. imperialism's contemporary commander staked to the earth floor of the interrogation tent" (Salisbury 53). Sher acknowledges that his "angry wish was rooted in... knowledge that white invaders had taken his Nez Perce people's homeland, raped women, and mingled their blood with his family's blood" (Salisbury 53). Similarly, in "Laugh Before Breakfast," Dirk Dark Cloud tells his son, Parm, stories about

killing "some of them highfalutin fellers what does the planning, them enemy offysirs." Once, his telescopic sight had found a white-haired man so important, the enemy soldiers had not only saluted but bowed. 'That old colonel or general, he looked," Parm's daddy mused, "like the gentleman you are named for—Parmenter, my old great uncle what always gived me candy when he'd see me." (132)

Dirk is so struck by the man's familial resemblance that he chooses not to kill him. As he explains, "[h]e was lucky he was the spitting image of Uncle Parmenter, so rich and well-dressed and proud and so good to me when I was little" (135). In both stories, the protagonist establishes some relationship, some similarity and sympathy, with the

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supposed “enemy,” despite all the training that has encouraged him to dehumanize those men. In this sense, Sher’s and Dirk’s stories serve as a defiant reversal of the earlier story of Sy, the Arapaho soldier who earned a Purple Heart when he was wounded “by a buddy who’d mistaken [his] Arapaho face for Japanese” (34). In that story, the unnamed “buddy” has been so well trained to find the enemy that he sees danger lurking everywhere, while Sher and Dirk are instead able to recognize similarities and build relationships.

A remarkable ability to build community is perhaps one of the best ways to handle the “grief that can never be finally ‘abolished,’” as Weaver describes it (8). Although he refers to the Trail of Tears as one example of that grief, Weaver extends his argument to speak more broadly about the ways in which “[f]ive centuries of ongoing colonialism in America, as in other colonial societies, has led to an erosion of self and community due to the dislocation resulting from cultural denigration, enslavement, forced migration, and fostered dependency” (37). *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin* displays the effects of that ongoing colonialism both in the veterans’ PTSD and in the stories’ expansion to include multiple generations spanning hundreds of years. In “Laugh Before Breakfast,” another story about Dirk Dark Cloud, Salisbury describes Dirk’s habit of getting drunk at a bar called Custer’s Bottomless Keg, where

veterans fought, again, America’s wars—with words, with fists, and sometimes with knives or with guns. Veterans of machine-age war fought the Indian Wars, citing treaties as if they’d read them, or proclaiming Manifest Destiny as inevitable as a weather system moving from ocean inland. Veterans fought the Civil War... Young again, grandfathers fought again the War to End All Wars, a war without end in memories... middle-aged fathers fought again the war that had amputated one of Parm’s father’s banjo-chording fingers, some toes, and part of his mind. (Salisbury 129-30)

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The scene weaves together similar threads scattered throughout the collection, emphasizing the all-encompassing role of warfare in American history and its central role in shaping many Native lives. Drawing on memories that extend back as far as the Civil War, it is clear that, for Salisbury's characters, the memories of war exist "in the blood," much like the Trail of Tears in Weaver's account (Weaver 8).

Those memories are passed down within individual families as well as in the larger community of veterans. The grandmother of twelve-year old Lack, the main character of "Bathsheba's Bath, Bull Durham Bull, and a Bottle of Old Granddad," had three sons, "all of whom she raised to manhood, only to lose the eldest in the war Lack's father had survived, the War to End All Wars, called—now that another war had begun—World War One" (Salisbury 15). Here, the narrator quickly highlights the influence of war on each new generation of the family: this is also where we meet Cousin Kenny, who is introduced as "the son of the brother who'd been gassed to death, in a battle that Lack's father and Uncle Clyde had survived" (16). A neighbor further describes Kenny's situation: "'[p]oor boy, he never had him no daddy, account of the one cussed war, and account of this new cussed war, not never no wife to take his mother's place now that she's gone" (16). The extended family has to take Kenny in after his mother's death; in turn, Lack, who must share a bed with his cousin, struggles to understand why Kenny tosses and turns all night, while Lack's mother worries that "her twelve-year-old son might catch the 'Bad-Disease' off sheets 'profaned' by [his] bachelor cousin" (16). By positioning Kenny among his father, uncle, and younger cousins, Salisbury further emphasizes the multigenerational impact of war within Native families.

Salisbury's narrative technique of collapsing time—particularly in the first section of the book, "Coming to Manhood: Some Initiations"—further emphasizes those intergenerational experiences. The section's four stories all depict boys too young to

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enlist or be drafted; nonetheless, all four include the protagonists' experiences in combat, thus defining these characters by the wars that lie in their futures. "A Volga River and a Purple Sea" opens with the clause, "[w]ar three years in his future" (31). This is the story of Sy, the Arapaho boy who will later be wounded by a buddy who mistakes him for Japanese. But before that trauma, Sy will break his ankle ice skating, spend the summer learning to swim in order to rebuild strength, and try to touch his best friends' older sister's breasts while playing in the river. The omniscient narrator reframes otherwise commonplace events in terms of their future effects—noting, for example, how Sy's "somewhat improved... awkward dog paddle... would, in three years, save his life" (32). By juxtaposing Sy's "sex-and guilt-ridden" behavior at age fifteen with his ability to "escape drowning with half of his squad" a few years in the future, Salisbury underscores the incredible youth of soldiers whose pre- and post-war lives will be defined by their military experiences (33, 34).

The connections between past and future are driven home in another story from Part One, "White Snakes and Red, and Stars, Fallen." In focusing on nine-year old Seek and his fifteen-year old brother, the story offers another unexpected glimpse into the future: "[h]is brother killed in the Korean War a few years later, Seek would remember... the exchange as close as he and his brother would ever come to saying, 'I love you'" (9). Because Salisbury establishes the future importance of an ostensibly minor event as it happens, we are further reminded of the connections across time that may only become visible at a later date. At the end of this story, too, the narrator highlights the intergenerational relationships built by imperial warfare: "Seek would watch as the flag from his brother's coffin was folded as small as a blanket wrapped around a new-born baby and placed in their combat-veteran father's trembling hands" (14). We see the father lose his son in a mirroring and reversal of Cousin Kenny's relationship to his dead father. Following the description of the son's funeral, the story zooms out to make a

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larger claim and, once again, to remind readers of the patterns that unite all humans: "Seek became, like millions of others, a soldier, a killer. Then... he watched over children, his own and those in an Indian school... nine months of school leading to graduation—nine months of pregnancy leading to birth—life—death" (14). Through the stories in this section, Salisbury ultimately creates the impression that time is both cyclical and inescapable. While this may not be a particularly comforting thought, it once again serves to offer community among the otherwise isolated characters in each story.

Emphasizing patterns that resonate across time also allows Salisbury to make larger connections between modern wars and the history of American colonialism. Although their experiences of war may build connections between men who feel estranged from their families, their communities, and themselves, Salisbury nonetheless condemns the imperialist system that is responsible for fragmenting those identities and communities in the first place. The book does not dwell on explicit connections, instead trusting readers to weave together the threads of distinct stories. When Dirk Dark Cloud feels frustrated by his inability to earn enough money to feed his family, Salisbury refers to him as "an Indian Adam" who "accuse[s] his stolen rib's Christian people of stealing land, after murdering Indians" (126). The "stolen rib" here refers to Dirk's German-American wife, implicating the larger history of colonialism in this individual relationship. In another brief critique of the U.S., Salisbury notes that "Sy had missed his history class's trip to see the heads of Indian-plundering Heads of State, carved into Jim, Joe, and Jeanine's Sioux ancestors' sacred mountain, whose new name mandated the conquerors' mode of life, Rush More" (33). The sentence is almost a throwaway, unnecessary in terms of the story's plot. Thematically, however, it is an important reminder once again of the resonance of the United States' imperialist policies in the present.

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Those critiques, and especially the paradoxical position of Cherokee soldiers serving in the U.S. military, become sharper and more explicit in "A Way Home." Here, the narrator explains that Whipp, son of a Cherokee mother and a white father, got his "Indian name, Whippoorwill," from a neighbor woman who "told stories that had created a role model, a father figure, a hero, Chief John Ross, Guwisguwi, a mixed-blood who'd sacrificed his wealth and risked his life to do what he could for his Cherokee people" (110). Although Salisbury does not go into any additional detail here, readers who are familiar with Cherokee history will understand that Ross "risked his life" to defy the American government—that is, the very government for whom Whipp has now risked his own life. Where Ross made sacrifices on behalf of the Cherokee people, Whipp has sacrificed his own health on behalf of the country responsible for the violent removal of his people from their homelands. Notably, Whipp did not make those sacrifices willingly, having spent a year protesting the Vietnam War before being drafted—a fact that casts further doubt on the United States' narrative of righteous patriotism and imperialism.

Perhaps the clearest critique of American imperialism appears in "Some Indian Wars, Some Wounds," an at least partially autobiographical story about a Cherokee soldier assigned to guard duty at an airbase. Salisbury's obituary notes that, although he enlisted in the Air Force at age seventeen, "he never engaged in active duty," going on to explain that "the only killing he did during his military service was the rabid skunk he shot, while on guard duty one night, at an airbase near McCook, Nebraska" ("Ralph Salisbury, Obituary"). This story, told by a first-person narrator rather than the third-person more common to this collection, tells a similar story of a guard who shoots a rabid skunk. In this version, however, the narrator also shoots a decorated sergeant in the thigh. The sergeant, heavily inebriated, refers to the narrator as a "redskin" and threatens him with a broken bottle, leading the narrator to shoot his superior officer in

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self-defense (Salisbury 117). The incident is officially declared an "accidental discharge," which, according to the narrator, "added to my and to my warrior forebears' long-ago humiliation, but I'd won some sort of Cherokee victory in the only history that really matters, the one in one's own head" (117). Salisbury's positioning of this incident as a "Cherokee victory" allows him to reclaim a potentially humiliating story about being bullied and insulted—instead suggesting that, because the narrator (like Salisbury) is able to leave the military without killing or serving on active duty, he has triumphed over American imperialism.

Ultimately, these conflicting notions of America as both noble and violent are at the heart of *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin*. The paradox is best summed up in the story of the Dark Cloud family. In "Laugh Before Breakfast," after Dirk tells the story of how he spared the life of the high-ranking enemy officer who looked like his Great Uncle Parm, Salisbury suggests that, "[l]ike America itself, Parm had two fathers—one loving, one not" (136). Much later, when Parm has been wounded in Vietnam and is recovering in a hospital bed, he tells a visiting priest that, "I was raised by two fathers, Father—one sober and kind and good, one so crazy drunk he'd shoot around his children and scare hell out of them" (152). Parm's father, both white and Cherokee and suffering from PTSD after serving in World War Two, is undeniably both good and bad. As Salisbury compares Dirk to America itself, he acknowledges the United States' dual nature: a combination of the heroics and patriotism that are supposed to come with protecting one's country paired with the imperialist structures and racist individuals responsible for carrying out that work. Salisbury's Native veterans see both positions; so do the families who are left to cope with the fallout. Sher, the Nez Perce army translator, explains that he "had learned to hide his feelings... from racist soldiers fighting for the army of democracy" (53). Here again we see that the damage done to

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Native peoples through official U.S. policies such as Removal is repeated through the wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The patterns that Salisbury establishes throughout *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin* build relationships not only between individual protagonists, but also between generations of veterans and their families, and among all American Indians who have felt attacked and invisible in the mainstream United States. Beyond the book's relationships, then, Salisbury's stories also situate him within a larger community of Native writers telling the stories of American Indian warriors and veterans. That community includes authors like Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), whose novel *Ceremony* follows a World War Two veteran suffering from PTSD; Anishinaabe writer and veteran Jim Northrup, whose poems and short stories often focus on Vietnam veterans; and William Sanders (Cherokee), whose novel *The Ballad of Billy Badass and the Rose of Turkestan* follows a veteran of the first Iraq War.

As in Salisbury's stories, each of these texts highlights the patterns of imperialism that war makes manifest. Another Cherokee writer, William Sanders, also draws specific connections between the history of Cherokee Removal and the United States' continued ethical violations. While Salisbury's Whippoorwill Willis looks to John Ross as a role model, Sanders's protagonist Billy Badass takes the comparison a step further when describing his experience of working with Kurdish rebels during his time in the U.S. Army (Salisbury 110). Billy explains that the American soldiers worked with those rebels until they were no longer useful, and then "left them to starve or be massacred" (Sanders 43). Watching their struggle, it occurs to Billy that

"this is what the Trail of Tears must have looked like. Another bunch of people, like us, who made the mistake of counting on the honor of the American government... Because we made the same mistake, you know. The Cherokees helped Andrew Jackson fight the Creeks, figured that would get us better



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treatment, and the son of a bitch double-crossed us the same way." (Sanders 44)

Though Sanders's comparison is more direct than Salisbury's, both writers draw connections between the history of Cherokee removal and modern American wars in order to identify the patterns and effects of American imperialism, casting doubt on the righteousness of the American cause.

Jim Northrup's poem "Ogichidag"—the Ojibwe word for "Warriors"—offers a more succinct critique of militarization: in just twenty-one lines, the speaker describes old men's stories of World War One, his uncles' return from World War Two, his cousins' time in Korea, and his own experiences in Vietnam (164). The poem ends by looking to the future: "My son is now a warrior/Will I listen to his war stories/or cry into his open grave?" (Northrup 164). His question is reminiscent of the stories Dirk Dark Cloud tells his young sons. After describing his father's service in World War One and his own service in World War Two, for instance, Dirk adds, "and just in time for you, Parm, and you, Juke, [the government will] get us into another ruckus, as sure as God made little Green Apples" (Salisbury 124). Through such specific and personal examples, Salisbury and Northrup critique the never-ending wars that have shaped their families' lives.

Though both writers identify the same problem, their stories imagine quite different outcomes: Northrup's characters often begin to heal when they return to and find support in their own communities, while Salisbury's veterans are more likely to remain isolated and "war-damaged" (145). In "Veteran's Dance," for instance, Northrup tells the story of Lug, an Anishinaabe veteran who, "ever since the war... [had] felt disconnected from the things that made people happy" (22). The story begins as Lug returns home to attend a powwow where he reunites with his sister, Judy. With her help, Lug visits a spiritual leader in the community and checks into an in-patient

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program to treat his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Although Judy is his primary source of support, much of that support comes from her ability to locate and access resources within the larger community: she calls the Vet Center and talks to a counselor who recommends the in-patient program; she visits the spiritual leader on her brother's behalf; and, at the end of the story, she takes Lug to a powwow where he can connect with other Native vets. Although the treatment program helps him, Lug "was anxious to rejoin his community. He wanted to go home" (Northrup 32). At the powwow, then, he jokes with a cousin who is also a vet before dancing the veteran's honor song (34). Lug's ability to heal is clearly connected to his ability to integrate back into his Anishinaabe community, and, although his sister initiates the process, they both draw on a variety of resources along the way.

This story stands in stark contrast to *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin*, where veterans frequently struggle because they have access to so few resources beyond their families. For the stories set during and after World War Two, at least, that difference may be based on the limited medical understanding of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at the time, as opposed to the more complex definitions of PTSD that developed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. In fact, we know that Lug's story takes place in the 1980s or later because he tells Judy about visiting the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C., which was not completed until 1982 (Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund). By this point, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* was in its third edition (*DSM-III*), which included an entry for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that had been missing from *DSM-II*, published in 1968 (Andreasen 69, 68). On the other hand, Dirk Dark Cloud returned from World War Two in the 1940s, before the first edition of the *DSM* had even been published. The *DSM-I*, published in 1952, did include a diagnosis for "gross stress reaction," which "was defined as a stress syndrome that is a response to an exceptional physical or mental

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stress, such as a natural catastrophe or battle" (Andreasen 68). Notably, this definition requires that the condition "must subside in days to weeks," a requirement that would have excluded the experiences of many veterans (Andreasen 68). Despite the existence of this category in *DSM-I*, its removal from *DSM-II* in 1968 indicates the lack of attention paid to veterans' experiences—and, presumably, the lack of resources available to treat a disorder that could not be formally diagnosed between 1968 and 1980.

Beyond medical and popular understandings of PTSD, however, there is a second important distinction between Dirk's experience and Lug's: Lug has a community to which he can return, while Dirk seems to be entirely isolated. Before the war, Dirk makes a living as a traveling musician. When he meets his wife afterwards, he simply stays with her in South Dakota. Although he tells stories of his childhood in Appalachia and names one of his sons after his great uncle Parmenter, he does not seem to have a relationship with any living relatives (Salisbury 132). This disconnection can be blamed, at least partially, on the long history of Cherokee removal, which Salisbury hints at when he describes Dirk's "outgunned Cherokee forebears," who "fled to wooded hills and into that flimsy sanctuary, memory" (123). In the first introduction to the Dark Cloud family, Salisbury sums up the history of Indian genocide that defines the United States:

Whole tribes had disappeared into the smoke of cannons, the only memory left of them descendants of enemies' memories. Indian hunting grounds had been cut into half- or quarter-mile-wide farms, the Sacred Earth drawn and quartered, as were bodies of pigs that Juke would help butcher—as were human bodies in history books. The Indian heritage of Juke's father, Dirk Dark Cloud, had been drawn—that of his children, Parm, Ann, and Juke, quartered. (121-22)

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Salisbury is clear that individual Native people continue to exist, but his stories highlight the ways that American Indian policy has left tribal nations fragmented and tribal lands drastically reduced. Although the Cherokee Removal took place more than a hundred years earlier, its effects continue to shape Cherokee lives in the twentieth century. We never learn the full story of Dirk's childhood, but the fact that he grew up in Kentucky rather than North Carolina or Oklahoma, coupled with his lack of family connections, suggests that Dirk, unlike Lug, has never been part of a larger Native community.

The history of Euro-Americans stealing Cherokee land, which was already well underway in the nineteenth century, must also be considered in the context of Termination, which became official federal policy in the wake of World War Two. As Bernstein explains, "[t]he rapid integration of Indian citizens into white America became the goal of federal policy" in the 1940s, paving the way for House Concurrent Resolution 108, passed in 1953, which "redirect[ed] the federal effort away from tribal development and towards tribal assimilation" (159). Ironically, Native peoples' exemplary service in World War Two was used as a justification for Termination in the 1950s. According to Bernstein,

Given white America's perception that individual Indians had proven that they were capable of exercising their citizenship responsibilities during the war, it seemed only fair that federal guardianship over the tribes and their lands be eliminated when the emergency passed. (159-60)

Although Dirk's Cherokee land and community had been disrupted long before Termination, the policy might nonetheless have affected him as the new owner of land in South Dakota that had belonged to his wife's first husband, a Lakota soldier who died in the war. More broadly, Termination sent a clear message to all American

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Indians about the value of their military service and the U.S. government's continued disregard for treaty responsibilities and the sovereignty of Native nations.

Within this context, we might better understand why Salisbury's veterans are so often isolated and why their stories so frequently have unhappy endings. Northrup's veterans benefit from the advances made by the American Indian Movement and other Native activists during the 1960s and 70s, which led to the reclamation and preservation of land, as well as a cultural revival that may have made way for the presence of a spiritual leader in Lug's community, in addition to the mental health resources available to veterans, both Native and non. Although Salisbury's stories are rarely as hopeful as Northrup's "Veteran's Dance," there is some sense that younger generations, the veterans of Vietnam rather than World War Two, might have more success: in the last story about the Dark Cloud family, we follow Dirk's youngest son, Juke. As his father predicted, the American government has started another war—this one in Vietnam—in time for his son to become a veteran, too. After returning to the U.S., he seems to be trapped by his PTSD and survivor's guilt, unable to leave his dead-end job as a hospital janitor and equally unable to make a serious commitment to his girlfriend, who is eager to leave town and "make a decent living someplace else—maybe have kids of our own" (Salisbury 187). By the end of the story, however, Juke has professed his love to his girlfriend and quit his job, as the "veterans counselor" recommended he do (190). These small victories suggest that there is still hope for Juke: the existence of a veterans counselor indicates that he is receiving professional support—more like Northrup's Lug than Salisbury's other protagonists—and his decision to commit to his girlfriend hints at a source of emotional support. It is that much more encouraging that his girlfriend, Alita, is also Native, and that she imagines starting a family with Juke, so that the "Vanishing Americans," to use Salisbury's tongue-in-cheek term, might resist vanishing for another generation. The story ends

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with Juke saying to Alita, “Leave here? I will. I really will” (Salisbury 190). While this is not as explicitly triumphant as Lug’s decision to dance a veteran’s honor song with his sister, it does imply that Juke still has the potential to break the intergenerational cycle of trauma and thus begin to envision a future for himself.

Beyond Juke’s relationship with Alita, Salisbury also points to the importance of building community among Indigenous peoples as a way of healing. Those relationships are casually scattered throughout Salisbury’s work: in “The New World Invades the Old,” Sher Sheridan has a brief encounter with a Russian woman who declares “that Czarist Russia had oppressed her own people, from a Siberian population,” which leads her to profess “hatred for what America had done to Indians;” in “Two Wars, Two Loves, Two Shores,” the merchant-marine seaman Ayun encounters a Sami woman who explains that “[w]e are reindeer herders, overwhelmed by Europeans centuries ago, just as your Indian people were. Now, ours is a nation within other nations. I work for the Russians, but I haven’t forgotten that they burned our ceremonial drums and burned our priests” (56, 63). Similarly, Sanders’s Billy Badass enters into a relationship with Janna, a Kazakh woman whose description of her people’s experiences of forcible resettlement sounds much like the Cherokees’ experience of removal (46). In each case, individual relationships serve as a reminder that Indigenous peoples exist around the globe and that they are united in their experiences of colonialism—and, most importantly, in their survival of genocide. As the unnamed Sami woman tells Ayun, “we Sami survived, and we will outlast the Nazis, too” (Salisbury 63).

Silko’s *Ceremony* similarly highlights patterns of imperialism and the importance of building community in order to resist and reverse those patterns. Just as Sher sees his father in “the torture of an elderly Filipino tribesman,” Silko’s protagonist, Tayo, sees his uncle Josiah’s death in the execution of the Japanese soldiers he is ordered to

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shoot (Salisbury 53, Silko 7). Many of Salisbury's stories also echo Silko's depiction of PTSD, which includes veterans dealing with alcohol addiction, getting into fights, and reminiscing about their popularity with white women, a phenomenon that Robert Dale Parker describes in his discussion of "restless young men" in Native American literature. According to Parker, these young men

live amid the often misogynist cultural mythology that contact with Euro-Americans (even long after such contact is routine) has deprived Indian men of their traditional roles... Moreover, their world has not managed to construct an Indian, unassimilating way to adapt masculine roles to the dominant, business-saturated culture's expectation of 9-5 breadwinning. (3)

Because Parker traces this phenomenon through earlier texts, like John Joseph Mathews's *Sundown* and D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*, before turning to a discussion of *Ceremony*, his "restless young men" are not necessarily veterans, which suggests a larger phenomenon at work. Even in *Ceremony*, where the protagonist is a veteran, his experiences of isolation and disconnection from his family and community predate his service in World War Two.

Many of Salisbury's protagonists might also be described as "restless young men," but, for these men, their behavior is explicitly connected to their military service. The children and teenagers who are the protagonists of the early stories do not suffer from the same symptoms, and Salisbury seems particularly interested in the contrast. We see this most starkly in the story of fifteen-year old Sy, whose single-minded goal is to impress the young women around him. While telling the story of Sy's hijinks, Salisbury interjects stark reminders of Sy's future as a soldier: Sy was "unable to foresee his being awarded a Purple Heart medal," and he had "[n]o way to know that in breaking his ankle bones and thus learning to swim, he'd escape drowning with half of his squad" (34). Through these glimpses into the future, which have the effect of

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presenting Sy's present experiences and concerns as frivolous, Salisbury seems to suggest that his combat experience will be at the root of Sy's future unhappiness. Beyond dealing with the physical injuries and trauma borne of combat, however, Bernstein emphasizes that American Indian veterans' "sudden and unprecedented exposure to the white world contributed to a new consciousness of what it meant to be an American Indian, and a sharpened awareness of the gap between the standard of living on most reservations and in the rest of American society" (171). In this case, perhaps Salisbury's protagonists, unlike Silko's, are unaffected by this phenomenon before the war precisely because so many of them are already disconnected from Native communities. Although they encounter constant racism, these young men have grown up assimilated into mainstream American culture in ways that Tayo does not experience until he enlists.

While this experience may lead to greater dissatisfaction after the war, having grown up in a Native community also enables Tayo, like Lug, to return to that community for support. Some members of his community, like Emo and Auntie, continue to inflict damage on Tayo, but the resources he needs to heal can also be found at home. Echoing Justice's claims about the importance of community, Salisbury's stories point to the importance of building connections. As Justice argues, "even those who are to varying degrees detribalized assert a relationship through perceived absence, and retribalization depends upon reestablishing those bonds of kinship" (*Our Fire Survives the Storm*, 23). For Silko, "kinship" refers not only to other people, but also to the world at large. Tayo must see the similarities between Josiah and the Japanese soldiers; he must understand how human behavior can affect a drought; and he must learn to see how witchery has shaped the world. For Salisbury's protagonists, on the other hand, the goal is often simply to establish kinship with another person. The stories that come closest to happy endings conclude with the



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beginnings of new relationships: in addition to Juke and Alita, we see Whipp profess his love for Ann, a young woman he met on the plane home from Japan, in "A Way Home;" in "Losers and Winners: An Ongoing Indian War," American Indian veteran Raymond asks his Cherokee classmate Irene on a date; in "Some Vanishing American Military Histories," Juke Dark Cloud, now a wounded veteran like his father, admits that "yes, Dad, you had some right to your own craziness, and I forgive you for getting drunk and shooting around my little feet a few times, and past my head" (Salisbury 170). Although Juke's relationship with his father remains complicated—more so because Dirk is already dead by the time Juke is able to forgive him—their shared experiences also allow for a kind of relationship that was impossible earlier in Juke's life.

In each of these texts, it becomes imperative that we recognize the impact humans have on one another and on the world at large. The narrator of Salisbury's titular story concludes that "I can't restore men's, women's, and children's lives, but I can try to make my own life, and those of others, somewhat better—can still try to change injustice to justice, still try to keep our species' suicidal tantrums from rendering us all extinct" (206). In his own obituary, published eight years later, Salisbury is quoted as saying, "[m]y work is offered to the spirit of human goodness, which unites all people in the eternal struggle against evil, a struggle to prevail against global extinction." By acknowledging humans' responsibility to one another and the necessity of building community, both within and beyond the stories themselves, Salisbury's fiction offers a way to participate in the healing process—a roadmap offering myriad paths toward "the healing of this grief" and a way to maintain "the relational system that keeps the people in balance with one another, with other people and realities, and with the world (Weaver 38; *Justice, Our Fire Survives the Storm*, 24).

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### Notes

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Ralph Salisbury, self-portrait, circa 1946.

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## Making the Leap: César Vallejo and the Early Poetry of Ralph Salisbury

CRYSTAL K. ALBERTS

Ralph J. Salisbury (1926-2017), a Cherokee-Shawnee-English-Irish-American poet publishing since the 1950s, has all but been ignored by most literary critics.<sup>1</sup> Born in the middle of the residential boarding school push for assimilation in what is now the United States of America (US), Salisbury grew up on a Depression-era Iowa farm and yet still managed to complete an MFA at the University of Iowa working with Robert Lowell.<sup>2</sup> While one might assume that Salisbury would follow in the formal footsteps of his mentor, he did not or, at least, not exactly. By the early 1960s, Salisbury began writing about his background, not just his "personal story and memories," as Lowell would do in *Life Studies* (Axelrod 107, quoting Lowell), but also his Cherokee heritage, including using transliterated ᎠᎯᏍᎩᏍᎩᏍᎩ<sup>3</sup> in his poetry, thereby making an early break from monolingualism in Native American publishing. Yet, neither his name nor work appears in Kenneth Lincoln's influential *Native American Renaissance* (1983) alongside N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Simon Ortiz, Joseph Bruchac, Leslie Silko, and others younger than him. This oversight is highly problematic, as Salisbury represents an essential part of the history of Indigenous literatures, especially in regards to poetry among Native Nations in the US. Specifically, Salisbury did not find inspiration solely in ethnographies, but rather turned to his own life, as well as other subjects and literary traditions like that of César Vallejo (Galician / Chimú). Robert Bly—fellow poet and sometime translator of Vallejo—associates this Peruvian's work almost exclusively with the Spanish surrealists, but Salisbury also read Vallejo in the original (as Vallejo intended). As a result, while Salisbury's poetry does incorporate "leaping" and some of the other traits ascribed to Vallejo's work by Bly, I argue that Salisbury draws

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additional inspiration from Vallejo, who was interested early on in what he called "'indigenist will' and 'indigenous sensibility'" (Mulligan xxvii, quoting Vallejo). As such, like Vallejo before him, Salisbury goes beyond the "parlor games" of the surrealists to answer the call made by Vallejo for "revolutionary writers," whose "job [is] to move the world with our weapon:" their pens (Vallejo, ed. Mulligan 202, 498).

In her introduction, Mary Hunter Austin declares *The Path on the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America* (1918) edited by George W. Cronyn, "the first authoritative volume of aboriginal American verse" (xv). She claims that one "will be struck at once with the extraordinary likeness between much of this native product and the recent work of the Imagists, *vers libristis*,<sup>4</sup> and other literary fashionables" (xvi). However, if Imagists believe that their work is "the first free movement of poetic originality in America," Austin suggests they think again, as the anthology demonstrates that Imagism "finds us just about where the last Medicine Man left off" (xvi). Her findings, of course, should be taken with more than a few grains of salt: the poems in the collection were "translated" by well-known salvage ethnographers, such as Frank Boas, who were probably merely mimicking the artists of the time. One example is Pulitzer Prize recipient Carl Sandburg, whose own poetry tended toward free verse, included the occasional Imagist work, and who also contributed a "translation" to Cronyn's project. Yet, as much as one might wish to dismiss the collection outright, *The Path on the Rainbow* sheds light on the literary history of Indigenous poetry and continues to exert influence.<sup>5</sup>

Appearing in the midst of US literary Modernism just as the country was about to enter another period of political isolation in the aftermath of World War I, Cronyn's collection serves a particular and peculiar xenophobic agenda, as Austin's introduction – seeming disdain for the Imagists aside – makes clear. According to Austin, since "[t]he poetic faculty is, of all man's modes, the most responsive to natural

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environments,"

[i]t is the first to register the rise of his spirits to the stimulus of new national ideals. If this were not so there would be no such thing as nationality in art, and it is only by establishing some continuity with the earliest instances of such reaction that we can be at all sure that American poetic genius has struck its native note. (xvi-xvii)

Cronyn's collection, on one hand, suggested that the US did not need to look to Europe or elsewhere for artistic inspiration, as there was plenty "American poetic genius" to be found on native ground. On the other, the anthology was compiled during a time when many in the US supported the growing eugenics movement, and the government was systemically removing tens of thousands of Indigenous children from their communities by force.<sup>6</sup> These children were then held in residential boarding schools guided by the ideology of "[k]ill the Indian in him, and save the man," which frequently resulted in literal death (King 110-111). Consequently, the works found within *The Path on the Rainbow* provide a "natural," romanticized (and cleansed) useable past free from the "last Medicine Man" that the settler colonialists of the US could take and make their own.<sup>7</sup> The fact that these oral histories and songs were committed to the page in English, creating a fixed version that further helped erase Indigenous languages, only adds credence to this assertion.

But, if one were to set aside the historical context of the anthology and adopt Austin's literary analysis, considering the purported importance of *The Path on the Rainbow*, one might be tempted to read Salisbury's work in light of Ezra Pound, among the most recognizable practitioners of the short-lived Imagist movement. However, Salisbury's free verse is not primarily influenced by Imagism's objectivism, which aims, as Charles Olson explains in "Projective Verse," to get "rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which

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western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature [...] and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects" (24). As I will show, Salisbury's early verse does not distance itself from the subjective or other characteristics often associated with the lyric.

As it so happens, doing away with the "I"—the subject, the soul, the lyrical interference—is just one of many issues that Robert Bly takes with early twentieth century poetry, which he declares to be "without spiritual life" ("A Wrong Turning" 22). But, Bly does not stop with "Imagism" or, as he calls it, "Picturism" ("A Wrong Turning" 26). He argues that later poets, even those who use "I," have created an impersonal speaker where the "poem is conceived as a clock which one sets going," resulting in poets who "construct automated and flawless machines" (Bly, "A Wrong Turning" 23). One of the leading offenders, for Bly, is none other than Robert Lowell ("A Wrong Turning" 24). Pulitzer Prize or not, unlike the verses found in Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), according to Bly, the greatest poetry must turn inward not just outward, but not *too* inward, otherwise it becomes what he calls "hysterical," as seen in Lowell's *Life Studies* (Bly, "A Wrong Turning" 29). It must contain images that engage the physical senses, explore both the conscious or unconscious mind, and not be afraid to embrace revolutionary feeling, whether in "language or politics" (Bly, "A Wrong Turning" 24-33). Among the poets capable of this true poetry: César Vallejo.

Born in Santiago de Chuco, César Vallejo's mother and father were the result of sexual interactions between Galician priests and their Chimú "concubine[s]," "placing [him] in a typical context of mestizaje in the Andes" (Mulligan xviii). However, "typical" doesn't quite capture all of the connotations that "mestizaje" carried during Vallejo's lifetime (1892-1938). While Indigenous peoples of the US were being subjected to Brigadier General Richard Pratt's solution to "the Indian Problem" and worse, Indigenous peoples in Central and South America also faced familiar stereotypes,



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oppression, slavery, the remnants of an elaborate sistema de castas, and attempts at systemic assimilation as various ideologies of indigenismo took shape.<sup>8</sup> Despite his poor background—both in terms of his social and economic status—Vallejo eventually earned a "*licenciatura*"<sup>9</sup> in philosophy and letters at La Universidad de la Libertad with his thesis 'Romanticism in Castilian Poetry'" (Mulligan xx, italics in the original), which is significant not only in terms of his own verse, but also because formal education was one of the few ways to raise one's status regardless of one's lineage.<sup>10</sup> Shortly thereafter, Vallejo published his first collection of poetry, *Los Heraldos Negros* (1919), quickly followed by his second, *Trilce* (1922).<sup>11</sup> Bly would translate excerpts from these and other works by Vallejo by the early 1960s and hold the Peruvian up as exemplary of the poetry he hoped to see in the US. According to Bly, "Vallejo is not a poet of the partially authentic feeling, as most poets in the English tradition are, but a poet of the absolutely authentic" (*Neruda & Vallejo* 169). Vallejo was filled with "tremendous feeling," yet "[h]is wildness and savagery exist side by side with [a tenderness] [...] and a clear intuition into his own inward directions. He sees roads inside himself" (Bly, *Neruda & Vallejo* 169). Even though, by twenty-first century standards, Bly merely reinforces of the stereotypes of Latin Americans as *deeply* passionate and the Romantic vision of Indigenous peoples as "Noble Savages," Bly would emphasize this reading of Vallejo time and again.

Bly continued to construct his vision of Vallejo by asserting that Vallejo's work was "an extension of the substance of the man, no different from his skin or his hands" (Bly, "A Wrong Turning" 24); as such, there wasn't a speaker or persona, just the poet. Bly further declared that Vallejo's work embraced Spanish surrealism based on what he described as "leaping," a term to explain the juxtaposition of images—usually between the conscious and unconscious. For Bly, "[p]owerful feeling makes the mind associate faster, and evidently the presence of swift association makes the emotions still more

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alive" (Bly, *Leaping* 28). Moreover, unlike the French, Spanish surrealists believed that the unconscious did have emotions. Consequently, "[t]he poet enters the poem excited, with the emotions alive; he is angry or ecstatic, or disgusted. There are a lot of exclamation marks, visible or invisible" (Bly, *Leaping* 28). In Bly's eyes, Vallejo exemplified these highly desirable characteristics: he embraced a subjective "I," had mastered the skill of making rapid and wild associations between disparate images and ideas, as well as tied them to intense feeling. To emphasize this point further, Bly selected poems by Vallejo to translate that seemingly support these exact claims right down to an excessive number of exclamation marks.<sup>12</sup>

As it so happened, in December 1915, more or less contemporaneous with his university thesis *El Romanticismo en la Poesía Castellana* (c. 1915), Vallejo published "Aldeana" in *La Reforma*,<sup>13</sup> which has been identified not only as the earliest poem contained in *Los Heraldes Negros*, but also, according to Alcides Spelucín, as the first poem in which Vallejo's own style and voice emerge (Ferrari, quoting Spelucín, 118 n. 32). Although overlooked by both Bly and Mulligan in their selected writings, Clayton Eshleman includes "Aldeana" in his *The Complete Poetry: A Bilingual Edition*. Eshleman translates the "Village Scene," beginning: "The distant vibration of melancholy cowbells / pours the rural / fragrance of their anguish into the air" (Vallejo, *The Complete Poetry: A Bilingual Edition* lines 1-3).<sup>14</sup> Immediately, one is struck by an image that invokes the senses, while also juxtaposing the concrete with the abstract, as literal "cowbells" may produce sound, but they are unlikely to spread the smell of an agrarian landscape. Even if one were to read this figuratively with a "cowbell" serving as a synecdoche for an animal, "anguish" is not generally associated with a single recognizable scent. These images, to use Bly's word, continue to leap from the air to the sun to a house, barn, and garden, settling on the penultimate image:

Languidly through

the decrepit village  
 rends a guitar's sweet yaraví  
 in whose eternity of deep affliction  
 the sad voice of an Indian dronedongs  
 like a big, old cemetery bell. (Vallejo, "Village Scene" lines 22-27)<sup>15</sup>

In English, the stanza reads as a lament for an Indigenous village that no longer exists. However, some things seem discordant. One word isn't translated: "yaraví," which Eshleman explains is "[a] song in which indigenous and Spanish melodic elements have been fused. The word is a hybrid in tonality as well as spirit and appears to derive from the Incan *harawi*, which was adapted for religious hymns from the time of the conquest until the eighteenth century" (622, italics in original). In other words, it cannot be translated, as there isn't an equivalent in English (or any other language for that matter). But Vallejo's work doesn't stop with a single Quechuan (or Quechuan-derived) word. "Aldeana" also includes the word "dondonea" translated as "dronedongs," which certainly strikes an odd note. Eshelman appears to have meant the neologism as an onomatopoeic word to continue the motif of bells that appears throughout the translation that is fused with "the sound of the Indian's voice" (622-623).<sup>16</sup> However, one might also see it as a play on *dodonea viscosa*, a medicinal plant in Quechua-speaking communities often used to create a poultice or as a covering to treat traumas and other ailments (Gonzales de la Cruz, M., et al. 9). Whatever it signifies, it appears immediately after "un indio." As such, the poem invokes Indigenous peoples, mestizajes / mestizos, and their cultures, which are at the heart of the racial tension in Perú.

The actual speaker of the lyric doesn't appear until the final stanza in which they look out over the scene:

My elbows on the wall,

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while a dark stain triumphs in the soul  
 and the wind sheds in motionless branches  
 tears of timid, uncertain quenas,  
 I sigh a torment,  
 on seeing how in the golden red penumbra  
 a tragic blue of dead idylls weeps! (lines 28-34)<sup>17</sup>

As suggested by the tone from the beginning, the speaker finds no joy in the apparent loss of this ancient village.<sup>18</sup> The speaker describes "angustias" ("agonies"), "gris doliente" ("aching gray"), "pena" ("pain"), and other words connoting similar emotions in nearly every stanza. Moreover, the speaker sighs "una congoja," translated as "torment," but "congoja" can also mean "grief" or "anguish," as the still boughs carry sounds of "timid, uncertain quenas" (Eshleman 31). "Quenas" are Quechuan flutes,<sup>19</sup> which, in the poem, are described as careful and hesitant about whether they should sound loudly so as to be heard. While the metaphorical quenas play throughout the (at least partially eclipsed) village, the "I" also seems to find their voice, as they exhale, then speak. Translated, "I" seems to be grieving the lost village. However, far from being the "last" of something,<sup>20</sup> through this depiction of what is likely an Andean village, the use of languages other than Castilian Spanish, and the inclusion of pervasive spiritual discomfort throughout, the poem attempts to move the reader to see this highland world differently, because the place and Indigenous peoples are still there. As such, "Aldeana" might also be read as playing with the death of "idilios," romantic, idealized, pastoral poems.<sup>21</sup>

Similar topics, tones, and terms are found elsewhere in *Los Heraldes Negros*, such as "Terceto Autóctono"—a series of three Spanish sonnets consisting of two quatrains and two terza rima tercets, a variant of the more common forms—initially titled "[De 'Fiestas Aldeanas']"<sup>22</sup> when it, too, was published in *La Reforma*, this time

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appearing in 1916 (Ferrari 63). As in "Aldeana," the poems are focused on laborers, shepherdesses, and others who are described as "el indio" or "indígenas"<sup>23</sup> individuals perceived by nearly all in Perú—at the time of publication—as being of a lower station, which is signaled by the work that the individuals are undertaking in this poem. Moreover, as in the aforementioned lyric, Vallejo includes more yaraví, quenás,<sup>24</sup> as well as "una caja de Tayanga, / como iniciando un huaino azul," while "el río anda borracho y canta y llora / prehistorias de agua, tiempos viejos."<sup>25</sup> Whether it is the river remembering old times or the Indigenous peoples of the highlands celebrating with Quechuan instruments and dance, even if his poetry does jump from image to image, Vallejo found his own version of native ground through his "indigenist will" and "indigenous sensibility," which he explicitly declares with the title change, even though as Vallejo explains "[a]utochthony does not consist in saying that one is autochthonous but precisely in being so, even when not saying so" (Mulligan xxvii, quoting Vallejo). "Autochthonous" is a word that also doesn't have an exact translation, but "Indigenous" is arguably the closest.<sup>26</sup> As such, he creates a new literature with depth rather than superficial mimicry, which he saw as dominating the Spanish-American literature of the time.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, *Los Heraldos Negros* is considered a "forerunner of literary indigenism," and "received a warm reception for its originality of style and thematic treatments of rural Peruvian life" (Mulligan xxii). Later works, including his various articles on the Inca, as well as *Hacia el Reino de los Sciris* (1924-1928), demonstrate similar thematic concerns.<sup>28</sup> While still a matter of debate among some critics, As José Miguel Oviedo asserts in his introduction to *Los Heraldos Negros*, "[e]l mayor mérito del trabajo es el de ser el único que por entonces hizo referencia al asunto del 'indigenismo' o 'nativismo' de algunos versos del poeta, cuestión que estaba de actualidad en el Perú" (15).<sup>29</sup> However, for those not fluent in Spanish, much is lost either because it isn't

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translated or because it is, thereby erasing the nuance of the language and its various connotations, making a fuller understanding of Vallejo difficult.<sup>30</sup>

Vallejo actually anticipated this issue, declaring: "Pero si a un poema se le amputa un verso, una palabra, una letra, una signo ortográfico, muere. Como el poema, al ser traducido, no pueda conservar su absoluta y viviente integridad, él debe ser leído en su lengua de origen, y esto, naturalmente, limita, por ahora, la universalidad de su emoción" (Vallejo, *El Arte y La Revolución* 62). Ironically, Mulligan, one of many who completely ignored the sonnet forms of "Terceto Autóctono," translates this passage: "But if from a poem one amputates a verse, a word, a letter, a punctuation mark, it dies. *Since the poem, when translated, cannot preserve its absolute vital integrity, it should be read in its original language, and naturally this limits, for now, the universality of its emotion*" (Mulligan 200, emphasis added). However, in his autobiography *So Far So Good* (2013), Ralph Salisbury notes that he "studied Spanish in college and ha[d] memorized poems by Federico Garc[í]a Lorca, C[é]sar Vallejo, and Octavio Paz" (215). Bly and others have repeatedly ignored Vallejo's words. Salisbury did not; he read Vallejo in the original and what Salisbury found there would go on to influence his own writing (Salisbury, *So Far So Good* 230).

Although not published in a collection until *Going to the Water: Poems of a Cherokee Heritage* (1983), Ralph Salisbury began writing about his Indigenous background at least twenty years earlier in "In the Children's Museum in Nashville," which first appeared in *The New Yorker* on 22 April 1961.<sup>31</sup> The speaker of the poem takes his sons to the place named in the title, providing a tour from a different perspective. The poem opens with "rattlesnakes coil, / protected by glass and by placards warning that if teased / they might just dash their brains against apparent air (Salisbury *Lights from a Bullet Hole* lines 1-3). As with all museums, they are filled with curated exhibits and, in the case of those of the "natural history" variety, the objects—

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even if dangerous, terrifying, or rarely seen in actual life—are preserved, tagged, boxed and put safely on display, as they are dead specimens like these rattlesnakes. However, the suggestion of a threat—a rattlesnake striking—though imaginary sets the tone and carries throughout the work, particularly as the next lines declares: "Negros are advised that, if notified in advance, / the Children's Museum in Nashville will take care of them / on certain days" (lines 4-6). Although the Black Civil Rights Movement had been underway since at least 1955, Jim Crow was alive and well in many if not most places in the US, including Tennessee. Consequently, these lines are a statement letting Black families know that accommodations can be made to allow them to visit as patrons, even under Jim Crow. But, for white visitors, the image of the rattlesnake is juxtaposed with that of "Negroes," drawing attention to the racist notion that there is some inherent, lurking danger if the constructed barriers separating the people should fail. However, the lines also carry an ominous message for anyone of African descent, as the Museum "will take care of them / on certain days," the implications of which only become clearer as the lyrical tour continues.

As it happens, "heads of bison," a staple of the Indigenous peoples of the Plains, which were nearly eradicated as a result of settlers and "Manifest Destiny," along with an "eland / (from Africa)" are also on display (lines 10-11). However, the parade of the dead doesn't stop with animals, it also includes "shrunken Jivaro noggins" (line 16). The Shuar ("Jivaro" was the name given to them by Spanish conquistadores), coincidentally or not, are Indigenous peoples, some of whom live in the Andes in what is now Ecuador and Perú. Each new exhibit documents the results of colonialism. Turning away from the human heads, the poem notes animal skeletons and that "[o]n Sundays, children are allowed to look / at electric stars" (lines 19-20). However, one child is always there:

Seen every day is an Indian

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child—cured by chance, the signs say  
in a dry, airless place—still possessed  
of parchment skin, thought eyeless, and still dressed  
in ceremonial regalia  
that celebrates his remove to a better world. (lines 20-25)

While grotesque to say the least, dioramas of Indigenous peoples were (are) not uncommon in the US. Anthropologist Alfred Kroeber captured "Ishi," a Yahi man, and put him on display at University of California Berkeley until "Ishi's" death in 1916; the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology "still cares for the objects he made during his residency," refusing to acknowledge that he wasn't living there by choice.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, as Robert Lowell's "At the Indian Killer's Grave" found in *Lord Weary's Castle* makes clear, putting Indigenous peoples' heads on display has a long history in the US, as he memorializes King Philip's War (c. 1675-1676), describing how "Philip's head / Grins on the platter" (lines 38-39).

As such, Salisbury's poem not only draws attention to this horrific practice, but also permits the reader to view this tableau through the eyes of individuals of Cherokee descent—actual, living Indigenous people. Moreover, his play with words and images jabs at US policies, such as boarding schools, to "solve the Indian problem." Here is a child who was "cured by chance:" "cured" as in "preserved," as well as "cured" of his Indigenous ways, although this was only accomplished through death. Yet, in death, the child is doing what would not have been allowed in life: he is dressed "in ceremonial regalia," albeit for the entertainment of a predominantly white audience (the museum is segregated after all). But, the speaker describes the donning of regalia as celebratory, as the child has moved on "to a better world," free from the actual dangers that he faced from places like the Museum (Salisbury, *Light from a Bullet Hole* line 25).



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Although it appears in a collection more than twenty years after its initial publication, "In the Children's Museum in Nashville" suggests that Salisbury, like Vallejo, began exploring what it mean to be Indigenous in his contemporary society early on and was not afraid to make politically conscious art in an attempt to disrupt the status quo. Salisbury's first book-length work, *Ghost Grapefruit and Other Poems* (1972), however, does not appear at first glance to have the same "indigenous sensibility" to use Mulligan's phrase for Vallejo. The influences of "canonical" poems presumably encountered at some point in Salisbury's education and Vallejo do leave their mark though. Salisbury includes "After Whitman's: 'There Was a Child Went Forth'" (obviously referring to Walt) and "Beyond the Road Taken" (a more indirect allusion to Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"). With each of these poems, Salisbury invokes the original and then challenges it in various ways in terms of style, form, and content. In a letter to Mona van Duyn dated 4 September 1964 referring to another poem, this time drawing on Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," Salisbury asserts: "though I imitate and relate, I do not echo."<sup>33</sup> He considered that poem a "disputation" with Shelley. His debates with the major (white) figures of poetry continue, in *Ghost Grapefruit*, as seen in "Boyhood Incident Recollected in Tranquility."<sup>34</sup>

In what is often considered a turning point in western literary history, in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Wordsworth envisions a new "I" for lyric poetry. Rather than "the frank, uncovered, tumultuously melodious canto whipped out, the image of emotion" that Vallejo suggests José de Espronceda and his "hermano" Byron embraced (Vallejo, *Selected Writings* 7), Wordsworth contends that while "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility [...] In this mood successful composition generally begins" (266). He famously calls for an embrace of the "[l]ow and rustic life," and the use of "plainer and



he sees does not invoke heaven, but the mouth of a serpent. This assertion is "that instant verified" by the boy, now "human-scientist" who investigates what he realizes were just "fellow fauna two-fold," a "murder" that will not yield food for his "empty belly" (lines 10, 12). However, the boy with his newly gained knowledge comprehends that the killing occurred as a result of "ignorance / and monstrous fear of what seemed monstrous" (lines 14-15). Because it isn't simply that he killed the snake-frog, but through language and association, it implies the fear of a beast with two backs, as what he saw was "against / nature, boy-man, man-woman in dread of the / hand's doing," an appetite not driven by the hunger, but generally the insatiable want for more, as the boy

cring[es] from knowing, simply:

the size of a snake's mouth, the size of a

frog's waist,

the appetite of the world's meat

so much more than the mouth can ever

encompass

although compelled by emptiness to try. (lines 17-25)

The boy understands that there are times when basic necessities may not be met and that the pure desire to consume more and more cannot fully satisfy, but may destroy.

While this piece invokes Wordsworth, it avoids the lyric "I" and plain syntax, opting instead for free-form associations and jumping from image to image that Bly suggests is so characteristic of Vallejo. Salisbury himself acknowledges that, in his mid-twenties, he "follow[ed] the example of [...] surrealists" and, like Vallejo, explored "the land between sleep and waking" (*So Far So Good* 230). I would argue that this poem embraces this mode, deliberately countering Wordsworth's democratic lyric with Spanish surrealism. However, in an oblique way, Salisbury also ties "Boyhood Incident

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Recollected in Tranquility" to Cherokee culture, which, according to James Mooney, regards all snakes as "'supernaturals.'" They are to be feared, revered, and "every precaution is taken to avoid killing or offending one, especially the rattlesnake. He who kills a snake will soon see others" (Mooney 294). The boy plainly states his "monstrous fear" of this snake being, and, of course, rattlesnakes were the first items on display in "In the Children's Museum in Nashville."<sup>36</sup>

Although only his second collection of poetry, by *Pointing at the Rainbow: Poems from a Cherokee Heritage* (1980), Salisbury had been publishing give or take for twenty years. Consequently, his aesthetic and thematic concerns remain relatively consistent thereafter. More often than not, the poems will be a lyric, open form, and filled with leaping images. Similar to Lowell, it will incorporate autobiographical experiences and family, but like Vallejo it will also include political commentary and, as suggested by the subtitle of this chapbook, most will include references to Cherokee life, culture, or history.

Along those lines, as it so happens, according to Mooney, if one kills a second snake, "so many will come around him whichever way he may turn that he will become dazed at the sight of their glistening eyes and darting tongues and will go wandering about like a crazy man, unable to find his way out of the woods" (294): Another snake appears in this collection. However, in "These Sacred Names," the speaker explicitly identifies the being, beginning:

A monstrous Uktena,  
writhing from Georgia to Oklahoma,  
this super-highway's bright scales hurl  
new bones over those White soldiers saw  
as trail-markers for return... (1-5)

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There are multiple stories concerning the "monstrous" Uktena (echoing the word used in "A Boyhood Incident"); however, many characteristics (at least as documented by Mooney) remain the same. Uktena "is a great snake, as large around as a tree trunk, with horns on its head, and a bright, blazing crest like a diamond upon its forehead, and scales glittering like sparks of fire" more than that "it is certain death to meet the Uktena" and even "to see the Uktena asleep is death, not to the hunter himself, but to *his family*" (Mooney 297, 299, 298). In the case of this poem, the speaker isn't referring to a literal snake, but rather to the interstate that winds its way across Georgia to Oklahoma, causing a type of death to the land. It is here that the stories of Uktena are merged not only with the highway system of the US, but also to history. The speaker references "new bones," lives lost in car accidents, that are added to bones of individuals who perished during "The Cherokee Death March," as the US military forcibly removed the Cherokee from "The Carolinas, Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia" (Salisbury, *Pointing at the Rainbow* lines 7, 37). Although the cause for the speaker's trip is the demise of a relationship, the images jump from Uktena to the Trail of Tears to racial tensions to Vietnam War protests to generalized Cold War fears, as the speaker discovers that there is "Nothing / to fight / beyond drowsiness at the wheel" (lines 19-21). The speaker, ostensibly close to that liminal state between sleeping and waking fights to stay alert, reflects on history, the various troubles facing the country, and presumably night, suggesting that Uktena, who kills on sight, is exerting its power by threatening the life of the speaker should he drift off behind the wheel.

This darkness continues as the speaker drives, when he realizes that he is tracing his "ancestors' 'Trail of Tears'" until the poem jumps, revealing that this same road is leading to a "reunion with wife and child." At this moment dawn breaks and:

Lake Texoma blazes like Uktena's mountainous head's gem.

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Its medicine springs up  
in the veins of green corn  
and in my veins... (lines 25-28)

As the speaker approaches the reservoir that shines like the Ulûñsû'tî in Uktena's head, the gem is said to bring "success in hunting, love, rain-making, and every other business" to anyone who possesses it (Mooney 298). Although initially seen as a glimmer of hope, the connection to Uktena also brings the specter of death, in this case, in the form of Lake Texoma, the result of the Denison Dam, which, like many such projects in the US was built under the policy of eminent domain often taking more Indigenous lands, flooding existing towns, hunting areas, and agricultural land in the process.<sup>37</sup> But, the speaker also invokes the medicine of the green corn, which was a main festival prior to forced removal that included a ceremony for cleansing away impurities or bad deeds and permitted the start of a new life.<sup>38</sup> The speaker begins to "chant against sleep, / against death" (lines 29-30). "These sacred names" include:

Chief Guwisguwi (John Ross) Tsali (Charlie)  
Sequoia (George Guest, Guess, or Gist)  
Tagwadahi (Catawba-Killer) Itagunahi (John Ax)  
and Ayunini (Swimmer). (lines 30-33)

Each of these figures—named in transliterated Cherokee, as well as English—played a key role in Cherokee history, its culture, or the preservation of it, as, among other things, they were Principal Chiefs, an individual who resisted removal, one who created the Cherokee syllabary, or were sources for Mooney, who left his ethnographic works behind. While the speaker chants as a way to remember and honor his Cherokee heritage, by including it in this poem, Salisbury uses his pen as the revolutionary weapon that Vallejo mentions: "In these people (The Aniyunwiya) come / back against bayonets, against extinction" (lines 34-35). The speaker suggests that as long as there

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are those to carry on the stories and the language, the Cherokee Nation will survive. But, the poem ends with a caution, as there will be a reunification if the Aniyunwiya come back "to join / in a sacred dance in Echota, the holy city, the maiden / whose death dooms us all, / the beautiful daughter of the sun" (lines 37-40). However, in 1980, New Echota was in the middle of being turned into a museum as part of a Georgia State Park;<sup>39</sup> meanwhile, according to Mooney, the daughter of the Sun was killed by none other than a rattlesnake (254).

In his autobiography, Salisbury declares "[f]ree association, spontaneity, a wholeness of the moment, a union of past and present, of childhood and after—these are what I seek..." (*So Far So Good* 4). During the course of his prolific career, spanning over six decades, Salisbury succeeded in finding a poetic form that generally enabled him to do just these things. He all but ignores the assertions of Mary Hunter Austin, whose work he may or may not have known, although one cannot help but read some of his titles—*Pointing at the Rainbow* (1980), *A White Rainbow* (1985), *Rainbows of Stone* (2000)—as a "disputation" of Cronyn's *The Path on the Rainbow*. And while there is always the chance that one might find a poem that fits the Imagist mode—as I have tried to imply—if one does, it has far less to do with anything asserted by Austin than Salisbury's education at the University of Iowa, career as a professor, and life as an artist / scholar / reader. Robert Lowell—Salisbury's mentor at Iowa—and his shift to a confessional mode, which was more emotive and personal, can certainly be seen in the content of Salisbury's work, as can "spontaneity," which Salisbury mentions himself. But rather than follow a US poetic tradition that some, like Bly, felt didn't embrace a spiritual life, the use of a feeling unconscious, or that remained politically aloof, Salisbury found the Spanish-speaking authors that he read in his twenties could show him a different way (*So Far So Good* 230). Consequently, Salisbury's poetry fully embraces the subjective, returns time and time again to events that shaped who he

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was—his hand-to-mouth existence on the family farm in Depression-era Iowa, his experiences surrounding World War II, and his views on war generally. Although he recollects these memories at a distance, they neither lack emotion nor substance, as the images engage the senses. Moreover, because he did embrace what Bly describes as the "leaping" methods of César Vallejo, not to mention a desire to produce if not "revolutionary" then at least "socially responsible" art, Vallejo becomes central to understanding Salisbury's work both in terms of form and content. Seeing few, if any, contemporary Indigenous poets using their own voices and backgrounds in the US, he turned to those that did, like Vallejo. As a result, Salisbury also began to show an "'indigenist will' and 'indigenous sensibility'" in his work by connecting to his Cherokee heritage before many authors who are credited with starting the so-called "Native American Renaissance." As a result, to overlook the contributions of Ralph Salisbury to Indigenous literatures (and just literature) in what is now the United States is to omit an author who began to challenge the monolingual narrative and settler colonialism earlier than most.

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### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> See "Obituary: Ralph J. Salisbury, January 24, 1926- October 9, 2017" available at <https://crwr.uoregon.edu/2017/10/30/obit-salisbury/> accessed 23 February 2019. While he was drafted and trained, he did not see active combat in WWII, but did receive educational funds for his service in the Air Force. Although a specific date isn't given, his time at the University of Iowa is likely sometime in 1950 or 1953 when Lowell was teaching at the Iowa Workshop. See Axelrod, p. 242.

<sup>3</sup> "Cherokee language" as written using the syllabary invented by Sequoyah; transliterated, it would appear as Tsalagi Gawonihisdi. For more information see the



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Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma's language resource page, <https://cherokee.org/About-The-Nation/Cherokee-Language>.

<sup>4</sup> French for "a writer of free verse."

<sup>5</sup> In the introduction to *New Poets of Native Nations* (Graywolf 2018), editor Heid E. Erdrich notes that "Internet searches for best-selling anthologies under the category of 'Native American' or 'American Indian' poetry return books published in 1918, 1996, 1988, and 1984, in that order" (xiii). Presumably, the work referred to by 1918 is none other than *The Path on the Rainbow*. Moreover, "Rainbow" continues to appear in the title of anthologies of Indigenous poetry, for example, *Voices of the Rainbow: Contemporary Poetry by Native Americans* (Arcade, 2012) edited by Kenneth Rosen. Although not mentioned by Erdrich, Salisbury also edited an anthology, *A Nation Within* (Hamilton, NZ: Outrigger, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> As the *Harvard Law Review* notes in "Regulating Eugenics:"

Negative eugenics commonly took the form of compulsory sterilization laws in the United States. Starting with Indiana in 1907, twenty-nine states enacted compulsory sterilization laws, and a majority of states still had such laws as of 1956. Eugenacists even wrote a model eugenic sterilization statute. All told, states sterilized over 60,000 "unfit" Americans up through the 1970s. Though some courts invalidated these sterilization statutes, the Supreme Court upheld their constitutionality in the infamous case of *Buck v. Bell* (1580).

*Buck v. Bell* is, of course, the US Supreme Court decision from 1927 in which Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes infamously stated that "three generations of imbeciles are enough," making forced sterilization constitutional (1581). The case has never been overturned and remains legal precedent in the US. After *Buck v. Bell*, according to "Eugenical Sterilization Map of the United States, 1935" found in *The Harry H. Laughlin Papers*, similar laws were passed in much of the US.

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas King, especially pp. 110-120, for a more in-depth discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Perú, roughly around the same time as *The Path on the Rainbow* appeared (1921-1926), became embroiled in a complicated and contradictory struggle for Indigenous rights that pitted cuzqueños against limeños in a debate between "*regionalismo*," defined as the Andean highlands (especially those around Cuzco the pre-colonial center of the Inca) versus "*centralismo*" (epitomized by the coastal area of Lima founded by Spanish conquistadores) with mestizos / mestizajes almost always in the conflicted middle (De la Cadena 45, italics in original). The details of this period are beyond the scope of the present argument; however, please see Marisol de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919-1991* (Duke UP, 2000).

In English, sistema de castas translates to "caste system." For more on the caste system in Latin America, see "Transatlantic Quechuañol: Reading Race through Colonial Translations," by Allison Margaret Bigelow (*PMLA* 134.2 [2019], pp. 242-259) or *Bound Lives: Africans, Indians, and the Making of Race in Colonial Peru* by Rachel Sarah O'Toole (U of Pittsburgh P, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Spanish for "bachelor's degree."

<sup>10</sup> See de la Cadena, pp. 44-85.

<sup>11</sup> *Los Heraldos Negros* is translated from the Spanish by Robert Bly as *The Black Riders* and by Joseph Mulligan as *The Black Heralds* with Mulligan's being the most direct. *Trilce* appears to be a word coined by Vallejo, which is untranslatable.

<sup>12</sup> Vallejo thus heavily influences Bly's own work and vision of what would become known as "Deep Image" in the 1960s and beyond, which focused on making subjective connections between the physical and spiritual realm, thereby creating an American poetry with spiritual life, revolutionary feeling, and images ("A Wrong Turning" 22-27). Jerome Rothenberg, coined the phrase "deep image." Rothenberg would begin "translating" Indigenous poetry by the late 1960s in what he would call "total translation" and also "ethnopoetics." See *Pre-Faces and Other Writings*, especially pages 76-92.

<sup>13</sup> "Reform" in Spanish.

<sup>14</sup> In Spanish, the poem appears:

Lejana vibración de esquilas mustias  
 en el aire derrama  
 la fragancia rural de sus angustias. (lines 1-3)

<sup>15</sup> In the original this stanza appears:

Lánguido se desgarrá  
 en la vetusta aldea  
 el dulce yaraví de una guitarra,  
 en cuya eternidad de hondo quebranto  
 la triste voz de un indio dondonea,  
 como un viejo esquilon de camposanto. (lines 22-27)

<sup>16</sup> According to Eshleman, dondonea appears twice in the body of Vallejo's poetry, the second time as "dondoneo" in "[La punta del hombre]." Eshleman and Ferrari opt for different translations. In *César Vallejo: The Complete Posthumous Poetry*, Eshleman and José Rubia Barcia coin "zazhay," asserting that "'dondoneo' appears to be a neologism, based on 'contoneo' (strut). To match Vallejo's sound distortion, we take the word 'sashay' and replace the two s / s with two z / s" (310). Later, Eshleman changes the translation to "stirrut" continuing to play with "contoneo (strut)," but this time "adding 'ir' to strut, (drawing forth stir and rut), [he] hope[d] to match the

strangeness of the original" (*The Complete Poetry*, 652). Mulligan follows Eshelman's "stirrut." Eshleman notes earlier that González Vigil "does not comment" on *dondoneo* (622).

<sup>17</sup> In Spanish, the poem ends:

De codos yo en el muro,  
cuando triunfa en el alma el tinte oscuro  
y el viento reza en los ramajes yertos  
llantos de quenás, tímidos, inciertos,  
suspiro una congoja,  
al ver que en la penumbra gualda y roja  
llora un trágico azul de idilios muertos!

<sup>18</sup> "Ancient" arguably being a more accurate translation of "vetusta" than "decrepit," as it appears to be derived from the Latin "vetustus" ("vetust," adj.).

<sup>19</sup> Eshleman defines "quena" as "a one-hole Indian flute that accompanies the yaraví songs in some parts of South America. Legend has it that it is carved out of the shinbone of a dead beloved" (*The Complete Posthumous Poetry*, 307). According to *Diccionario Quechua-Español-Quechua / Qheswa-Español-Qheswa Simi Taqe*, quena is a hispanicized version of "qena" defined as "Instrumento musical aerófono, oriundo de la cultura andina hecha de caña hueca, hueso o metal. Tiene varias aberturas o huecos para pulsar y una boquilla, bisel o abertura en la boca para soplar. Carece de lengüeta. Tiene un timbre muy expresivo y peculiar" (457). In English, roughly translated, it is a flute-like instrument of the Andean culture made of hollow cane, bone, or metal that has a very expressive and peculiar sound.

<sup>20</sup> A discussion of the "lasting" of a group of people is beyond the scope of this paper; however, for more see *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England*, Jean M. O'Brien, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010, especially pp. 105-143.

<sup>21</sup> Defined by the *Diccionario de la lengua española* as "[c]omposición poética que recreaba de manera idealizada la vida del campo y los amores pastoriles."

<sup>22</sup> "Terceto Autóctono" is translated by Mulligan as "Autochthonous Tercet." "De 'Fiestas Aldeanas'" translates roughly to "Parties of the Village," specifically a sparsely populated village that may not have the authority to govern itself. This assertion is based on the definition of "Aldea," a "[p]ueblo de escaso vecindario y, por lo común, sin jurisdicción propia," found in *Diccionario de lengua española*, Real Academia Española; however, admittedly, this does not account for the passage of time and the Aldean Spanish dialect.

<sup>23</sup> Ferrari, "Terceto Autóctono (I)" 6; "Terceto Autóctono (II)" 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ferrari, "Terceto Autóctono (I)" lines 7, 9. In "Terceto Autóctono (I)," line 9, "aquenando hondos" is translated by Mulligan following Eshleman as "Quenaing," another neologism (22, 571 n. 17).

<sup>25</sup> Ferrari, "Terceto Autóctono (III)" lines 12-13 and 10-11, respectively, translated by Mulligan as "a *caja* from Tayanga sounds, / as if initiating blue *huaino*" and "the river flows along drunkenly, singing and weeping / prehistories of water, olden times" ("Terceto Autóctono (III)" lines 12-13 and 10-11, italics in original). Mulligan directly quotes Eshleman's translations of the Quechuan words: "'The *caja* is a musical instrument combining a kind of drum with a ditch reed (from which *quenas* can be made). Tayanga is a northern Peruvian town specializing in the fabrication of *cajas*'" (Mulligan 571, n. 19m italics in original). Mulligan does the same for *huaino*: "'The most well-known representative indigenous dance of Peru, with happy, flirtatious movements (and sometimes words)'" (Mulligan, n. 20, quoting Eshleman).

<sup>26</sup> "Dicho una persona o del pueblo al que pertenece: Originarios del propio país en el que viven" ("autéctono," 1. Adj).

<sup>27</sup> His contemporaries attempted to "keep to the naturalist novel, in purebred style, in rubendarionian [referring to Ruben Darío, considered the father of Spanish-American modernism] verse and realist theater," but they were not able to pen anything of substance, leading Vallejo to declare in 1926: "[a]mid this dearth of spiritual command, new writers in the Castilian language don't show their outrage over an empty past, toward which in vain they turn for direction [. . .] If our generation manages to break its own trail, its work will crush the previous. Then, the history of Spanish Literature will leap over the past thirty years as over an abyss" (Vallejo, ed. Mulligan, 151). Vallejo jumps over the perceived void created by the result of ventriloquizing previous Spanish and South American literary movements and cuts to more contemporary issues. For the Spanish version of this work, see "Estado de la Literatura Española" ("The State of Spanish Literature").

In an essay solely on Vallejo, one could trace the impact of one of Vallejo's stated aesthetic inspirations: Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein. However, that is beyond the scope of this currently project. Unsurprisingly, Eisenstein and Vallejo's Soviet connections remain unacknowledged by Bly, as his translations were published in the midst of the Cold War, and reprinted during the height of the Vietnam / American War.

<sup>28</sup> Translated by Mulligan from Spanish to English as *Toward the Reign of the Sciris*. This work has been called a novella of American folklore (Vallejo, *Narrativa Completa*, 47 n107) and focuses on the Quechua.

<sup>29</sup> Loosely translated from Spanish, this passage states: "The greatest merit of Vallejo's poetry is that he was the only one at the time who made reference to 'indigenismo' or

'nativism,' which were contemporary issues in Peru." The same can be said of some of his prose, like *Hacia el Reino de los Sciris* and others.

<sup>30</sup> Reading Vallejo only through the eyes and translations of Robert Bly or others also limits Vallejo's work, According to the *National Observer's* review of Bly's 1962 translations, the work of Vallejo (and Neruda) exemplifies "poetry of masculinity and strength," which was perfectly suited for Bly's "Deep Image" movement (Galvin 361, quoting the *National Observer*). However, as Rachel J. Galvin explains in "Poetic Innovation and Appropriative Translation in the Americas" (2014), this aesthetic was achieved by disregarding accepted ways of transforming Spanish to English, as well as adding language to poems that doesn't appear in the original (361).

<sup>31</sup> The image of Museums reoccurs with relative frequency in Indigenous poetry, for one contemporary example, see *Nature Poem*, Tommy Pico, New York: Tin House, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> See The Hearst Museum of Anthropology website on the history of Ishi, available at <https://hearstmuseum.berkeley.edu/ishi/> accessed 10 March 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Salisbury, Letter to Mona van Duyn, 4 September 1964. Mona van Duyn and Jarvis Thurston were the co-founders of *Perspective: A Quarterly of Literature and the Arts*, which was among the little magazines to publish Salisbury's work. The archive contains correspondence dating back to the mid-1950s.

<sup>34</sup> This poem also appears in *Light from a Bullet Hole: Poems New and Selected 1950-2008*. The line breaks used here reflect those in *Ghost Grapefruit*, which vary from those in *Light from a Bullet Hole*. Also, "spreckled" in line 7 in the *Ghost Grapefruit* version appears as "speckled" in revision found in *Light from a Bullet Hole*.

<sup>35</sup> Byron, of course, had a contrary view, often preferring a more formalist approach.

<sup>36</sup> From "The Snake Tribe:" "The generic name for snakes is indädû'. They are all regarded as anida'wehĩ [...] having an intimate connection with the rain and thunder gods, and possessing a certain influence over the other animal and plant tribes" (Mooney 294). Whether the Cherokee stories incorporated into these poems were those told to Salisbury by his father's family or are from sources such as James Mooney's *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*, or some combination is unknown; however, Mooney will be used here.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, "The History of the Denison Dam," from the US Army Corps of Engineers, Tulsa District, available at <https://www.swt.usace.army.mil/Locations/Tulsa-District-Lakes/Oklahoma/Lake-Texoma/History/> accessed 4 March 2019.

<sup>38</sup> See Mooney, pp. 420-423. Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma no longer posts information about the Green Corn Dance on their website, the Nation's statement is available at <https://www.cherokee.org/about-the-nation/culture/> accessed 29 February 2020.

<sup>39</sup> See the New Echota Georgia State Park website: <https://gastateparks.org/NewEchota>

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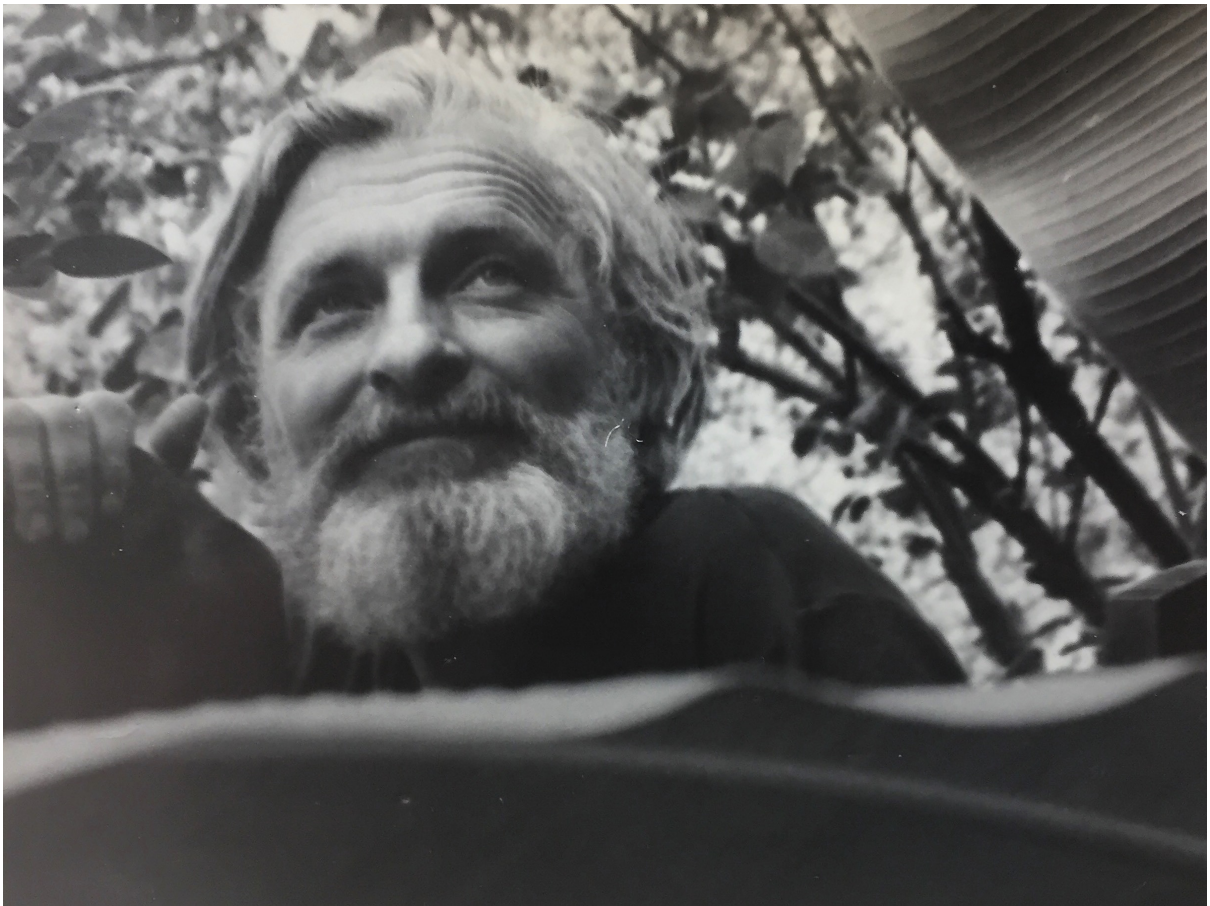
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Ralph Salisbury, Fresno, California, 1970. Photo: Ingrid Wendt.

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## **“The Indian Who Bombed Berlin”: German Encounters in Ralph Salisbury’s Work – Modulating Modern Precariousness**

CATHY COVELL WAEGNER

Ralph Salisbury’s canon is laced with encounters with Germans and Germany, serving to lend his stories and autobiography, *So Far, So Good* (2013),<sup>1</sup> a transnational edginess in connection with his self-identification as Native American. At times the Germans are presented as the dangerously inimical Other, although Salisbury’s or his narrators’ realizations of inclusive human kinship generally undercut the jeopardy and alienation. Salisbury spent extended time in Germany in many capacities, including Fulbright Fellow (1983, 2004, 2005) and networking sojourner, and writes of his experiences there ranging from dealing with a formidable East German guard at Checkpoint Charlie to joy in teaching enthusiastic students Native American literature. In his autobiography Salisbury refers to his many German American neighbors and the Wessels family of his mother’s first husband—themselves dealing with issues of otherness in patriotic America—in (in)direct confrontation with his alcohol-troubled and frequently violent “English-Cherokee-Shawnee father” (*So Far, So Good* 5). In the semi-autobiographical tall tale “The Chicken Affliction and a Man of God”<sup>2</sup> Salisbury changes his Irish American mother’s heritage to German American descent for the boy-focalizer’s mother, re-dressing—in Faulkneresque Southern modernist manner—his underlying boyhood trauma with humorous-grotesque exaggerations when the young narrator’s staunch mother futilely attempts to protect the boy from his abusive father. Salisbury shows literary kinship with other modernist writers in the short story “Silver Mercedes and Big Blue Buick: An Indian War”; a Babbitt-like shoe-store owner, who could possibly have felt at home in Sinclair Lewis’ *Main Street*, conducts

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a Hemingway-flavored gender battle with his Sioux German-descended wife, as well as a perilous driving contest with a skilled Mercedes driver on narrow Bavarian roads. In "The Indian Who Bombed Berlin," a Native American exchange professor recalls his callous wartime destruction of enemy "cathedrals and homes" in Germany (202), but finds himself constantly, transculturally, and ironically readjusting his lines of affiliation during a riotous demonstration by students of color in Berlin. Modulating modernism to produce a "Cherokee modern" approach, Salisbury's complex instrumentalization of Native American and German stereotypes and the accompanying issues of precariousness, alterity, agency, and reinforcement of Indigenous presence can be compared to and contrasted with strategies employed by two Anishinaabe authors in different genres and literary modes: Gerald Vizenor's in *Blue Ravens: Historical Novel* (2014) and Drew Hayden Taylor's in *The Berlin Blues*, a 2007 play.

This essay will first consider Ralph Salisbury's (auto)biography in terms of *precariousness*—the violation of basic physical and psychological needs in childhood, the alterity and shakiness of his family's ethnic identity, wartime hazards in dangerous training missions, and his existential precariousness through his pacifist and anti-racist counter-stand—and the way it interweaves with his exposure to (images of) Germans and Germany. This precariousness will then be related to *risk* as a key component of modernism and Salisbury's modulation of this into "Cherokee modern" in an individualistic knitting together of autobiography and fiction to support agency and Indigenous presence, often with self-directed irony. Three sections subsequently examine a trio of Salisbury's short stories: The first, *Translating Biography to Literature: Tall Tale Strategies*, offers a relevant reading of "The Chicken Affliction and a Man of God"; the second, focusing on the fourfold combat in "Silver Mercedes and Big Blue Buick: An Indian War," creates a surprising amalgamation of conflicts in German traffic; the final section of analysis of Salisbury's fiction demonstrates how "The Indian Who Bombed Berlin" evokes

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ethical agency as a possible route for transnational restorative justice. I continue with some ideas on the ways Vizenor's Native protagonists in *Blue Ravens: Historical Novel* employ stereotypes as weapons against German soldiers in wartime precariousness. Taylor's *The Berlin Blues* returns the discussion back to a largely comic tall-tale contest, this time between two sets of ethnic stereotypes within a frame of mimicry and hegemonic European re-colonialization. My concluding paragraphs can be read as suggesting reasons why Salisbury, the "Cherokee humanist and Indigenous cosmopolitan" (Krupat 73), chose to end his autobiography with a comparison of the natural music of trumpeter swans, no longer threatened by extinction, to Beethoven's symphonies (*So Far, So Good* 273-4).

### **Biographical German Encounters**

Ralph Salisbury (1926-2017) grew up in a rural area near Arlington, Iowa, attending school with mostly German American children (*So Far, So Good* 20). Although Ralph's father Charles (Charley) did not ever tell his family or community directly that he was of Native descent ("he never, so far as I can remember, said that we were Indian – and never said that we were not," 39-40), young Ralph sensed that his family was treated as different, for example when "a spiteful, possibly racist neighbor" turned his father in to the authorities for hunting out of season (58). Supportive connections with neighbors, especially through his Irish American mother, are also described, however. Her first husband Bernard Wessels, father of Ralph's revered, eight years older, half-brother Bob, was German American. Wessels died after enlisting during World War I: "the American army may have been a way of transcending his bearing a German name... His was a sad and not unusual story, death from meningitis in a Texas training camp" (*So Far, So Good* 139). The Wessels family did not approve of their son's enlisting, nor of his marriage to an Irish American woman (241). Salisbury vividly remembers how Wessels remained a thorny

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"presence... in my parents' quarrels" ("The Quiet" 25). Not without empathy, Salisbury depicts his own father's overcompensation for alterity through the images of the family barn and Charley's clothing: "I'd see our barn, the only white one among the dozens of red—symbolic, maybe, of a Southern-born mixed-blood Indian man's urge to be of the dominant race, the same urge that moved him to wear his one suit, a white shirt, and a necktie when going to town" (27). The English surname did not tend to serve the family well, we are told: "Our English name was not advantageous, whether our German American neighbors knew we were Indian or did not" (70). Indeed, in a tavern frequented by local German Americans, Charley's "urge to be of the dominant race" put him in jeopardy in a brawl: "During World War II a group of drunks threatened my father in a tavern, not as an Indian but as 'a goddamned Englishman.' An older German American present restrained the would-be attackers by telling them, 'Charley is a good Englishman'" (70). The motif of aggressive and discriminatory German behavior, balanced by broad-minded interactions of good will, accompanies the reader of Ralph Salisbury's autobiography and stories.

Teenage Ralph learned to believe that physical fighting was necessary for survival as he "grew to manhood in a community like most, where men have to fight to get respect" (154). Salisbury was deeply influenced by what he called "the lynch-mob anger that the entire country had been feeling since a deluge of propaganda against Japan, Germany, and Italy had begun" (125). His half-brother Bob fought the Nazis in North Africa and was a maltreated prisoner of war in Italy, and Salisbury recalls how he "had wanted to kill his captors, the Germans, who'd been so evil in the official history books of twelve years of state schools" (175). Newspapers and movies aroused his desire to be a warrior when he "experienced orgasm-resembling release in seeing British Spitfires' gun-camera film of Nazi bombers bursting into flames in newsreels" (125). At age sixteen he painstakingly attempted to build a fighter-glider out of strips of sawed-up boards, binder twine, and farm

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fertilizer bags in a material “labor of abstract hate” (126). In his later years, Salisbury’s dream of flying a glider was finally fulfilled, but his memorable flight in “a graceful, German-designed glider” was tempered by his stark recollection of the war dead: “I remember that my cousin Stacy was killed while piloting a glider carrying troops in the invasion of Normandy” (128). Salisbury’s adult explanation of the rise of Hitler, near the beginning of his memoirs, places fault mainly on institutionalized propaganda:

From the depths of humiliation and near-starvation imposed by England, France, and the United States, Germany, united under Hitler’s dictatorship, emerged prosperous and proud. Ceaselessly propagandized, the German population felt moved to be led on and on, to greater victories, greater glory. (13)

The mature autobiographer sees through the web of propaganda—on both sides of the Atlantic and Pacific—to the machinations driven by greed for material and territorial wealth, by stereotypical hate and misdirected patriotism, encouraging the “craziness of nations, which were daily slaughtering thousands of our own kind in war” (126).

When did the fiery young Ralph, would-be “Cherokee warrior, movie dream hero” (134), grow disillusioned with the “propagandization” that demonized the German people? Salisbury carefully records the ethnic discrimination he personally experienced or observed after enlisting at age seventeen in the army air corps. His not-immediately-identifiable ethnicity (or that of the recruits he befriended) led to verbal abuse attack as “spik,” “Hispanic,” or “dago” (141; 172; 151). Ralph buddied up with Jewish trainees, “on the basis of... some vaguely sensed community of pariah-hood,” and was mistaken for a Jew (148). The irony of preparing to fight in Europe “to save... Jews from Nazis” but having to “watch Jew-hating training sergeants mistreat [American] Jews” did not escape the young trainee (124). There had only been one black family in Salisbury’s home territory, and he was incensed

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by the segregation and blatant discrimination directed toward African American soldiers in training camp (86).

The many dangerous training missions the air corps recruits were sent on, made all the more hazardous by faulty equipment, poor preparation, and infelicitous weather conditions, gave Salisbury a sense of perilous combat. As he told interviewer Bo Schöler in 1985, "I never engaged in bombing an enemy city, but a lot of my comrades died in airplane disasters... probably a hundred that we lost during the two-and-a-half years I was flying" (Schöler 28). When Specialist Gunner Salisbury heard about a training plane needlessly bombing cattle and a Navajo home, ostensibly to have a live target (150), he meditated on stages and incidents in the genocide of Native Americans by the settler colonials and their military, a genocide resulting in "eight million Native Americans [being] wiped out"—even more than the approximately six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust by the German Nazi organization (150). Salisbury did not actually serve abroad in World War II, since his orders for deployment to Europe were changed to retraining with the large B-29 Superfortress for bombing duty in the Far East. The war ended before this training was completed. Corporal Salisbury firmly decided not to serve in active duty for *any* war, and later encouraged his son Brian to register as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War (75).

Ralph Salisbury's professional career as a college teacher and university professor was strongly linked to post-war Germany. His first trip to Germany took place in 1967 following a sabbatical year in London from the University of Oregon. He purchased a VW bus in Hannover, traveled to Berlin and later Munich (email from Ingrid Wendt, 23 Jan. 2019), and must have been keenly aware of the burgeoning of German student demonstrations for peace in Vietnam and a restructuring of university and social systems. At any rate, Salisbury's experience at Checkpoint Charlie between West Berlin and Communist East Berlin showed him the "workings of a police state" (*So Far, So Good* 209), when two men—unwisely

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arrogant in their interaction with a border guard—were detained behind closed doors. Salisbury and his four companions, one a former colleague from Drake College in Des Moines, Iowa, continued on to a museum in East Berlin to see Greek artworks that were as displaced as prisoners of war or migrants, “looted from Greece by Germany, then looted from Germany by Russians, and then ransomed back by the East German government” (201). Salisbury surmises that the Southern American accent of one of his companions attracted the negative attention of four young men, who menaced the five tourists, musing that perhaps the accent “had reminded the four of Lyndon Johnson’s voice talking about his invasion of Vietnam, or perhaps they had had some personal experience with Southern-born American soldiers before the Russians took over” (210). Ironically, the nearby presence of uniformed museum guards discouraged the Communist harassers, and the danger became one more tale in the dense network of threats—from his father, from intruders on the farm, from school bullies, from officers, from suspicious strangers—that Salisbury faces down in his autobiography.

A second encounter at Checkpoint Charlie in 1983, during a semester as a Senior Fulbright Fellow at Goethe University in Frankfurt, reinforced this pattern of stern and helpful guards in East Berlin and is embedded in an important accolade of thanks to all who have assisted him during his long lifetime. A strict East German border guard noticed that Salisbury had not signed his passport:

Jet-lagged and exhausted after weeks of little sleep while I’d worked to read the final projects of the young poets and fiction writers who were my students, I stupidly reached into my coat for a pen and simultaneously reached to take the passport back from the East German border guard... At the tense East German border, where many had been killed while trying to escape to the West, I escaped trouble because a kindly young soldier – as young as the young soldier I’d once been – took a worried look at his officer, then far down the line of Americans being detained, and told me to wait and sign the



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passport after I was safely back on the bus. I never studied German and can only converse haltingly and ungrammatically, but I understood the young guard as well as I've understood any poem I've memorized. The German word for "thanks" I knew but could not say, for fear of getting the guard and myself in trouble. (183)

Salisbury returned to Germany repeatedly. In addition to a Eurail trip with his wife Ingrid Wendt and their four-year-old daughter March-August in 1976, Salisbury stayed in later years in Munich and Murnau, tracing with his wife her family history in Hamburg, Cologne, Wiesbaden, and the Stuttgart area (email from Ingrid Wendt, 17 Jan. 2019). Moreover, Salisbury taught classes on contemporary Native American literature at Goethe University while Ingrid Wendt served as a Fulbright Fellow there between 1994 and 1995, accompanying her to poetry-teaching workshops in ten German cities. Furthermore, Salisbury taught literature and history courses at the University of Freiburg in 2004 and 2005 as a Fulbright Specialist. Immersed in an extensive network of German colleagues and close friends, the strong husband and wife team made at least six other trips to Europe between 1983 and 2005 to take part in international conferences and to travel in Germany and beyond. There can be no doubt that Ralph Salisbury's transnational experiences in Germany were intensely important personally, academically, and literarily.<sup>3</sup>

### **Precariousness and Cherokee Modern**

The concept of precariousness has taken on particular importance in current cultural discourse, not least through Judith Butler's post-9/11 collection of philosophical-political essays *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004). Her stance against "corporations that monopolize control over the mainstream media with strong interests in maintaining US military power" (147), consonant with Salisbury's, leads her to inquire what makes some human lives "ungrievable" (xiv and passim). An alterity of pernicious discrimination, Butler asserts, plays a key role

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in the distinction between humanization and dehumanization of war dead, whereby “the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human” (xv). Butler claims that this deep form of exclusion stabilizes a world order that supports a hierarchy of injurious othering in spheres of nationalism, ethnicity, gender, and class. Butler recommends Emmanuel Levinas’ visionary call for an awareness of a salutary kind of alterity, of “*Peace as awakens to the precariousness of the other*” (Butler 134, my emphasis).<sup>4</sup> I maintain that Salisbury’s statements and literature provide evidence that he would agree with this philosophical application of precariousness and alterity, with its agenda of moving toward political peace in postmodern times. Salisbury recounts his own “appalled” reaction to 9/11 in terms of the German civilian war-other, with both sides thoroughly “propagandized”: “I watched the TV coverage of the airplane’s gracefully turning to complete its suicide mission, and I was appalled, remembering my propagandized eighteen-year-old’s training to inflict massacre on the propagandized populations of German cities in World War Two” (Mackay 15).

Two further recent applications of precariousness—with respect to isolation and placelessness—arise from precepts of modernism and its “riskiness” (to be discussed below) and have relevance for Salisbury’s life-writing and fiction. In a 2018 volume titled *New Perspectives on Community and the Modernist Subject*, the editors seek to refocus the traditional image of the “solipsistic and isolated modernist individual” by placing its interiority into contexts of “communal affiliations,” many of which are “non-conventional and non-essentialised external forms” (Rodríguez-Salas et al. 1-2). This approach would revalue the protagonist’s tentative and “precarious” connections to others and “show that many modernist narratives are built on the tension between organic, traditional and essential communities, on the one hand, and precarious, intermittent and non-identitary

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ones, on the other" (7). For Salisbury, biographically, this could perhaps offer context for an interview statement that speaks to a stronger "non-conventional" affiliation to Germans than to an essentialized form of "pan-Nativeness"; "I suppose," Salisbury reflects, "that maybe I might have more in common with a German than I would have with a Navajo in many important cases" (Schöler 32). A fictional example of the "tension" in established vs. precarious communities will follow in the discussion of "The Indian Who Bombed Berlin."

In *Postcolonial Modernism and the Picaresque Novel: Literatures of Precarity* (2017) Jens Elze links the traditional wandering picaro figures with the economically jeopardized underclass members of what he labels "postcolonial modernist" narratives. Both groups "combine an existential precariousness with an economic precarity that is condensed in the picaresque's traditional propensity to 'atopy' – a social placelessness in terms of genealogy and aspiration – that will serve as its main category of differentiation from the Bildungsroman" (25). As a Native postcolonial traveler and unsettler preferring "non-conventional" affiliations, Salisbury could qualify as a picaro in his life-writing; but his insistence on the wholeness of his identity—as "a Cherokee-Shawnee-English-Irish person, not part this part that but all everything, whatever it is" (*So Far, So Good* 242)—alongside his website's statement of his transnational *Bildung*, where he explains "I have lived and worked among the intelligentsia of many nations" ("Ralph Salisbury"), counters Elze's "placelessness in terms of genealogy and aspiration." Salisbury is thus able to, as it were, have the precarious modernist cake and eat it too.

Salisbury recorded his admiration of numerous modernist authors, citing his teacher Robert Lowell's strong influence (Schöler 31), calling Ernest Hemingway his "hero" (*So Far, So Good* 190), quoting Robert Frost's advice (184), praising Flannery O'Connor's late modernist art (185), and evoking William Faulkner with whom he shared the inclination to "hunt and peck," meaning writing slowly to encourage thinking (186), as well as the dubious honor of being called "nigger lover" by local

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Southern citizens (applied to Salisbury living in Bryan, Texas, and teaching at Texas A&M University 192). Salisbury also attests to weighty bonding with Faulkner through the latter's valuation of Native Americans: "It was a white writer, William Faulkner, who first gave me a sense of the sanctity of my Indian heritage. Faulkner's character Sam Fathers, 'son of a slave and a Chickasaw chief,' became my spirit father" ("The Quiet" 25).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Salisbury sees a bond between the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Southern modernists and Native American authors. "Like Faulkner and other southern white writers, Native American writers write from a conquered people's awareness" ("The Quiet" 34), creating innovative literature that challenges received conventions and "since the United States' shattering defeat by tiny Vietnam" takes on "a new importance to contemporary readers" (34).

A well-known scholar of modernism, Michael Levenson, stresses the *risk* (6, my emphasis) taken by daring authors following what has come to be considered the modernist credo of "make it new" in their literary art. A number of them faced the physical perils of war, and all of them the philosophical terrors of alienation, cultural fragmentation, and a profound sense of loss. We could venture to say, though, that few, if any, of the Anglo-American canonical modernists were confronted with the task of subsistence-level survival, combatting poverty, malnutrition, and violence (in the family, with peers, and in the community) to the extent that Salisbury was. However, the current transnational, even global, perspective on modernism admits many authors from disadvantaged colonial backgrounds—and this could include Native Americans—who indeed battled with such threats. In an encyclopedic article on Indigenous modernism, the University of Oregon scholar Kirby Brown convincingly demonstrates that the expanded "New Modernist Studies has an 'Indian problem,'" largely neglecting Native American authors (289). He resoundingly sets the record straight, presenting significant Native American writers of various genres and media, male and female, based in precarious "Indian Country" (294) or urban centers, whose work lies in the high

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modernism period of 1910s to 1930s, as well as recent critical publications that successfully offer new contexts for Native American literature within American modernism. On the temporal axis, Salisbury's publications move beyond the core period of modernism, placed as 1890-1945 by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz in their influential article "The New Modernist Studies" (738). That being said, Mark Wollaeger, the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2012), would assure us that these dates are not exclusive, particularly in postcolonial domains: "It is the persistence of conceptual affinities and various formal preoccupations that makes the identification of instances of modernism outside the temporal core both possible and increasingly uncontroversial" (13). Nevertheless, despite certain "conceptual affinities and various formal preoccupations" of global family resemblance that Salisbury might share with the modernists, his approach does not fit entirely comfortably with theirs.

Perhaps a decisive note of difference to the modernists in Ralph Salisbury's adult life and work lies in his adoption of agency. Biographically, he chose not to serve in the Korean War; he did not let threats of lynching deter him from teaching racial equality at Texas A&M University; he unswervingly and vociferously criticized the hegemonic and capitalist support of military ventures; he sought to travel and work in former enemy countries such as Germany and Italy; he deliberately proclaimed his hybrid Native ancestry in contrast to his father, who attempted to pass as Anglo-European in his Iowa family and community. Even as an adolescent, Salisbury valiantly chose agency at an early pivotal point in his maturation, successfully challenging his father to stop shooting at his mother:

I did something. I tried to change my life, to change the deadly fear of submitting to overwhelming violence, overwhelming force. Today I do not expect immediate results, in the world around me or in the formation of what people call my character, but by act or by word I try to change what seems to need changing. (94)

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Through his proactive espousal of multifaceted risk in reality and in fiction, Salisbury possibly moves beyond a modernist weltanschauung of shoring fragments against the ruins<sup>6</sup> to a stance that can broadly be labeled—as in the shorthand title of this volume—“modern,” specifically “Cherokee modern”: experimental, hazardous, and audaciously ethical.

### **Translating Biography to Literature: Tall Tale Strategies**

Ralph Salisbury’s autobiography returns again and again to the precarious parameters of his childhood, to chronic hunger, illness, dangers in nature and from intruders, near drowning, hostile peers, drive-by shooting, “my parents’ undeclared war” (163), and above all violence perpetrated by his unpredictable father Charley. The traumatic memory of his intoxicated father shooting a rough circle in the floor around four-year-old Ralph’s bare feet becomes a meme in *So Far, So Good* that is repeated and woven into many descriptions of jeopardy in war, travel, or professional life. The extended meme is described in full when Ralph has a further threshold experience of initiation into adulthood. He begs his father to let him fend off a potentially dangerous intruder in the family barn loft with Charley’s pistol:

My father regarded his middle son in the glow of a coon-hunting lantern. “All right,” he decided, a father whose own father had deserted him. “All right. You take my pistol.” The pistol with which he’d defended himself and defended our family several times. The pistol with which he’d shot a ring around my bare feet when I was three or four. The pistol that had sent bullet after bullet past my head when I was ten and moving, though terrified, to plead for my mother’s life... [T]hat time [in the dark barn] was a rite of passage into manhood. I’d measured up and won the respect of a father who’d often made me feel unvalued, unloved... Three years later an atomic bomb turned my dreams of warrior manhood into shadows burned onto a concrete wall. (137-8)

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The fear and emotional pain of his father's pistol attack on the barefooted child is foregrounded in a number of Salisbury's short stories, but one story, "The Chicken Affliction and a Man of God," chooses the genre of the tall tale to assuage this fear and pain, not least through the support of the German American mother of the focalizer boy, Juke. A sequence of stories in *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin* collection features the protagonist brothers Juke (Jukiah) and Parm, whose names derive from Salisbury's Cherokee Shawnee relatives two generations older (cf. *So Far, So Good* 40). The youths' experiences, however, are fictionalized versions of Ralph's and his brothers'.<sup>7</sup> Salisbury's mother was actually Irish American, so why did he choose to change the ethnicity of the stalwart, long-suffering mother in the Juke and Parm story-sequence? One explanation lies in the contrast and comparison present in "The Chicken Affliction" between the father's inebriated reliving of his World War I confrontations with German soldiers and his struggles with his German American wife, who is in solidarity with "most of their [community and its God]" (139). He returns home from his drinking sprees "cussing and screaming and shooting at Germans as dead as doornails already and not attacking anybody for years" (137), only to face his wife's calling up a religious "Force a whole lot stronger than Hitler and all those other dead Nazis put together" (137).

Salisbury remembers his biographical father as a talented tale-teller and reconstitutes some of his father's stories in *So Far, So Good*. Charley, born and raised in the "hills of Kentucky" (115), is voiced in dialect, relating family tales of danger with outrageous imagery in hyperbolic action or contests. Charley's account of his son Ralph being struck by lightning and then running from further strikes provides a cogent example:

"Lightning left us as blind as hogs in the whiskey mash a minute or two, and then we seen Ralph jump up from where he's been throwed. He ran hell bent for election, sloshed through the slough, ran up to the next fence, backed off

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a dozen steps or so, and ran again and slid like one of them baseyball players on his belly through mud under the bottom barbed wire." (266)

Intertextually, the narrative voice in "The Chicken Affliction" could be heard as a third-person overlaying of father Charley's recounting from *So Far, So Good* with that of the son Juke's, the quasi-fictional observer-participant.

The structure of the tall tale generally encompasses entangling contests between con men, often between braggarts and understaters. The hyperbolic rhetoric of the braggart usually leads to his being overtopped by the superiority of the understating *eiron*, with the boasting *alazon* ending as a fool.<sup>8</sup> In "The Chicken Affliction," Juke's religiously teetotaling mother sets out to trick his alcoholic, nonbelieving, and choleric father (the tellingly named Dirk Dark Cloud) into sobriety by having the local priest, Father O'Mara, arrive at their home Sunday noon when Dirk will be returning from a drunken Saturday night out. Ma, at least temporarily, loses this framing contest when her husband—mostly silent except for curses—ignores the priest's elaborate remonstrations and fires a pistol around the priest's feet: "dust spurted up between shiny shoes, and spurted again and again as the old man skipped backward" (143). The immediate competition between Father O'Mara and Dark Cloud is given image by their respective cars. The former's is a gleaming Lincoln sedan with "immaculate paint," and the latter's a "fender-frayed" pick-up truck covered with "mud, dust, and rust" (138-40). The contest is temporarily decided by the priest's foolishness. He up-ends Dirk's whisky bottle over the "ex-oil-barrel trash burner," starting a fire that scorches his "white hair, combed forward over a receding hairline" but leaves his "eyebrows still as white as little arcs of springtime's last snow" (142). The hellfire with which Father O'Mara threatened the "once-a-month drunken Indian" seems to attack and ridicule the priest himself (141).<sup>9</sup>

In order to present the small boy Juke as witness and indirect reporter of the action, Salisbury cleverly depicts him as rooted in place by the contests unfolding,



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unable to run away even though his mother persistently warns him to vanish: "Don't let [your father] see you" (139). The narrative voice interprets this sentence for the reader in a psychological reading of Dirk's Native precariousness; we are told that Juke's Ma means "Don't let your dark eyes and skin remind your crazy drunk dad of his own half-breed generation's hunger and cold" (139). The tall-tale humor is radically undercut by the nine-year-old boy's fear when he does finally move, attracting his irate father's attention. Juke dodges the bullets zooming past him and heads to the hills behind the farmhouse. The narrative voice describes his flight, not without bitter irony, in terms of the cliché of the Doomed Native American: "Not yet ten, and not ready to accept his mortal destiny, Juke, a Vanishing American, ran, hoping to vanish temporarily and escape permanently vanishing" (144). The thunder that has accompanied the shots gives way to a hailstorm, and Juke hovers among bushes in the freezing dark while comic restitution, engineered by Ma, plays out in the farmhouse kitchen. Dirk, now sobering up, Father O'Mara, and the sheriff (whom Ma has summoned) companionably eat several helpings of Ma's stewed chicken and Dirk's favorite dish, Cherokee dumplings. Shut out of this warm resolution, the son re-experiences his father's "half-breed generation's hunger and cold," continuing the inherited pain and precariousness.

Salisbury's application of the stereotypes and dynamics of the tall tale invites a juxtaposition with some of Southern Modernist William Faulkner's stories. In them the device of boy narrator/participant is frequently used with moving and ironic effect to reflect the imperfections and (comic) struggles of the adult world. In "Shingles for the Lord," the first-person narrator remains loyal to his father even as "Pap" bargains away his son's beloved dog in a complicated effort to overtop his neighbors and ends up accidentally setting the local church on fire. The boy's "Maw" knows how to take care of, dust off without judgment, and finally boost up her foolishly stubborn husband and is the understating winner of the subtle contest between her and Pap. With regard to hyperbolic imagery, Father O'Mara's

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eyebrows “as white as little arcs of springtime’s last snow” in Salisbury’s story intertextually compete with those of formidable Minister Whitfield in “Shingles for the Lord” whose eyebrows look “like a big, iron-gray caterpillar lying along the edge of a cliff” (41). In Salisbury’s “Chicken Affliction,” Ma’s chickens provide a cartoon-like sequence; their coop destroyed when Dirk drunkenly drives into it, they constantly fly into the pick-up through one open window and are hurled out the other by Dirk, accompanied by both his cursing them as “Raven Mockers, the Cherokee witch-birds of his nightmares” (140) and his attempts to free himself from a growing pile of “smothering feathers” (139). The swirling, dangerous ponies of Faulkner’s “Spotted Horses” provide moments of similar comic-book imagery in the dialect of tale-teller Ratliff’s account:

Then [the Texas horse trader] jumped into the [cluster of cornered horses], and we couldn’t see nothing for a while because of the dust. It was a big cloud of it, and them blare-eyed, spotted things swoaring out it twenty foot to a jump, in forty directions without counting up... Then it was all dust again, and we couldn’t see nothing but spotted hide and mane, and that ere Texas man’s boot-heels like a couple of walnuts on two strings, and after a while that two-gallon hat come sailing out like a fat old hen crossing a fence. (168-9)

The Texas horseman and his partner, the master-trader Flem Snopes, hoodwink nearly the entire hamlet of Frenchman’s Bend into purchasing these violent horses, becoming, as narrative touchstone Mrs. Littlejohn proclaims, “them fool men” (174). The horse-swapping humor is undermined by debilitating injuries and the searing financial depletion to the poorest in the community, who, like poverty-stricken Henry Armstid, have succumbed to their own greed and pride in wanting to take advantage of a bold bargain. The modernist sense of loss and human frailty emerges in most of Faulkner’s stories, even his tall tales. In Salisbury’s “Chicken Affliction,” German-descended Ma’s daily recurring struggle, “ministering to her

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war-damaged husband and to her war-damaged children" (145), implies less a sense of loss than a possibly more postmodern view on Salisbury's part. Only critique of, or change in, the master narratives of hegemonic contestation that lead to the recurrence of brutalizing war on (inter)national levels can allow harmony and respect within the family.

### **Stereotypes and Intertwining Indian Wars on German Roads**

In an adjustment of the tall-tale stereotypes and strategies of "The Chicken Affliction," the short story "Silver Mercedes and Big Blue Buick: An Indian War" places the focalizing third-person narrator on tour in Germany. There, we find him fighting a gender battle with his Native-descended wife encoded within a contest between a sleek Mercedes and an outsized American Buick on the narrow roads of the Bavarian countryside (The detailed description of the traffic, with bicycles crisscrossing among the high-speed cars, attests, in my judgment, to Salisbury's first-hand experience of driving on German roads.) Mac Mackenzie, the frustrated businessman from New Ulm, Iowa, and his wife Dorotea Weiss, who is of Sioux and German descent, have traveled to Germany at Dorotea's behest to improve their unsatisfactory marriage. She has always denied her Sioux heritage, favoring the German side, but Mac seems only to have been interested in her past beauty-contest victories and her role in furthering the image of his business ventures, not her choice between "Crazy Horse or Crazy Hitler" affiliations (44). He worries constantly about her graying hair and growing lack of attention to her clothing, and he insults her repeatedly with the epithet "crazy bitch" (49, 52). Mac would easily fit into one of Sinclair Lewis' modernist, satirical novels of small-town, small-minded America, despite his international experience and his potential familiarity with Indigenous communities. The superficiality of his traveling is revealed when he spends far more time ogling German waitresses, "as pretty as cheerleaders," (45) at various locations than he does grasping concentration-camp exhibits when he

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casually passes through Dachau “for a quick looksee” (45). In fact, he views flourishing Germany and the arrogant Mercedes drivers as proof that World War II was “no more than a fraternity-party scuffle, everything was hunky-dory again” (50).

The contest in womanizing, materialistic Mac’s failed marital relationship is barely satirically humorous, however. Neither is his recollection of his wartime experiences killing enemy soldiers in Germany, where he entered as “a conqueror... with cannon, and with prick... the same way his English great-great-great-grandpappy had entered the New World” (42-3). His driving competition with the skilled and enviable Mercedes driver—the German man’s arm firmly placed around an attractive young female passenger—lends itself more readily to modern tall-tale humor, though not without imagery of threat. The description of the “silver-haired” driver hyperbolically combines war and new-wealth imagery, his “sunglasses as round as double-barreled shotgun muzzles aimed forward” (50).

The escalation of tension between the traveling couple in Hemingway’s short story “Hills Like White Elephants” can be found in Salisbury’s “Silver Mercedes and Big Blue Buick” too, but rather than the minimalist dialogue in Hemingway’s story that revolves around the unspoken secret of the (dark-skinned?) woman Jig’s socially transgressive pregnancy, the exchanges between Mac and Dorotea grow increasingly explicitly insulting and verbally cruel, especially with regard to the reasons for their childless marriage. A secret is suddenly aired: In the moment the Buick crashes into a bike-rider, Tea confesses to Mac that she is terminally ill, showing in her rhetoric of stereotypes that she has seen through his social façade of decency:

“I’m not young anymore,” she sobbed against his chest. “My looks were all you cared about, and nine months, six, five, then you’ll be free of your old worn-out squaw, free to have all the sex you want, and it won’t matter one iota. To you I’m already as dead as my babies are.” (51)

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In a split-second flash, Mac continues to spin out the pejorative stereotypes, imagining his life following her death and ascent to a "German-Lutheran heaven," including insurance money, remarriage to a youthful woman, a son who is a "100 percent white American boy," and relief "not to have to go on pampering Tea through old age, his hard-earned home her personal Indian reservation." He would not marry "another not-quite-vanished Vanishing American – all that bottled-up hate about stuff so long ago nobody could remember" (52).

With an ironic twist, Tea manages to upstage him, ending his daydreams as she embraces her double heritage and arouses the German passersby's sympathy in a semi-frieze. "The girl [the bike rider hit by the Buick] put her head on Tea's shoulder," Salisbury writes, "and Tea, her dark face all but buried in blond hair, began to sob" (52). The witnessing Germans donate money to replace the girl's ruined bike. In the end, "crying like a goddamned fool" (52), Mac realizes he is overtopped—in the driving contest, his relationship, and in his interaction with Germans. Thus a complex fourfold-intertwining "Indian war," as the title of the story has it, evolves: Buick vs. Mercedes; the marital battle including the fight over control of the Buick, which results in the accident with the bike rider; Americans vs. Germans in World War II and the present; and the ethnic and physical struggle within Dorotea.

### **Testing Affiliations: "The Indian Who Bombed Berlin"**

In the short story "The Indian Who Bombed Berlin," Salisbury deviously and powerfully weaves components of his biography—teaching students at German universities in numerous time periods, for example—within a fictionalized past of fire-bombing cities in Germany during World War II; an imagined diegetic present of becoming a victim during a rough demonstration by Arabic youths in the Berlin metropolis during the (anti-American) protest years of the late 60s or 70s; plus a narratorial flash-forward to the 90s, after the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan. The first-

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person narrator's pleasure in fulfilling the terms of his academic grant "To Further International Understanding" (202) by teaching German university students "who were admirably fluent in English" and "most of them strongly egalitarian" (202-3), as well as his enjoyment in acknowledging the ancient cobblestones and fortress walls (cf. 204, 206), alternate with memories of his having viewed German cities at a cold distance, from maps or bomber planes as "puzzle patterns of tiny city blocks glimpsed through clouds, and through clouds of smoke" (202). During the war he had not contemplated "the devastation of cathedrals and homes, not only in big prime target cities but in small secondary targets" (202). Above all he had failed to consider the "men's, women's, and children's lives" that he extinguished as a bombardier (206).<sup>10</sup> The moment the demonstrating "Near East and Middle East" students throw him from a historic bridge, "which I and other bombardiers had failed to destroy," the narrator experiences an ironic *déjà vu*, "for the second time in my life flying above the bridge – this time not thousands of feet above, but just enough to clear the low stone railing" (205).

Ethnic critique that emerges in the story is directed toward the American and English soldiers rather than the German or Arabic/Turkish-speaking students. The small-statured narrator must endure racist epithets such as "Tonto" and "Red Nigger" dished out by his larger pilot, both soldiers being "Yanks" in Britain during the war years (201). Particularly perfidious is a British colleague, a bomber during the war, at the German university, who feels that the narrator has wrested the former's "Writing for Stage and Screen" class away from him. The British playwright threatens to report the narrator for his "redskin wog's subversive blather" (203), including the "redskin" narrator's expression of "doubt that Hitler could have gained power had not Germans been suffering from enemy-imposed hunger" (203). The British adversary apparently deliberately betrays the narrator as American to the angry "dark-skinned demonstrators" (204) on the streets while the narrator is walking on his way to teach. In his university classes, the Native narrator had

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believed that he "got on especially well with the sons and daughters of Turkish workers, who'd been recruited for jobs in Germany but not been given German citizenship" (204), but in the mob-like demonstration his attempt to show solidarity, shouting "WOGS OF THE WORLD UNITE!" (205), fails miserably. The professor's established community with his students of all ethnicities does not extend to the exceedingly precarious one with the dark-hued demonstrators. He envisions his father's "brown face" several times during the ordeal, but this connection also fails to lend him an effective strategy. Even his Native "war whoop" (205) does not help in the grotesque escalation, which is saved from tragedy by the narrator's self-ironic view of his predicament, ending with him "lecturing, barefoot," muddied but uninjured, in his classroom "that had housed American occupation troops" (206). For the demonstrators, however, he remained a "Satan American! Murderer!" (204).

In the epilogue to the story the narrator admits that this epithet of "murderer" does indeed fit him. The events have at least furthered his own international and self-understanding. He evokes ethical agency as a possible route for restorative justice, observing "I can try to make my own life, and those of others, somewhat better – can still try to change injustice to justice, still try to keep our species' suicidal tantrums from rendering us all extinct" (206).

### **Blue Ravens: Stereotypes as Weapons in Wartime Precariousness**

The trickster tactics of the narrator of "The Indian Who Bombed Berlin"—his shout of solidarity as a "wog," his war whoop—prove to be of no avail in a crisis situation. This is different in Gerald Vizenor's *Blue Ravens*, wherein the Anishinaabe protagonist-brothers, writer Basile Beaulieu and painter of blue ravens Aloysius Beaulieu, find themselves in brutal trench warfare in the Europe of World War I. Vizenor draws on his own relatives' participation in overseas combat, and his employment of trickster tropes arises, we can presume, more from the rich Anishinaabe trickster tradition which segues productively into postmodern

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literature, than the con-man topos of the tall tale, despite morphological connections of structure. On a meta-level, as Vizenor explains elsewhere, “The trickster is agonistic imagination and aggressive liberation, a ‘doing’ in narrative points of view and outside the imposed structures” (“A Postmodern Introduction” 13); like the postmodern author, the trickster “animates... human adaptation in a comic language game” (14). Both the author of *Blue Ravens* and the clever Beaulieu brothers use “agonistic imagination” and “adaptation” in the narratives they activate of Natives involved in a war between hegemonic powers. The survival tricksterism practiced by Basile and Aloysius in their combat with German soldiers is particularly successful because it also relies on a very different and specific source of stereotype: the extremely popular “Indian” adventure novels of Karl May, published in the 1890s in German and read avidly by successive generations of German youth. May claimed to have experienced the encounters with Native Americans that he wrote about, but in fact the con-man author drew on questionable secondary sources and his own fantasy to create his ferocious scalpers and noble savages. Winnetou is the best known of the latter, loyally protecting his brave German blood-brother, Old Shatterhand, from all Native enemies. Birgit Däwes and Kristina Baudemann have recently published a special-issue volume, addressed principally to teachers in Europe, that attests to the continued prevalence of the stark Karl May stereotypes among German pupils’ images of Native Americans.<sup>11</sup>

In wartime scenes in *Blue Ravens*, Sergeant Sorek forces the White Earth Anishinaabe brothers into a clever instrumentalization of stereotypical “Indian” roles. The sergeant, who might have watched the earliest films in the emerging western genre, “was not romantic but he was convinced that stealth was in our blood, a native trait and natural sense of direction even on a dark and rainy night in a strange place” (121), and, in a kind of double finesse, the brothers’ strategies even fulfill this stereotype. Worthy of a Native trickster tale, their “first night of stealth and surveillance in the rain was solemn but only conceivable in a shaman



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story" (121). They use assumed Native skills of establishing oneness with nature to detect alien movements and they locomote like animals: "Aloysius lowered his head and moved in the smart spirit of an animal, sudden leaps, lurches, and slithers on his belly... Native hunters moved in the same way" (130-31). Aloysius carefully applies warpaint, which in the Native artist's ironic protest becomes a "comic mask" (129) with the shapes and colors of a Chagall work. Ferociously wielding his pocket knife, the gentle painter Aloysius exploits the stereotype of the savage Native warrior to overcome, capture, and, during mission after "risky" mission (121 and passim), even kill young German "Boche" (121) soldiers frozen into fear by the anticipation of being painfully tortured or summarily scalped, no doubt remembering the gruesome cruelty of the wild Comanche warriors in Karl May's books. The brothers are extraordinarily successful scouts after their first mission in which they were captured by two even cleverer Oneida scouts from a different squadron. The dark humor of the brothers' grotesque-ironic situation is overshadowed by the deadliness of the hands-on contact of World War I: "We were native scouts in a nightmare, a curse of war duty to capture the enemy" (130).

The brothers enter Germany in the Army of Occupation, quartered on the 5,000-year-old defensive site of the Ehrenbreitstein Fortress on the Rhine and Mosel rivers overlooking Koblenz, originally a Roman city, one of the oldest in Germany. They travel several times by steamboat down the Rhine River, a classic tourist activity, but the sight of starving civilians continues the brothers' experience of the horrors of war: "Yes, we had survived the war as scouts and brothers, a painter and a writer, but were unnerved by the wounds and agonies of peace" (143-4). The Treaty of Versailles "became a tortured tongue of grievous reparations and vengeance" (144), a seed for later renewed war. The brothers have no stereotypes or paradigms to mediate the self-destruction of an ancient culture and its contemporary descendants; the Euro-American settler society's genocidal attempts to destroy Native peoples and cultures through violence and false treaties could be

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viewed as an inverse precedent. The Anishinaabe brothers rely instead, modernist-style, on their renewing, visionary art of Native presence. After their time in the Army of Occupation in Koblenz, Basile tells us, "my literary scenes were more fierce and poetic, and the images my brother created were more intense and visionary" (144). Back home, however, they discover that their war efforts, insights, and art have not changed their status with regard to sovereignty, as "The native soldiers who were once the military occupiers had returned to the ironic situation of the occupied on a federal reservation" (175).<sup>12</sup>

The Anishinaabe brothers' empathy for the occupied in post-World War I Germany echoes that of the Native narrator in Salisbury's "The Indian Who Bombed Berlin," who maintains that (among other factors) the Germans' "suffering from enemy-imposed hunger" (203) led them to invest in Hitler's promises of economic success. In "The Chicken Affliction," Dirk Dark Cloud's hyperbolic "cussing and screaming and shooting at Germans as dead as doornails already" (137) masks the literal and emotional "hunger and cold" (139) of his "war-damaged" Native self (145). Thus, to use a slantedly appropriate military metaphor, Vizenor and Salisbury 'join forces' in imagining a precarious, "non-identitary" (Rodríguez-Salas et al. 7) community of those wounded by war and hegemonic ambitions in both the "Old" and "New" Worlds.

### ***The Berlin Blues: Unsettling Farce***

Drew Hayden Taylor, who calls himself a "blue-eyed Ojibway,"<sup>13</sup> envisions, as a farce, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century recolonization of a First Nations Anishinaabe/Ojibway community by German entrepreneurs deeply influenced by their adolescent reading of gripping Karl May novels. In his comic play *The Berlin Blues*, he depicts efficient but naïve and humorless Germans, Birgit Heinze and Reinhart Reinholz, as wannabe-"Indians," economically and ideologically taking over the (fictive) Otter Lake Reserve in Canada with the plan of establishing "OjibwayWorld," an Anishinaabe

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theme park. The residents of the Reserve have far less knowledge of their own culture and Indigenous language than the Germans. Birgit and Reinhart speak Ojibway phrases, for instance, but the Natives cannot follow them. Reinhart points out that "there is no word in Ojibway for goodbye. Or for hell," and Otter Lake resident Trailer Noah can only show astonishment: "Really! I didn't know that. (to [Band administrator] DONALDA) Did you know that?" (16-17). Most of the residents are impressed by the Germans' knowledge and know-how, and willingly participate in setting up a giant laser dreamcatcher, a white water kayak run, Crazy Horse pony rides, bumper canoes, a facsimile of the Rocky Mountains, Sitting Bull Steak House, and "Dances With Wolves – The Musical," complete with a large herd of imported buffalo on stage. No German stereotypes are omitted, it seems. When the buffalo stampede and destroy the theme park before the Grand Opening, Birgit calmly consults her "Aboriginal theme park emergency manual" (83). Taylor stresses both the "delight" and the "outrage" that his play has evoked, "showcas[ing] contemporary stereotypes of First Nations people, including a fair number of these that originate from Indigenous communities themselves, to the often outraged delight of... international audiences" ("Drew Hayden Taylor"). The irony in his prefatory Acknowledgements in the printed play suggests that his hilarious comedy has outgroup barbs directed at Germans: "And I suppose I should thank all the German people out there who have a special place in their hearts for Winnitou [sic] and all other native related things. This is my special homage to you" (*Berlin Blues* 5). Taylor has also recently created a documentary film called "Searching For Winnetou" (CBC, January 2018), which he describes on his website as "Drew's quest to understand the roots of the German obsession with Native North Americans" ("Drew Hayden Taylor"). Elsewhere, Hartmut Lutz has coined the term "Indianthusiasm" to describe this undifferentiated and thus deleterious German obsession (23).

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We could read the play as a tall-tale contest between two sets of ethnic stereotypes, German vs. Native. But that would oversimplify the way the German characters adopt or discuss in their own stereotypical manner what they consider traditional Native customs, and the way that the Natives joke about (and also activate) those same clichés. When Birgit first meets long unemployed Trailer, who has lived in a gritty trailer for decades, she asks him, “Trailer... hmm, is your name indicative of your Aboriginal heritage? Possibly because you are such a good tracker and trailer of deer and other such animals? That is why you are called Trailer?” Trailer responds deviously, “Yeah. That’s me” (16). The line between stereotype and real-world condition is blurred: The Germans offer to build a wellness center to counter the unhealthy obesity of many Reserve dwellers, for instance, and this is broadly welcomed by the characters in the play, even Angie. A Native woman who grew up in a city and has only lived on the Reserve for five years (and sells toy canoes to tourists), Angie views the theme park venture, with the exception of the much-needed wellness center, as culturally lethal. She warns that “OjibwayWorld is not the world of the Ojibways. It’s some genetically modified, bastardized, hybrid, freak show” (61). With that pronouncement, the long history of “freak shows” and western movies exoticizing, stereotyping, affixing, and demeaning Native American and First Nations peoples opens up for the viewer. Daniel Heath Justice begins his watermark study, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), by elaborating on the way stereotyping imposed by outside groups serves to create an image of “Indigenous deficiency” (2). The German entrepreneurs’ appropriation of what they consider “Indian” activities and artifacts—including wearing Native-themed t-shirts (21), collecting beaded vests and porcupine quill boxes (41), greeting the morning sun (59), as well as teaching the Reserve’s residents how to make proper pemmican (53)—might seem merely whimsical, but in fact this inverted postcolonial mimicry serves to show the Europeans’ presumptuous sense of superiority—and their opportunism. The largely playful postmodern farce *Berlin Blues* with its ridiculous

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hegemonic recolonization indeed reveals deep crevices in cross-cultural esteem. As Salisbury has also vividly shown in "The Indian Who Bombed Berlin," in his own way, the "International Understanding" championed by such undertakings as the ambitious and praiseworthy Fulbright two-way exchange program remains work in progress.

### **Alterity, Agency, and Ethics**

Biographically, Salisbury saw his Fulbright mission as performing academic and ethnic double-duty: "I have been invited abroad to work, as a professor and as an American Indian writer carrying on in the Oral Tradition by presenting his work" (Mackay 15). Welcoming the Euro-German interest in his Native American identity and in the public readings of his multi-layered prose and poetry, a 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup>-century realization of an "Oral Tradition," was not dissonant with his self-described unity of hyphenated identity. Salisbury did not display a modernist distrust of obtaining wholeness in the forging of his identity, nor modernism's tendency, in a kind of inverse alterity, to privilege non-traditional artistic achievers. In a 2009 portrait, Arnold Krupat praises Salisbury's postmodern feat of espousing *both/and* rather than the exclusionary *either/or*, "the ways in which Ralph Salisbury continues to model the traditional and modern (postmodern, if you will) roles of the poet as Cherokee humanist and Indigenous cosmopolitan. Marked by deep roots and varied routes – he has read and taught in Italy, England, Norway, Germany, and India" (73).

The optimism of the firmly grounded ethics expounded by this "Cherokee humanist" is not infrequently imperiled in Salisbury's short stories. War, economic-institutional machines, and mob thinking might seem too omnipotent for the individual to influence them, but succumbing is never entertained as a long-term option.<sup>14</sup> Salisbury is, however, honest in his presentation of hurdles. With regard to his Native identity, which was reinforced by his father Charley's sustainable

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techniques for farming, hunting, and masterly tale-telling,<sup>15</sup> in conjunction with Salisbury's own direct contact with his father's Native relatives and their lore in Kentucky, Salisbury calls himself "his immediate family's last-ditch Indian survivor," knowing that his own children and grandchildren "don't feel Indian... having grown up geographically removed from any Cherokee influence other than my own" (*So Far, So Good* 241). He admits that he has not always followed his own advice as an "elder" (265) to novice Native writers to

write of what you have lived or have witnessed. Don't let the conquerors' whims turn you into a tourist-grade museum exhibit... I too have slid into the trap I've warned of, trying to give some substance to my Indian people's past and thus sometimes taking others' laboriously arrived at scholarly suppositions and turning them into fiction. (241-2)

This is clearly not the case with his stories of German encounter, however, which refract his own experiences and blend his concerns as a "Cherokee humanist" and an "Indigenous cosmopolitan." Salisbury's lived Native culture is passed on through his literary works, his teaching, and his transcultural interactions; it melds with the flourishing Indigenous presence locally and globally, physically and literarily. In his later years Salisbury moved beyond personal precariousness to productive awareness, feeling free, as he indicates to his readers, to joyously and unconventionally entangle the distinctive calling of no-longer-endangered trumpeter swans, migrating in large flocks over his Oregon home, with Beethoven's sophisticated symphonic compositions ("Epilogue", *So Far, So Good* 273-4). Ralph Salisbury's embracing of *both/and* leads to an enlightened international contentment: "It's a good day to live, here where I am now, in Germany, a nation divided among conquerors, now becoming one nation again after massive destruction, oppressive occupation. It is a good day to live, a seminar in Memory and the Native American Tradition for me to meet this afternoon" (251).

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Work by Ralph Salisbury used by permission of The Literary Estate of Ralph Salisbury. Copyright © 2020 by The Literary Estate of Ralph Salisbury. All Rights Reserved. No reproduction without permission of the estate.

<sup>2</sup> This story and the two others mentioned in my introductory paragraph are found in *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin*, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> In a 1987 autobiographical sketch, Salisbury recounts in detail the strikingly transnational genesis of his poem "Cherokee Ghost Story: My Father's". He recalls how "[a]bout a month after I'd returned from an intensely meaningful few days of talking with Scholer [sic: Schöler] and others in Denmark [about, among other things, an autographical story my father told me], I spent a long afternoon exchanging knowledge with Bernd Peyer, the German-Swiss scholar who had set in motion the correspondence which culminated in Dr. Martin Christadler's inviting me to teach in Germany. Talking with Bernd brought back the intense feelings I'd had in Denmark; and before I left my desk at the university that day, my father's story had migrated through Time and Space, from his youth in Kentucky, through my childhood in Iowa, by way of Denmark and Germany, onto a sheet of paper, and after some months of revision the poem made its way back to the southeastern U.S., where it – and my father – had originated, the poem published in *A Negative Capability*, printed in Alabama in 1984" ("The Quiet" 22).

<sup>4</sup> Butler quotes from Levinas' essay "Peace and Proximity" (first published in 1984).

<sup>5</sup> As inspiring as Sam Fathers is in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha world, he illustrates—according to Louis Owens—the modernist "Chief Doom School" of literature with regard to Native Americans (Owens 81-2), Sam Fathers being the last of his vanishing line and people.

<sup>6</sup> The original version of this phrase is the fourth-to-last line of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922): "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" describes the role of the modernist artist.

<sup>7</sup> The nine Juke and/or Parm Dark Cloud stories make up *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin's* Part Three, titled "All in the Family: Some Vanishing American Military Histories" (119-90). The reader is specifically told that Juke's and Parm's mother is German American on p. 122 of the first story, "A Vanishing American's First Struggles against Vanishing." Reviewer Eric Wayne Dickey is not entirely correct in implying a steady maturation of the protagonists in the entire story collection of *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin*, but his point about the "uncertain and painful victory in Berlin" of the adult narrator is well taken. As Dickey puts it, there is "a kind of chronology in the book. Starting with a young boy in elementary school, each protagonist advances in age. Each tale adds to the receding story as Salisbury

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marches us toward adulthood and onto an uncertain and painful victory in Berlin" (95).

<sup>8</sup> The tall-tale figures and strategies overlap in uncoincidental ways with those in Native tales. In her insightful study (that has perhaps not received the recognition it deserves) *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature: Reimagining Nativeness* (2008), Eva Gruber describes how Native "tricksters are both culture heroes and fools" (95). Gruber also analyzes meta-level "trickster discourse," which I reference in connection with Gerald Vizenor's *Blue Ravens*. Salisbury evokes "Old Man Coyote, the Trickster" in an incident in *So Far, So Good* (164).

<sup>9</sup> The story indicates that the priest has physically abused Native children and is thus not on higher moral ground than Dirk Dark Cloud. Father O'Mara, we are told, had "reportedly slapped [the Indian face] of many a defiant reservation-orphanage child" (143).

<sup>10</sup> In *So Far, So Good* Salisbury shudders at the horrendous damage of the fire-bombing that "had incinerated Dresden, a massacre greater than the ones perpetrated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (174).

<sup>11</sup> See: Däwes and Baudemann, editors, [*Beyond Karl May:*] *Teaching Native Literatures and Cultures in Europe*.

<sup>12</sup> I discuss some of the ideas expressed here in connection with Native protest and the instrumentalization of stereotypes in Waegner 2015 and 2017.

<sup>13</sup> The title of Taylor's 1998 book of humorous essays and columns is *Funny, You Don't Look Like One: Observations from a Blue-Eyed Ojibway*.

<sup>14</sup> Faulkner also displays this discrepancy between rhetorical optimism, as in his much-cited Nobel Prize address, and the overwhelming burden of history and racism encoded in his major novels, at least with regard to some of the main protagonists.

<sup>15</sup> "My father... told Indian hunting stories and taught me to hunt with Indian skill, Indian instinct and taught me... a religious view based on awareness of Creation" ("Some of the Life and Times of Wise-Wolf Salt-Town" 251).

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Ralph Salisbury (right) with his half-brother Robert (Bob) Wessels, parents Olive McAllister Salisbury and Charles (Charlie) Salisbury.

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## THE VITRUVIAN MAN AND BEYOND: SPIRIT IMPERATIVE IN THE LIFE AND POETRY OF RALPH SALISBURY

INGRID WENDT

Ralph Salisbury, my brilliant, passionate, and deeply-spiritual Cherokee-Shawnee-English-Irish-American husband, began his every day, just after sunrise, by going outdoors to say his morning prayers — acknowledging and offering gratitude to the spirit presences inherent in earth's Creation.<sup>1</sup> Standing upright, feet firmly planted, with arms at his sides, he'd start by facing East, for two or three minutes, silently praying to the Great Spirit of All and then, feet unmoving, he'd pray to the Spirit of the East, bringer of Sun, on whom re-birth depends. At the conclusion of these opening words — which were constant from day to day, and sacred, not to be written down — he'd raise his arms parallel to the ground (envision Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man"<sup>2</sup>) and pivot, at the waist, his entire torso 90 degrees: first, to the right, then back to center, then to the left, and back to center again, where he'd lower his arms and turn his whole body to face and pray to another Spirit of the Four Directions; and again, at prayer's conclusion, he'd raise his arms, pivot, and repeat the same pattern, until each Spirit had been addressed. Turning again to face the East, he'd conclude with prayers to the Spirit of the Sky and to the Spirit of the Earth, "from which growth comes, in which my loved ones lie."<sup>3</sup>

Whether it was on our East-facing balcony, with the city of Eugene, Oregon, spreading across the valley far below our hillside yard and the large vegetable garden we planted every Spring; or wherever his writing and his teaching took him, be it the landscaped grounds of the Villa Serbelloni, high above Lake Como; or the Autumn tundras of Norway and Finland, 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle; or gazing at one of

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countless other vistas that spread before him, he silently, humbly, prayed, expressing the hope that through his respectful attention and the attention of other Indigenous people around the world, Creation may continue to sustain us.

Like the "Vitruvian Man," who stood perfectly centered in the fusion of a circle and a square, Ralph stood fully present in the fusion of both a dual and a non-dual world — the place where opposites dissolve — where spirit is fused with the physical, where subject and object, self and other, as well as past and present, form an inseparable unity into which one's own being is an integrated whole, immersed in the Sacred Reality of the universe. This place of fusion also represents where Ralph stood with regard to identity. When asked to which of his people he paid primary allegiance, Native American or Caucasian, Ralph's answer was often to paraphrase a passage from Luigi Pirandello's short story "War,"<sup>4</sup> in which a bereaved father says that he "does not give half of his love to one child, half to another, he gives all his love to each of his children. I am a Cherokee-Shawnee-English-Irish person, not part this part that but all everything, whatever it is."<sup>5</sup> In conversation, he'd often say "I would give all of my love to my Indian people, and all of my love to my white people. I am not part Indian, part white, but wholly both." Thus, Indian *and* white, Ralph stood in his own physical and spiritual space at the center of the overlapping circle and square. This inner space, which defies categorization, was the space from which Ralph drew courage and the motivation to bear witness for all people, especially the victims of injustice.

That sense of oneness, of inter-connectedness, which infuses all of Ralph's work, stemmed from his belief that Divinity is "imminent" within each element of Creation. And here I tread carefully, and as respectfully as possible. Ralph seldom spoke directly of his beliefs, and I — neither theologian nor scholar of Indigenous Studies— come from a family and a cultural heritage very different from his own. What I have pieced together

comes from many years of closely reading Ralph's poetry and from what I know of his intentions; from deep conversations not only with him, but with other Indigenous writers, in which I participated; from my own wide readings; and from conversations with scholars of Native American literature and religions. If this essay speaks wrongly of Ralph's beliefs, and/or the beliefs of his Cherokee and other Indigenous people, I take full responsibility, and I apologize, in advance, to whomever these words might offend.

To the best of my understanding, and as this essay will, throughout, elucidate with reference to specific poems, Ralph believed that Spirit is not separate from Creation. Spirit is "Immanence," not "Transcendence." The "God of All," to whom Ralph prayed, was not the God of Western theology who created the heavens and the earth, while remaining separate from them.<sup>6</sup> God did not create the world and then admire His creation from an outside vantage point. In Indigenous theologies, God *remains within* all earthly beings; every rock, every tree, every pool of water, every animal — every element of nature is "sensate" and aware of our presence, just as we are aware of *its* presence. In the words of ecological philosopher David Abram:

For the largest part of our species' existence, humans have negotiated relationship with every aspect of the sensuous surroundings, exchanging possibilities with every .... entity that we happened to focus upon. All could speak, articulating in gesture and whistle and sigh a shifting web of meanings that we felt on our skin or inhaled through our nostrils or focused with our listening ears, and to which we replied — whether with sounds, or through movements, or minute shifts of moods.<sup>7</sup>

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When hunting deer, for example, the animal Ralph saw was not "a" deer, but "Deer" — the proper name of a relative — the embodiment of an inexplicable life force, which must be acknowledged and thanked. Ralph's "negotiated relationship," this "exchange" between animals and himself, as he was hunting and fishing, consisted of a wordless awareness, a "shift" of consciousness, of "mood," rather than ritual speech; but we see in his poems its verbal equivalent. In his poems Ralph asks forgiveness from the animals he's killed for food (he never killed for sport); he asks forgiveness from all beings he may ever have harmed, for he was "one with them." "By naming others, whether they be human or more than human," says Professor John Baumann, scholar of religious studies, "you are acknowledging their existence, you are acknowledging the 'sensate intelligence' of something that senses you, as you sense it, in the same way, whether Past or Future or Present. Every time you name something you're bringing it into existence, you're acknowledging it, it acknowledges you, and now you're forming this reciprocal relationship with your world. That reciprocity is at the core of Indigenous thought."<sup>8</sup>

And it isn't only the "living, animate" that is "sensate," it's also what the Western mindset terms "the inanimate": stones, rocks, mountains, water, minerals, and the like. I'm reminded of a deeply spiritual moment Ralph and I once shared, when the renowned Sámi poet, visual artist, and musician Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, at his home on the Finnish tundra, carefully handed to each of us, in turn, a very large stone. "Hold it," he said, "in your hands. It will breathe."<sup>9</sup> It did. We felt it. I am still without words to describe it.

In addition to his belief in the "sensate" oneness of all Creation, Ralph also felt that every aspect of our world is in a state of constant change, constant flux, its future existence dependent on the continuation of "right practices" (also referred to as "right



actions”) and the attention, gratitude, and respect to which he — in line with tradition and in harmony with Indigenous people around the world — committed himself to observing.<sup>10</sup> Seen in this context, Ralph’s morning prayers were also a form of “right action.” By acknowledging and addressing the sacred deities, he was not only giving thanks and speaking words of supplication; he was, with his words, doing his part to keep Creation intact and viable. Only on one, very special occasion, at the south rim of the Grand Canyon, when our daughter Martina was nine, did Ralph speak his prayers aloud and in our presence. Every other morning, as long as he was physically able, he chose to be alone and out of doors, no matter where his travels took him, and to silently repeat the same verbal sequence: his own words interwoven with the language of ritual he’d discovered many years before, during his readings of James Mooney’s collection of *The Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (1891), and Mooney’s comprehensive publication of Cherokee history, myths, and legends, published in 1900.<sup>11</sup> Ralph especially appreciated the works of Belgian-born Frans (sometimes spelled Franz) Olbrechts, who lived among the Cherokee people and completed, edited, and published Mooney’s second book of sacred texts in 1932.<sup>12</sup>

Ralph did, however, offer his readers — in the introduction to his sixth book of poems, *Rainbows of Stone* — the words with which his daily prayers concluded: “I thank the Creator for my small place in the immensity, power, glory, and beauty of Creation. I pray that I may be worthy of my Medicine Path and live well enough and long enough to fulfill my destiny.”<sup>13</sup> In *Rainbows of Stone* he also included a poem titled “Six Prayers,”<sup>14</sup> which follows the same sequence and contains the essence as his morning prayers but uses different words. “Six Prayers” is more of an *approximation*: a consciously crafted poem that stands on its own, with literary turns of phrase and images that echo throughout his entire *oeuvre*. In the poem, Ralph begins by addressing the Cherokee

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god of Thunder, who once, during a fierce storm, when Ralph was 15, struck him with lightning as he was climbing through a wire fence, during harvest time, far out in the fields of his Iowa family's farm.

That spirit power turned, now, into ally — for he came to believe, later in life, that this event "marked" him to carry out a mission<sup>15</sup> — Ralph asks for help in shaping the poem he will write that day, its subject usually unknown to him until he put pencil to paper: a poem which he hopes will nourish the spirits of his people, just as rain has always made possible the growing of beans, pumpkins, and yams to nourish their bodies. In stanza two, Ralph's prayer, again, is not for himself alone, but for the earthly renewal which only the Spirit of the East can bring, as seen in the images of sun, to awaken the birds and melt the mountain snows, thereby ensuring the ongoing supply of water upon which life depends. In stanzas three and four, he prays that his words might help humankind to connect with each other, to live in harmony, as Creation intended us to do. Stanza five returns us to the request of stanza one — aid with his writing — but this time, Ralph prays his words may help readers of the future, in whose world "the green of even the tallest pine/ is wolf tooth white" (a reference, I believe, to nuclear winter) — a future when growing food (metaphorically, providing hope, providing color) may be next to impossible.<sup>16</sup> Stanza six brings in a bittersweet awareness: the Sacred Earth holds Ralph's loved ones (father, mother, brothers, aunt); yet earth's "black loam"<sup>17</sup> (Ralph's often-used metaphor for the sacred soil of creativity) contains seeds/words that he trusts will grow, after the warmth of his hand turns snow (paper) to life-giving water (the catalyst which allows his words to flow).

Thus, a poem which has edged toward darkness — as does much of Ralph's work — ends on a note of light, of optimism. Humankind has, yes, wreaked havoc upon itself and upon our world, and will do so again and again. Yet, as demonstrated here and

elsewhere in his work, Ralph never lost hope that life on this planet, as we know it, may endure.

### **Six Prayers**

Thunderer God of the turbulent sky may  
my turbulent mind shape  
for my people  
rain clouds  
beans  
pumpkins  
and yams.

East Spirit  
Dawn Spirit may  
birds awaken in  
the forest of teeth  
whose river your color must say  
frozen mountains'  
prayer that you  
will loosen them.

Spirit of the North  
whose star is our  
white mark

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like the blaze we chop in black bark  
where the trail home  
divides  
even in  
our homes  
we need  
you to guide.

Spirit of the Sunset West  
may gray clouds  
hiding friends from me  
glow  
like yours  
that we grope  
toward each other through  
a vivid rose.

Spirit of the South  
direction of  
warm wind  
warm rain  
and the winter sun  
like a pale painting of a morning glory  
help me Spirit that in my mind humble things  
  
a man may give to his child may grow

the blue of berry  
orange of squash  
crimson of radish  
yellow of corn  
when the green of even the tallest pine  
is wolf tooth white.

Spirit of the Earth  
keeper of Mother Father  
Sister Brother  
loved ones all  
once praying  
as I pray  
or in some other way  
Spirit the black dirt  
is like the black cover of  
a book whose words  
are black ink I can  
not read  
but I place my brown hand  
on snow  
and pray that more than snow  
may melt.

Ralph's existential understanding of Creation, which came from many sources — among them, the earth-wisdom of his parents, amplified by his near-death experience with lightning, together with his commitment to honoring friends who died in World War II,<sup>18</sup> and, later, with finding an Olbrechts' photograph of the Cherokee Medicine Man Jukiah, to whom Ralph bore uncanny resemblance — gradually led him to the full realization that he was being called upon to dedicate his life, his teaching, and his writing to a complex "spirit imperative": a sense of sacred duty, which he referred to (by turns) as his Medicine Path, his Spirit Path, his Destiny. This sacred duty was, quite simply, to use his love of language and his gift with words "to heal" and "to save," though as he once so humbly stated, "If I am in any sense a medicine man, my ceremonies are my fiction and my poems."<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the words "to save" appear throughout Ralph's many books of poems.<sup>20</sup> One of their earliest appearances is in a poem titled "Their Lives and the Lives": "My life maybe bettered but not lengthened / *by lives I have tried to save in words...*(italics mine).<sup>21</sup> In "An Indian War, Possibly Not the Last," a poem written for his younger brother Rex (who made the Air Force his career, rising to the rank of Colonel), Ralph wrote, "I fight an Indian war/ again, not hand to hand,/ but hand to pen,/ taking a stab at/ making less meaningless/ a page's white skin, // *To try to save a future for generations...*"<sup>22</sup> The imperative to save appears also in "This Is My Death Dream," a poem about a fever-vision he had as a three-year-old child: the enormous family barn was balanced on his thumb, holding (he realized, in retrospect) all the animals "terrified/ I'll drop them/ to smash amid kindling./ How can they know/that fever from/ the heavens will burn/ their home before I'm grown, and/ *the only way they'll be saved/ is for me to survive/ lightning and war/ and remember them....*"<sup>23</sup> In the poem "Green Smoke," which retells an event that happened during Air Force training (Ralph corralled

and tied down a bomb which had rolled loose from its moorings) he writes: "And yes, eighteen, I saved eight men,/ Nine if I count myself, ... *and now I'm a poet And try to save everything/ I love.*"<sup>24</sup>

Ralph's commitment "to heal and to save" is also revealed in the very titles of poems written *not* as re-creations of original Cherokee sacred formulas, but as poems intended

to keep his own sometimes-flagging spirit alive, as well as the spirits of his readers — poems with sometimes whimsical, sometimes serious, titles: "A Cherokee Secular Formula to Cure Egoism," for example, and "A Defense Against the Evil Without and the Evil Within," "A Ritual for Approaching My Death," "A Ritual Not to Feel Alone." "War in the Genes, a Reveille for Mustering the Dead." "Death Song, My Own." "A Prophecy, Wish, Hope or Prayer." "A Medicine Man, His Natural Perspective." "Cherokee Manhood-Vigil Vision." "A Cherokee Ars Poetica." "A Ritual Seeking a Voice." And many more: telling the truth, but telling it "slant."<sup>25</sup>

Titles of other poems reveal Ralph's commitment to go beyond the limits of felt experience. Words by Columbian novelist Laura Restrepo — "The duty of the writer in violent times is to keep history alive" — serve as epigraph for Ralph's poem "Potato-Planting, a Native History," which includes a reference to the genocide of his people by those who "skinned men" as we now skin potatoes.<sup>26</sup> In "These Sacred Names," Ralph's felt duty to passing along (saving) the history of his people extended also to keeping alive, through naming, the spirits of respected Cherokee elders: Chief Guwisguwi (John Ross), Tsali (Charlie), Sequoia (George Guest, Guess, or Gist), Tagwandahi (Catawba-Killer), Itagunahi (John Ax), and Ayunini (Swimmer).

In these the people (The Aniyunwiya) come  
back against bayonets, against extinction,

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rejoining kin, beneath the clay, beneath the rivers of  
 The Carolinas, Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia, to join  
 in a sacred dance, in Echota, the holy city, the maiden  
 whose death dooms us all,  
 the beautiful daughter of the sun."<sup>27</sup>

In the poem "'Katoohah,' We Say," Ralph imagines "how it was, / the lighter women taken, and the darker, / more fertile, land. // ... But Yunwiya now call each other 'Cherokee,' / the Choctaw insult name 'Cave Men,' / altered by White contempt, that verbal victor. // 'Katoohah,' I repeat / for pleasure of sound — ... // and hear 'The U.S.,' on / a Russian or Asian or Arab's / contemptuous tongue."<sup>28</sup>

Ralph's multi-faceted imperative to heal the spirits of those still living and those to come, and to save — through speaking them into existence — the ways, beliefs, names, histories, and customs of his Cherokee forebears, is *not*, however, to be found only within these (and many more) specific poems, within his daily prayers, and within book titles based on Cherokee myths (*Going to the Water: Poems of a Cherokee Heritage*, *Spirit Beast Chant*, *Pointing at the Rainbow*, *A White Rainbow*, and *Rainbows of Stone*). Nor was his mission to save only his Cherokee people and their heritage; Ralph wished, as well, to acknowledge, honor, and preserve the memories of those 90% of all tribal peoples in the Americas whose lives and cultures were decimated by invading Europeans.<sup>29</sup> Among many such poems are "Canyon de Chelley," "Montezuma's Castle — Cliff Dwelling — Arizona," and "A Costal Temple Ruin, 1992," written during one of our many trips to Mexico. Another dimension of Ralph's commitment to other Indigenous people can be seen in poems declaring kinship and a spiritual connection with the living descendants of those tribes which *did* survive —



"Medicine-Meeting, Hoopa, 1994," for example; "For My Swinomish Brother Drumming Across the Water"; and "For Octavio Paz," the Mexican Nobel Laureate, whose Indigenous ancestry figures prominently in his writing.

One might even go so far as to say that Ralph's two-fold imperative — "to heal" and "to save" — is manifest, one way or another, in almost every poem he wrote: poems to preserve the names, stories, and story-telling voices of his immediate and extended family; poems which speak into "continuous being" the sacred world around him; poems expressing a sense of mineral, vegetable, animal, and human kinship that extended to all people, everywhere in the world; poems that praise and celebrate, and in so doing, attempt to save all that is beautiful and true, while protesting all that is not. Taken together, these various manifestations of Ralph's spirit imperative to save "all he loved," were nothing less than a wish to save the world.

And he said as much, in his final years, often declaring that his life and his writing were dedicated to the Tribe of the World, the Human Tribe. "Though I have lived and worked among the intelligentsia of many nations, my writing comes from having lived as a questing, mixed-race, working-class individual in a violent world, and my work is offered to the spirit of human goodness, which unites all people in the eternal struggle against evil, a struggle to prevail against global extinction."<sup>30</sup> As Choctaw/Cherokee scholar and novelist Louis Owens once wrote of Ralph's poetry, "every line is something like prayer."<sup>31</sup>

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What led a boy of mixed-race ancestry — born and raised on an Iowa farm, in a house that, until he was fifteen, had no electricity or indoor plumbing; a boy whose elementary education, through the eighth grade, was in a one-room, country school — what early influences were strong enough to keep Ralph going steadily forward, through a lifetime

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of challenge, to the place of deep wisdom in which he quietly strove to unite all people in the struggle "against global extinction"?

As objectively as possible, I suggest that Ralph's goodness and steady optimism were inborn, were part of his very DNA, of who he was. Although he'd be first to say that he was not perfect, one need only look at family photos taken during the Great Depression of the 1930s and during World War II — in which Ralph is, almost without fail, the only one smiling — to see the inner radiance that was there from the very beginning. Nourished and given direction by the teachings of both parents, Ralph's love of life was deepened and expanded by his intimate relationship with the land, with land's creatures, and with the cycles of birth, growth, death, and regeneration, which he experienced first-hand, as "givens."

Growing up the middle child of the five who survived infancy, Ralph was not formally introduced to any organized religion. His family belonged to no church. He did, however, as do many children, incorporate into his vocabulary the random, isolated words from the Christian lexicon that were spoken at school and in town; words he encountered in the school's encyclopedia (which he read all the way through) and in whatever novels he could find. His family did not celebrate religious holidays, there were no Christmas presents, no tree, though his father did, on occasion, cut a Christmas tree for the school from the tip of a large, side branch of a farmyard pine. Yet, Ralph often credited each parent with having instilled in him a deep awareness of an order to the world, of things that existed "beyond our knowing" and were important to recognize and respect.

Rachel Carson, world-renowned naturalist and early environmentalist, has said, "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."<sup>32</sup> That person was Ralph's Irish-American mother, who'd been

asked to stop attending her third-grade Sunday School class at the Methodist Church because she asked too many questions. She formed ideas of her own, however, and years later taught her son what he, as an adult, often said was “something like Pantheism.” On more than one occasion his mother told him that God was to be found in all living things—the flowers, the trees, the birds and other animals—a belief he accepted without question, for it made sense that everything he already loved was sacred. Who or what God was, his mother didn’t say, nor did she teach him to pray. But their shared belief in “God-in-Nature” is evident throughout his every book.

Does this make Ralph a “nature poet,” as one commonly uses this term? I offer a very qualified “yes,” and suggest that his work might better be described as “Ecopoetry,” long before that term came into fashion. For, although a love of nature infuses much of his work, that love is almost always coupled with an awareness that our Sacred World, as we know it, is at all times (and never more so than today) on the verge of destruction, its harmony offset by human intrusions ranging from small and almost-inconsequential, to the enormous and irreversible. I cannot count the times, beginning with our first long car trip together, he spontaneously quoted, in full, Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “God’s Grandeur,” which begins with joyful images of a glorious world, and quickly moves to lines of despair. “Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;/ And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;/ And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil/ Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.”<sup>33</sup>

Ralph’s poems praising the beauty of nature likewise, quite frequently, make similar leaps into a darker awareness. Lines expressing delight at seeing a hummingbird at the feeder might jump to an image of bombers; a poem about the conical top of a

deodar cedar, tossing in the wind, moves (via surprising associations) into a memory of Hiroshima's destruction near the end of World War II.

This coupling of the beautiful and sacred with its opposite (or the threat of it) appears throughout Ralph's work, beginning with his first published book, *Ghost Grapefruit*. "Beyond the Road Taken" invites the reader to "Draw close; .... / Between these feet ... / is a crocus I would save from browsing deer / save for you the small beauty the sun / and snow left me, yellow petals low like myself / in tall green, which lumbermen will find , / one day, a good investment. ...." (italics mine)<sup>34</sup> Another early poem recalls a verbal exchange between an unseen mother and child, in the back yard of the house next to ours in Fresno, California, where we lived 1969-1971. In this poem the "impatient mother" of the title (so different from his own), wreaks — in one small moment — havoc on the spirit of her child, rejecting and stifling not only her child's delight and wonder but also the child's love offering.

**Too Small to Break the Roots, She Offers Her Impatient Mother  
A Flower Potted in the Whole Earth**

"I found it for you

I found it for you

I found it for you."

"Oh,

shut up

"But I

found it I

found it I

found it."<sup>35</sup>

Ralph's father's spiritual influences were of a different order, consisting in great measure of teaching-demonstrations of "correct action": namely, the farming and hunting practices he'd, himself, learned while growing up "mixed blood" in the Kentucky hills, a hardscrabble life in which he'd had but two years of formal schooling, a life in which some Cherokee traditions survived, though unnamed and (presumably) unrecognized as such, and many more were lost through intermarriage with whites.

Though Ralph's father never told his children of his Cherokee heritage (a fact they learned, as adults, at his funeral, from his darkest-skinned, Kentucky-raised brother) — with possibly some Shawnee thrown in (a theory based on Ralph's great-grandmother's "given" Shawnee name, "Chicabob"<sup>36</sup>) — in his memoir Ralph writes, "Dad essentially lived as Cherokees had lived for centuries."<sup>37</sup> His father planted according to phases of the moon, "raised his sons to follow a traditional Cherokee hunter and warrior ethic, and to farm, following Cherokee traditions, the [way] now called ecological or organic."<sup>38</sup> This way of farming involved returning to earth — plowing into the earth — what today's city gardeners call compost but on the farm was called barnyard waste. Implicit, of course, in this instruction, was the Indigenous concept of "sacred reciprocity."<sup>39</sup>

The barnyard waste on Ralph's parents' farm included not only vegetable waste, but the by-products of butchered farm animals and of the wild game (rabbits, squirrel, duck, deer, fox, weasel, and pheasant) that Ralph learned to trap and to hunt—first with a bow and arrow his father helped him fashion "out of a willow or a maple branch.... lamenting that he did not have hickory, as he'd have had in Kentucky...."<sup>40</sup> and later, with a gun, for food to keep the family alive during the Great Depression of the 1930s: a time when many family meals consisted solely of cornbread and milk, or potatoes with

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white-flour gravy, or bread spread with lard, for flavor and for whatever protein it might contain.

His father also initiated him into several ceremonial rites of manhood. Ralph was "blooded" when his father helped him kill his first animal: an ill chicken, a mercy killing, described in a poem titled "First Kill, 4<sup>th</sup> Year." " ... his son his future — Dad/ has fitted my finger, thin/ as the sick chicken's claw,/ around trigger curved like the beak of hawk. ...."<sup>41</sup> Yet Ralph's "real bleeding," he says, "came at age twelve, [the traditional Cherokee age, he said, for rites of manhood] when I first hunted alone and brought back meat, two pheasants...."<sup>42</sup> "Adrenalin still high, I felt proud, but ... I also felt a humility, which merged with a larger humility, the humility of knowing that I had taken a life to sustain my life and the lives of my family. My family's Cherokee prayers for the life taken had vanished as Cherokee lives had been taken, generation after generation, but the feeling, the awareness would live in me and would live in other humans as long as there was human life to sustain itself by feeding on other life."<sup>43</sup>

Though his father said no prayers upon the taking of life, he *did* instill in his son a recognition that the animals he killed had spirits of their own, which must be respected. His father taught him to think as the hunted think, something Ralph talked about often. "My father told hunting stories, in which animals were real characters. You understood that he'd thought a lot about the animals in order to be able to hunt them successfully, and you understood that what the animals *were* had become a part of my father's life—not just their meat becoming a part of his body. ..."<sup>44</sup> "I have tried to get some sense of my father's spirit life—and my own—onto the page."<sup>45</sup>

These early teachings recur, in a variety of forms, in poems of hunting and/or fishing that, together, form a strong subject-thread that runs throughout Ralph's work. In "Their Lives and the Lives"<sup>46</sup> — a poem mentioned earlier in this essay — the physical

lives of the trout, and even of the worms Ralph used to catch the trout, have become (physically) part of his body. His waist, his personal “equator,” has been growing. But more than physical enlargement, Ralph’s spirit has grown larger, as well, by taking these animals’ spirits into his own. In keeping with Indigenous tradition, he asks forgiveness from both trout and worms, a ritual grown from respect, humility, and gratitude.

Returning us to the main theme of this essay, “Their Lives and the Lives” also illustrates two distinct components of Ralph’s overarching spirit imperative “to save”: one, that his hope that his words will save the (inner) lives of his readers; and two, his *unstated* wishes to save and pass along to future generations the stories and myths of his Cherokee people, to call these stories “into being” and into *our own* awareness. In this case it’s the (not particularly pleasing) myth of “Raven Mocker” (which Ralph reprinted, in full, as epigraph), who tears hearts from living creatures to lengthen his own “growsome” [sic] one.<sup>47</sup>

### **Their Lives and the Lives**

Having sacrificed four worms  
and torn four lives from river  
and fed somewhat a world  
and slightly increased my own equator, the cry  
of a raven falling with dusk down mountain, I think  
of Raven Mockers plunging meteor teeth into hearts  
and adding men's years to their own “growsome” lives.

My life maybe bettered but not lengthened  
by lives I have tried to save in words, I pray

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for forgiveness from four rainbow trout,  
their scales as brilliant as dawn river's torrents,  
their lives and the lives  
of some worms,  
which knew earth well,  
now part of my own.

Another clear sense of his father's spirit appears in the poem "For My Swinomish Brother Drumming Across the Water," mentioned earlier in the context of declaring kinship with other tribal peoples.<sup>48</sup> Here the son-become-poet lets his Swinomish "brother" know that he has, also, followed the paths of "right action" and "reciprocity" by using as much of the deer as he could, returning to earth, "our common home," that which he cannot use.

I am both brother and killer of Deer,  
whose hide I will strip from my family's meat  
and offer all not needed back  
to the Earth, our common home.

Yet also, in this poem, another important spirit awareness tiptoes in, one I believe Ralph came to on his own: the recognition that, because he and Deer are "one," when he speaks it is through Deer's lips; the words (the blossoms) Deer grazes among will spread — as blossoms will grow and seed and spread — and in so doing, they will convey, in poems, what Ralph feels.

I have lived so many seasons of venison I feel  
that, in uttering what I feel,  
it is Deer who grazes, mouth



plucking whatever will blossom and wither and seed  
pastures of air,

which I would share  
with others forever or as far  
as pastures have anything to give to sky.

Again, we see Ralph's optimism, as well as his sapience: his words, "which [he] would share/with others," will endure "forever or as far/ as pastures have anything to give to sky" — hopefully, as long as there are eyes and ears to read and hear it, which may (or may not be) forever.

This ebullient poem consists of an overlay of image upon image: metaphors which, taken together, create an invisible, conceptual reality impossible to apprehend through our five human senses. And it leads us to another consideration, of just *where* this interaction — this putting of feelings into word-blossoms — takes place. Where else but in "pastures of air....", before they are transcribed onto the page — for Ralph considered his poems, like the stories he heard as a child, part of an oral tradition; his hope was that they be heard, if possible, before being seen on the page, and he was conscious, at all times, of cadence, of rhythm, of the pulse of his language.

And here, with the mention of "air," lies subtle but strong evidence of Ralph's awareness of another Indigenous concept, its inclusion in this poem stemming from what I believe was Ralph's intuitive, inner knowledge of what has always been part of ancient belief systems: that "breath" is inextricable from "spirit." As Baumann confirms, "The etymology of 'psyche,' the term we use for that sense of who we are or what we belong to, in Greek means 'soul,' it means 'mind,' it means 'breath' or 'gust of wind.'"

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'Pneuma' in Greek, which meant 'spirit,' was also the word for 'wind,' 'air,' 'breath.' The Latin term 'anima' which we've defined as 'spirit' or 'soul,' is derived from the Greek term 'animus,' which meant 'wind.' In Sanskrit, 'Atman,' the very core, that piece of Brahman which is independent of, yet totally part of, Brahman, means 'soul,' but it also means 'air' and 'breath'. We see this through all cultures."<sup>49</sup> In similar fashion, the words "to inspire" and "inspiration" also take on new meaning. "In-spire": *in-* 'into' + *spirare* 'breathe': from the Middle English *enspire*, from Old French *enspirer*, from Latin *inspirare* 'breathe or blow into': originally used to refer to a divine or supernatural being imparting an idea or truth."<sup>50</sup>

Referring to the book *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy*, by James McNeley,<sup>51</sup> Baumann continues. "This concept of 'air/breath' being inseparable from 'soul,' at some point took on the meaning of an immaterial, spiritual presence, and that's where ... 'God' or 'deity-like' creatures arose in Western religions and in Eastern religions. But in Native spirituality, [Spirit] stays as air, it stays as wind, it stays rooted in the physical world."<sup>52</sup>

A vast number of recurring images in Ralph's poems can be viewed through this lens, starting with the title poem which opens his first book, *Ghost Grapefruit*, a poem acknowledging his kinship with, and indebtedness to, William Shakespeare, which begins, "My poems are filed in grapefruit crates,/ whose cardboard spacers shape air/ — which Shakespeare also shaped —/ like grapefruit segments for/ ghost Hamlets...."<sup>53</sup> Perhaps someone, someday, will focus on the many times Ralph uses the words "air" and "breath," as well as the words "words" and the "tongue" which "shapes" (or "spades") them, the "ear" which hears them, the "nostrils" which carry "air/Spirit" to the brain's recognition; to examine the often-linked image of blossoms to some of these words; to examine the myriad of contexts in which these images are used; and to relate



out of his brain to raise  
 her coffin to blaze like a meteor,  
 her Cherokee-Shawnee braid  
 loosed at last  
 to spread black sunshine  
 on a snow horizon.<sup>57</sup>

The acts of calling into being, of saving, all that Ralph loves, reaches new heights in one of his most exuberant poems, "A Fancy Dancer, Ascending Among Mountain Flowers,"<sup>58</sup> a poem singular in its adherence to one particular (though complex), dream-like vision. Here, the entire poem not only speaks into being the elements of Creation (in which Ralph imaginatively, joyfully, dances) it also celebrates his deeply felt sense of connection with members of other tribes. In this poem, Ralph places himself within the ongoing pan-tribal, Native American "fancy dance" movement that began in the 1920s and 1930s, originally created in response to, and in defiance of, the 1883 government-imposed ban on Native American religious ceremonies, tribal dances, and the practices of medicine men.<sup>59</sup> One might again notice images we've seen in poems already cited, plus other, related, images which are sprinkled throughout Ralph's body of work: "sun," "gene," "blossoms," "petals," "breath," "air," "season," "step," "words," "poetry," "molecule."

### **A Fancy Dancer, Ascending Among Mountain Flowers**

I am dancing to bees' zither rhythms, and, with  
 their gracious or drunkenly heedless permission,  
 am dancing with the scent  
 of centuries of millions of beautiful women with

each breath each step  
through blossoms toward clouds  
imperceptibly thins.

Without missing a molecule of more  
and more ethereal air,  
I'm dancing with timberline pines, which shrink, degree  
by chilling degree, cone after generation of cone,  
their sweet, sun after sun, season on season, growth,  
as Pygmy Mammoths, my fellow mammals, gene  
on gene, grew smaller, to survive,  
as has, century after century, word  
after compressed word, our poetry.

Particles of mineral syllables beneath  
each foot's sole's eloquent cells,  
I am dancing, with giddy expectation, on  
stone only glaciers have carved, when,  
out of some utterly beyond me lexicon,  
dawn wind, a fancy dancer, from every tribe,  
whirls petals faster than any man,  
thought by exuberant thought jiggling, toward summit and  
exhaustion's rhapsodic anticipation of fulfillment, can.

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Parenthetically, this poem might bring to mind words of Walt Whitman, whose rhapsodic "Song of Myself" begins, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. // My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air..."<sup>60</sup> Ralph calls it "molecule," Whitman calls it "atom." The science is a bit different, but the concept is the same — as is the image of tongue, the pulse, the rhythm, the tone of giddy inclusivity, the unbridled love of Sacred Earth. I suggest, however, that unlike Whitman, Ralph's *underlying* intention and belief was that his poem, his exuberant words, would — like the words of his morning prayers — help keep the cycles of the universe in flux, in a state of constant creation.

Several other word clusters in "Fancy Dancer" demonstrate one more key element in Ralph's personal belief system: the concept of "simultaneity." The moments in which the Fancy Dancer makes his way to the mountaintop are moments in which "cone after generation of cone," "sun after sun," "season on season," "gene on gene," "century after century" are embedded. The past is not past but exists within every present moment we live. A snippet of another poem, "A Declaration, Not of Independence," also demonstrates the concept of simultaneity. Within the meat of quail lie, compounded, the past lives of countless other lives.

. . . while hunting my family's food,  
 I thought what the hunted think,  
 so that I ate, not only meat  
 but the days of wild animals fed by the days  
 of plants whose roots are earth's  
 past lives, all fed by the sun,  
 rising and falling, as quail,  
 hurtling through sky<sup>61</sup>

Just as, “century after century,” “gene on gene,” “sun after sun” is present in the mountain landscape through which the dancer ascends, so, too, the quail contains within itself a great chain of past lives, all of them fed by “earth’s past lives,” as earth has been (and continues to be) fed throughout all time “by the sun.”

We might compare this view of the universe to that of poet William Blake, who saw a “World in a Grain of Sand ... a Heaven in a Wild Flower, ... And Eternity in an hour.” Unique to *Ralph’s own* vision, however, as we see in *other* lines of “A Declaration...” and in other poems, is his recognition of *past human innovations* and *human contributions* that have gone into improving and benefitting our lives today. In “Fancy Dancer,” it’s the contributions of poets and poetry which have survived — though diminished in size, perhaps a reference to epic poetry — to inform our ways of looking at the world. In “A Declaration...,” Ralph lets us know that the quail hunter’s success *also* depends on *the lives of other humans*, a dependence that crosses national boundaries as well as those of time. Had humans not, centuries past, invented gunpowder, the quail would not come “hurtling through sky, // [felled by] gun-powder, come— / as the First Americans came— / from Asia.”<sup>62</sup>

Ralph’s sense of history and of connectedness to other humans around the world is closely linked with gratitude: not only for the inventors among them, but for the labors of working-class people with whom he never stopped identifying, even after years of teaching at the university level at home and abroad. The poem “After Heart-Bypass Surgery, Another Ritual for Continuing Struggle” offers another example. Here it is the raw materials from overseas and centuries of human labor, that allow Ralph’s foot to be “shod with soft/ rubber—from trees French Legionnaires ordered planted/ by Indo-

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Chinese, tapped now by Vietnamese,/ supplying an American corporation named, for victory, Nike. .... "<sup>63</sup>

A more recent, and a very short, poem — written after receiving a (remarkably-now-possible) phone call while camping in the mountains — illustrates Ralph's gratitude for a moment's delight which would not have happened, were it not for human labor (implied in the making of cell phones) and, farther back, for the Mesozoic Age — from which, after all that lived and died was compressed into oil, has come the plastic components of cell phones — and for the eons of ancestors, whose genetic mutations resulted in the formation of his own ear, allowing him to hear, over thousands of miles, New York to Oregon, his granddaughter's voice.

### **Awakened by Cell Phone**

Awakening, beneath pines  
where a border of earth  
the river dried from  
gives thanks to rain,

I hear the lovely and loving chatter  
my daughter's year-old daughter sends  
through silicon crystals  
transmitted into eons of green  
metamorphosed into petroleum  
reborn as plastic, and, yes, into the centuries  
of families which formed my ear.<sup>64</sup>



The word “eons” plays a major role in this poem, as it does in many others.<sup>65</sup> “Eons”: a word more sweeping in its inclusiveness than decades, or centuries, or even millennia. Ralph’s pleasure in small things and his belief that small moments were everywhere, just waiting to be found, was intrinsically linked to his inborn optimism and an ever-present awareness of simultaneity: of the “eons” residing within each moment, that have led to each moment, but are hidden as the pit of peach is hidden, in the indescribable juiciness of each and every passing day.

A poem very different in content (though it also revolves around the image of petroleum/oil and the word “eons”) is “Around the Sun, the Alaskan Oil Spill.”<sup>66</sup> Here, Ralph’s view of a universe in constant creation takes us into the future. Through great compression of image and metaphor — a visual comparison of globules of spilled oil to space capsules (which will go into the atmosphere via the nostrils of Arctic terns) — we see a universe always in flux: a universe in which a tern (having unwittingly inhaled oil) will someday return to earth, to decompose and end up being part of ongoing creation. Even Ralph’s own “cells may return” as something else.

Different, also, *in tone* from “Awakened by Cell Phone,” “Around the Sun, the Alaskan Oil Spill” carries forth Ralph’s belief of God-in-Nature, instilled by his mother, and is one of his clearest, strongest, and most direct rebukes of humans who would sacrifice the harmony of nature for material gain, and a declaration of what “the sacred” truly is. Here, as well (as in earlier poems, but now with an all-inclusive vision), he speaks into being, with the all the “breath [his] mind can hold”: nothing less than the *holiness of all Creation*, in all of its connectedness, all of its cycles.

### **Around the Sun, the Alaskan Oil-Spill**

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Space-capsule-shape globules of oil  
re-entering the atmosphere  
in the nostrils of terns,

an ocean of air between words'  
furthest surges and home,  
I say a tern may return,  
eons from its final breath,  
and smother some other creature—

and I say my cells may return,  
eons from poems:

which say each tern is sacred,  
its flesh to become new life,  
to go on sustaining lives;

which say that oil—  
formed from the dead—is sacred,  
not to be wasted or used  
to gratify greed;

which say, with all the breath a mind can hold,  
each moment of life is sacred,  
and Timelessness and Death.

Perhaps the most comprehensive, wide-ranging, and joyful declarations of Ralph's love of life, his sense of gratitude, and his sense of mission, is the "Epilogue" which concludes his prize-winning autobiographical memoir, *So Far, So Good* (and which will conclude this essay, as well). Written when Ralph was 82, the Epilogue can be seen as a long, radiant, prose poem — or a teaching demonstration of what I, in the language of literary analysis, have abstracted into such words as "multi-faceted and multi-dimensional ... spirit imperative." Here we have it — a paean, a psalm, a tapestry of thanksgiving for his own long life, a love song for the universe, in all of its seamlessly interwoven, wondrous and simultaneous, past and present elements — written in a style deliberately elliptical, as Ralph's poems, his images, were elliptical embodiments, through language, of his sense of standing, like The Vitruvian Man at the center of so many interconnections, so many overlays, so many memories — a prose poem that is, in style and content, the essence of the word with which the epilogue begins: "simultaneity."

Here Ralph recalls his youthful pursuit of enlightenment: his reading about human development, about the aboriginal Senoi "dream peoples" of Malaysia, about Eastern religions; reading Freud; reading whatever he could find, that might help him on his Spirit Quest, to fathom the mysteries of the universe and of the human mind. Here we have his life-long condemnation of war, and the awareness that beauty and goodness is always threatened by violence, as he experienced it often, in his childhood, in the social environment of the Great Depression, during military training, and as it occurs throughout every lifetime, every century. Here we have example after example of his personal resilience, of his determination to find the best that each day offers, to live as full a life as possible while, at the same time, following — as long as possible — his

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Spirit Path, His Medicine Path, his Destiny, his spirit imperative to save not only his ancestral heritage, not only moments in history and memories he brings to the page, not only the beauty of any given day, but the very future of our world: to protect future generations from "those whose love of power threatens to destroy our children's children's children and render humans extinct."<sup>67</sup> And still, through it all, to rejoice in the splendor of each given day.

### Epilogue

Simultaneity. Access to one's entire life in any moment. To see or to feel the universe in a grain of sand, eternity in an hour. To live, not by the calendar, so useful in sentencing criminals. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. ... what went on for generations of adaptation goes on in each new child — and human embryos still have gills and tails in the womb.

Dream recall. Meditation. Dianetics. .... Time travel all the way back through the faunal scale to the beginning of life. Science fiction. Religion. Simultaneity. Fascists shooting at my brother as he escapes prisoner of war camp while my brother is aiming a gun at my father and going to kill him if he doesn't stop abusing our mother, while someone is enduring a winter night to shoot the glass out of a window above my baby bed. Simultaneity. Simple mindedness. Why not.

...

Why am I not walking in the sunshine of my eighty-third spring, a spring I would not be seeing out this or any other window had not medical skill progressed to the ability to transplant a blood vessel from my ageing left leg to my ageing heart? My heart, receiver of stolen goods, thriving — leg still o.k., like any living thing robbed of anything short of life — why am I not walking, my eyes stealing the beauty others have labored to create, in front yards most will labor one third, approximately, of their lives to own? Why are my feet and my mind not tagging along with my gaze and my mind into the reality of this day's, this instant's inexpressible splendor?

My mind unites with the hand clutching this pen — same tool with which bored clerks were busily recording their century's piracy's booty and inhumane worship of wealth. Gloriously, transcendently "mad" William Blake experienced the world in a grain of sand, eternity in an hour. As mad as Blake, whether gloriously and transcendently so or not, I am trying to experience again and again at least some of my

past, in a computer chip, and to translate it into ink, in the hope that others may experience a tiny piece of a time I would like to call mine — a time I try to save from those whose love of power threatens to destroy our children's children's children and render humans extinct. I hope to feel myself fifteen again and again and afraid of death and trembling and trying to do what a son and a man, a man, should be expected to do, defend his home. I hope to sense again and again the fragrance of fallen maple leaves, the bouquet of a stranger's perfume, an island of impossible dreams in an arctic ocean of air, the brilliance of sun in daffodils, the daffodils I would give my wife, my complex, fascinating wife of 40 years, when, tired, and beautiful, utterly, unutterably beautiful, she returns from her work day — eight hours of William Blake's eternity. Unaware that I am trying to destine her to live the rest of her and William Blake's eternities in a computer chip — itself, so I understand, a grain of sand — she will suggest, I hope, a walk, a walk through sunlight finding fulfillment in forsythia — forsythia seething like terribly beautiful — and reassuringly distant — lightning, forsythia a molten thunderbolt hurtling toward sky and into two ageing lovers' delighted eyes.

So, enough of this purple poeticized prose, somebody, somebody with a body still as young as a newly created poem, may say, hurling youthful flesh — past my awed, admiring, aged eyes — toward no place else but bed.

"Forsythia," by God, I affirm, in my eighty-third spring's hours and hours of eternities. "Forsythia," yes, by God, "Forsythia," by God, and by chance or by hook or by crook or by a poet's warped way of looking at facts, but by God, whatever else, by God, by God, by God!

And wild ducks, yes, rain or shine, raincoat or t-shirt, hundreds and hundreds of wild ducks so numerous and varied I couldn't even begin to count the jewels the force of their landing will scatter across water shining like a silver platter, yes, ducks, wild ducks, mallards, like the ones I'd get soaked and shiver and shiver for hours to harvest from blue or gray sky for my family's often bare meat platter, wild ducks, bless their beauty, their forgiving, fearless and greedy gabbling enjoyment of life as intense as my hopefully equally forgiving own.

Trumpeter swans, for sure, straight lines of black-marked white flowers, growing in a blue or a gray sky garden, and trumpeting, yes, creating a music — presumably about arduous effort and anticipation of food and of mating — mating for life, I am told, for life —and whatever each swan may feel about death and ongoing life, is all, I believe, that Beethoven could express.

And now, again and again, snow geese, a great, white, incredibly beautiful

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blizzard descending on the gray waters of the bay — a beautiful blizzard to these ageing eyes — soon, too soon, to close — a blizzard a beautiful reminder of winters gone and winters to come and to melt again into forsythia blossoms under egg yolk color sun.<sup>68</sup>

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*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Work by Ralph Salisbury used by permission of The Literary Estate of Ralph Salisbury. Copyright © 2020 by The Literary Estate of Ralph Salisbury. All Rights Reserved. No reproduction without permission of the estate.

<sup>2</sup> The "Vitruvian Man" is a pen and ink drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1490. It shows a male nude standing within both a circle and a square and is said to represent the Renaissance "ideal" of human and mathematical proportion. Its title refers to notes da Vinci made, in the margins of his drawing, from his readings of the 1<sup>st</sup>-century Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Salisbury, *So Far, So Good* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 251.

<sup>4</sup> Luigi Pirandello, "War," from the 1925 Collection of short fiction *Raccolta Donna Mimma*, part of the 15-volume series of *Stories for a Year* (1922-1937). Pirandello's actual words, in translation, are, "Parental love is not like bread that can be broken to pieces and split amongst the children in equal shares. A father gives all his love to each one of his children without discrimination, whether it be one or ten, and if I am suffering now for my two sons, I am not suffering half for each of them but double..." [Pirandello's own two sons were captured during World War One.]

<sup>5</sup> Salisbury, *op. cit.*, 242.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph called this god by various names, including "God of All Creation," "Creator and God of All," "God Who Can Not Be Named," "God of the Universe," and others.

<sup>7</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in the More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2017 edn.), ix.

<sup>8</sup> John Baumann, Ph.D. in Religious Studies, Independent Scholar, in conversation with the author, March 10, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, in conversation, at his home on the Finnish tundra, September 1994. The Sámi people, formerly called Laplanders, are the Indigenous people of northernmost Scandinavia and the northwesternmost part of Russia. Often referred to, by outsiders, as the "white Indians of the north," their culture, customs, language, and literature have survived centuries of Nordic oppression, at the hands of non-native peoples of all four countries. Valkeapää was, in his lifetime, a multi-media artist celebrated around the world.

<sup>10</sup> Conversation with colleagues in Tromsø, Norway, led to the following lines from my poem, "Questions of Grace": "Ánde Somby, Sámi lawyer, son/ of reindeer herders descended from/ reindeer herders farther back than anyone/ knows, tells how when his

father had to kill/ one of his own he talked to it, petted it, 'Deer,/ I'm sorry you happened to be here just at this/ wrong time. Whose fault is it I do this?" Ingrid Wendt, in *Surgeonfish* (Cincinnati, OH: WordTech Editions, 2005), 43.

<sup>11</sup> James Mooney, *The Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (7th Annual report, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1891), 302-97. James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*. (US Bureau of American Ethnology, 1897-8 Annual Report, 1902.)

<sup>12</sup> Frans Olbrechts completed, revised, and edited James Mooney's second collection of sacred formulas (which also included Cherokee history and myths), titled *The Swimmer Manuscript: Cherokee Sacred Formulas and Medicinal Prescriptions* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 99, 1932).

<sup>13</sup> Ralph Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2000), xii. Ralph wrote similar sentences in *So Far, So Good*. On page 262, he wrote "...I pray that the God of the Universe will allow me to live long enough and well enough to fulfill my Medicine Path, my destiny, in writing, in teaching -- in becoming as good a person as I can be." And on page 269: "'May I live well enough and long enough to fulfill my destiny,' is my prayer. May I fulfill my Medicine Dream. May I follow my Medicine Path to its end. And may I and may my loved ones live a life of beauty and happiness after death."

<sup>14</sup> Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 103-104.

<sup>15</sup> In his memoir Ralph recounts the time when "a thunderbolt, hurled by one of our principal spirits, Red Man, the Big Thunder, touched me but left me alive." *Op. cit.*, 266.

<sup>16</sup>The threat of "nuclear winter," as the result of multiple, massive firestorms that would follow in the wake of nuclear war, was a scientific concept that arose in the 1980s and was very much on Ralph's mind, as it was in the minds of us all. The theory suggested that fires could send so much ash and soot into the atmosphere, that sunlight could not enter, the globe would cool, and major agricultural losses would ensue. While it's tempting to think that Ralph, in this poem, was talking about climate change, "Six Prayers" appeared in the year 2000, six years before Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" announced to the world the devastation global warming will wreak, if left unaddressed.

<sup>17</sup> Black soil — *truly* black soil, not a metaphor — is specific to the area of Iowa where Ralph was born and raised. This image appears throughout his work.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph spoke often of his intention to honor the friends he lost during World War II, by writing poems and stories that would convey not only their personal experiences but the true realities of war, which he saw as hidden behind propaganda and the lies of politicians.



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<sup>19</sup> Ralph Salisbury, "Between Lightning and Thunder," *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann, eds. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987; 2005 edn. by Bison Books), 26.

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to the scholarship of Arnold Krupat, who first called attention to this theme in his brilliant introduction to *Light from a Bullet Hole: poems new and selected 1950-2008* (Eugene, Oregon: Silverfish Review Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph Salisbury, *Pointing at the Rainbow: Poems from a Cherokee Heritage* (Marvin, South Dakota: Blue Cloud Quarterly, 1980), 9; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Salisbury, *War in the Genes & other poems* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Cherry Grove Editions, WordTech Communications, 2006), 76.

<sup>23</sup> Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 123-124; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 119-120.

<sup>24</sup> Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 28; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 93.

<sup>25</sup> "Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant," is the often-quoted first line of the Emily Dickinson's poem #1129.

<sup>26</sup> Salisbury, *War in the Genes*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Salisbury, *Pointing at the Rainbow*, 14-15.

<sup>28</sup> Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 60; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 106.

<sup>29</sup> The centuries-long genocide of the First Peoples of the Americas was officially sanctioned by Pope Alexander VI, in his Papal Bull "*Inter Caetera*," of 1493, also known as the "Doctrine of Discovery." This edict authorized Spain and Portugal to claim for their respective countries any lands "discovered" by explorers, to colonize them, and to dominate over their inhabitants, resulting in a global momentum of domination and dehumanization. The edict continued to be used by other governments, including the United States, as late as the nineteenth century, to justify the ongoing, systematic genocide of Native Americans. Recommended viewing: "The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code," a 2014 documentary film directed and produced by attorney/scholar Sheldon Peters Whitehorse.

<sup>30</sup> These precise words do not appear in any of Ralph's published works, but he included them often, in this exact form, in the biographical statements requested by publicists, during his later years.

<sup>31</sup> Louis Owens, from the dust jacket endorsement of *Rainbows of Stone*.

<sup>32</sup> Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), 55.

<sup>33</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," written 1877, published posthumously in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Robert Bridges, ed. (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918).

<sup>34</sup> Ralph Salisbury, *Ghost Grapefruit* (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca House, 1972), 41.

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<sup>35</sup> Salisbury, *op. cit.*, 55. [An aside: Ralph's use of the word "short" is puzzling; perhaps he is referring to his height, for he was, all his life, painfully aware of being the shortest male (5'7") among his peers.]

<sup>36</sup> Geary Hobson, Arkansas Quapaw/Cherokee writer, professor, and friend, gave him this suggestion in personal correspondence sometime in the 1980s, long after Ralph had already conducted extensive research into Cherokee history and culture. Except to pay tribute to the possibility of Shawnee ancestry, Ralph's primary *felt*, Indigenous identity was Cherokee.

<sup>37</sup> Salisbury, *So Far, So Good*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> The precept of "reciprocity" is at the heart of Indigenous practices around the world and is one of the recurring themes in Robin Wall Kimmerer's highly recommended book of essays, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> Salisbury, *So Far, So Good*, p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Salisbury, "Between Lightning and Thunder," 24.

<sup>43</sup> Salisbury, *So Far, So Good*, 100.

<sup>44</sup> Salisbury, "Between Lightning and Thunder," 20.

<sup>45</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>46</sup> Salisbury, "Their Lives and the Lives," *Pointing at the Rainbow*, 9. A revised version appears in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 30.

<sup>47</sup> The spelling of "Growsome" appears as Ralph found it, in James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokee*.

<sup>48</sup> Ralph Salisbury, *Like the Sun in Storm* (Portland, Oregon: Habit of Rainy Nights Press, 2012), 10. This poem was written in the town of La Connor, Washington, on the shores of Puget Sound, where we were living for a month. The Swinomish Reservation was located just across the water, on Fidalgo Island.

<sup>49</sup> Baumann, *loc. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> This etymological tracing can be found in multiple sources.

<sup>51</sup> James McNeley, *Holy Wind in Native Philosophy* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1981).

<sup>52</sup> John Baumann, *loc. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> Salisbury, *Ghost Grapefruit*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> The word "tongue" can also, of course, mean "language." It's possible that sometimes Ralph deliberately used this word as a double entendre, as in the poem "Katooh, ' We Say," where the country name "U.S." is spoken *on* (not *in*) a foreigner's

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tongue. My sense is that, in most cases, Ralph was referring to the muscle that resides in the mouth.

<sup>55</sup> Ralph Salisbury, *Going to the Water: Poems of a Cherokee Heritage* (Eugene, Oregon: Pacific House Books, 1983), 54; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 68.

<sup>56</sup> Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 116.

<sup>57</sup> Salisbury, *Pointing at the Rainbow*, 1; reprinted in *Light From a Bullet Hole*, 29.

<sup>58</sup> Ralph Salisbury, *Blind Pumper at the Well* (Cambridge, UK: Salt Publishing, 2008), 8.

<sup>59</sup> The Fancy Dance, a derivative of the war dance, is said to have been created by members of the Ponca tribe. It has now become part of Pow Wows held across the United States and around the world.

<sup>60</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," from *Leaves of Grass*, first edition 1855, self-published.

<sup>61</sup> Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 3; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 87.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* At the time the poem was written, the Bering Land Bridge Theory was more or less accepted and was not, as it is today (2019), the subject of some controversy and contention.

<sup>63</sup> Salisbury, *War in the Genes* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Cherry Grove Editions, WordTech Communications, 2006), 112; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 139.

<sup>64</sup> Salisbury, *Like the Sun in Storm*, 80.

<sup>65</sup> Close readers might discover that in earlier books, Ralph used the British spelling "aeons," Same word, same concept. Both spellings are correct.

<sup>66</sup> Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 68; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 109.

<sup>67</sup> Salisbury, *So Far, So Good*, 272.

<sup>68</sup> *Op. cit.*, 270-274.



Ralph Salisbury, Milwaukie, Oregon, 2013. Photo: Ingrid Wendt.

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## Speaking of Ralph: Ingrid Wendt in Interview with A. Robert Lee

**1. First, Ingrid, every heartfelt condolence from James Mackay and myself at the loss of Ralph in 2017. Let's start with writing itself. Both you and he shared a decades-long writing life together. How did that work?**

Thank you for asking. What a wonderful life we had. We married when I was 24 and Ralph was 43. Quite the age difference, right? We didn't feel it. We were of one heart, one soul, with compatible interests and a mutual respect for our differences. How grateful I am that life permitted us 48 married years together.

Happily, our writing life together worked amazingly well— in great measure because our circadian rhythms and writing practices were so very opposite. Ralph's best writing time was very early morning. His daily practice was to rise early, sometimes as early as 4:30 or 5:00, fully alert—a body rhythm ingrained from childhood, when he'd rise before dawn, even on school days, to milk the cows before breakfast. He'd make coffee, take it to his desk, and wait for inspiration. He seldom had to wait long. When the sun rose, he'd interrupt his work to say his morning prayers and then return to the poem—or story—at hand. If working on a poem, he almost always had a solid first draft, from beginning to end, before noon. When writing fiction, he'd get a substantial start the first morning, and then come back to it on consecutive days until completion.

I, on the other hand, am always slow to awaken and, with the rare exception of writing residencies, I'd write only in the late evenings, whenever I had the prospect of two or more uninterrupted hours. This didn't happen as often as I wished, but I took lots of notes, which would later become longer, more complex poems, all the better for having simmered for days or weeks on the back burner. And I'd fallen

head over heels with teaching and parenting and working on the house we bought for a song and saved from demolition and moved across town, and all the rest: fully engaged with life *in the world* in ways I'd never before dreamed possible.

Also good was that our mutual respect, plus our vastly different writing styles, kept us from ever competing. And though we often were inspired by similar subjects and shared experiences, and held quite similar world views, we approached our writing from such different directions that neither of us feared slipping into the other's skin or fearing an editor might prefer the other's work. I rejoiced in Ralph's successes, and he in mine. We rarely sent our work to the same places, and rarely appeared together in print.

Looking back—though we had our occasional disagreements—we were a team in every possible way, sharing household responsibilities and co-parenting, even before there was such a word. Ralph was good with cars and tools of all kinds and could fix almost anything; he once even re-wired the house we moved. I took care of the everyday household things—all except the dinner dishes, which he did. I hated doing dishes, so this was a perfect arrangement. On the occasions I was invited out of town, on one- to three-week visiting poet gigs, Ralph took over completely: single-parenting, cooking, cleaning, the whole shebang. I did the same for him, when he traveled a month in India, for example, on a lecture tour sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, or when he traveled within the U.S. for conferences or poetry readings. I even taught his graduate writing classes.

After our daughter was grown and gone, we traveled together: attending conferences, giving readings, lecturing, teaching overseas on Fulbright professorships, sharing a residency at the Rockefeller Center in Bellagio, and more. Ralph, being older than I, officially retired from university teaching in 1994; and so from that year until his death in 2017, he wrote (as usual) almost every morning,

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and—after an early afternoon siesta—he’d also work until supper. His literary output during the 1990s and 2000s was staggering! I, being younger, continued working half-time as a visiting writer, and the free time Martina’s departure (in 1989) opened up was quickly filled with editorial projects, lecturing and keynote-speaking, and other professional engagements, until I was traveling throughout our home state of Oregon and to other states, as well. My own writing productivity increased, however, especially during several short poetry residencies, and by the end of the next dozen years I had three new manuscripts circulating. The last of these three was published in 2011. In other words, all our married life we orbited each other nicely.

The old saying that “opposites attract” was, in great measure, true. We complimented each other in so many ways, including temperament. But it was our shared world views, a shared sense of humor, an ability to laugh at the same things, including ourselves, and a belief in and respect for each other’s work that kept us together and allowed for our writing, and our marriage, to flourish.

**2. You were present at the creation of so much of his poetry and fiction – how did he go about his writing especially when combining it with the role of university professor?**

From 1967 until his retirement in 1994, Ralph’s teaching load in the English Department of the University of Oregon, consisted of one graduate poetry writing workshop each term, which he met for three hours, one evening per week, and mentoring the many students who signed up for one-on-one “Writing and Conference” credit, during his afternoon office hours. Some years, he’d also teach an afternoon literature class for one or two of the three university terms, or an undergraduate or graduate fiction writing workshop.

This schedule allowed him to spend mornings at home, writing—both before and after breakfast. He'd lunch, take a short nap to catch up on lost sleep, and then walk two miles, in all kinds of weather, to spend long afternoons at the university, taking care of the business that "comes with the job": department meetings, committee and juried dissertation meetings, correspondence, advising writing students, and so on. Then he'd walk home. All in all, it was a brilliant, win-win schedule for him as well as for his students.

As to his writing practices, for most of his life Ralph wrote rough drafts—of both poems and short fiction— with pencil and paper. His poems almost always began with his capturing an image seen from his desk or an image remembered, from the past or from a dream, and letting a stream of consciousness carry his words forward until patterns and themes emerged and evolved. I believe he never knew the endings of his poems in advance, and he seldom "tinkered around" with alternate routes to them, generally reaching them that same day. When he was finished with one poem and had more time, he'd revise it and/or others. I wish I knew more about the rough drafts of his stories; he seldom talked about his fiction. But I do know he wrote first drafts by hand, in pencil, on yellow-lined paper.

When large desk computers came along (was it during the late 1980s?) and three were given, by the UO's School of Liberal Arts, to the English Department, a kind of bidding war took place among the professors, with all contenders writing letters attesting to the extremity of their needs and their individual worthiness to receive one, for their own exclusive use, but only in their private offices in the English Department building. As one of the winners (an accomplishment he was proud of till the end of his days) Ralph received the use of a big clunker which he "took to" like the proverbial duck to water. How much easier revision became; and preparing work for publication was so much less drudgery!



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As the years went on, and computers became smaller and more affordable, he bought one for use in his home office, as well, and slowly began transitioning from pencil and typewriter to computer, for even rough drafts of poetry and prose. Eventually, in the last 15-20 years of his life, he used the computer for every kind of writing, including voluminous correspondence, and was almost obsessive in backing up his creative work. As his literary executor, I can't help wishing his filing system had been more outside-user friendly, and that he'd saved physical copies of his email correspondence, but happily, most of his poems and prose are still accessible, as are two cardboard boxes of poems that I'm pretty sure haven't yet appeared in print.

**3. Ralph clearly took great pride in his Cherokee-Shawnee ancestry, mixed as it was with his Irish and English roots. Yet in his autobiography, *So Far, So Good* he asks "Am I still an Indian?" What is your take on how he regarded his Native legacy?**

Yes, that question *is* perplexing, isn't it? It's so unlike the rest of the book, I had totally forgotten he wrote this, and so I did a digital search and found it on p. 241 (paperback version). Until then, Ralph has fully embraced his Native, as well as his Irish-English, heritage and has given us many details of his father's having raised him in traditional Native ways: teaching the importance of reciprocity, while working the land; telling stories during long, winter evenings, with all 5 children gathered around, stories that sometimes involved mystical, mythical creatures his father had heard about as a child in Kentucky; fashioning a bow and arrow for Ralph, when teaching him, at a very young age, to hunt.

And all this without his father's revealing to his family that he had Native blood: a fact Ralph learned from relatives, as a young man, shortly after his father's death in 1958. But that first revelation allowed him to finally put together and to begin to feel, for the first time in his life, a true sense of "belonging." His private ways of

perceiving the world—the inner values that had made him feel so different from his peers, from the world outside of the farm, from even his siblings, who were perhaps less inclined to take deeply into themselves the lessons their father taught—suddenly made sense. He immersed himself in learning all he could about his Native ancestry. The “inner confusions” he wrote about in earlier poems and fiction, disappeared. That new context grounded him.

Though in his younger years Ralph had always been a good chameleon, nimble in making his way in the “White man’s world,” beyond the farm, the more he learned about his heritage, the more certain he was that he’d found his spiritual home. Ralph also became more and more sure of his purpose as a writer, as a teacher, as one destined to carry forward the values he hoped would keep our world from self-destruction. He grew to love his Indian ancestors, deeply and intimately, and, in similar fashion, he felt, intuitively, as close to many Native author-friends as if they were cousins.

So yes, he did take great pride in his Native ancestry. And even more than pride, Ralph carried a deep love for all his people, both living and dead, and a quiet dignity of bearing, very much in keeping with his Native heritage. Though he was a master teacher, a master lecturer, and an admirably patient listener, he preferred one-on-one conversation to larger social gatherings. He also took upon himself the responsibility of carrying forward, in his poems and fiction, the historical, social, cultural, spiritual, and ethnographic information about his Indian people, their way of life, and his awareness of the great wrongs inflicted upon them by Westward Expansion. He dedicated himself to transmitting this collective memory, determined not to let the Vanishing American disappear completely from public awareness.

So why that question, written when Ralph was in his 80s, “Am I still, after all these years, still an Indian?” Did he doubt himself?

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I say he never *stopped* being an Indian. The question, I believe, is rhetorical, the kind of question good teachers sometimes ask. He did not doubt himself. I believe the question springs from his awareness of how he had been seen by those who lack understanding of mixed-race allegiances.

His question also reflects, I think, his ever-present memories of the racist reactions he'd encountered when he first publicly identified as Native American, with the publication (in 1982 and 1983) of three books in a row that boldly employed titles, topics and themes that referenced his Native heritage. Despite the emergence of what's now called the Native American Renaissance, despite the rapidly expanding circle of contemporary Native writers where Ralph and his work found acceptance and respect, the reception of Ralph's new books within the UO's English Department wasn't exactly warm. In those days, as I remember them, the movers and shakers and decision makers were academics for whom White male writers were the only ones deserving admission to the literary canon. The wonderful, worldwide, *current* proliferation of Native American / Ethnic Studies programs is, in the minds of many who studied and/or taught in the 1970s and 1980s, a dream come true. But "back in the day," when Ralph's three books appeared, there had been only a sprinkling of Native American Studies classes taught across campus--none of them in the English Department. In fact, a university minor in Native American Studies didn't become an established field of study until 2014. So, in essence, Ralph was leaping off a cliff without a net.

To be fair to his colleagues (some of whom *did* react kindly), Ralph—with his light complexion and blue eyes—had never been considered as other than white. He'd been hired away from Drake University (Iowa) in 1960, with a promise of tenure based on an exemplary teaching record and a strong publication history of poems and stories in national magazines. He was a rising star, a "golden boy," who, in

1961, published a poem in *The New Yorker*: a big deal then as well as now, though I strongly suspect that if anyone in his department actually *read* the poem, they'd been quietly baffled by its content, which was an exposé of the racist assumptions of the staff of a children's museum. In the early 1960s Ralph had—together with fellow department member and fiction writer James B. Hall—helped shape the new MFA program in Creative Writing, one of the first in the country. Ralph was also, by 1964, Editor-in-Chief of *Northwest Review*, a literary journal of national and international distinction. Even his first book of poems, *Ghost Grapefruit* (Ithaca House, 1972)—much of it written before he'd fully embarked on the quest to learn all he could about his Native heritage—didn't rattle anyone's feathers or sound any bells of alarm.

So, imagine the consternation in the English Department when, in 1982 and 1983, his second, third, and fourth books were titled *Pointing at the Rainbow*, *Spirit Beast Chant*, and *Going to the Water: Poems of a Cherokee Heritage*. To say his colleagues were not pleased is an understatement. And, as Ralph continued to publish poems that drew on his complex world view and his allegiance to his Indian-Caucasian ancestry? Let's say his promotion to Full Professor was a long time in coming.

"Why are you always writing about those red Indians, man? Why don't you write about your Irish people?' ... and I could only wish that I had written more about my Irish American mother." (SFSG, 240) This challenge from a colleague appears just paragraphs before Ralph's question, "Am I still.... Indian?" and leads me to believe that besides rhetorical, Ralph's question is also *empathic*. It's almost as if he's seeing himself through the eyes of that colleague, as though that long-ago colleague were still around to see *him*: an old white guy, more fluent in the language of academia than in the language of his Native people, good with a

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computer and far from the hunter he once had been, far from the traditional way of life of his Native ancestors. How could this light-skinned, blue-eyed elder, walking the halls of academia instead of a dirt path along a Kentucky creek, as he'd done as a child when visiting his Cherokee-Shawnee grandmother (herself a descendant of the Cherokee who'd hid in the hills to avoid the Trail of Tears)—how could he be the “real thing”?

And who knows? Maybe, like the rest of us, Ralph sometimes *did* have self-doubts. If he did, and that's a big “if,” the delightfully sardonic way he acknowledges that *(yes) he's led a way of life far from the traditional ways of his father and of his Indian ancestors*, implies other, hidden, rhetorical questions. The very next sentence, which begins a new paragraph, reads:

Applying the Rez Test of authenticity, it is true that I have never lived in North Carolina, never lived on our single reservation, one that a kind white man bought for a few oppressed Cherokees after so many had been robbed of their fertile plantations, hunting grounds, and population centers, including our sacred city Echota—after so many had been ethnically cleansed, been massacred, been death-marched west. (241) [But does that make me less authentically Indian?] *(words in brackets mine)*

Ralph goes on to recall, again tongue in cheek, how even his “civilized” family was one step farther from the hunting grounds of his ancestors: his family used newspapers and the pages of mail-order catalogs, instead of leaves, for personal hygiene. [Was his father, then, a “lesser” Indian?] There's a note of sadness in Ralph's admission that he raised his own children even farther from the traditional ways of his Native ancestors, though he did teach his sons to hunt in the ways his own father taught him, and made sure his children learned family history. That he didn't pass on more: does that make him less Indian?

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Ralph then offers another admission: when his fiction and poetry referred to Indian history, or his protagonists or poems were written from a Native perspective (which many were) they were not always from his own lived experience. [Does this make him less Indian?] As a writer of poetry and fiction, he was comfortable writing, on occasion, from other people's points of view and with putting his characters in situations he'd never been in. When he wrote of traditional Indian practices, or of the challenges of being mixed-blood, or of being a full-blood Indian, he borrowed what he'd learned from ethnographers and from the autobiographies (written and/or told him in conversation) of other Native writers; they provided him with the *substance*, the *details*, of real-life situations. [Other fiction writers do this; are Native peoples not allowed to do the same?]

I love the way Ralph concludes his various responses to the rhetorical question, and concludes this section of the book, with a wonderfully subtle refusal to accept the "either-or" dialectical framework within which his own, rhetorical question is asked. The answer, he suggests—by referencing a story by a writer he greatly admired—is more complex than either *yes* or *no*.

In Luigi Pirandello's short story "War," a bereaved father says that a father does not give half of his love to one child, half to another; he gives all his love to each of his children. I am a Cherokee-Shawnee-English-Irish person, not part this part that but all everything, whatever it is. (SFSG, 242)

**4. His tough Iowa farm childhood and upbringing obviously weighed throughout his life. Why do you think it stayed with him so greatly?**

Oh, you're so right—his childhood on the farm was a topic he returned to over and over, throughout his life. And to your question, I wish there were a simple answer. The "tough" parts—his family's poverty and state of near-starvation, their need to work tirelessly and be ever-vigilant, keeping guns at the ready to protect

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themselves, in a society out of balance during the Great Depression, and the hardships of the Great Depression itself, as well as his father's drunken violence—scarred Ralph for life. Becoming a writer and a teacher, drawing upon (though often disguising) his experiences for subject matter, was a way of not only surviving but of prevailing. Of healing.

Examples of the violence include the time his father, in one of many drunken rages, shot into the linoleum kitchen floor around Ralph's four-year-old feet. In some ways similar to persons with PTSD, Ralph—for over a year, after we were together—would often be startled awake, right after he'd fallen asleep. He didn't know why; he thought it might be something neurological. His whole body would jerk, almost jump. But then one night he awakened with the full realization he'd been having flashbacks of that shooting incident, though the scars remained. And that was it: the sudden, startled wakings never returned.

He also told of another time when his mother sent him to warn his older brother Bob, working a tractor in the fields, that their father was coming after him with a gun. His brother returned to the house, planning to disarm their father, but by that time Charlie had passed out. He told, also, of being ten or eleven and accompanying his mother, whom his father had threatened to kill, as she set out on foot for a neighbor's house to call the sheriff, while his drunken father—from the front porch—shot bullet after bullet at or near her, kicking up the dust in front of their feet. Ralph's mother walked on, but Ralph returned to confront his father and begged him to stop his shooting. Ralph was successful, and—though he never remembered just what he said—that was the last time his father threatened any of his family with a gun.

The world outside the family unit was dangerous, too. One night when he was 15 or 16, at home with his mother, the two of them the only ones awake—his brother Bob off to war and his older brother Ray off to town with his father—Ralph went out the

back door with a loaded gun to frighten away a prowler. Thieves from cities often roamed the Iowa farmland, looking for animals or machines or whatever they could find, to sell on the black market. Seeing no one, afraid for his life, Ralph shot into the dark, never knowing whether he'd wounded anyone; but the sounds stopped. The prowler had probably fled through the fields. Another night, with the whole family at home, his father drew his gun on two men who had come to rob the family. They left and robbed a family down the road, instead.

What complicates my answer is that Ralph was able to live long enough, and conquer his traumas well enough, to recognize that there was more goodness, intertwined with the hard stuff, than he was aware of during his youth. And as he grew in ability to see his own suffering in a wider context, the more aware he was, I believe, that his background gave him the authority and the opportunity to explore larger social issues and to lead his readers towards a deeper awareness of poverty, violence, and their consequences.

From his conscious, formative years during the worldwide Great Depression of the 1930s—years in which he thought that President Hoover's first name was "Damn," years during which winter meals often consisted of milk and homemade white bread, or cornbread, spread with lard, sometimes with milk and potatoes and flour-based gravy—Ralph learned first-hand the concept of poverty. He learned first-hand how it felt to be overlooked by those who wield economic and political power; how it was to be working class, to be an outcast; he learned that Capitalism can deal out injustice, that Democracy works often at the expense of society's "have nots." He also learned empathy. He learned how to forgive his father (as can be seen in the many *good* memories Ralph shares in his autobiography).



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Violence and economic hardships are, of course, almost always intertwined, as social scientists, therapists, psychologists, and others have been telling us for quite some time. And these interconnections were among Ralph's major themes.

I think he'd also agree that without his "tough childhood," without the darkness, he wouldn't have half been half the writer he was. Much of his work can be seen, I believe, as the work of a "survivor" who refused to be defined or limited by the traumas he experienced and who channeled his "fight or flight" response into something of beauty and truth. Ralph's own awareness of this seeming paradox—light growing out of, and indeed fueled by, darkness—is epitomized in the title of his book of poems, *Light from a Bullet Hole* (2010), with his deliberate choice of *from* rather than the more conventional *through*.

And there's yet another way to answer your question. Let's talk about the weight of Ralph's childhood in terms of "place." All of us were born *somewhere*. right? And for a while that place was the center of our universe. For those who remained in that place for most of our childhood years, it became part of who we are and the lens through which we viewed the world. That place was critical to our sense of identity. It shaped us. N. Scott Momaday, in his cover endorsement for Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Place: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*, says: "Keith Basso gives us to understand something about the sacred and indivisible nature of words and place. And this is a universal equation, a balance in the universe. Place may be the first of all concepts; it may be the oldest of all words."

Despite the tough childhood Ralph endured, he talked often, and wrote extensively, about his gratitude for growing up working the land, for its having connected him at a profound and intimate level with the cycles of life, of the seasons; he felt a kinship

with the earth and all its creatures, both large and small; he came to understand earth's power to give and its power to take away.

He knew, also, that the place which formed him was more than geographic location, more than the forces of the natural world, but the human society which he found there, with its own ethics, concepts of wisdom, of manners, of morals.

What I'm saying is not news, of course. What *is* new, however, as *I see it*, is the relatively recent development of academic fields of study in this area, and the proliferation of literary publications, both within and outside of the academy, devoted to the investigation of our human relationship to "place." I think of journals such as *Windfall*, which publishes writing exclusively from and about the Pacific Northwest; the online literary journal *About Place*, published by the Black Earth Institute and "dedicated to re-forging the links between art and spirit, earth and society." Another is *Claw and Blossom: human nature, natural world*; another, *Terrain*, which "searches for the interface—the integration—among the built and natural environments that might be called the soul of place"—and this is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

So, despite the tough times he endured as a child, the Ralph I knew also had happy memories, among the troubled ones, and he drew upon them to live a balanced life. His autobiography is peppered with memories of games he and his siblings played, the special desserts his Aunt Jennie cooked, his mother's flower and vegetable gardens, her canning. The first orange Ralph ever ate, at age six, was brought by distant cousin, visiting from Florida. Eventually the family (when Ralph was fifteen) was able to get running water and electricity.

His mother, whom I knew, had been for Ralph a model of patience and endurance, who shared with her children her own hard work ethic (as did his father) and her

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sense of “the holy” within all living things. I loved her wry sense of humor, which Ralph and all of his siblings inherited. When we’d come to visit, his mother would say “Oh, good: now I have someone to help me clean out the refrigerator.”

Of his father, Ralph had far more happy memories (looking back) than traumatic ones. When I met Ralph, in 1967, his father had already passed on, and Ralph had, long before that, already forgiven him. Apparently, his father had given up drinking, and by the time Ralph’s sons were born, Charlie had become the loving grandfather they and their cousins remember.

No, despite the memories of hard times, Ralph loved and remained deeply connected with his family, until one by one they preceded him in death. Each family member, including his mother’s sister, Jennie, who lived with them, is remembered in individual poems written for and about them. We went to the Iowa farm where Ralph was born, and on which Ralph’s sister, Ruth, and her husband Bob Walker, still lived and farmed, as part of each Summer vacation for the better part of 40 years. Ralph’s brother Bob and family owned the farm next door, about ½ mile down the now-paved road. Those were happy times; I have a video recording of the four surviving siblings (his elder brother Ray died in middle age) sitting around a kitchen table, reminiscing about Pappy and Ma (or Mother, as she was sometimes called). On other occasions, Ruth would get out the large, old, tin bread box with a huge collection of black and white photos saved, over the years, and spread them randomly on the table, leading her and Ralph to spend an evening of random reminiscing, with myself and our daughter, Martina, as their rapt audience.

So yes, back to your questions: the hardships of his childhood did weigh on Ralph throughout his entire life. They made for important stories, important poems. But balancing that weight was much goodness, which I think Ralph would want his readers to know.

**5. War holds an immensely important role in his outlook – bomber-crew training, aerial bombardment over Berlin, Korea, and eventually peace activism against the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Could you say something more of this trajectory in his life? In what ways did he regard himself as a “peace poet,” especially in the context of nuclear power and arms?**

From the time Ralph was old enough to grasp the socially-correct concept, glamorized during the early days of World War II, that fighting for one’s country was a moral obligation and that dying for one’s country was noble and glamorous, he wanted to become an Air Force pilot. As a teenager, he built model planes and imagined himself rescuing his eight-years-older brother, Bob, from a prisoner of war camp in Italy. Ralph enlisted in the United States Air Force when he was 17, and the day after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday he was on a train for the first time in his life, headed for 29 months of military service, all of it in training on various air bases in the western United States. To his great disappointment, his rural high school had not offered him (or anyone) the necessary math to become a pilot, so Ralph did what was he was assigned: he trained as a machine-gunner and flew over two hundred B-24 and B-29 bomber practice missions.

Though he was proud of his endurance and the skills he learned, and grateful for having made friends who steered him towards getting a higher education, the horrors he experienced—witnessing flaming plane crashes that took two hundred lives (SFSG, 177), some of whom were Ralph’s friends—led him to the devastating awareness that those deaths were pointless: that war was pointless; that he’d been propagandized; that dying was far from glorious. He often said that before enlisting, he hadn’t really internalized what death, especially a painful death, actually was. He had been young and immortal (right?), like many young soldiers, all around the world, who enlist at an age when their prefrontal cortexes are still

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forming, when their ability to look at all sides of the issues, to make rational decisions, is not yet fully operational. All that testosterone, each “invincible” generation repeating the enthusiasms of the generation before. He saw what Pete Seeger later immortalized in song, “gone to graveyards, every one.” He learned at university and through family experience (his mother’s first husband died in World War One), that almost every generation, throughout history, has had its own war, and that the reasons for war are closely tied to economics. Believing the world should not function that way, Ralph became a pacifist. His commitment, as you’ve rightly noted, was lifelong.

One of the ways his pacifism played out was through his poetry and fiction. I remember his talking about using the gift of his survival and his gift with words, to work to honor the memories of his friends killed in air crashes, by exposing the lies they’d all been fed and by telling the truth about war.

A sometimes-thorny issue, with which Ralph chose not to engage, was whether it was necessary for America to join the Allies in fighting the Nazis and the Japanese during the Second World War. What Ralph really railed against were the root causes of war and human blindness to the wheels of propaganda (among other complex reasons, such as the way Germany’s resources were depleted after World War I) that initially induced the German people to follow Hitler, similar to the wheels he’d himself fallen under, in America. He argued against the political and economic forces which persuaded all the young and vulnerable into laying down their lives for no good reason. He made his points quite well, I believe, in his writing—though he never could persuade one of his brothers, Rex, the youngest in the family (who made the United States Air Force a lifelong career—during which he flew hospital ships and transport missions in Vietnam) that the Vietnam War was wrong.

Ralph also, by extension, loathed the nuclear arms race and felt an uneasiness, throughout his life, about the fact that American lives had been spared—at the end

of World War II—by the horrific destruction of the entire cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He feared that if left unchecked, the nuclear arms race, which escalated to epic proportions in the 1950s and 60s, and kept on escalating, would lead to nuclear holocaust and the ultimate destruction of our world. That threat is, of course, back with us again, thanks to multiple causes that don't fall within the scope of our conversation.

So yes, Ralph *did*, over a good many years, take upon himself the responsibility of reminding his readers that the nuclear threat wasn't going away just because the world's attentions might be elsewhere. His awareness of nuclear threat extended not only to bombs, themselves, but to the nuclear reactors that were predicted (and have, by now, at least twice been proven—in Chernobyl and Fukushima) to have disastrous consequences should anything go wrong.

There's something I need to clarify, however, before returning to the trajectory of Ralph's lifelong pacifism. Despite the realism and historical accuracy of his short fiction, Ralph never saw combat. He was not "The Indian who Bombed Berlin." He never went to Korea. In fact, he was never shipped over either the Atlantic or the Pacific. The news of Germany's surrender arrived when he was on a troop train bound for the East Coast, where he was to be shipped across the Atlantic. He then returned to another American air base, was trained to firebomb Japan, and was getting ready to get shipped there, when *Japan* surrendered. A few years later, an Air Force computing error sent Ralph an honorable discharge before he was even called up to serve in Korea. By the time it arrived, however, he'd already decided to serve only on the condition that he serve as a medic; if that didn't work, he'd officially declare himself a Conscientious Objector and go to prison. rather than fight. "Why didn't you become a CO right away," I once asked. "Because that would have meant going to prison, and my family would have had no income."

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No, about Berlin and Korea, Ralph was merely doing what fiction writers do, *imagining what could have happened*, right (?), what memories he would have carried, what recognitions he would later have had, had he actually been in those bombers. And why should he worry that readers would assume the stories were autobiographical? Did anyone assume that N. Scott Momaday had been in the Army, when he wrote about a WW II soldier returning to his New Mexico reservation? I see various future research papers here: WW II veterans who became writers, specifically those with Native American heritage.

I'm surprised, now that I think of it, that Ralph's editors did not insist on a disclaimer at the beginning of his books of short fiction, stating that "the places and the names....etc., are not based on actual characters or events," or however that goes. Misleading his readers was never Ralph's intention.

Autobiographical details that Ralph *did* bring to that Berlin story were his having lived and taught in Germany, several times, as a Fulbright professor; having been to Berlin several times (before and after the Wall came down); and having participated in anti-war rallies, in Oregon and California, during Vietnam War years and during the early days of the still-ongoing wars in the Gulf.

But back to the trajectory, and to contextualize Ralph's political activism during the Vietnam War era, when Ralph—by then a professor at the University of Oregon—was openly decrying the United States military involvement. In those days, the term all of us used was "anti-war poet"; the terms "peace poet," "pacifist poet," and "activist poet," had yet to evolve.

With your kind permission, I'll digress just enough to give a bit of historical context to Ralph's peace activism and mention the non-profit, umbrella organization called "American Writers Against the Vietnam War," created in 1965—the year American forces landed in Vietnam—by American poets David Ray and Robert Bly, for the

purpose of organizing readings, meetings, rallies, teach-ins, demonstrations, and the like. Bly and Ray also co-edited and published (in 1966) an anthology, still available, titled *A Poetry Reading Against the Vietnam War*, which contained work by many of the most highly-regarded poets of the time: Galway Kinnell, Grace Paley, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, Donald Hall, Robert Lowell, James Wright, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Louis Simpson, William Stafford, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Bly and Ray, themselves, and many more). The significance of that anthology cannot be overemphasized. It inspired many other writers and editors to do something similar, and it fostered a wave of poetry readings throughout the United States, all of them passionate and well attended. One can find many accounts of this anthology, and the movement, online.

It was during this time that Ralph, as Editor-in-Chief of *Northwest Review* conceived of a special "Protest and Affirmation" issue, which I, as Managing Editor from 1967-1968, helped create. Behind that title was his belief—first articulated, he told me, by poet Denise Levertov—that there are two ways to resist oppression: to actively *name and resist it*, and to praise and celebrate what it is we live *for*. Or, as Oregon-born poet Phyllis McGinley once said, "In times of unrest and fear, it is perhaps the writer's duty to celebrate, to single out some values we can cherish, to talk about some of the few warm things we know in a cold world."

Farther along in our conversation I'll come back to the political backlash from the University of Oregon's publications department. It wasn't pleasant. But Ralph held his ground, got two other faculty members to back him, and the issue was published (after prolonged delay).

Both Ralph and I, in the following years, participated in several readings, rallies, and marches against the Vietnam War. Some were in Fresno, California, where I had a temporary assistant professorship at the state college (now university), and where



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Ralph had been hired as a visiting professor for two years. One memorable march was downtown, where we and many hundreds of students, faculty, and community members marched through the streets on a hot, hot day. The march was peaceful; we never doubted it would be. Oh, we were so innocent, in the days before the deadly shootings at Kent State (May 4, 1970). On the Fresno campus, FBI agents were everywhere, every day, for months—easily identified by their gray suits. (Who wears gray suits with large walkie-talkies in their bulging breast pockets on campus?) I strongly suspect that to this day, our names and faces are in some FBI files, somewhere. At one of the marches on campus, our group of protestors was approached by a group of young, macho males (aggies, they were called: agriculture students, very right wing) swinging heavy bicycle chains in our direction. We didn't linger.

Ralph's officemate in Fresno was a young Everett Frost, an English professor/friend who, on his own time, counseled young men who wanted to know their alternatives to military service, should they be drafted. Everett, consequently, was suspended from teaching by the college administration (over loud objections from the English department) for allegedly conspiring to blow up the grand piano in the music school—an absurdity that didn't hold up in court. For a couple of days *all* English professors, including ourselves, did not have access to our offices, while all filing cabinets were searched for evidence. Strange and ugly times.

But I digress. On we go to the wars of the next generation. First, it was the Gulf War, began under (Republican) President George Bush, in early 1991, with the bombing of Iraq: the goal, to oust Saddam Hussein, who had invaded Kuwait. The days prior to the first "shock and awe" wave of U.S. bombings of Baghdad were excruciating for us, as they were for many millions of our fellow citizens, unable to stop the Desert Storm and Desert Shield operations that had begun, actually, with buildup of troops in 1990. Both Ralph and I responded by writing protest poems, as

did many others. We participated in readings, locally, though there wasn't the same kind of nationwide movement as during the Vietnam War, in part because that military action was of a limited duration.

Ten years later, however, after the (second) Bush administration announced a war against terror (and its mastermind, Osama bin Laden, leader of al-Qaeda, who had planned the simultaneous attacks on New York's World Trade Center's Twin Towers and the Pentagon, in Washington, D.C.), a whole new nationwide protest movement erupted, with poets again at the helm. This time the first move was made by the late poet-publisher Sam Hamill, after he declined an invitation to attend First Lady Laura Bush's White House Symposium "Poetry and the American Voice," in February 2003—a symposium that was canceled as a result of much negative publicity. Hamill called for poets to submit work to what became the huge, online anthology *Poets Against the War* (part of which was later printed as a book). That site, now archived and difficult to access, originally contained over 4,600 contributions from poets worldwide and grew to include over 10,000 poems. It became a forum where poets could register their opposition to the Bush administration's initiating war with Iraq. I encourage readers to search online for more details.

What happened next, and happened almost simultaneously, was that a great many editors of journals and/or small, independent poetry presses, all across America, also published print editions of state-specific, or city- or region-specific anthologies of anti-war poems. Here in Oregon, Ralph and I both appeared in *Raising Our Voices: An Anthology of Oregon Poets Against the War*, edited by Duane Poncy (Cherokee) and Patricia McLean, in 2003. Again, we participated in readings. And we organized two of them, a year apart, timed to celebrate the January birthday of Oregon's most world-renowned poet, William Stafford (1913-1993), who had been a

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close friend. Stafford, a Conscientious Objector during World War II, had spent three years in work camps in Arkansas, California, and Illinois, fighting fires and maintaining roads, which he described in his memoir *Down in My Heart*.

We called the first event: "Every War Has Two Losers," a title taken from the posthumous publication of Stafford's anti-war poems and related prose. To this reading we invited audience members to bring and read either a favorite Stafford poem, one of their own, or one by someone else, that decried war and/or promoted peace. Our second event, titled "The Unknown Good in Our Enemies," came from a Stafford poem titled "For the Unknown Enemy." (Again, readers can look online for either "The Unknown Good in Our Enemies," an article I wrote, and/or google "William Stafford For the Unknown Enemy".) For this program we researched anthologies and put out an online call for work by poets living and writing in the Middle East. We chose about 20 poems, from several countries, and assigned local poet friends to share in reading them at our event. We also produced a small booklet of these poems for each audience member to take home.

Although those readings were long ago, Ralph maintained his anti-war and pro-peace activism throughout the rest of his life. Which brings me back, Bob, to your designation "peace poet." That slight but important semantic shift from Ralph's considering himself "anti-war" to "pro-peace" was very gradual, very undramatic. Thank you for catching that. Looking back, I'm not finding where Ralph publicly used this term; I surely have missed something. But the term was certainly how he increasingly grew to think of himself, the seed having been planted, perhaps, with his editing the special "protest and affirmation" issue of *Northwest Review*.

What comes to mind right now are lines from a Denise Levertov poem, which we greatly admired. "Nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness, the deep intelligence living at peace would have" (from her book *Life at War*, 1966). The positive tone of these lines, and Ralph's thinking of himself as a "peace poet," were

clearly in keeping with his lifelong commitment to use his teachings and writings to make significant social change, to work *within* society, rather than to attack it. He maintained this stance all his life, right up through his final, as yet-unpublished, book of poems *Living in the Mouth*.

I'll conclude by taking advantage of our digital format and mention a YouTube performance of a song that means a lot to me, personally, in its almost perfect expression—in words by Argentinian poet Mario Benedetti, put to music by Alberto Favero— of how I saw Ralph and his work for peace and justice and how we walked *cado a cado*, elbow to elbow, in the streets and in all we did as teachers and writers, supporting each other's work for 48 years. It's a love poem, of sorts, in which one lover says, "If I love you, it's because you are / my love my accomplice my all / and out in the street arm in arm / we are so much more than two / .... Your hands are my caress / my daily reminders / I love you because your hands work hard for justice .... Your mouth that's yours and mine / Your mouth that's never wrong / I love you because your mouth / knows how to yell like a rebel ... And for your honest face / and your vagabond step / and your weeping for the world / because you're one of the people, I love you .... and out in the street arm in arm / we are so much more than two."

During Ralph's memorial service, while a local *a cappella* choir performed this piece, the audience could follow along with program inserts that contained the original Spanish poem and, across the page, the English translation by Paul Archer (which, online, is at the bottom of the screen). The choral arrangement is by Liliana Cangiano. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLEDo1tYztc>

**6. The both of you spent much time in Europe, Germany and Italy especially.**

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**The Fulbrights and the travel. What was Ralph's sense of Europe, its cultural strengths and yet its battle-scars?**

Oh, we were so very fortunate, from the very beginning, to be able to visit many different countries in Europe and to have extended stays in several of them. And, different (I like to think) from most tourists, our experiences were more than skin deep.

Our first European trip was in 1976, when Ralph took a Spring term sabbatical at full pay and we added an extra three Summer months, living on savings. We spent a total of almost 6 months in Europe, traveling on a 3-month Eurailpass, which in those days was affordable and could be spread out longer by staying for 10 days, 2 weeks, or even a month or more, in one place, before traveling on. With a 4-year old in tow, that was not only practical: it was essential.

There was another reason we stayed for long periods: a month in Murnau, Germany, for example, at the foot of the Bavarian Alps; a month in Tossa de Mar, on the Costa Brava of Spain. Ralph always, from the very beginning, wanted to live "among the people." We stayed outside of tourist areas and took public transit where we wanted to go. We most fervently wanted, also, *not* to be instantly identified as Americans, so we could observe and learn and maybe even interact with people on *their terms*, not ours (though we still, no doubt, stood out "like sore thumbs.")

We almost never stayed in hotels. For shorter stays of a week or 10 days, we'd find a room for rent in an ordinary household. Airbnb's didn't exist. In German and Austrian small towns, we'd walk from the train station, find a "Fremden Zimmer" sign in a window, and knock on the door. In tiny Murnau (home to Gabriele Münter and Wassily Kandinsky more than 70 years before us), we stayed in a Bavarian farm household, sharing the roof and a wall with the barn. We met such kind, wonderful people that way. Or, in larger cities, we'd consult our well-worn Frommer's Guide,

phoning—at the very last minute, from the station—private homes recommended by travelers before us. We also spent some time with distant cousins, from both sides of my parentage: two households in Backnang (near Stuttgart) and one in Wiesbaden.

Our next trip to Europe, in 1983, was for Ralph's Fulbright Senior Professorship at the Goethe Universität in Frankfurt. His assignments involved teaching Native American Literature and Creative Writing, for the Spring and Summer semesters. Both of us were invited to give readings at the Amerika Haus in Frankfurt. Ralph was also invited to lecture at the University of Arhus, in Denmark.

During this period, we, with our then-eleven-year-old daughter, initially stayed for 6 weeks—for lack of available university housing—with friends of friends, with whom Ralph had corresponded, but whom we'd never met: teachers Guenter and Mechthild Hesse and their five year-old daughter, Anna. The Hesses opened to us their beautiful home in Bad Homburg, just outside of Frankfurt, and opened their hearts, including us in family meals, introducing us to the German way of life, taking us on excursions and walks through vineyards and forests, showing us small, historic cities close enough for day outings. Every night, after *Abendessen*, and the girls were asleep, we'd stay up till all hours, drinking wine and talking politics and cultural differences and education and everything else under the sun. We're friends to this day, and our paths have crossed often, over the years, both in Germany and in Oregon. Whenever Ralph and I flew in and out of Frankfurt, maybe a dozen times, *en route* to conferences or guest appearances or his Fulbright research award in Norway, we'd stay with our friends. I did so just last September, *en route* to the Native American Studies symposium at the University of Valencia.

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In 1994-1995, I, myself, had a Fulbright Senior Professorship in Frankfurt, and Ralph was privately offered a class in Native American literature. Together, during the year, we traveled to 10 different German cities, where I gave workshops on the teaching of Creative Writing in the Classroom, to secondary and university level teachers of English. Two years later we were south of Munich, where I had a one-month residency at the Villa Waldberta, under the sponsorship of the Kulturreferat, München, to work collaboratively with Munich visual artists Traude Linhardt and Susi Rosenberg—on an installation piece (painting, sculpture, and poetry) titled “Space/Word/Time.” Seven years later we were in Germany again, teaching for two Summers in a row at Freiburg’s University of Education, as Fulbright Senior Specialists. How could any two people have been luckier than we?

Our brief travels and extended periods of residence in Italy evolved throughout the 1990s, beginning with Ralph’s receiving, in 1992, a 5-week Rockefeller Residency Award at the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, on a hillside overlooking Lake Como. In 1995, the Fulbright commission sent both of us on a joint reading tour of three cities in Italy: Turin, Parma, and Rome. We also accepted private invitations to read in Padova, Florence, and Venice. In Parma, we were hosted by a group of writers and artists whose parents had been partisans in World War II, and we learned some rousing songs that honored their resistance. Also, in Parma, we met some Americans in the breakfast room, who (it turned out) had an apartment for rent in Venice; we took it for three months in the late Winter/early Spring of 1996. While in Venice, two Parma friends came to visit, introducing us to the sisters Sandra and Flavia Busatta, who—from their home in Padova—were publishing *HAKO*, a journal of Native American history and culture, from their home in Padova. One thing led to another, and Sandra invited us to visit her ESL high school classes. And the following year, our daughter Martina, who was working in Florence as Assistant

Dean of Studio Art Centers International, found us an apartment *there*, for the month of February 1997.

As to how Ralph saw Europe's cultural strengths and its battle scars, what a huge question! Though wary of generalizations, my first response is that he probably saw these as somewhat connected, as do I.

One of Europe's cultural strengths, Ralph would have said, is its art: the centrality of it, how integrated art is into society—vibrant and visible and valued by the majority of the population (at least the populations we saw, from our American perspective). Everywhere in Europe, we found streets bearing the names of artists, writers, composers. One of the first things Ralph wanted to do, whenever we arrived somewhere new, was to visit whatever art museum(s) that city had to offer. We did day trips to small towns, if an art museum was there. We even bicycled to the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands, far out in the countryside.

Ralph had studied art as a university student, intending to be a painter, before he discovered his love and talent for writing. He was at his happiest, "in his element," with visual art, and he shared much of his knowledge with me, who'd had but one semester of art history in college. He loved the paintings of Rembrandt and Van Gogh, he loved the German Expressionists, he loved the Surrealists, and Picasso, and Goya. He loved the Miró museum in Barcelona. The Prado in Madrid. The Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. And in every museum, of course, it was inescapable: representations of war. The art of Anselm Kiefer in everywhere. Reminders, reminders. Battle scars. We wondered if ever there were historical periods when one or another war, somewhere, did *not* plague Europe. We also talked about how some of Europe's greatest visual artists, writers, and musicians (we went to many concerts, too) were creating their finest masterpieces during periods



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of wartime; it had to be more than coincidence. Observing these correspondences enriched our/Ralph's experience.

Another strength he saw, I believe, was Europe's dedication to keeping history alive. Centuries-old fountains everywhere. He applauded the preservation of old buildings; he applauded the adventurous designs of the new; he applauded their integration. He applauded the European way of renovating interiors, to keep up with more modern conveniences and styles, while preserving their historical exteriors. He loved the ancient cathedrals.

In those days (the 80s, 90s and early 2000s; I'm sure it's changed now, with the huge influx of immigrants) Ralph saw a cultural strength in Europeans' having grown up in places that have been there for centuries: "belonging" to those place in ways most Americans have never experienced. Alas, it seems to be our American way—a way Ralph often bemoaned—to tear down the old to build the "new and better." There are exceptions everywhere, of course, in the United States, especially on the East coast.

While Ralph both admired (and, I believe, envied) Europeans their being surrounded by tradition, he equally admired Europeans' ability to adapt to the demands of growing populations. He admired the "co-housing" developments springing up in Freiburg, in the early 2000s. He admired the many ways—design, architecture, the transportation infrastructure, recycling, caring for the environment—Europe was far head of America. We felt a bit like the youngest kids in class, always two developmental steps behind our older classmates.

Yet, amid all that he saw as good, Ralph also saw the battle scars. He noted the architectural differences between the "truly old" and the "hastily rebuilt": those

huge, monochromatic, cement-gray, working-class apartment buildings in downtown Frankfurt (and other cities, throughout Europe, bombed heavily during World War II). What strength it must have taken *everyone*, in all countries, to get their bearings again, to move forward with their lives, while bearing grief for everything and everyone they had lost. Everyone, including Germans, the perpetrators, had suffered greatly. As had the Italians, Germany's cohorts, for a while. We saw the bridge in a town near Padova, where bullet holes still remain. We saw the trees from which dissidents were hung with barbed wire. Different from most Americans of his generation, different from even his siblings, Ralph was keenly aware of the victims on *both* sides. He refused to see his generation as "the great generation," a slogan that was in vogue in the 1990s, back home. Aware, too, that he *could have been* part of the American air raids on any of the many German cities we visited, he was extremely thankful that he didn't have to bear that kind of guilt.

In Germany Ralph saw another, unique, kind of cultural strength: the open admission of guilt and a determination to never let this happen again. The concentration camps, open to the public; war memorials everywhere, including the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin, deliberately *not* rebuilt, its bomb scars intact, as a reminder. Because we were in Frankfurt for the first half of 1995, and then came home, I/we didn't really know how that year was marked in other European countries, but surely there were commemorative events. In America, we saw upon returning, town after town was celebrating "50 years of Victory." Germany, on the other hand, was celebrating "50 years of Peace," with major exhibits in major museums and in other places, as well: the lobby of the opera house, the lobbies of government buildings, in banks, at entrances to cemeteries and cathedrals. I wish I could remember more about the exhibit that revealed the secret involvement of everyday citizens as members of the SS, and the other exhibit

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of photos taken by foot soldiers, during the war, that was that talk of Frankfurt. We went to a photo exhibit in Bonn: German women clearing the rubble after bombing raids. In Nuremberg we visited one of Hitler's largest stadiums, built for mass rallies, turned into a museum documenting, in both German and English, the rise of the Nazi party (which bears rather frightening parallels to what Ralph saw happening in our own country in 1995, and is happening again today, at an even faster pace.)

And of course, seeing all this open admission, as well as Germany's ongoing efforts at restoration, Ralph was keenly aware of what is still lacking in America, where most of our countrymen and women carry on as though slavery never happened, as though the genocide of 90% of all Native Americans never happened, as though putting Japanese-Americans in internment camps never happened, as though the Ku Klux Klan didn't still exist. (How angry he would be, had the crisis at our southern border—immigrant parents and children being separated at the border, and held in detention—happened while he was alive.)

He was also aware that almost every German his age or older had some painful memories of the war. People we saw every day—retired people strolling in parks on Sunday afternoons, or market vendors, or older proprietors of business establishments, had quite possibly lived through bombing raids and had seen horrors we cannot begin to imagine. Some had possibly been combatants, or the relatives of combatants. All those who had survived, he intuited, had learned to deal with humiliation, shame, unimaginable guilt, as well as grief for their own people lost in battle. Memories of unimaginable suffering at the hands of the Russians. Battle scars everywhere. Palpable.

He also saw the cultural strength of resilience, in Germany and throughout all of Europe. He was keenly aware that Europeans have endured what the dominant

culture in America had never, in memory—except for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, in 2001—had to endure: an invasion by a foreign power. If today, in 2019, American memories of 9/11/2001 are still fresh, how much wider and deeper and longer the memories of the many millions of European survivors of World War II, who suffered losses day after day, for years.

All this, and so much more, Ralph was keenly aware of. We talked about it. He wrote about it. But complicating and deepening his feelings was the awareness that it was *his generation* that had been fighting in that war, and that greatly heightened his respect and compassion, coupled with a deep caring for everyone he met.

### **7. What, in this connection, of the translation work he did with Harald Gaski on the Sami writer Nils-Aslak Valkeapää?**

Oh, I was hoping you'd ask about this. Ralph and I, in 1987, participated in a conference called the "International Writers' Reunion," in Lahti, Finland. Ralph, by that time, had already published four books of poems that drew heavily on his Cherokee heritage and his sense of kinship with indigenous people around the world. He went to Finland well aware that what we used to call Laplanders (also known as the "white Indians of the north," due to their fair complexions and light-colored eyes) were now being called what they call themselves: the Sámi (one of several spellings). He hoped to meet at least one Sámi writer in Lahti. When that did not happen, he waited till the "farewell" cocktail party, where all participants were gathered, to take the microphone and announce his hope that someone could connect him with one or more living Sámi poets. The happy result was that someone whose name is not on my radar, put Ralph in touch with world-renowned Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943-2001).

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Thus began a lively correspondence and exchange of poems, which led to Ralph's receiving three of Nils-Aslak's books, already translated from the Sámi into Norwegian. This, in turn, led to Ralph's freely undertaken, 7-year project of translating Valkeapää's work into English, with no expectation of reward other than the satisfaction of making Nils-Aslak's poetry available to the English-speaking world.

Knowing neither Sámi nor Norwegian, Ralph enlisted the aid of Swedish-born and Oregon-based vintner and scholar of American Literature, Lars Nordström, Ph.D (Portland State University). Lars, fluent in English, was also fluent in Norwegian, so he gave Ralph a word-by-word, literal English translation of every poem, which Ralph then turned back into poetry, very closely approximating the form, intent, and as much of the literal content as possible.

Lars lived outside of Portland, 100 miles north of Eugene, but they spent many afternoons, over the next seven years, at our dining table, translating three books: *Trekways of the Wind*; *The Sun, My Father*; and *The Earth, My Mother*. In 1990 they were able to enlist the aid of a third person, Professor Harald Gaski of the University of Tromsø, Norway: a native Sámi speaker, fluent in English, sensitive to the nuances of poetry, and a close friend of Nils-Aslak. Harald's participation was essential to ensuring the fidelity of the translations to their original Sámi versions.

The three translators met for the first time in Tacoma, Washington, that same year (1990), when Harald—much in demand as a public speaker—was participating in a symposium at Pacific Lutheran University. Ralph drove north to Portland, picked up Lars, and the two then drove another 150 miles north to meet Harald. The three hit it off right away; and from then on, all three corresponded intensely for quite some time—focusing almost exclusively on *Trekways*. Harald was also able, a year or two later, to come to the University of Oregon for a different symposium, and they worked together in person, which speeded things along. *Trekways* was published in

1994 by DAT (a Sámi publishing house based in Norway) and distributed by the University of Arizona Press. Visually, the book is stunningly beautiful, Valkeapää contributing his own vividly colored cover design and interior black and white illustrations.

About Nils-Aslak's pleasure in their translations, Harald has recently written, "Nils-Aslak was very happy for the English translation of his poetry, he said several times that they had kept the Sámi sound, rhythm and feeling for the text, so he preferred to use the English translation rather than the Norwegian and Swedish ones, even in Scandinavia."

But even before *Trekways'* appearance, Harald had begun planning, together with the United States Fulbright Commission, to bring Ralph to Norway so that the two could work together on the second book in the trilogy: *The Sun, My Father* (published by DAT in 1997). Harald was successful: Ralph received a Fulbright Research Award to spend the Summer of 1994 in Tromsø, 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle; and Nils-Aslak—the one time we met him, at his home in the middle of the Finnish tundra, almost a day's drive from Tromsø—was wonderfully welcoming. His gentle spirit filled the room and drew us all—Ralph, me, Harald, and his wife, Britt Rajala—under its wing.

Lars and Harald continued the work on the finalization of *The Sun, My Father* at the Rockefeller/Bellagio Center (Italy), for a month in the Spring of 1995 from the Sámi original *Beaivi, áhčážan*. Ralph joined them for an intense last week, turning their literal translations back into poetry.

Quite the well-traveled, world-renowned poet, who can be seen on YouTube participating in the opening ceremonies of the 1994 Olympics in Lillehammer,

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Valkeapää tragically was severely injured in a traffic accident in 1996, stunning all of Scandinavia and especially the Sámi. He died in 2001, in Helsinki, on his return from a chain-poetry reading in Japan. A deeply moving, half-hour tribute video, which includes sections of an interview conducted with the pensive, mature poet/singer/artist talking about his life, his philosophy, and especially about the uniquely Sámi *yoik* (a kind of identity-song), can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pINieDqXOvw>.

This documentary, which I highly recommend, also contains many

clips and photographs of the poet at different ages, and provides a good window into the Sámi culture, in general. And—a bonus—about 12 minutes into the film we can see Nils-Aslak at his home, entering the door I recognize.

The last book in the trilogy, *The Earth, My Mother*, was first published in 2001, shortly before Nils-Aslak's death. The Norwegian translation came out in 2006. Harald and Lars (who'd returned to live in Sweden) waited several years before meeting, during a two-week residency program obtained by Lars to translate the book into English. In 2016 they presented their work to Ralph for his corrections.

Sadly, Ralph was never able to hold this exquisite English translation in his hands, for it was not published till 2018, due to the complexity and expense of publishing such a heavy (2 ½ pounds), large (8 ½ x 9 inches), and visually stunning book. Its full-color dust jacket and black cover, embossed with silver, as well as the full-color end pages, incorporate Nils-Aslak's paintings and designs, and the book itself, in addition to poetry, contains many full-color reproductions of his paintings, as well as hundreds of black and white, as well as color, photographs which Nils-Aslak had taken on numerous visits with indigenous people all over the globe, including the American West. I refer readers to a webpage <https://www.dat.net/product/the->

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[earth-my-mother/](#) for a glimpse of the front cover and DAT's description, part of which reads:

In the *Earth* book the Sámi perspective has been expanded to embrace indigenous people around the world. The Sámi stood in the center of *The Sun, My Father*, while the speaker in *The Earth, My Mother* travels far and wide to visit jungles, and he does not pretend to be like them even though he registers kindred values and ways of life. *The Sun, My Father* (1997), originally published as *Beaivi áhčážan* (1988), won the Nordic Council's Literature Prize in 1991. The book combines poetry, original artwork as well as color and black-and-white photographs. In this book the indigenous peoples' voices are expressed through poetry and imagery. The contrasts between insight and primitiveness in the traditional western sense of these words are transformed into a message about humanity's relationship to the earth. As part of this there is also a cosmic and religious dimension of indigenous peoples' faith and gratitude for everything that makes life good. The images are, in addition to the author's personal photographs and paintings, collected from various archives and photographers.

These words for me describe not only the book but also the basis for Ralph and Nils-Aslak's and Harald's close friendship, across the miles, and how, philosophically, temperamentally, and spiritually, they felt themselves brothers. I believe, also, that their friendship deepened Ralph's own sense of connectedness with indigenous people everywhere, which we find increasingly reflected in his poetry of the late 1990s and early 2000s.



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**8. Politics. He evidently saw himself of the Left as do you. What form did that take? What did that mean in terms of Party – and especially during the Clinton and Obama presidencies?**

Ralph stood, all his life, firmly on the Left, in all issues and policies. He was a champion of many liberal and progressive causes: Social Security and affordable healthcare for all, minority rights, gender equality, economic parity, social programs to help the disadvantaged, gun control, environmental protections, expanded educational opportunity, social nets for those who need them, abortion rights, limited military spending, and so much more. The tax loopholes available to the uber-rich disturbed him greatly. He would find it intolerable that today, 1% of the United States population has the collective wealth of the bottom 90% (a statement made by Presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren, who knows her economics).

One of the earliest forms Ralph's Left-leaning took was combating racism at the college—Texas A&M—where he taught from 1951-1955. Like all other states in the "deep South," Texas, at that time, was still deeply segregated, and Ralph—who was shocked at the racism he found among his students—very quickly determined he had a moral and ethical obligation to stand against segregation, which his young, privileged, white male students took for granted. I remember his telling about students in his Beginning Logic class trying, in vain, to defend their arguments that Blacks were inherently inferior, challenging him with such questions as "would you want your sister to marry one?" Ralph didn't relent; and when the students ran out of verbal agility, Ralph began to receive thinly veiled threats to his life and property. One night, a Molotov cocktail (a bottle filled with gasoline, with a lit fuse stuffed into the top) was tossed onto his lawn, close to the porch. Fortunately, it didn't explode or catch his house on fire.

This didn't stop Ralph from continuing to challenge injustice, but when (in 1955) the opportunity arose to return to his home state of Iowa, to teach at Drake University, and to move his family a thousand miles north, he took it. His activism continued, but on a different path. While at Drake, where he taught for three years, he received a tip from a friend who worked at the Des Moines Register (the state capitol's large newspaper), that the University was secretly planning to bring then U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon to campus to award him an honorary degree. A Republican, Nixon was not trusted by most Democrats (for complex reasons I won't go into). As Martin Luther King once said, Nixon "almost disarms you with his apparent sincerity" and warned that, if in control, Nixon could be "the most dangerous man in America."

Ralph, appalled at what the University administration was planning, leaked the word to an English Department friend, and the word spread like wildfire. Many faculty members, across campus, let their ire be heard; and Nixon, as a consequence, was un-invited. But Ralph's own head was close to the departmental chopping block, and he knew when to leave. By 1960 he was at the University of Oregon, where he continued—through his writing, his teaching, his mentoring, and editing—to use his gift with words to come out against injustice, discrimination, and repression, wherever he saw it.

Another form Ralph's stance took was consistently voting a Democratic ticket, regardless of whether the race was local, regional, or national. He was born in 1926, remember, just before the Wall Street crash that started a years-long, worldwide Depression; there were winters when his family was barely able to put any kind of food on the table. When he was old enough, he worked 10-, 12-, 14-hour days on the farm, when he wasn't in school. And even during the school year, he rose before dawn to milk the cows and he worked after school until suppertime,

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and often later, doing the evening chores. He went to a one-room country school for the first eight grades. His high school, in the closest town of Aurora (five miles from the farm) provided a limited education. So, from an early age through all his adult life, he identified as working class, a designation he wore like a badge, with pride.

Our country is built on the working class, he'd say, whose labor keeps the economy moving. The working class deserves, and has always deserved, throughout history, better working conditions, better pay, better security. And so, for that matter, did the middle class, especially in public service fields such as education. (How he loved the re-runs of Charlie Chaplin films, by the way, especially "Modern Times"!)

He learned early on that Capitalism, the economic and political system upon which our country was founded, depends—if it is to thrive—on humanism, fairness, good will and philanthropy, of wealth *not* being in the hands of the top 1% of the population. He knew that Capitalism, in our country, has seldom worked as it should. And though we haven't yet had another Great Depression, Ralph lost a good 1/3 of his retirement savings during the Recession of 2008, the final year of the presidency of (Republican) George W. Bush. Contrast that to Bill Clinton's time in office, when the U.S. had strong economic growth (around 4% annually) and record job creation (22.7 million). Toward the end of Clinton's tenure, the U.S. federal budget had three *surplus* years, the first since 1969 that weren't achieved through a war economy.

Ralph was a great supporter of Clinton and was especially supportive of Barack Obama, whose response to the crash of 2008 was to create the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and, with the help of Elizabeth Warren, to enact Wall Street reform and pass the Credit Card Act of 2009. Obama also sponsored Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization and the Job Creation Act of 2010. He was the first president to create anything even *resembling* universal health care, with a program nicknamed Obamacare: a now-defunct health plan that insured

many millions of previously uninsured citizens and did away with all insurance companies' refusal to accept new clients with pre-existing conditions. Obama was, furthermore, an ardent and active environmentalist, a supporter of civil rights, and *also* a great *reader* of both poetry and fiction. Ralph loved him!

How did Ralph's personal convictions play out in private life? Something not widely known is that we purchased our first home—a 1920s wooden bungalow (considered "vintage" in the United States) for a \$20 legal fee, from a MacDonald's hamburger restaurant (so they could build a parking lot) and hired house movers to haul it across town and deposit it, on stilts, on a vacant lot we purchased with an early inheritance given us by his mother. Ralph, with help from his teenage son Brian, Brian's friend Jay, and me (when our baby was napping), spent a Summer taking off the low-peaked roof, too high to pass under the cables that were stung, in those days, over every intersection in town. Once the house was in the new location, Ralph dug the 6-foot deep sewer line; he built a higher second story onto the house; and framed the new roof with the help of a retired carpenter. We both dug the foundation; Ralph re-wired the whole downstairs so that the electric company would hook us up to power lines. We built the front steps and a balcony with lumber salvaged from the old roof. The following Summer and Fall, he covered the second story outside walls with wooden shingles salvaged, with my father's help, from the 2-car garage that came with original property, which Ralph had cut into manageable chunks with a chain saw (like reversing the pre-fabrication of a house), and hauled, in a utility trailer, into the vacant back yard.

But when we first moved in, October 1972, with our 11 month-old daughter, we lived—for two months—in two rooms, the kitchen and bedroom, with no indoor plumbing and only one electric light and a space heater, made possible by the electric cord coming from our neighbor's garage and through a crack in the kitchen

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window. Crazy, right? But to put things in a world perspective, we had it better than many millions of people in third-world countries, then and now. We were happy. And we were in love.

In the coming years, even when we were more comfortable economically and Ralph was receiving accolades for his writing and invitations to teach and speak overseas, he never forgot his roots and was always a champion for the working class and for racial and ethnic minorities. One of his favorite t-shirts, one which came from the 2012 “Split This Rock” protest-poetry festival in Washington, D.C., sported—in large, bold, white letters on a black background— words originally attributed to Hopi elders, brought into public awareness by African-American poet June Jordan: “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for!” He wore that t-shirt everywhere.

Looking back on all these years, from the perspective of 2019, I think there was never a time when Ralph was *not* engaged in Left-leaning social activism. Not only was he alert to any and all opportunities to rally (I remember his marching at my side in a Eugene demonstration to support local teachers), to sign petitions, and to write poems that spoke against oppression. I believe he considered all of his writing, teaching, and editing as a form of social activism, on many different fronts: civil rights, pacifism, environmentalism, gender equality, economic parity, redressing the wrongs done to Native Americans and other minority groups. Toward the end of his life, when his health kept him more housebound, he signed so many online, political petitions his email in-box was overwhelmed, but every day, he continued to sign, with the result (of course) of getting on every other Liberal’s mailing list. But he never complained.

How pleased he’d be to see the flourishing of today’s activist writers of conscience. Poets of color, representing many different ethnicities, are becoming rising stars in celebrated literary circles and among the reading public. He’d be thrilled that

Muskogee (Creek) poet and musician Joy Harjo, with whom he'd appeared in Native American publications and events, is our current United States Poet Laureate. I just today learned that Democratic Presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren has added an African-American, feminist poet, Camonghne Felix, to her communications team, and I encountered the term "civic poetry." Ralph would be cheering.

I'll let him have the final say right now and conclude with a biographical statement from his website. "Dedicated, as he says, to the Tribe of the World, Ralph Salisbury comments: 'Though I have lived and worked among the intelligentsia of many nations, my writing comes from having lived as a questing, mixed-race, working-class individual in a violent world, and my work is offered to the spirit of human goodness, which unites all people in the eternal struggle against evil, a struggle to prevail against global extinction.'"

[www.ralphsalisbury.com](http://www.ralphsalisbury.com)

**9. He was also a committed environmentalist as, again, are you. How would you characterize his views, living as the both of you did for decades in the Pacific Northwest?**

Yes, Ralph came to Oregon in 1960, and I, in 1966. Oregon, as you know, is enormous; our European friends are always surprised by how long it takes—a whole day—to drive border to border, from the Pacific coast to the Snake River, which divides Oregon from neighboring Idaho. Oregon, about the size of Germany, together with Washington State and Idaho, constitute the Pacific Northwest (though Montana is sometimes included), with most of the population centered in the

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westernmost parts of Oregon and Washington, between the Cascade mountains and the Pacific Ocean. Oregon's coastline is 363 miles long (another long day's drive, since much of it is curvy and slow going).

Ralph's view of living here is beautifully expressed in a statement he makes 10 minutes into a just-released documentary, *Writing Oregon*, available online at <https://www.write-place.org/current-projects/the-film-project/>. I believe it can be streamed to a larger screen. The film's very subject is what it means to live in close relationship with, and to bear witness to, the majesty and complex ecology of our unique Oregon landscape, which encompasses the Pacific coastal areas, the valleys between the coast and the high Cascade mountains, and the many miles of vast, open, high desert plateau to the East. Ralph's contributions, as well as my own, are heard in interviews and as voice-overs of brilliantly filmed and edited footage of our diverse landscape, together with interviews, poems, and prose writings of several other notable Oregon writers and historians, delicately woven in.

The footage of this film, shot in 2013, was just a day or two after we'd returned from a few days at the beach cabin we owned for 39 years. Of the ocean, Ralph says, "It's so big, it makes you feel humble ... attuned to the ways of the universe. I feel very ennobled to be there." I think he also felt ennobled each time we camped in the Cascades, or drove, on occasion, to the vast open spaces of Eastern Oregon, where far-distant mountains (the Wallowas and the Steens), visible across miles and miles of rolling, high desert plateau, give one a sense of just how very small we humans really are. Later in the film (30.31 minutes) Ralph reads his poem "Sheep Ranch Home Near Airbase," about that very far-eastern Oregon, in which Basque immigrants have made their living raising huge herds of sheep.

The Pacific Northwest, says professor, writer, and editor Laura Laffrado, is "different in all ways from other places in the United States." I think Ralph would totally agree. A related topic, which could be a paper—someday—for any student or scholar,

would be on the “Pacific Northwest aesthetic,” as seen in the proliferation of artists working in all media. In poetry and fiction, for example, several writers of prominence during the 50s and 60s—including poets Theodore Roethke and Richard Hugo, and fiction writers Ken Kesey and Ursula Le Guin)—wielded great influence over the writings of the next few generations and put the Northwest “on the radar” of environmentalists nationwide. Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac are two other names associated with Oregon. Perhaps the most profound, far-reaching influence of all was the prolific poet and pacifist William Stafford, who died in 1993—having published about 50 volumes of poems (more keep appearing, posthumously) and having served for many years as Oregon Poet Laureate, a position now held by his son Kim.

Ralph’s sense of humility in the face of the Oregon landscape, reflected in the work of Northwest writers, is also part of the social consciousness of most of our neighbors, near and far, throughout the Pacific Northwest. By contrast, in the American *Midwest*, where Ralph and I were born and raised, the horizon can, for the most part, appear within walking distance. And though it’s dangerous to speak in generalizations—especially when speaking from personal experience and observation—this *close horizon* seems to have created a disproportionate sense of human self-importance and a regional attitude—passed down from the first white settlers—that the fruits of the earth, the fertile farmlands and woods and the animals who lived there, were given by God to serve human needs: to be cut down, to be tamed, subdued, and controlled, along with America’s First Peoples. That attitude was carried, of course, by the earliest wagon trains across the Rocky Mountains and Oregon’s Cascades, when the “West was won.”



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By the time we arrived, however, that attitude, especially west of the Cascade mountains, was greatly diminished. And now, in the 2010s, we're seeing a movement towards acknowledging and honoring First Peoples by replacing some place names—streets, rivers, bridges, mountains, and so on—with their original tribal names or with words taken from the languages of the tribes who lived there (at least 46 different tribes, who spoke in 26 distinct languages). As to environmental protections, Oregon has long been among the nation's leaders. An example would be the 1971 passage of the Oregon Bottle Bill, the first in the nation. which requires a cash deposit on every can or bottle of beer and soda, redeemable upon the containers' return.

So, in addition to Ralph's falling in love with the landscape of the Pacific Northwest, especially of Oregon—a place whose beauty inspired and welcomed him—he also found himself in a human community that, increasingly, shared his own, personal, environmental values, including his awareness of the dangers of nuclear reactors and their immense threat to all life systems. One, in particular, had the potential to destroy much of our beloved Pacific Northwest. Ralph's poem "Respecting Uktena" is a protest against the Trojan Nuclear Power Plant—the world's largest pressurized water reactor—built at a cost of \$460 million, along the Columbia River northwest of Portland, 160 miles north of our home in Eugene. Operations, which began in 1976, gave the Pacific Northwest not only more electric power but also kindled a huge, 17-year backlash and protest movement among environmentalists.

Ralph's voice was, of course, but one of many of thousands of relentless Oregonians speaking out until—after the discovery of a major earthquake fault line nearby—the plant was taken down. (The threat of catastrophic earthquake, however, remains.) As a fellow activist, our neighbor Camilla Pratt, herself instrumental in getting our local utility company to divest its stake in Trojan, has eloquently said of Ralph's

poem: "It is wonderful, amazing, and reassuring how personal, altruistic endeavors coalesce to nourish human connectedness."

One of Ralph's strongest environmentalist poems is "Around the Sun: Alaskan Oil Spill," which I append, with poems on other subjects, at the end of this conversation. "Around the Sun ..." was his response to an oil tanker's running into a reef in Prince William Sound and breaking open, spilling millions of gallons of oil and killing millions of mammals and other sea creatures—a catastrophic event of epic proportions, unlike anything ever seen before. Ralph saw this as an ominous turning point in the health of our planet. It was an event, he feared, that could happen again, elsewhere. And it has, many times.

Given today's flourishing of literary journals that put environmental concerns front and center, Ralph would be right in there with everyone else, calling himself an "environmentalist poet," or "climate poet." Terms keep evolving, as the climate crisis intensifies, and our political parties become increasingly polarized.

**10. What do you think the role of spirituality, especially Cherokee, was in his make-up? "My experience of being struck by lightning has become, after 53 years, a Spirit Awareness." (p. 283, Sfsg)**

What an insightful selection of sentences to pair with your good question. Thank you. But before I go any further, I'll point out what I think is Ralph's typographical error; instead of "53 years," I think he intended "63 years," which would better coincide with his writing these words in his late 70s. The lightning strike occurred when he was 15.

Ralph's spirituality centered him and, I believe, lay beneath everything he did and everything he wrote, for most of his adult life. But, as he suggests in the passage

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you quote, he wasn't entirely conscious of the connection between his Spirit Awareness and the lightning strike until he began working on his autobiographical memoir.

Ralph's Medicine Path took, in Ralph's early years, a circuitous route. A line by Theodore Roethke comes to mind, "I learn by going where I have to go" ("The Waking"). And so it was for Ralph. His father had given Ralph his own Native ways of looking at nature, without naming them as such. His mother, raised in a Methodist family, did not belong to any church, but she had her own private faith: God lived, she said, within each flower within each living, growing thing, a faith Ralph remembered her sharing with him when he was very small. So, Ralph's parents, each in their own ways, instilled in him a reverence for the earth and all creatures that live upon it.

But the reverence they taught had no framework, no context; his family professed no religion, they belonged to no spiritual community beyond the farm. Ralph was in awe of Nature's beauty and its power to give and to take away, but he had no words to describe it. He also was deeply aware of the family's dependence upon the earth for their sustenance. That lightning strike at age 15 broke, I think, like the blow of an axe, into his sense of oneness with nature. It was deeply unsettling; and this unease stayed with him, as well. It was, in fact, in the lightning strike's aftermath that Ralph began to long for a religious context which might, through language, bring inner peace and understanding.

He'd noticed that people around him seemed to draw comfort from Christianity. They went to church, they prayed, they talked about the Bible. So, at age 18, in Air Force training camps, he read, cover-to-cover, the military-issued New Testament. Twice. He said it didn't "reach him as it should." Older Air Force friends, some of

whom had already started university, told him about the Koran. He found it at a public library near the air base. It didn't work for him, either. In college he read in the Vedic holy books and in the Upanishads. Still, nothing resonated. So, he read psychology, he read Freud, he studied art history. In college he discovered the Surrealists. They had a deep influence on his writing style, they validated for him the importance of dreams, which they—and, later, Ralph—often used as sources for their writing. But I don't think he found in them the comfort, the *solidity*, he was seeking.

Following the advice of friends and encouraged by university professors, he embarked on a life of writing and teaching, still without having found a place his spirit could rest. But he remained open. And when, at age 34, he learned of his Native heritage, everything changed, and he gradually embarked upon a many-years-long study of the history, culture, religion, sacred rituals, formulas, and myths of his Cherokee forebears, which *did* speak to him, profoundly, as did his wide reading in the poetry and fiction of his Native American contemporaries. The more he learned of the Native world view, the more he found himself "at home": a home he embraced, in the remaining two-thirds of his life, with the passion of one who is reunited with a country from which he'd been separated at birth.

He adopted words from the Native American spiritual lexicon: words such as "Medicine Path" and "destiny." Those words became part of his everyday speech, part of his daily prayers.

He prayed every morning to the spirits of the four directions, the spirit of sky, and the spirit of earth. During the last decades of our life together, he said a silent prayer before each evening meal; we had a ritual of holding hands and closing our

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eyes, silently letting go of the day and being mindful of the moment and where our food had come from. We talked only once about what words if any, were in our minds at such times. Ralph said that his ritual had long been to recite a prayer he'd composed years earlier. It appears in the preface to *Rainbows of Stone*: "I thank the Creator for my small place in all the immensity, power, glory, and beauty of Creation. I pray that I may be worthy of my Medicine Path and live well enough and long enough to fulfill my destiny." Over the next thirteen years, this developed into a lengthier version: "May I live long enough, and well enough, to fulfill my destiny. May I fulfill my Medicine Dream. May I follow my Medicine Path to its end. And may I and my loved ones live a life of beauty and happiness after death." (SFSG, 284)

What was that destiny? That Medicine Path? I think the answer is connected to the words you've quoted, in your question, to which I now return. For the longest while, Ralph talked and wrote and gave interview answers about that lightning strike and how it affected him; he often attributed that strike to the Cherokee god of thunder, without revealing *why* he was struck, or what the thunder god's *purpose* might had been.

Much earlier, in a 1983 interview with Bo Schöler (available online), Ralph states only that it left him "with a sense of awe and an intense love of life; that's all I can say." Four years later, in his essay "Between Lightning and Thunder" (in the collection *I Tell You Now, Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, edited by Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann, 1987), Ralph quotes lines from his poem "A Midnight Dawn" (*Pointing at the Rainbow*, 1980), which recount his being struck by 'Red Man ... God,' but Ralph still does not theorize *why* he was struck. In that same essay, he goes on to say that "Red Man, Spirit of Thunder and Lightning ... an important part of my religion [,] infuses my awareness...." Is he suggesting that

“awe” had replaced “fear”? I can only speculate, but that would be consistent with his response in the interview.

So, you’ve hit the nail right on the head, when you refer to that sentence near the end of Ralph’s memoir. I think what we’re seeing it that Ralph, now—at the end of a long book in which he’s been looking back at the parallel, sometimes simultaneous, paths his life has taken, tracing them back to their beginnings—has finally found what he’d been seeking. The reason for that lightning strike, I suggest, was that Red Man, the Cherokee god of Thunder, had marked him, had bestowed upon him a destiny, a Medicine Path, a spiritual quest in which—learning from going where he had to go—he would come to his Native heritage, learn its essence, and in so doing, find his spiritual home. This destiny also included the responsibility to bring his learning, along with his life experience, into his poetry and fiction; to preserve and to pass along the collective memory and heritage of all of his people, both Native American and Caucasian; to use his talents to help others; and to save all that he loved, including the human community, through his writing and teaching. I thank Arnold Krupat for pointing out, in his introduction to Ralph’s 2009 book of new and selected poems, *Light Through a Bullet Hole*, that Ralph’s commitment “to save” everything he loved, is a thread that runs throughout his entire work.

Ralph was careful to use the words “Medicine Path,” “destiny,” and other similar terms with respect. For him these adopted words were as natural as breath, and helped, I think, give him the courage and strength to keep going, keep writing, despite whatever demands his teaching, editing, mentoring, parenting, householding, and later, his health and staying alive might make.

He had many other, related, spiritual beliefs, as well. He believed in the mythical, mystical spirit powers of animals, for example: not that Hummingbird would bring

him his people's sacred tobacco, as in the myths of his ancestors, but that Hummingbird's very presence was a gift. He taught me how to see and identify the hoof prints of Deer, which were evidence of Deer's recent presence: a gift he delighted in finding. Those hoof prints found their way into many a poem.

He believed the Spirit World, in which his people "on the other side" now lived. Different from the Christian view of a separate Heaven and earth, he believed that the Spirit World is all around us: in the air, the trees, the winds, within birds and other living creatures.

He believed that some of his deceased family members had visited him, during nighttime dreams and in waking visions.

His personal belief system also converged, at times, with some of the basic elements shared by most of the world's major religions. He was comfortable incorporating words from other faiths into his own poetry and prose. He was comfortable using the word God, for example. Another example would be his memory of waking, as a child, in the middle of the night, to the beautiful sound of singing; he believed then, and he believed all his life, he'd heard angels singing.

He spoke often, and he wrote, in *So Far, So Good*, of an experience we both had in 1996, when Italian friends Sandra and Flavia Busatta (self-proclaimed atheists) took us to the cathedral of Saint Anthony, in Padova, and suggested we place our fingers lightly on the side of the green marble tomb. We did as they suggested; and we later talked about the almost-tingling sensation, the nearly imperceptible vibrations, the energy—who knows what to call it—emanating from the spirits of thousands of others who had touched that wall before us. Or was it the spirit of Saint Anthony? Our friends had not told us what to expect, but later, they said they felt it, too, each time they placed their fingers on that tomb.

There's another aspect of Ralph's spirituality I'd love for someone, someday, to explore in depth. Though Ralph claimed to not have read much about the Buddhist faith, a reviewer of his first book of poems found it to have some of the qualities of Zen Buddhism. He was intrigued by that, as well as by a comment from a former student, the award-winning poet Olga Broumas, who referred to him as a Zen-like teacher. His only explanation was that it must be a natural affinity, because, as he said, he knew nothing about Zen.

Two Summers ago I was reading an interview with Norman Fischer on the "Tyranny of the Self." Fischer, raised in the Jewish faith, which he never abandoned, also has become a senior dharma teacher of Zen Buddhism. What Fischer expresses several times (*The Sun*, August 2018, p. 6) is almost identical to beliefs that Ralph held, about which I've written in my essay "The Vitruvian Man": that every moment of what is conventionally called "the present" includes "all the past, a concern for others, and a sense of going beyond one's own limited sphere of identity." The present moment, according to Fischer, also includes the future. Ralph would have wholeheartedly agreed.

Words from another *Sun* interview, this time with David Budbill, in the February 2017 issue, also resonate. Budbill is talking about the life of the hermit, in various religions; and in a way, I think Ralph would also have made a good hermit, too, or monk. Although he loved his role as teacher, he loved corresponding with indigenous writers, editors, and friends with whom he felt a spiritual connection, and loved being part of such literary gatherings and conferences as the Associated Writing Programs annual conference, or Native American writers' "Returning the Gift," I was his link to the everyday world of neighbors, family, and friends. He was most comfortable talking one on one, or—paradoxically—in front of a group; but



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small, and even deep, talk in small groups, became more difficult as the years went by.

Budbill talks about the social role of the “recluse,” saying that “many ancient societies—being less pragmatic and more mystical [than ours]—understood that monks and nuns and hermits have visions that will benefit the whole society.” He goes on to describe a Buddhist friend whose contribution to peace and justice is to split wood: to do no harm to humanity. He refers to the role of Thomas Merton, the perfect example of the “engaged recluse.” “In order to think this way,” Budbill says, one realizes what Christians call the “Mystical Body of Christ, and what other religions call the Universal Soul, the Tao, or the One,” is to accept the idea that “we are all one unified being.” Ralph would have, again, agreed wholeheartedly. “Engaged recluse.” Yes. That was Ralph.

**11. Back to writing. How would you best characterize Ralph’s style of literary voice, the poetry, the stories and the autobiography?**

I’m not sure one can lump the literary style and voice of all three genres into one description, but if there *is* one common characteristic, it might be a fusion of the first words that spring to mind: “passionate,” “intense,” “from the heart,” “lyrical.” Much of Ralph’s work was multi-layered, with imagery working double time or more. His work was always motivated by felt experience, be it his own or that of someone else, into whose point of view he entered , using his dual gifts of empathy and imagination. His writing became a way of gaining, for himself and for others, a deeper understanding of that felt experience, by re-creating the context in which it occurred and, then, through its re-telling.

He was always, always aware of the musicality of language and the power of words to hook and to hold readers by the sheer power of sound. I speak as a musician as

well as a poet and reader, and the sounds of his poems, which were *linguistically* highly compressed, shone, from within, like crystal. The chimes of his words had power, in addition to the intensity of their meanings. Poet Kwame Dawes has recently described the quest for beauty in language as an act of resistance and protest in the face of the ugliness of human oppression. I think Ralph would say that was one of his goals, as well.

As to accessibility, Ralph's poems often needed more than one silent, visual reading to fully grasp. More compressed than either his fiction or his autobiography, Ralph's poems were sometimes difficult, I think, for audiences to follow on first hearing, without the texts in front of them. Daring, adventurous, multi-layered and highly unconventional, the majority of his poems make giant, quick leaps from image to image, which—like individual pieces of a jigsaw puzzle—don't make sense until a whole flower or mountain comes together. I can think of no other poet whose style is even closely related to Ralph's. Useful to remember is that Ralph was greatly influenced by the Surrealist movement and the dream analysis theories that studied during late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. This intense compression became a bit looser, more relaxed, I think, as time went on. His final manuscript of poems, *Living in the Mouth*, currently seeking a publisher, is perhaps the most reader-friendly of all, and—in many ways—most beautiful. I'm eager for it to appear.

His fiction is to my mind the most straightforward of the three genres he wrote in. Stories vary greatly in their degrees of formality, yet they are always engaging. Sometimes the voice is distant, almost scholarly. Other times it's full of playfulness and wit ("The Sonofabitch and the Dog" comes immediately to mind). Sometimes it's conversational and, dare I say it, almost conventional—in *style*, mind you, *not* in subject matter or theme. And there was always a clear beginning, middle, and end.

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The structure of his prose autobiography, *So Far, So Good*, and his prose essays are equally accessible, as well as elegant and full of philosophical asides. There's also a compelling circularity to the narrative, which—though the book does begin with his birth and ends with his final years—is not precisely chronological. Within each chapter Ralph, the narrator, groups memories together, by the process of free association, according to subject, topic, and theme.

For example, *So Far, So Good* opens with of an incident that occurred in infancy, in the dark of winter: glass falling from a bullet fired, from outside, through the window over his baby bed. His fear captured and forever held in subliminal memory, the very next sentences jump to *another* time he felt such fear: as an eighteen-year-old crew member in a World War II airplane's below-zero bomb bay. In terms of style, wow! From baby bed to bomber. That's one heck of a stylistic leap! And it's also the beginning of a recurring theme: the presence of many fearful, life-threatening events which shaped and colored his sense of self as well as his writing—some of which, I believe, can be seen as the work of a "survivor," as a way to channel his "fight or flight" response into something of beauty and merit, as well as a refusal to be defined or limited by the traumas he experienced.

Such clusters of memory, within each chapter, could—to a reader expecting clear chronology—seem chaotic and random. But Ralph, the innovator, was also a master storyteller, and he saw to it that each cluster had its own inner cohesiveness—just as one piece of glass, one color, in a kaleidoscope has its own internal integrity—and there is no one, correct, linear order in which to put those pieces, just as there is no one "correct" turn of the kaleidoscopic wheel, to put the colors in.

To look at it another way, I am convinced, though Ralph and I never talked about it, that this book is a demonstration of his spiritual belief in the interconnectedness of Past, Present, and Future, as well as the oneness, the interconnectedness, of all earthly existence. This is a huge topic, and I discuss it at length in my essay on "The

Vitruvian Man....,” which appears elsewhere in this issue and concludes with the book’s final chapter, which weaves together kaleidoscopic memory after kaleidoscopic memory—as lovely, flowing, and lyrical as a long, long prose poem—in which we find reappearances of all of the book’s recurring themes, subjects, and topics. To my mind, it’s one of Ralph’s most exquisite and profound works.

**12. Who were the writers, past and those who were his contemporaries, that he admired? He was also, in turn, a mentor to other writers – what do you recall of this?**

Let’s start with Ralph as beloved teacher and mentor to other writers. After his death, letters from former students came pouring in from all directions, telling me how much his faith in them and their writing, his gentle guidance, his “seeing them,” gave them the courage to follow their own voices, to build meaningful lives as writers and responsible human beings. Many of his students went on to careers of great distinction: poets Olga Broumas, for example, and Brigit Pegeen Kelly (their studies with Ralph several years apart) both received the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Award. Marilyn Krysl—author of many books of poems and stories, as well as remarkable essays—became head of Creative Writing at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Barbara Drake, like Krysl, born in Oregon and a prolific poet and essayist, is now Professor Emerita of Linfield College. Oregon’s current Poet Laureate, Kim Stafford, studied with Ralph, as did the bestselling author James Abel (pseudonym for Bob Reiss). World-renowned author Barry Lopez studied with Ralph and took the cover photo for Ralph’s *Going to the Water* at Lopez’s home on the McKenzie River. Acclaimed poet John Witte, who in 1980 began a 29-year stint as Editor-in-Chief of *Northwest Review*, studied with Ralph. The late Steven J. Cannell, celebrated novelist and creator of several classic television series, including “The Rockford

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Files," "Barretta," "The A-Team," and "21 Jump Street," and owner of his own television studio, went out of his way, in all interviews he gave (to *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and so on, as well as on television) to credit Ralph with having given him the faith to believe in himself as a writer, despite his struggles with dyslexia. In a short, 5-minute video (<http://cannell.com/dyslexia.html#video-div>) Cannell devotes the last 3 ½ minutes telling how Ralph changed his life. (Scroll down and click again on "Dyslexia in Adulthood.") Patty Dann, author of the novel *Mermaids*, studied with Ralph. Her novel was turned into the 1990 film by the same name, starring Cher, Winona Ryder, and Christina Ricci.

One of Ralph's happiest afternoons was in May of 2012, when a room full of former students, from all over Oregon, paid him tribute in a bevy of speeches and poems inspired by or dedicated to him. Ralph's response, which was filmed, included tributes of his own—to late poet-colleagues as well as to his own professors, most notably the poet Robert Lowell—and his reading of a poem written to honor his one-room school teachers, who nurtured his talents: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhlx5R0Qeqc>

Going back to the writers who influenced *him*, whose work he admired, whose work suggested new ways of seeing and navigating the world beyond the farm, as well as ways to write about it (if only that *their* writing on a particular topic or theme gave him the inspiration and/or courage to do likewise). In random order, assigning a higher rank of influence to no one author (and I'm probably forgetting many more):

- Samuel Johnson, whose work he read while studying English literature, offered many valuable life-lessons. Here's a line Ralph often quoted: "A man, sir, should keep his friendships in constant repair."
- Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, which he read while on air base guard duty, led him to understand the futility of war.

- Walt Whitman. Ralph felt a close affinity with Whitman's expansive, all-inclusive, humanitarianism vision, as well as his rambling style. One of Ralph's early poems is titled "After Whitman's 'There Was a Child Went Forth'." I think there's a strong chance that Ralph thought of himself as that child.
- Albert Camus. Existentialism. Ralph taught himself to read French, so he could read *The Stranger* in the original.
- He loved the work of Mexico's Nobel Prize-winner Octavio Paz; the Peruvian poet Caesar Vallejo; Spain's Federico Garcia Lorca and other Spanish and Latin American poets. Ralph spoke pretty good conversational Spanish and loved to recite sections and sometimes whole poems he'd memorized for their musicality as well as for their content. In fact, that's one of the ways he won my heart, reciting poems in Spanish on long car trips. His little paperback Penguin anthology of Spanish and Latin American poets, in both Spanish and English translation, is falling apart.
- The writings of Sigmund Freud, both in content and in style, which he found beautiful, despite translation.
- He credited the Surrealist painter and writer André Breton, in particular, with influencing his stream-of-consciousness method of writing. He did not, however, believe that the French had "discovered" Surrealism. In "Between Lightning and Thunder" he says that visions and dreams are nearly always important in tribal life, and that the French were actually "rediscovering" so-called "primitive" African art. "I think it's a fair assumption," he says, "that

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contemporary Native American writers—particularly the ones who grew up in primitive ways, as I did—derive their ‘surrealist impulse’ from the ways of their own people rather than from the educated French writers, splendid though some of those writers are. ... I’m glad for having grown up in a context that let me value dreams and carry them with me into my waking day.”

- Ralph’s father, in his storytelling and ballad singing, also exerted what Ralph once said was the most important influence of all. The family had no electricity, no radio, no television, and his father was the family’s evening entertainment. Ralph hoped to carry forward that oral tradition in his own writing and to incorporate the cadence of his father’s masterful and elegant storytelling voice.
- Ralph credited William Faulkner with giving him a sense of the sanctity of his Indian heritage. Faulkner’s character Sam Fathers, son of a slave and a Chickasaw chief, became his spirit father. He loved Faulkner’s “headlong surge of words” in search of meaning, and he loved that Faulkner’s voice was like his own father’s storytelling voice: Southern, and in keeping with the oral tradition. He mentioned that Faulkner’s voice had helped him make the leap—between his father’s storytelling and ballad singing—into writing fiction and poetry.
- He read all the ethnographic materials about the eastern-band Cherokee he could find. Transcriptions of Cherokee folktales reconstructed from the field notes of Frans Olbrechts. The “Swimmer Manuscript: Cherokee Sacred Formulas and Medicinal Prescriptions,” collected by James Mooney and published by Olbrechts. In “Between Lightning and Thunder,” Ralph says

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that “Cherokee history, tradition, and myth are part of my awareness, and I try to be faithful to them in all I do.” In the Bo Schöler interview he tells how, having grown up not knowing his heritage, the work of James Mooney—an ethnographer who lived among the Cherokee during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (as did Olbrechts, later)—helped him realize his people had a past, a civilization, which gave his own experiences “universal validity.... It gave me courage.” He thought of Mooney as a “spirit guide.”

- As to contemporaries whose work he admired, oh, there are so many I’m afraid that I may commit a sin of omission should I name just a few and/or forget anyone. William Stafford. Joseph Bruchac. Jim Barnes. Joy Harjo. Simon Ortíz. Duane Niatum. Kimberly Blazer. Leslie Marmon Silko. Louise Erdrich. N. Scott Momaday. James Welch. Gerald Vizenor. Sherman Alexi. Louis Owens. Raymond Carver. Joyce Carol Oates. Denise Levertov. Charles Olson. Gary Snyder. Robert Creeley. Allen Ginsburg. The Beats. The Black Mountain Poets. All were important to him. Some were personal friends.
- Ralph also credited his university writing teachers—and their own writings—for inspiration and encouragement: Robie Macauley, James Hearst, Robert Lowell, R.V. Cassill, among others. Just being part of Paul Engle’s elite Iowa Writers’ Workshop itself gave him confidence as well as teaching and organizational skills.

### **13. Say something, if you would, about the work that went into editing *Northwest Review*.**

Ralph’s first experiences with *Northwest Review* were as Poetry Editor for a handful of issues, in 1960 and 1961. In 1964 he stepped into the editorship, on the heels of



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a rather contentious period when the Fall 1963 issue—edited by Ralph’s predecessor, Edward van Aelstyn—had aroused quite the furor among conservative Oregonians, who complained that their tax dollars had gone into publishing work they thought too radical.

Founded in 1957 by English and Journalism students at the University of Oregon—funded by the UO administration, with printing done by the UO’s Student Publications Board—the primary mission of *Northwest Review* was, for its first five years, to publish new poetry, fiction, essays, and book reviews by established writers, in the manner of the most prestigious, university-affiliated, literary journals of the time—*Kenyon Review*, *Southern Review*, *Sewanee Review* and others which—as I remember from my undergraduate days at Cornell College, Iowa—were extensions of The New Critics’ aesthetic and whose function was to provide a venue for literary criticism and reviews of contemporary books of poetry and fiction. First publication of new poetry and fiction, in *those* journals, was limited. This is where *Northwest Review* differed, its staff choosing to publish much more *new* work than writings *about* it.

*Northwest Review*, however, under van Aelstyn, went even “farther out” and quickly became one of the most adventurous of university-funded journals, seeking out new, “cutting-edge” work from younger, less-established writers who were garnering public followings outside of academia (although some of them taught in it): Bernard Malamud, Charles Bukowski, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Robert Creeley and others whose work had begun, in the 1950s, partly as a rebellion against the Modernist tradition and the constraints imposed by the New Critics, partly as a reflection of wide-ranging influences, including Eastern religions. The *Northwest Review* Ralph inherited from van Aelstyn was already publishing the Beats, the Black Mountaineers, the Deep Image poets, poets from the “New York

Schools," and others. The journal also hosted visual art, including work by Ansel Adams.

Ralph, appointed as van Aelstyn's replacement in 1964, was on the "same page" as van Aelstyn in their shared aesthetics and their interest in the intersection of poetry and politics. But Ralph also kept faith with the literary traditions in which he, himself, had been schooled, and he published—alongside new writers—poetry and fiction from more established, mature practitioners, whose work exemplified excellence, regardless of style. Ralph's *Northwest Review*, the one I worked on from 1966-1968, was a thrilling amalgamation, if you will, of the sedate and the outrageous, the traditional and the daring. In short, it published the best of new writing from around the globe, while retaining its Pacific Northwest identity. The Spring 1966 and Summer 1967 issues, in fact, contained special Northwest Poets sections, in addition to poems by such luminaries as Robert Penn Warren and James Merrill. And *NWR* now published a heftier chunk of literary criticism and book reviews than before.

But to circle back for a moment, to 1964, and the circumstances surrounding Ralph's appointment (which carried, beyond editorial duties, an order from higher-up, to lead the journal in a more reputable direction). History has it that van Aelstyn and his entire editorial staff had been fired for publishing an issue (Fall 1963) featuring the works of Philip Whalen, Antonin Artaud, and Charles Bukowski, plus an interview with Cuba's Fidel Castro by Charles O. Porter, a former member of the United States House of Representatives and a feisty Oregon activist. The whole university came under the attack of Oregon conservatives across the state, for printing what was perceived as sacrilegious poetry, pornography, and Communist propaganda. Numerous letters of indignation and numerous petitions demanded accountability, including the resignation of Arthur Fleming, the university president.

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Fleming did not resign. Instead, “Despite letters of support from prominent poets and the formation of a Faculty Committee for Academic Freedom, Fleming removed van Aelstyn as editor and gave responsibility for the journal to a *Faculty Publications Committee*. When that committee promptly reappointed van Aelstyn as the editor, Fleming suspended the journal altogether.” (<https://www.edwardvanaelstyn.com/obituary>). Van Aelstyn subsequently kept his selections for the next issue, which would have followed the scandalous one, and established his own independent *Coyote’s Journal*, which flourished.

What I know of that time is pieced together from what Ralph told me and what can be found online; but I do know that Ralph was an active supporter of van Aelstyn and the *Review*, throughout the altercation, and Ralph was instrumental in getting *NWR* up and running again, with the support of the English Department, by creating new protocols for faculty approval, before publication, of all accepted materials, and a structure that would give the Department greater control over staff hiring. Ralph also, I believe, promised to regain the trust of Oregon voters by bringing back a more “balanced” table of contents, more in line with the other leading university-affiliated journals of the 60s. To himself, however, Ralph vowed never to censor content. “Excellence” was still the determining factor in whatever he chose. In fact, Ralph actively continued to encourage submissions by writers who challenged the American status quo, who broke boundaries both in style and content.

Ralph’s newly-structured *NWR* staff, which I joined as a first-year graduate student in 1966, included himself as Editor-in-Chief and eight to ten Associate Editors, all of whom were faculty members, tasked (if I remember correctly) with “screening” future tables of contents to be sure nothing scurrilous sneaked in. The Associate Editors also occupied a prominent position on the masthead and gave *NWR* an air

of stability. This was a brilliant stroke on Ralph's part: the title looked good on their CVs, having faculty watchdogs reassured the *Review's* readership; and the work the Associate Editors did was (in practice) minimal.

Below them on the masthead stood the Managing Editor, generally a second-year MFA student, and then five to seven Assistant Editors (first readers), selected from MFA students and senior English majors. Several Staff Assistants handled business and office affairs, including intake of unsolicited submissions and the attendant paperwork of sending out letters of acceptance or rejection. The masthead also included various Consulting Editors, including William Stafford, W.D. Snodgrass, James B. Hall, Frederick Candelaria, and other prominent writers and editors not affiliated with the University of Oregon. For Ralph, the position relieved him of teaching one class and allowed time for his extensive *NWR* responsibilities, which included a great deal of reading, decision making, and correspondence.

Without good records of the duties everyone performed, my memory says the Assistant Editors read everything submitted and voted among themselves what to accept and what to return. During my first year on staff, I was part of this group. Not everyone read everything, but every poem, story, essay, review, or work of art was read and viewed by at least two people. If they both agreed to keep the piece for further consideration, they sent it to the Managing Editor. If they both voted to reject it, the piece went no further. If they disagreed, a third reader was assigned. The Managing Editor's job—which I held my second year of the MFA program—was to whittle even further, and to send a final batch to Ralph, for his final selection, via the Associate Editors. I don't believe they ever turned anything back.

Ralph and I, then, collaborated on three issues of *NWR* during the academic year 1967-1968. The last of the three, the Summer 1968 "Protest and Affirmation" issue, was right in step with the "American Writers Against the Vietnam War" movement:

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a non-profit, umbrella organization founded by poets Robert Bly and David Ray. (See my answer to question 5.) Our special issue contained work by many distinguished writers of the time: a story by Joyce Carol Oates; poems by Karl Shapiro, Joseph Langland, Diane Wakoski (Diane's, I remember as wonderfully daring), Eugene Wildman, Charles Edward Eaton, and others; several essays, including one by William Cadbury on the literary aspects of The Beatles' song lyrics; William Witherup's translations of Sergio Echeverdia; Edith Siffert's translations of Yuki Sawa; nine book reviews; and much more.

The issue also contained, right in its center, on glossy paper, a series of six black and white images on the subject of war and its consequences: a photograph by Harry Gross; an oil painting by Berk Chappell; a relief etching by David Scrafford; a sculpture by Jan Zach; and four drawings by Argentine-born Mauricio Lasansky. While all of the artworks make clear anti-war statements and were created to arouse discomfort, it must have been the photograph by Harry Gross, with an eagle holding a dove in its talons, against a backdrop of the American flag, and particularly the set of drawings by Lasansky, that most touched the sore nerve of someone in the printing department of the UO (still governed by the Student Publications Board). Seeing these drawings again, today, as I write, I am struck once more by Lasansky's unambiguous evocations of horror: each drawing a grotesquely-distorted face of child shrieking or crying, or turned half-skeleton, or with a Nazi helmet/skull atop a screaming mouth held open by fingers, bringing immediately to mind the now-iconic photographs of Vietnamese children running down the road, burned by napalm. I think of Edvard Munch's "The Scream." I think of Goya. But to my mind, Lasansky's drawings are even harsher: they shock; they wound.

And so, right at the height of the Tet Offensive, when the anti-Vietnam War movement was gaining strength throughout America, we had—at the University of Oregon—a single person, or maybe several people, in the UO printing office,

staging a counter-protest, apparently offended by the difficult images or the anti-war sentiments. The printing of that special issue was held up, in fact, for many months, and—although the cover says “Summer 1968,” my memory says it came out in early 1969, though it may have been even later. One thing I am sure of is that I have a copy of a letter from Joyce Carol Oates, written to Ralph on December 18, 1968, asking whether her story, “The Heavy Sorrow of the Body,” had been published yet.

I also have clear memories of Ralph’s working closely with his incoming Managing Editor, Bill Sweet, in the Fall of 1968, making phone calls and sending letters to prominent writers and editors of other journals across the nation, asking that letters of protest be sent to the English Department, which—for obscure reasons—seemed disinclined to challenge the university administration, which was supposed to oversee the Student Publications Board. Maybe the Department had been through enough hassle, back in 1964. (And, despite all I’ve said earlier about forward-thinking Oregon, this was still the 1960s; and the faculty majority was still older and conservative-leaning.) My best hunch is that the Associate Editors, most of whom were also Ralph’s friends, stood up on his behalf and were outnumbered.

The matter took so long to resolve that by the time the issue was finally printed, I had finished my MFA program and was teaching at Fresno State College (now University) in California, so my name was listed as a “Consulting Editor” and Bill was listed as “Managing Editor.” Bill, a year behind me in the graduate program, had worked as an Assistant Editor under me and, as incoming Managing Editor, saw things through after my departure. Without Bill’s efforts *Northwest Review* would have died then and there, because—sometime that Autumn or Winter, before the issue was finally printed—the English Department removed Ralph as Editor-in-Chief

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and (some months later) replaced him with one of his friends and colleagues, John Haislip. The Associate Editors were also removed.

The next issue came out nearly two years later, in Winter, 1970, with a much-diminished staff: only three Associate Editors (two graduate students and a former professor who was now teaching in Texas); one Managing Editor; two Assistant Editors; two Staff Assistants; and no Contributing Editors. That was quite the purge!

What I strongly suspect—and this is the only thing that, in retrospect, makes sense—is that the English Department, facing pressure from the letter-writing campaign, arranged a *quid pro quo* with the University administration: Ralph's dismissal as Editor-in-Chief, the removal of all of the UO's Associate Editors, and the removal of the Consulting Editors, for the issue's release. Lots of hand-slapping, all around. Or, who knows—I'm the last alive who remembers—maybe they all resigned, in protest. I can't help hoping this is what happened.

**14. I've heard you give a public reading to poems of his that you most like. Which stand out for you? Why?**

May I append a dozen or so poems at the end of this interview? These are the ones I chose for the public reading you heard in Valencia, Spain, at the international symposium on "Teaching and Theorizing Native American Literature as World Literature," October 1-2, 2018. I chose these poems for their wide range of topics—from the complexities of mixed-race identity, to environmental activism, to expressions of Ralph's deep spirituality, to his pacifism, and to his love for and loyalty to family—as well as for their brevity and accessibility, upon first hearing and/or first reading, and for their teachability. I would find it extremely difficult to choose, among these and many other favorites, which ones I most like, out of his 11 books of poems, as well his final collection, *Living in the Mouth*. More important to

me, right now, is that his poems be discovered as the truly remarkable and wonderful gems they are, and that readers will want to find his books to read more!

**15. Hard to summarize of course, but what do you think is his legacy not only as humanist but author?**

Oh, this is challenging. Ralph would, I believe, see those two designations—humanist and author—as inseparable, when applied to his work. His writings (and teachings) were his tools of choice for (first, as a very young author) arriving at self-understanding and self-expression but mainly (throughout the rest of his life) for the betterment of all humanity. He wished his writings to carry forward his ancestral values and beliefs and keep alive the memory of the oppression of ancestors on both sides of his family. He wished his work to help future generations of readers to find parts of themselves in his own “felt experiences,” transformed into stories and poems, to help them feel less alone in turbulent times; to recognize the sacredness of the universe and of the human community to which we all belong. He wished that his work would help combat propagandized versions of reality; he hoped for his writings to endure as long as Shakespeare’s and that they would inspire readers to recognize the inherent goodness that lies within themselves, to have faith in themselves, to honor their oneness with creation, to live in harmony and peace with each other, and to unite as one voice in a universal chorus of praise.

But stepping outside of Ralph’s sense of purpose, I believe Ralph’s literary legacy has already taken its place alongside that of many leading late-20th and early-21st century Native American writers, as evidenced by his presence in a great number of anthologies, his editorial work, and by his decades of participation in correspondence, readings, panels, and personal and literary friendships with other Native American, as well as non-Native, authors.



What has yet to happen, and I think it will, is that Ralph's poetry, even more than his fiction, will come to be valued not only for its evocation of Native American realities and humanitarian concerns, but also for its uniqueness of vision and voice, its highly-compressed elocution: as markedly different from the poetry of his contemporaries as William Blake's poetry was from others of Blake's time.

To look at this another way, Ralph, as a young man, wanted to be a painter and studied painting at university; but poetry lured him in and kept him hooked. Add to this his sense of kinship with the Surrealists as well as the Senoi dream people of the Malaysian highlands, whose society was built around the practice of sharing dreams. Perhaps Ralph's early and mid-career poems will someday be seen as dream canvasses, as vision's embodiments: images connected by visual/intuitive associations and dream-like juxtapositions that, in a painting, would be seen by the eye in one moment of time, all images existing simultaneously.

What I hope will also emerge is that Ralph's legacy as a poet will more and more come to be viewed as that of a mystic, a "seer," a shaman of sorts, with his poems acting as "received visions": often cryptic, difficult to describe, but with a commanding presence, the kind of spirit power that passes between a shaman and one whose mind is open and ready to receive it, who does not try to translate instinctive understanding into "meaning," who takes the time to suspend conventional expectations and just absorb and be enriched and be fortified by the experience.

What interests me, also, is that during the last decade of his life, Ralph's poems became less and less dense, they became more conventionally "accessible," and their focus was increasingly on family connections and on the glories of the natural

world which has, so far, survived (though already diminished by environmental degradations) and continues to bring us joy. Aware that his own personal future was shortening, Ralph chose to celebrate the spiritual legacy he was leaving to future generations, honing down the complexities of his world awareness to what he felt most essential to convey.

**16. Could you offer a personal vignette which for you helps memorialize his gift?**

Ralph was a masterful public speaker. Whether introducing another writer at a public event (or teaching a class, or giving a reading of his work, or speaking as an invited guest to classes and conferences around the world), his humble, playful heart and brilliant mind always put his audience at ease and opened them to what he, uniquely, had to offer, letting them know he saw them. This was one of the things I most loved about him — the caring, the poise, the dignity, and the humility with which he spoke directly from the center of his best self to the best selves of his listeners, in all of their own, many complexities. A good example is a reading he gave to a large audience at Tsunami Books, in Eugene, Oregon, in 2012: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4-57qSDLXg\>

One such happy and very brief moment, which stands out in my memory, demonstrates not only Ralph's love of connecting with people but also his love of catching them off guard by saying something unexpected, letting them know that despite his credentials, he was, like them, vulnerable and human.

The occasion was his guest appearance in an advanced English language and literature class, in a public high school in Padova, Italy, taught by Professora Sandra Busatta, co-editor of the Italian journal of contemporary Native American

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studies, *HAKO*, which had recently published some of Ralph's work. She had prepared her students well, having shared some of his poems beforehand and leading them to expect a writer of considerable distinction. While he was being introduced, the students were politely attentive and (judging from their body language) expecting to be bored.

What neither they, nor Sandra, nor I expected, was that Ralph's first words would be a sentence he'd learned that day on the train, as together we'd continued to master essential, conversational Italian. In a loud voice, he seriously proclaimed, "*Vorrei un bicchiere di vino rosso.*" The class broke up laughing. The last thing they'd expected to hear was, "I'd like a glass of red wine." He had them in the palm of his hand.

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Ingrid Wendt and Ralph Salisbury, Akumal, Quintana Roo, Mexico, 2012. Photo: Julie Bray.

## Poems by Ralph Salisbury<sup>1</sup>

### Sometimes Likely

If you look white  
like I do  
And work in the South  
like I do  
and want to go on making a living for  
your woman and children  
like I do  
there are some  
of your people you are  
sometimes  
likely to forget.

--from *Rainbows of Stone*  
University of Arizona Press, 2000

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**With the Wind and the Sun**

When the squadron I was in  
bombed a Navajo hogan, killing,  
by mistake, some sheep—  
just like that flipped out ancient Greek Ajax did—  
and blinded an elderly man,  
my white buddies thought it was funny—  
all those old kids' war-movies again  
against the savages, and,  
ironically near where  
the atom bit the dust, but

the Jew navigator,  
who'd thought World War Two  
had been won,  
didn't laugh, and I,  
hidden under a quite light complexion,  
with the wind and the sun waging Indian war  
to reconquer my skin  
defended myself  
with a weak grin.

*--from "Going to the Water: Poems of Cherokee Heritage" (Pacific House, 1983), reprinted in "Light from a Bullet Hole: poems new and selected 1950-2008" Silverfish Review Press, 2009*

**Swimming in the Morning News**

A mother is saved from drowning below a bridge  
in U.S.-bombed Baghdad, or,  
she is one of my Cherokee ancestors,  
forging the un-bridged, then, Mississippi near  
present day St. Louis, and crows,  
flying above my meditations,  
make me remember black hands of old clocks,  
which awakened me to cawing  
the day I awkwardly swam  
and saved two young women from drowning,  
today, the somber wings of poetry so many's  
sole chance to survive.

--from *Like the Sun in Storm*, The Habit of Rainy Nights Press, an imprint of Elohi Gadugi, 2012 [*Elohi Gadugi is Cherokee for "the world (elohi)" "working together in community (gadugi)"*]

**A Coastal Temple Ruin, 1992***For Octavio Paz and Cesar Vallejo*

Surf echoing Spanish cannon, or Aztec drums  
summoning centuries of slain,  
victory-regalia-petals proclaim sun  
ascendant, while rainbows wing  
from nests, to split banana beaks and sing  
eons-extinct sea-verge-ecology ancestries,  
clouds, roots, fragrance, fruit  
offering survivors of war in the genes more  
than invaders took  
and defenders gave  
their lives trying to save.

--from *War in the Genes*  
Cherry Grove Editions, WordTech Editions, 2005



**For Robert Wessels**

My half brother, whose German-American father died,  
in the American army, in World War One, was,  
in World War Two, captured by Germans, who  
flew him from Tunisia to Sicily.

Escaped, he worked on farms,  
for a hiding place and food,  
while Italian sons were U.S. prisoners of war.

Pick grapes, scythe wheat—  
make wine, bake bread,  
a little sanity  
among millions of the mad.

--from *Blind Pumper at the Well*  
Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2008

**Old German Woman, Some Wars**

"Help me!" she cries, faltering, reckless or trusting, from tram,  
a survivor of bombs, most likely, and, now,  
a flesh-and-blood bomb herself,  
the only possible target, me.

I'm old, she's older, and I've no time to accuse,  
"Coventry's rubble," or her, the name  
of a map-coordinate I'd flown to set aflame.

Her hand finds the hand I've offered, her feet meet  
the cobblestoned earth, we share  
with thousands of the living and with  
those billions, who waltz, in petal gowns,  
or, snail-shell-helmeted, march,

her thanks an echo of mine,  
war ending, my bomber turning away from this city,  
my fate to live to write to be  
ignored, or read, by all  
I would love to save.

--from *Blind Pumper at the Well*  
Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2008

**My Country Again Threatening Aggression**

(This time, for oil in Iraq)

The sea, though equally lethal, killing millions, seems sane,  
as it destroys our own and nations we call enemies.

More mathematically predictable than Christians,  
our crusaders will change ocean to oil  
then celebrate, not in cathedral  
or temple or mosque but in banks,  
the union of women and men –  
and children – with earth,  
not sensing for even one instant  
the sea's awesome eons of giving and taking away.

--from *Blind Pumper at the Well*  
Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2008

**An American-Indian Success Story in India**

My abandoned grandmother's raising twelve kids—  
two years of study all that my father could get,  
before racism shut down his school—  
six years of university for me, after what  
the army had taught—

a Bombay newspaper reporter—  
to whom I'd given an interview  
after her union's strike had ended  
press-censorship—honored my family  
as a Native American success story.

Although assaulted in their legislature,  
India Indian women won freedom for everyone,  
and I would honor here those  
who honored my American Indian father and  
grandmother.

--from *Blind Pumper at the Well*  
Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2008

**Medicine-Meeting, Hoopa, 1994**

*for Helen and Chad*

Telling the gathering I'm Cherokee –  
my skin, like the skins  
of many of them, the skin  
of soldiers who tore  
futures not rightfully theirs  
from the genes of defeated populations –

my answers are Father's mother's: "Sassafras tea  
for congested lungs; mint leaves  
for troubled digestion; willow bark chewed  
for pain; tobacco breathed,  
into aching ears"--

and words of love,  
to raise the dead

in children's dreams  
of living as women and men.

--from *War in the Genes*  
Cherry Grove Editions, WordTech Press, 2005

**Respecting Uktena**

Columbia River Cherokee glittering monster Uktena, I recall  
my sister's husband's plowing from Mississippi loam  
a stone ball, proof of our tribe's migrating through  
as once was generally believed,  
or maybe a jewel pried from Uktena's skull—  
luck for our people forever  
or curse if you lack respect.

Mt. St. Helens erupting—Trojan nuclear plant  
and others built on seismic faults—  
Uktena, oh mighty Uktena, forgive us,  
yes, we are foolishly greedy, and Trojan's our doom's name.

--from *Like the Sun in Storm*  
Habit of Rainy Nights Press, 2012

**My Brother's Poem: Vietnamese War, 1969**

You tell me you can not write it  
yesterday's pretty village splinters and in  
your aircraft cargo compartment ammunition/rations/med-  
icines gone an American lies wrapped in his raincoat  
strapped to the floor of that machine generations struggled  
to invent and thousands of hours of lives went to create  
the boy's belongings all he could bear  
on his back packaged beside him  
sunset a shimmer like cathedral glass  
a memory the instrument-panel glow  
as low as devotional candles showing  
in plexiglass monsoon screams past your face  
above the controls your own American face.

--from *Like the Sun in Storm*  
Habit of Rainy Nights Press, 2012

**A Genesis**

What happened to sheets of carbon all night  
while under moonlit sheets I loved then dreamed?

In dawn my hand switches on, black clouds  
shoot lightnings from the wastebasket,  
and on my desk are rectangular fields,  
black loam that I know  
was growth pressed under tons of earth  
aeons before Shakespeare—  
new growth my own rows of words, this morning seen  
as the words of men through the centuries  
imprinting themselves, for love or fear,

which other words and sounds not words had stirred,  
stirring true lovers and readers and dinosaurs, and

before there were even leaves—  
not those of books—stirring nothing until nothing  
moving with nothing in nothing  
like love created  
this poem and  
the next.

--from *Going to the Water: Poems of a Cherokee Heritage*  
Pacific House Books, 1983



### **Awakened by Cell Phone**

Awakening, beneath pines,  
where a border of earth  
the river dried from  
gives thanks to rain,  
I hear the lovely and loving chatter  
my daughter's year-old daughter sends  
through silicon crystals  
transmitted into eons of green  
metamorphosed into petroleum  
reborn as plastic, and, yes, into the centuries  
of families which formed my ear.

--from *Like the Sun in Storm*  
Habit of Rainy Nights Press, 2012

**Around the Sun, the Alaskan Oil-Spill**

Space-capsule-shape globules of oil  
re-entering the atmosphere  
in the nostrils of terns,

an ocean of air between words'  
furthest surges and home,  
I say a tern may return,  
eons from its final breath,  
and smother some other creature—

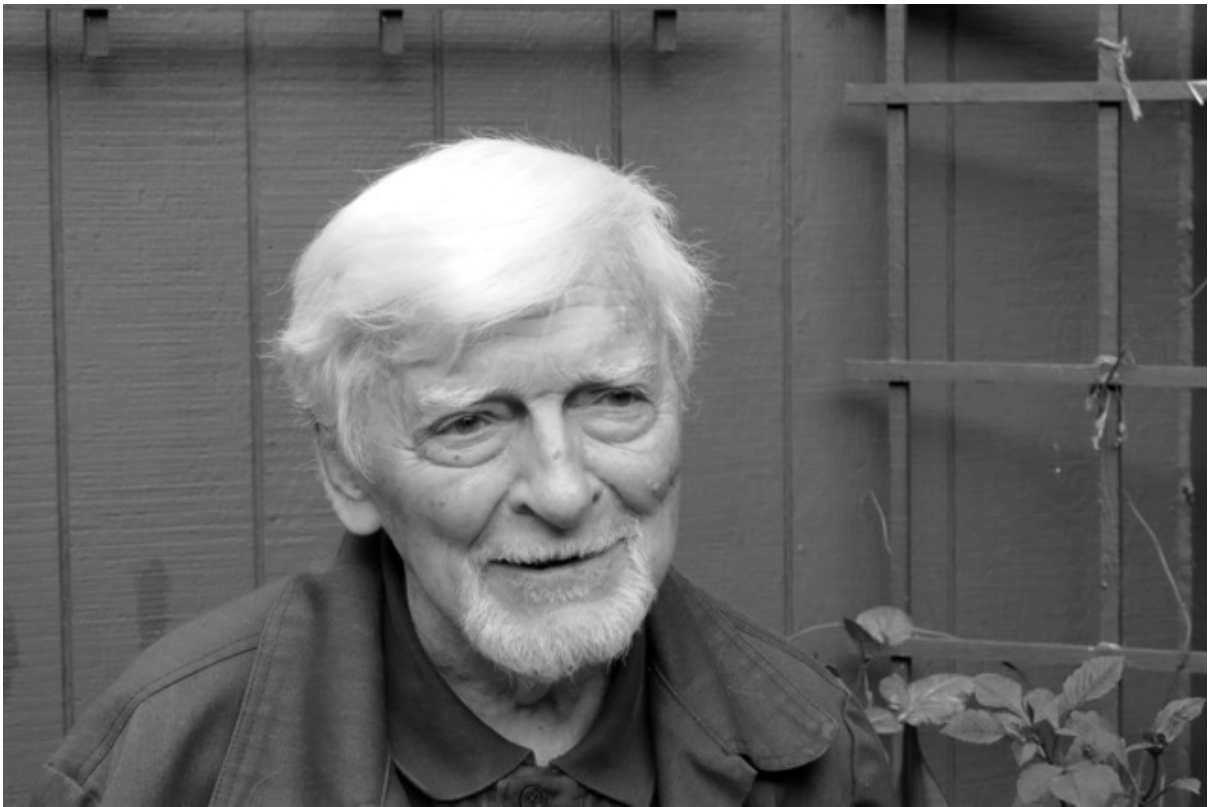
and I say my cells may return,  
eons from poems:

which say each tern is sacred,  
its flesh to become new life,  
to go on sustaining lives;

which say that oil—  
formed from the dead—is sacred,  
not to be wasted or used  
to gratify greed;

which say, with all the breath a mind can hold,  
each moment of life is sacred,  
and Timelessness and Death.

--from *Rainbows of Stone*,  
University of Arizona Press, 2000



Ralph Salisbury, Eugene, Oregon, 2012. Photo: Ingrid Wendt.

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**Tiffany Midge. *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's*. Foreword by Geary Hobson. Bison Books/University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 195 pp. ISBN: 9781496215574. <https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/bison-books/9781496215574/>**

This funny little book means a lot. I say "little" because it is under two hundred pages long and contains much white space and several blank pages separating its eleven parts, but it is not small in significance. On the contrary, this first humor book by Tiffany Midge, a Lakota poet and memoirist, is full of insight and delight. Unsurprisingly, though this wide-ranging collection is comedic, it contains the aspects of poignant memoir and poetic language that were featured in two previous books by Midge: *Outlaws, Renegades, and Saints: Diary of a Mixed-Up Halfbreed* (1996) and *The Woman Who Married a Bear* (2016). Although Tiffany Midge is a citizen of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and strongly identifies and speaks as a Native woman, she offers a special perspective. She notes she is not necessarily recognized by strangers as Indigenous and did not grow up on ancestral Lakota land, but in the Northwest. Midge writes:

I am an undeterminable ethnicity, tending to blend in, more or less, in any particular group. As a child, I was assumed to belong to a family of Japanese tourists while waiting for a raft to cross over at Disneyland's Tom Sawyer's Island. At different times I wasn't allowed to play with the children of bigots. I am repeatedly asked my cultural origins as if I'm an oddity or unfathomable puzzle (31).

To Sigmund Freud and, closer to home, another author of Standing Rock Sioux nationality, the legendary Vine Deloria, Jr., humor is not merely amusement, but a deep and revealing facet of human expression. Deloria writes in his classic chapter "Indian Humor" from *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969): "Laughter encompasses the limits of the soul. In humor life is redefined and accepted" (146). Irony and satire offer keen insights into the psyche of individuals and collectives. *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's* deploys several forms including one-liner gags, domestic humor, Indian humor, memoir, political satire, social criticism, and feminist humor, all in various ratios. Humor from an Indigenous point of view strategically employs an accessible and inviting form to shake up mainstream readers and educate them on the experiences of Native peoples: how their rights have been and continue to be ignored or trampled upon and their identities and resources appropriated or plundered. Midge's humorous pieces published in mainstream outlets online gained popularity and thus represent a significant intervention, and those articles collected in such a book as this potentially open lines of sympathy and communication between mainstream non-Native readers

and Native Americans. As Vine Deloria, Jr. noted, “people have little sympathy for stolid groups” (146). Deloria argues that author and comedian Dick Gregory achieved much more than he was given credit for when he injected humor into the Civil Rights struggle. With his books, albums, and stand-up comedy routines, Gregory invited “non-blacks to enter into the thought world of the black community and experience the hurt it suffered. When all people shared the humorous but ironic situation of the black, the urgency and morality of Civil Rights was communicated” (148). Likewise, Midge does similar work in cultivating sympathy and empathy for Native Americans, such as the abused water protectors objecting to the Dakota Access pipeline at Standing Rock—her ancestral homelands—and so raises issues of cultural appropriation in teasing and chiding subsets of non-Native readers.

The most compelling writing found therein is about herself and people she has known, including her late Lakota mother and late white father. The dialogues between the author and her mother found in the title piece and “Conversations with My Lakota Mom” are nothing short of hilarious. One great example of Midge’s familial writing and wry perspective is her account of her father playing the role of Chief Bromden in a local stage adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, co-opting one of her mother’s old wigs. Although her father had “plenty of cultural insider awareness, he played mostly to stereotype, and his Bromden was stiff as a cigar-store Indian” (28). The author liked to think her dad attempted to bring some relevance to the role, “having been married to a Native woman, for all those years, but he was by no means a Will Sampson or Jason Momoa” (28). Along with the brilliant and frank writing about her mother’s final months in the title piece and her father’s “Ugly American” imperialist attitudes while living in Asia (“The Siam Sequences”), Midge is also a deft character portraitist. My personal favorite is “The Jimmy Report,” about an eccentric vintage clothes shop owner in Bellingham, Washington. Sassy Jimmy is a transgressive trickster whose pranks and hoaxes keep the narrator and reader in stitches. Tiffany Midge has a sharp eye for ironic detail and an appreciation of oddball aesthetics.

The issue of the audience for this book is an interesting one, but it would seem to have broad appeal to both a general audience and Native American readers. Sometimes the audience is by implication heterogeneously Native, but also including non-Natives having some familiarity with Native culture. At other times, it is constructed as a gaggle of yoga-pants wearing, Hillary-loving, liberal Democrat women. Such women treasure Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and its recent adaptation as a chilling Trump-era dystopia, not realizing that such subjugation has been a reality for Native American women for centuries, Midge claims in “An Open Letter to White Women Concerning

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*The Handmaid's Tale* and America's Historical Amnesia." (Atwood, for her part, has stated that all her iconic novel's horrors and humiliations were based on historical precedents.) At other times, the audience is constructed as white women in general, half of whom frustratingly voted for Trump in the 2016 election. They are trendy consumerists, "basic bitches" obsessed with Pumpkin Spice ("An Open Letter to White Girls Regarding Pumpkin Spice and Cultural Appropriation"). In fact, much attention is lavished on white women and their novel, mellifluous names, such as Finnegan, Delaney, and Saffron, which Tiffany Midge enjoys uttering, punctuating her pieces and lending them a certain poetry amidst satire. But in general, the intended audience seems mainstream, although many of the pieces were originally published in *Indian Country Today*. This book would be a good one to recommend to resistant non-Natives to help explain why "Indian" costumes, Donald Trump's gauche celebration of President Andrew Jackson, and his taunting of Elizabeth Warren as "Pocahontas" are problematic, even maddening to many Native Americans. Midge takes the bull by the horns: "And if valorizing Andrew Jackson and signing pipeline orders *on the same day* isn't evidence enough to prove that the president holds no regard whatsoever for Indigenous people or the law or treaties or the environment, he also flagrantly tossed around racial epithets during a White House meeting with senators" (187). One of my favorite disses in the book is when Midge declares: "Trump is the personification of imperialism, a fat taker; he puts the *colon* in *colonialism* and worse"; meanwhile, Melania is "our future First Naked Lady" (163). Here's to Tiffany Midge, who gets straight to the utter unprecedented nature of our strange times, the absurdity of it all.

While the book is enjoyable and thought-provoking, there is some room for improvement. One suggestion would be to make more contemporary references to Native American literature and culture. Many of the allusions are vintage, from the title referencing Dee Brown's 1970 nonfiction bestseller about the mistreatment of the Indians of the West in the nineteenth century, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, to gags referencing a famous line from Chief Joseph's 1877 speech, here given the Erma Bombeck treatment: "I will fight no more about putting the toothpaste cap on, forever" (6). Such references are pretty old-school, recalling some of the jokes that Vine Deloria, Jr. catalogues in his chapter on "Indian Humor" from *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969). For example, there is much riffing on the old 'Indians used every part of the animal and wasted nothing' trope, which is used a number of times. Perhaps some more recent references or jokes about Bunky Echo-Hawk, Joy Harjo, or A Tribe Called Red could be added. Or how about an allusion to a contemporary Native writer who uses humor and satire, such as Gerald Vizenor, LeAnne Howe, or even the controversial Sherman Alexie? The topics of critique are often not surprising, but Midge usually finds

something new to say: Thanksgiving, casual racism in everyday speech and restaurant names, cultural appropriation in offensive Halloween costumes, and of course, Pumpkin Spice (which sounds like the fifth Spice Girl, joining Baby, Sporty, Scary, and Posh Spice). Speaking of which, a minor quibble with this book is that, at rare moments, it felt like University of Nebraska Press editors might have been a bit more proactive about making this feel more like of a coherent book rather than a collection of previously-published pieces. For example, although these short pieces are well grouped topically into eleven parts, certain jokes are repeated as many as three times in the book, if we count Geary Hobson's foreword. This collection is enjoyable, but not every piece is side-splittingly funny. Some of the political humor already seems dated. Such pieces were great for a timely newspaper column, but when placed between hardcovers, they seem a bit underwhelming.

The foreword by Geary Hobson, the gifted and vastly underappreciated Cherokee-Quapaw and Chickasaw fiction writer and storyteller, feels kind of vintage as well, yet everyone will learn something from it. It catalogues moments of Native humor from literary history, concluding: "yes, non-Indian American people, humor does exist among Native American people" (xvi). However, this proclamation echoes what Deloria wrote over fifty years ago. In "Indian Humor" Deloria writes: "It has always been a great disappointment to Indian people that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by professed experts on Indian Affairs. Rather the image of the granite-faced grunting redskin has been perpetuated by American mythology" (148). Along those lines Midge delivers, in "Redeeming the English Language (Acquisition) Series," an excellent discourse on the origins and history of "Ugh," the favorite expression of the "grunting redskin," beginning with a memoir of the 1870s, traveling across the canonical novels of James Fennimore Cooper, and discussing a particularly problematic song in *Peter Pan*. In his foreword, Hobson goes all the way back to an 1832 reference in Washington Irving's classic travel narrative, *A Tour on the Prairies*, in which "he describes some Osage warriors around a campfire, cracking up Irving and his fellow tourists with their antics" (xv). If it seems like there has not been much progress from the time that Deloria was writing in the late 1960s to today, perhaps most Americans really do remain in thrall to enduring stereotypes of the stoic Indian, not much more enlightened to realities of Native life. This is depressing, but much evidence would support such a view. Back in 1926, H. L. Mencken wrote: "No one in this world... has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people" (Kahn). I am grateful to Geary Hobson for showing how extensive was the rise of American Indian journalists using humor in the post-Civil War

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period, which encircled a Cherokee—DeWitt Duncan Clinton—and a Muscogee Creek—Alexander L. Posey (Fus Fixico)—among others.

Two of my favorite pieces which take on ethnic fraud evoke hearty laughter, comprising a slam-bang satirical pair. The first is “Things Pseudo-Native Authors Have Claimed to Be but Actually Are Not,” which includes a Chameleon who can “blend into the brightly colored tablecloths or barstools, making it easier for them to prey upon unwitting directors of reputable publishing houses or editors of endowed literary journals” (132-33). The second warns “You Might Be a Pretendian... if both of your parents emigrated from Germany” or “if you buy black hair dye by the case” (135). I have definitely seen “that guy” at a Native conference or two.

I made a comparison to Erma Bombeck earlier, which is very much meant to be a compliment. For “Aunt Erma” was my homegirl. Reading Tiffany Midge’s book kept reminding me of Bombeck, which led me on a memory path; I checked out from my local public library an e-book collection of three of Bombeck’s humor books. Bombeck was writing her early domestic humor columns in the same suburb (“Welcome to Warm and Cheerful Centerville, Ohio”) where I later grew up reading her in the *Dayton Daily News* even though, as a boy, I was not her target audience. Her family home in Centerville was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2015. My mother once went to a Bombeck book signing. My Grandmother Snyder, a retired schoolteacher, was a fan and owned a number of her hardcover books from the 1970s with titles such as *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, Then What I am Doing in the Pits?* and *The Grass is Always Greener over the Septic Tank*. These zany titles grabbed your attention and curiosity just like *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese’s*. And some of Tiffany Midge’s columns, with their accessible idiosyncrasies, are reminiscent of Bombeck’s work. Midge is known to write of her marriage and domestic life; her piece in *Chuck E. Cheese’s* called “Eight Types of Native Moms” is perhaps the most Bombeckesque. Like Tiffany Midge, Erma Bombeck was a strong advocate for women’s rights, and fought for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). In 1978, Bombeck’s feminism was outed when she was appointed to the President’s National Advisory Committee for Women and “embarked on a two-year speaking tour urging holdout states to ratify the Congressionally-sanctioned Equal Rights Amendment,” Kristen Levithan notes in her article “Erma Bombeck: Feminist Housewife.” While advocating for the ERA, Bombeck “blended her trademark humor with a spirit of activism.” Addressing the National Student Nurses’ Association convention in Utah, Bombeck jested: “We’ve got to get sex out of the gutter and back into the Constitution where it belongs... The ERA cause—‘equality of rights under the law’—may be the most



misunderstood words since 'one size fits all'" (qtd. in Levithan). While Bombeck's late-twentieth-century columns were generally not explicitly political, in her 1983 book *Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession*, she posed the rhetorical question: "What kind of a mother would go to her grave thinking ERA stood for Earned Run Average?" (21). Midge's fierce feminist satire shines through such pieces as "Committee of Barnyard Swine to Determine Fates for Women's Health." For taking me back to Erma Bombeck and associated memories, I am grateful to Tiffany Midge.

One visionary piece is "Thousands of Jingle Dress Dancers Magically Appear at Standing Rock Protector Site." Both in its sharp political commentary and its use of imagery and dialogue, this is an excellent piece of writing. "The jingle dress dancers could not be reached for a comment. They appeared momentarily on the highway, danced, lifted the spirits of the people, and then dissolved back over the hills from whence they came. The swish and tinkle of their jingles could be heard from beyond the horizon," the piece concludes onomatopoeically (83). Midge notes that this piece garnered many likes and shares online to the point that it went viral amidst the depression of the election results coming in. In a followup article, "Satire Article Goes Viral on Day of 2016 Presidential Election Results," Tiffany Midge concludes that the popularity of the first piece indicates that its readers believed that the story was real reportage rather than "satire" as she puts it, that "people can't discern what is real and what is false" (86). I would call it fiction or fantasy blended with political commentary, not satire particularly. If it is satire, what is being satirized? Midge took the popularity of the article to mean that "the majority of the population is illiterate with regards to Native culture and grossly misinformed about Indigenous people" (85). While this is true, and no doubt some of the comments that were made online after her piece was published support that conclusion, surely some of these readers understood what she was up to. Otherwise, it seems too depressing to view the viral success of something you wrote as evidence of widespread ignorance in Trump's America, rather than your own inspirational talent.

I particularly appreciate Midge's highlighting of the problem of the "white savior" narrative that is still so common today, "the all-too-familiar trope in which a heroic white character rescues folks of color from their plight" (29). This trope suggests that Natives are merely passive tragic victims who are acted upon. Although it is common, in many cases it seems to go largely without notice or criticism. In Midge's memoir, this issue arises as she describes how her late white father, while serving a prison sentence, was studying different Shakespearean plays and scenes with Native and black inmates. She imagines an idea for Hollywood: a heartwarming white-messiah prison movie. One

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example within my area of research is David Grann's romanticizing treatments in *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (2017) of the attorney W. W. Vaughan, who was thrown from a train, and the FBI agent Tom White, who was brought in by J. Edgar Hoover to solve the Osage murder cases and is given a large section of the book (which is being made into a Martin Scorsese film starring Robert DeNiro and Leonardo DiCaprio). Vaughan was surely killed because he was going to share what he knew about conspirators Bill Hale and H. G. Burt with the FBI and was killed before he could. That is noble, but as I explain in my forthcoming book, *Our Osage Hills*, to be published by Lehigh University Press, W. W. Vaughan was more than happy to charge Osages ten thousand dollars a head to restore them to "competency" in his regular law practice so they would not be subject to the chiseling of a white guardian; that sum of money has the buying power of about \$140,000 in 2018. Furthermore, the Osages might have paid nothing; according to Terry Wilson in *The Underground Reservation* (1985), lawyers "profited by representing Osages applying for competency even though the agency handled all such cases free" (140).

So this book, while humorous and at times whimsical, takes on some serious issues facing not only Indian Country but the United States at large. *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's* deserves a large audience so that, among other reasons, Native American humor can move closer to the status it held in the early twentieth century, when America's most popular entertainer—who, like Tiffany Midge, also penned a humorous newspaper column—was Will Rogers, "The Cherokee Kid."

As Vine Deloria, Jr. writes, "When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive" (167). *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's* achieves this balance, its comedy amply evidencing and promoting not just survival but also survivance, as theorized by Gerald Vizenor, an enduring, "active sense of presence" renouncing narratives of "dominance, tragedy and victimry" (vii).

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Review Essay: **Developing Indigenous Visual Arts Transnationally and Across Genres**

**Denise K. Cummings, ed. *Visualities 2: More Perspectives on Contemporary American Indian Film and Art*. Michigan State University Press, 2019. 284 pp. ISBN: 9781611863192. <https://msupress.org/9781611863192/visualities-2/>**

For over a century, the collocation of “Native American” and “film” evoked a cultural imaginary begun in 1914 by Edward Curtis’s *In the Land of the Head Hunters*: the representation of North America’s Indigenous people through settler lenses of ethnography, exoticism, or colonization. Since the 1990s, however, Native filmmakers have been changing the game. In his 2012 history *The Inconvenient Indian*, Thomas King noted that “the history of Indians in Hollywood is more a comedy than a tragedy,” and some of the best contemporary works, according to King, are Native-authored short films and documentaries (50). Indeed, in the first two decades of the new millennium, Indigenous North American film has become a highly prominent genre, as productions and events around the world demonstrate: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, Augsburg University in Minneapolis; Edmonton, Ottawa; Chaco, Argentina; Inari, Finland; and even Stuttgart, Germany all host annual Indigenous film and/or media festivals. The imagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival in Toronto, founded in 1998, has become the world’s largest of its kind. This development has also been reflected in academic scholarship. While the largest number of available studies still targets non-Indigenous representations of “Indians” as projections of difference, as Robert Berkhofer’s *The White Man’s Indian* began to do in 1978 (see also Rollins and O’Connor 1998; Kilpatrick 1999; Marubbio 2006; Raheja 2010; Howe, Markowitz, and Cummings 2013; Hilger 2016; and Berumen 2020), critics have increasingly addressed Native-authored film: from Kerstin Knopf’s seminal study *Decolonizing the Lens of Power: Indigenous Films in North America* (2008) to Lee Schweningen’s *Imagic Moments* (2013) and Wendy Gay Pearson and Susan Knabe’s collection *Reverse Shots* (2013).

A similar trend on a much larger scale may be noticed in the field of Indigenous art history. Originally framed by European and European-American anthropologists, Native American and First Nations visual arts had long been relegated to the discursive systems of “science” or “history” rather than aesthetics. But curators and art historians—such as Gerald McMaster (Cree), Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), Ruth B. Phillips, and Allan J. Ryan (to name but a few)—and institutions across the continent—such as the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Museum

of Anthropology in Vancouver, British Columbia, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Québec, the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City, and, of course, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.—lastingly changed the game (cf. Berlo 1992, Berlo and Phillips 1998, Ryan 1999, Rushing III 1999, Phillips 2011).

The two volumes on *Visualities*, expertly edited by Denise K. Cummings, laudably continue this work in both fields of Indigenous film and Indigenous art history across North America, and expand it by dimensions of transnational (or trans-Indigenous, to use Chad Allen’s successful term) connection, of genre-crossing, and of transmediality.

Dean Rader argues in *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature* that “Native visual and verbal texts do more than problematize genre, they alter epistemology” (316). Acknowledging this impact and following the success of the first installment (*Visualities: Perspectives on Contemporary American Indian Film and Art*, 2011), *Visualities 2* highlights the importance of the visual dimension in contemporary Indigenous cultures. In the first volume, ten contributors celebrated and helped to define Indigenous visualities, including films such as Chris Eyre’s *Skins* and *Smoke Signals*, Sherman Alexie’s *The Business of Fancydancing*, Shelley Niro’s *It Starts With a Whisper*, Tracey Deer’s documentary *Mohawk Girls*, Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie’s digital short *Aboriginal World View*, as well as other works of visual art by Hock E. Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Carl Beam, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Fritz Scholder, T.C. Cannon, Larry McNeil, Tom Jones, George Longfish, Teri Greeves, Eric Gansworth, Melanie Printup Hope, and Jolene Rickard. The sheer length of this list already indicates the pertinence of a sequel, and the second volume brings together ten U.S.-based, Native and non-Native experts, four of whom had also contributed to the first volume, in an intriguing and rewarding interdisciplinary project.

Like the 2011 collection, *Visualities 2* is subdivided into two major sections, with the largest (of seven chapters) dedicated to film, a smaller section (of two chapters) exploring contemporary visual art, and an epilogue on social media and the digital realm. Cummings summarizes the purpose and demarcation in her introduction by writing, “[b]esides new scholarship on American Indian creative outputs—the primary focus of the first volume—this second volume contains illuminating global Indigenous visualities including First Nations, Aboriginal Australia, Māori and Sami” (xv). Even if this expansion is exemplary rather than systematic, with one example each from New Zealand and Sweden/Sápmi, the move is as praise-worthy as it is future-oriented, documenting the increasing scholarly interest in trans-Indigenous solidarities and

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criticism. Ranging from Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay's feature film *Ngati* (1987) to the collagraphs by Inuit artist Annie Pootoogook, the works analyzed in this volume prominently testify to and celebrate a vibrant and dynamic artistic scene and confirm Thomas King's 2012 assessment that it is at the various sites of visual production that the most exciting interventions into colonial discourse are being created today. The volume also features two overarching themes which, I believe, tie in remarkably well with larger discussions in current Indigenous studies scholarship: the question of genre boundaries, on the one hand, and the nexus between aesthetics and political activism, on the other. Both of these themes reflect the volume's topicality and relevance particularly well.

The volume begins chronologically with Taos Pueblo scholar P. Jane Hafen's analysis of Kent Mackenzie's 1961 sixteen-millimeter semidocumentary *The Exiles*. Whereas the film—about Los Angeles-based Native Americans in the late 1950s—was written and directed by a non-Indigenous director, it is prominent as one of the earliest realistic depictions of urban Natives, and it was restored in 2008 to reach a broader audience. Discussing the mixed reception of the film's restored version and its problematic circumstances of production, Hafen reads *The Exiles* through its similarities to N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn*. With a particular focus on two sections from the novel, "The Priest of the Sun" and "The Night Chanter," she argues that Momaday "anticipated the circumstances of post-World War II dislocation of Native peoples" and, in some passages of his text, even "sounds like he is writing a narration to *The Exiles*" (16-17).

Whereas Hafen reads the 2008 restoration of Mackenzie's non-Native film through the lens of a Kiowa perspective from the 1960s, another fictional text from the so-called Native American Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s served as the basis of a 2013 feature film by non-Native brothers Alex and Andrew Smith: James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974). In her contribution, Joanna Hearne combines a framing of the film (which borrows the novel's title) within Barry Barclay's concept of "Fourth Cinema" with an interview with the directors as well as Blackfoot/Nez Perce actress Lily Gladstone, who plays the character of Marlene. The term of "Fourth Cinema," which is Indigenous-authored and situated outside of a nation-state logic, also informs later chapters by Lee Schweningen and Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr. and is arguably a useful background from which to develop further methodologies for Indigenous visualities. Hearne's conversation, then, focuses, among other topics, on the declared goal of the filmmakers to reach a mass audience for Native American issues, and it reveals the challenges that arise in a production which the Smith brothers designed as "an

inverted western” (48). The film’s position between aesthetic and political aspects, as emphasized by the participants, also highlights one of the central themes of the entire volume: the role of political activism in contemporary Indigenous studies.

This theme also plays a dominant role in Channette Romero’s discussion of Catherine Anne Martin’s (Mi’kmaq) documentary *The Spirit of Annie Mae* (2002), which is the subject of the following chapter. The question of political activism does not merely occur in the obvious topic of the film, since Annie Mae Aquash was one of the most prominent Native women involved in the cause of the American Indian Movement, but, as Romero argues, through the form of privileging “tribal storytelling techniques and optics to resist imperial images of Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women” (61). Contextualizing the female activist’s biography within a long-standing history of colonial violence, and giving a voice to the women who knew her, Martin successfully questions the gender politics within AIM and highlights Indigenous women’s activism without exploiting the sensationalism of Annie Mae Aquash’s murder. Romero reads the film in the context of other approaches, such as Joy Harjo’s poem “For Annie Mae Pictou Aquash” or Paul Chaat Smith’s and Robert Warrior’s *Like a Hurricane*. However, for an even broader perspective on these cultural reflections, a consideration of Yvette Nolan’s play, *Annie Mae’s Movement*, would have been a fruitful addition. Romero’s argument—that the film’s reliance on “mainstream film genres” (such as true crime or biography) eventually “limits its effectiveness” (79) and fails to connect its subject to ongoing Mi’kmaq activism—may be disputed, but it certainly adds to a differentiated view on the complex case of Annie Mae Aquash’s legacy.

Also focusing on colonial history and activism in Canada, Penelope Myrtle Kelsey zooms in on Cree director Tasha Hubbard’s animated short, *Buffalo Calling* (2013), and her documentary, *Birth of a Family* (2016), in a relatively brief discussion of “buffalo as a site of Indigenous knowledge and renewal” (86). In both films, the migration of Canadian plains bison is read in the context of colonial violence and connected to the Sixties Scoop, in which Aboriginal Canadian children were forcefully removed from their families. While Kelsey notes that the conflation of the decimation of buffalo and of genocidal practices may be seen as problematic, she convincingly foregrounds Hubbard’s emphasis on the shared experience, and on the foregrounding of Indigenous cosmologies in both films.

The traumatic historical complex of removal, forced adoption, and boarding schools is a shared experience among Indigenous people around the world, and both Diné filmmaker Blackhorse Lowe’s feature *Shimásání* (2009) and Swedish/Sami filmmaker

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Amanda Kernell's *Sami Blood* (2016) effectively translate traumatic history into "texts of desire and agency" (99), as editor Denise K. Cummings argues in her chapter. Cummings's definition of "visuality" for this purpose, as "the interplay of visual images with lived personal identity" (98), further enriches and contextualizes the volume's coherence and re-reading of contemporary Indigenous visual art. Her close reading of the films' intergenerational conflicts as trans-Indigenous examples of identity formation "as it relates to federally sponsored systems of forced assimilation and internalized oppression" (99) powerfully reverberates throughout the volume and sets a convincing leitmotif for the book's transnational range—convincingly placed at the literal center of the volume.

Next to political activism, as noted above, the volume also aptly reflects on larger questions of genre, and Jennifer L. Gauthier elaborates on these questions with reference to Aboriginal Australian filmmaker Rachel Perkins. By renegotiating colonial history through a variety of genre traditions, including adaptations of plays, melodrama, musical drama, comedy, utopia, and political commentary, Gauthier argues that Perkins effectively Indigenizes Western formats in her films *Radiance* (1998), *One Night the Moon* (2001), and *Bran Nue Dae* (2009). Her reading aptly differentiates conventional delimitations of genre and effectively complements, in its analysis, the transnational perspective of the overall volume.

Similarly picking up the question of genre by addressing, once more, Barry Barclay's "Fourth Cinema," Lee Schwenger develops an Indigenous film aesthetic from the example of Barclay's first film, *Ngati* (1987). He emphasizes the importance of geography and land, of borders and border crossings, and of community to argue that the dense connections between politics and aesthetics are characteristic of contemporary Indigenous cinema—touching again upon the volume's key theme of political activism. "The very fact of a Māori-made film is already political, is already an instance of resistance, and already offers an opportunity for a reversal of the gaze," Schwenger claims (177). The political dimension of contemporary Indigenous film, however, goes far beyond a mere reclaiming of presence, and it also transcends the binary construction of representation and reversal.

This is also substantially underlined by the collection's second (and unfortunately much shorter) section on contemporary Indigenous art, which Laura E. Smith opens by discussing Ehren "Bear Witness" Thomas's video, *Make Your Escape* (2010). In the short video, the Cayuga artist subverts and Indigenizes practices of settler memorialization by putting Vans sneakers—remodeled into moccasins—onto



monuments in downtown Ottawa. Demonstrating once more the political impact of First Nations aesthetics, Thomas—also a member of the collective A Tribe Called Red—cleverly combines music, popular culture, and urban landscapes into a revisiting of memorial culture.

The second article in this section, by Anishinaabe scholar Molly McGlennen, introduces readers to Inuit artists Annie Pootoogook, Jamasie Pitseolak, and Pitaloosie Saila to argue that “we can look to the visual cultures of Inuit expression as a way to more deeply understand the continuum of violences that colonial incursion instigates to this day” (224). Works such as *Pitseolak’s Glasses* (Pootoogook 2006), *The Day After* (Pitseolak 2010), or *Strange Ladies* (Saila 2006) use the domestic, everyday sphere or the history of colonial violence to foreground Inuit agency and liberate Inuit culture from hegemonic representations “frozen in time” (235).

Concluding the rich offering of scholarly perspectives on contemporary Indigenous visual art, Sihasapa Lakota critic Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr. circles back to the question of representation and genre. In the long history of Hollywood-produced images, Indigenous people remain affected by stereotypes and tenacious questions of “authenticity,” but increasingly dismantle these images by deconstructions, counter-histories, and Indigenized discourse. Van Alst sees a particularly strong movement in the field of “digital territory” and social media, arguing that Indigenous people have effectively made these “their home in ways unique to their communities” (246). Combining strategies of humor, “an almost-constant activist component,” and “a sense of shared community,” Van Alst argues that Indigenous people around the globe are effectively using these digital “new lands” for reflections of Native “people and spaces as contemporary, evolving, and forward-looking/thinking” (247-248).

In the growing interdisciplinary field of Indigenous studies, such emphases on visual and digital media, presence and futurity are direly needed. As P. Jane Hafen reminds us in her chapter on *The Exiles*, “what we do is not merely an intellectual enterprise,” but instead, “all of us must be careful to be precise, exact, and thorough. As scholars of American Indian literatures, we bear a responsibility beyond other literary scholars” (20). This responsibility is born exceptionally well by the volume’s editor and contributors. In addition to the themes of political power, activism, and genre, the connective fabric that firmly holds together *Visualities 2* is formed by questions of agency, sovereignty, and artistic representation. Whereas the previous volume had more of a quantitative balance between the sections of “Indigenous Film Practices” and “Contemporary American Indian Art,” the second installment is more clearly

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focused on film, also showing the rapid developments that this genre has undergone since the release of Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* over twenty years ago. Indeed, as Cummings writes elsewhere:

the current climate for Indigenous American cinema demands that efforts be undertaken to close the digital divide, to insist on full telecommunications access for Native Country, and to stay alert to the more than a decade of post-*Smoke Signals* Indigenous creativity and transformations of film in the media landscape that have spurred all the small and varied screens to come alive with Indigenous-created content (2014, 295-96).

Given the book's successful application of Cummings's agenda, it is not easy to find room for improvement in this excellent collection. In terms of editorial elegance, one may wonder why some chapters use parenthetical citation and others work with endnotes, but besides such formal trifles, *Visualities 2* powerfully upholds the important aim of changing "the current climate" in scholarship—not only of Indigenous American cinema, but of Indigenous creativity at large.

Molly McGlennen writes toward the end of this volume that "it can be the incremental but persistent work of everyday action and language that can help open the minds of people. But, in the end, I still wonder if that will ever be enough" (McGlennen, 235-36). This collection makes a profound, diverse, and laudably transnational contribution to the persistent work McGlennen describes, and it will be a valuable addition to any Indigenous studies scholar's bookshelf.

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**James H. Cox. *The Political Arrays of American Indian Literary History*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 282 pp. ISBN: 9781517906023.**

<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-political-arrays-of-american-indian-literary>

James Cox's latest book with the University of Minnesota Press takes an approach that may be—at first glance—all too obvious. As he explains in the introduction to *The Political Arrays of American Indian Literary History*, his monograph “takes as its central focus what Native texts say and do politically and proposes that literary scholars approach single texts, collections of texts by the same author and by multiple Native authors,” along with the “conversations among Native and non-Native authors about their works as” what Cox describes as “political arrays” (1). By drawing on a range of historical and contemporary texts, outside of the early Native American Renaissance Period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Cox's study offers a series of “confounding but also generative collisions of conservative, moderate, and progressive ideas that together constitute the rich political landscape of American Indian literary history” (1). As someone who has paid close attention to the ways in which recent Indigenous women poets living in Canada and the US speak to and are influenced by each other, such a conversation seems not only useful but indeed critical to think through the complexities of what Cox describes as “American Indian literary history” (1), to expose and unpack the differences and similarities as well as points of confluence between and among Indigenous writers. The choice of comparisons and the range of periods explored are what make this monograph both exciting and unique. Moreover, by referencing the important contributions of a wide range of Indigenous scholars working in the field in thoughtful ways, Cox establishes the conversational nature of this project and the need for more work to be done on the relationships he outlines in *The Political Arrays*.

Most compellingly, Cox insists upon the breadth of texts that he includes in this monograph, arguing that “all forms of writing under my consideration” are “literature” and deserve to be valued “as significant contributions to American Indian literary history” for their “cultural, historical, and political” perspectives (2). By decisively refusing to favor white western canonical ideas of what constitutes literature, Cox makes space for a fascinating set of case studies, beginning with the complex web of nodes created by responses to Louise Erdrich's mid-1980s novels, from Indigenous (Leslie Marmon Silko) and non-Indigenous critics and writers (Peter Matthiessen and Wendy Lesser), which he connects through Matthiessen to Simon Ortiz, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and Paula Gunn Allen. By referencing “letters, novels, reviews, articles, and

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paratexts," Cox conveys the range of "political positions on and investments in the field of American Indian literary expression" and the challenges that arise when Indigenous authors write (8). And by selecting a relatively recent and highly charged set of contexts, Cox demonstrates the need to think about relationality when analyzing American Indian literary history. He attends to a wide range of perspectives and makes important connections to the politics of the day, whether personal, tribal, state, federal, or transnational. In doing so, Cox refuses to see American Indian literary history as anything less than complex and messy, yet clearly worthy of further investigation.

In the chapters that follow, Cox explores the role of "Indigenous Editing" by examining the decisions of those who edited the *American Indian Magazine* (1913-1920) and *American Indian* (1926-1931); the "transnational political arrays" expressed in the periodical publications of Cherokee writers, Will Rogers and John Milton Oskison (19); the "anticolonial politics" of the Lynn Riggs and James Hughes film, *A Day in Santa Fe* (1931) and its resonances with contemporary Indigenous filmmakers (19); the significance of mid-century correspondence between Native men (John Joseph Mathews and Lyn Riggs) and Anglo-male literary scholars (primarily Walter S. Campbell and J. Frank Dobie), who promoted the work of "individual Native writers, if not Native American literature as a field" (144); and the "diachronic political arrays" that emerge from detective novels produced by Indigenous authors in the 1930s, whose influence on "post-civil-rights-era detective novels" demonstrates the continued linkages between and differences among political positions put forth by these contemporary Indigenous writers (22). The last chapter probes Louis Owens' controversial claim that Gerald Vizenor and Sherman Alexie are located at opposite ends of the political spectrum, an assertion that Cox subverts using Owens' own "contemporary Indian spectrum" (23). As part of this conclusion, Cox uses this comparison as a springboard to probe how allegations of Alexie's sexual misconduct and his responses to them intersect with critical political arrays, especially those focused on gender and sexuality. Cox turns to the work of Carole LaFavor, Winona LaDuke, and Marcie Rendon, albeit briefly, to reframe the conversation, ultimately reminding readers of the need to consider "the full range of Native politics in American Indian literature" (212)—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

While I am torn by Cox's decision to highlight Alexie in his conclusion, a decision that could be read as replicating a kind of canonization that is potentially deeply sexist and harmful, *The Political Arrays* does not shy away from initiating some of the difficult but necessary conversations that are essential to understanding American Indian literary history. As Cox reminds readers, "Native people hold political views of all kinds: liberal

and conservative, moderate and extreme, unpredictable and contradictory. American literary history contains equally diverse political perspectives" (212). Ideally, Cox's monograph will prompt a variety of scholars to continue to add to and complicate what is an important and necessary endeavor—to understand the complexities and contradictions that shape and are shaped by Indigenous literary history in the United States.

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**Adam Spry. *Our War Paint Is Writers' Ink: Anishinaabe Literary Transnationalism*. SUNY Press, 2018. 256 pp. ISBN: 978143846881.**

<https://www.sunypress.edu/p-6530-our-war-paint-is-writers-ink.aspx>

The Anishinaabeg are known for transformation and adaptation. Our ancestors migrated to the lands where the food grows on water (manoomin/wild rice) and created mino bimaadiziwin (a good life), which followed the cyclical transformation of the seasons. They had a long and rich tradition of storytelling that functioned as a means to remember historical events, regulate behavior, sustain relationships with humans as well as with other beings, and provide entertainment. As the number of European traders and, later, American settlers, grew the Anishinaabe relied on their long-standing values to guide them as they adapted new technologies. We continue to adapt today and have an active and robust literary presence.

In *Our War Paint Is Writers' Ink*, Spry traces the ways in which Anishinaabe writers used new technologies of expression—such as the novel, lyric poetry, and journalism—to speak to non-Natives in a legible way. While there is an astounding and diverse body of work, he details a clear pattern of Anishinaabe writers presenting their nation as strong and legitimate. They employed literature as a tool to shape public opinion to their advantage. Spry also considers the ways in which Euro-Americans have used the act of writing to imagine Anishinaabeg. When taken as a whole, these texts offer new insights into the often-contentious relationship between two nations. Spry works to read “across the boundaries of settler-states and indigenous nations” to “challenge our understanding of the role literary writing plays in the ongoing dynamic of settler-colonialism and indigenous resistance” (xx). In addition, he asserts the importance of form and genre and argues for more research into Indigenous forms of genre.

Spry begins with the play *Hiawatha, Or Nanabozho: An Ojibway Indian Play* (1923/2011), which has largely been criticized and marginalized by contemporary scholars. He traces the complex history of this drama and identifies it as a point of convergence, drawing connections to earlier Anishinaabe writers, Euro-American writers, and contemporary Anishinaabe writers, asserting that we can both acknowledge the complications of this work while also celebrating it as an act of Anishinaabe persistence and survival. Spry challenges the reader to think about Anishinaabe and Euro-American writers as participating in a process of exchange. This text defies neat boundaries between settler and Indigenous, as do many of the other works examined throughout Spry's book. Thus, this play introduces a central argument of the book, which is that “writing allows cultural material to move independently



between indigenous and settler contexts, taking new meanings and different political valences as it goes" (4). Spry's arguments fit well within the long-standing Anishinaabe sensibility that readers and listeners must come to their own understandings of stories and that these understandings will deepen, adapt, and transform over time.

*Our War Paint* is focused on the post-treaty-making era from about 1886 to the present, with each chapter following a shift in US federal Indian policy: The Dawes General Allotment Act of 1886, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, the termination efforts of the 1950s, and the tribal self-determination policy since 1973. Spry's inclusion of Anishinaabe and non-Anishinaabe writers provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the context in which the works were written and have been read. His careful historical research reveals a complex network of Native and non-Native writers who were reading each other's work both at the time the works were written as well as long after, demonstrating the dynamic nature of their engagement. Spry draws upon Gerald Vizenor's theory of transmotion throughout the book, both for textual analysis as well as for a broader understanding of the ways in which Anishinaabe understand and employ sovereignty.

The chapters are well organized and necessarily dense to effectively convey the transnational exchange between the Anishinaabeg and the United States. Spry masterfully weaves connections throughout the book. In chapter 1, "Revolutionary in Character: Translating Anishinaabe Place and Time in the *Progress*," Spry details the ways in which Theo Beaulieu, the Anishinaabe editor of the newspaper, *Progress* (from 1886-1889), published politically motivated translations of Anishinaabe sacred stories to influence the present and envision the future rather than to understand the past. In chapter 2, "Englishman, Your Color Is Deceitful: Unsettling the North Woods in Janet Lewis's *The Invasion*," Spry shares new findings regarding Lewis's little-known historical novel. He uncovers an extraordinary record of collaboration and argues that, while Lewis is non-Anishinaabe, the novel can be read as an example of Anishinaabe nationalism. Spry provides long overdue analysis of Vizenor's reexpressions of Frances Densmore's translations of Anishinaabe nagamonan (songs) in chapter 3, "What Is This I Promise You?: The Translation of Anishinaabe Song in the Twentieth Century." In chapter 4, "A Tribe of Pressed Trees: Representations of the State in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," Spry suggests that, despite critiques by scholars including Arnold Krupat and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, we can find a version of nationalism in Erdrich's works. He delineates the ways in which several of Erdrich's characters work within the "third space of sovereignty," through both self-governance as well as leveraging federal and/or state resources.

Spry ends the final chapter by noting that, while nationalism has certainly provided a powerful means for Anishinaabeg to defend values and traditions, perhaps we need a new strategy that is more strongly aligned with our values. He suggests that “mino bimaadiziwin’s radically expansive idea of interdependency – which stretches the idea of social obligations beyond the mere humans to plants, animals, manidoog, and everything else that comprises that natural world... may eventually mean leaving behind the idea of nationhood altogether for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of what it means to lead a good life” (179). This question is worthy of consideration as we face increasing threats from multinational corporations and as many Anishinaabe nations face dwindling populations due to blood-quantum-based citizenship requirements. If we then turn to Spry’s analysis of “Initiation Song” as reexpressed by Vizenor in *Summer in the Spring*, we are reminded that “so long as the Anishinaabeg are capable of reimagining and reasserting who they are as a people – a continually new people – they will weather the storm” (Spry 183). Anishinaabe writers will continue to use literature as one means to imagine our future and to work toward mino bimaadiziwin.

As many Anishinaabe writers before him have done, Spry pushes the reader to see beyond binaries, to see complex webs of relationships and innovative adaptations to unthinkable circumstances. He offers a new methodology for the study of Anishinaabe and Native American literatures, which includes engagement across time and nation in order to understand the various ways in which literature has and can shape policy, challenge fundamental assumptions, as well as offer new visions for the future.

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**Joe Lockard and A. Robert Lee, eds. *Louis Owens: Writing Land and Legacy*. University of New Mexico Press, 2019. 328 pp. ISBN: 9780826360984.**

<https://unmpress.com/books/louis-owens/9780826360984>

"Time wounds all heels": so reads the title of a poem in Jim Northup's mixed-genre work, *Walking the Rez Road* (1993). In Northup's signature humored way, the quip telegraphs the reverberating after-lives of the Vietnam War. The poem's closing line amplifies this trauma by invoking intergenerational Indigenous survivance under settler occupation: "I'm a veteran of America's longest war, maybe" (154). Choctaw-Cherokee writer-scholar Louis Owens, whose formative years—and fiction—were profoundly shaped by the Vietnam War, likewise understood the challenges of surviving the "longest war." In his critical work, he named the genocidal violence at the heart of US settler colonialism while characters in his novels alternately carry its scars and bestow them on others in acts of collateral and lateral violence. Northup's title came to mind amid my own pained and lengthy reflection on the publication of *Louis Owens: Writing Land and Legacy*. More specifically, I thought of the disjunction between the far distances the field has traveled since Owens's time, and the seeming fact that Owens himself, unlike Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, has become "stuck in time." Co-edited by Joe Lockard and A. Robert Lee, the collection announces its unease with Owens's current place in the field, a sense that, closing in on a generation past Owens's death by suicide in July 2002, "there has been a gathering if still not sufficient recognition of his varied and considerable achievement" (1). The editors make it personal, adding that "one motivation for this book project was the realization that we have personal knowledge of Louis and his concerns that younger scholars do not, along with a consequent sense of responsibility for fostering discussions that he began" (7).

I am struck by what seems implicit in this statement, and what I have observed more generally: in Indigenous literary studies today, Louis Owens's creative and critical work has little visible presence. Yet in a remarkable decade that closed with his death, Owens published a monograph, five novels, and two essay collections, contributions which David Carlson in this volume rightly calls "foundational," providing "key parameters for understanding the now-burgeoning field of California Indian literature" (98). Owens's monograph, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, published in the Columbus quincentenary, was, as contributor Billy J. Stratton affirms, the "first native-authored book-length study of Native American literature" (121). *Other Destinies* traces a genealogy of Native novelists that spanned work by John Rollin Ridge, Christine Quintasket/Mourning Dove, D'Arcy McNickle, Leslie Silko, James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, and Gerald Vizenor, many of whom he also invoked in the

exuberantly trans-Indigenous orientations of his novels. This work pivoted the field at that time, making possible the kind of robust critical conversations that seeded the explosive growth of Native American literary studies in the 1990s and onward into the present. *Mixedblood Messages* (1998) and *I Hear the Train* (2001) demonstrate the range of Owens's contributions to the field of Indigenous Studies: from his critique of post-colonial theory's erasure of Indigenous frameworks in "As If an Indian Were Really an Indian: Native American Voices and Postcolonial Theory," to his succinct yet substantive interventions in settler colonial logics from the televisual to the theoretical, from the literary to the environmental. Working with the tools and terms that were common in the 1990s, Owens repeatedly made visible how US literature, art, and popular culture lent imaginative possibility to the engines of settler resource extraction, land theft, and dispossessive intergenerational trauma. Owens never saw the blossoming of the Native American Literature Symposium, nor that of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. Yet he spoke frequently of an imagined future where there would be books written by members of every tribal nation.

At its best, this collection places Owens in meaningful relation to Indigenous literary field formation while also directing us to his interventions in US literary history. Birgit Däwes, for example, frames a compelling reading of *Nightland* (1996) with generative attention to trans-Indigenous and transnational mappings. Essays by Cathy Covell Waegner and James Mackay work to place Owens in conversation with Cormac McCarthy and Ken Kesey respectively; Carlson and Stratton provide key insights into Owens's notable career-long engagement with John Steinbeck. Others generate particularly rich new readings of Owen's novels. For example, in his luminous essay on *Bone Game* (1994), David Moore delineates how Owens "plays a literary bone game, pitting mystery against mystification to dramatize deadly colonial ironies" (179). Moore also brings important attention to how Owens's always-intertextual novels directly address a cohort of Native authors who were friends or mentors, including Momaday, Vizenor, Silko, Tapahonso, King, and Welch.

Most successful in this collection is the suite of three essays comprising the "California" section which fulfills the co-editors' aspiration to provide "a renewed center" for "diffuse Owens scholarship" (7). Together, these essays situate California as source, site, and struggle for Owens, whom Carlson aptly calls a "California-rooted Indigenous writer" (98). In doing so, they brilliantly surface the confluences of Owens's biographical, environmental, creative, and scholarly lives. Chris LaLonde, a foundational Owens scholar whose book, *Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns* (2002) remains vital, identifies the through-line of how Owens turned his "sharpest sight" to

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the still largely unmarked genocidal history at the heart of the so-called golden state. Through his attention to Owens's short stories—including "Your Name is Night," his last published fiction—LaLonde declares that "the genocidal history of California haunts him, haunts the state, should haunt us all" (86). Carlson's standout essay, "Louis Owens, California, and Indigenous Modernism," uses the frequent metaphor of the river in Owens's novels to tell the "indigenous understory of California" (108): "There is a river of colonial trauma, so to speak, that flows under the surface of the lives of many in California" (109). There are many facets to appreciate in this essay which so deftly comprehends Owens's dual role as Steinbeck and Native literary studies scholar. Foremost, though, is Carlson's articulation of Owens's "aesthetic of Indigenous modernism" (98). Through nimble analyses of *The Sharpest Sight* (1991) and *Bone Game*, Carlson makes the case that:

one of the underappreciated aspects of Owens's work is the way that he thought through the projects of various American modernists, including Steinbeck, in order to move toward a more inclusive aesthetic and an alternative form of historical memory, responsive to his experiences as a diasporic, indigenous person of mixed heritage in California (99).

Ultimately, Carlson details how, "in working through the problems of representing indigenous California, Owens was propelled further into an interrogation of what American Indian literature might become and how it might engage with other, more problematic stories embedded in the American canon, some of which he deeply loved" (98). Stratton's essay, "Reading Steinbeck, Reading California," similarly grounds his reading of Owens in an attentiveness to the worlds and words that Owens was raised and trained in, an important reminder of the distance covered from his first seeking out Scott Momaday at UC Santa Barbara only to be told that he did not teach a class in Native literature.<sup>1</sup> Stratton's essay provides a layered understanding of Owens's intellectual engagement with John Steinbeck's work, which, he reminds us, extended through his career. Stratton articulates how "Steinbeck's work was instrumental in opening a window for Owens to contextualize his unsettled experience in poverty, and to consider the empowering value of his own knowledge and experience" (128).

Yet too few essays in this collection make direct and relevant connections between the "here and now" and "then and there" of Indigenous literary studies. The resulting effect is at times a puzzling decoupling from the introduction's aspiration to generate new directions in Owens scholarship. Notably, I was puzzled why the co-editors did not confront more directly and definitively Owens's part in "a number of theory controversies" (3), for example the high-profile, often personal conflicts involving

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Sherman Alexie, and Gerald Vizenor, among others. The wounds of this time, exacerbated by how Owens was put in his posthumous place by some literary nationalism scholarship, have not healed and indeed underline Owens's lack of critical recognition today. Individual contributors take it up with mixed results, as it were: some essays seem from a different time, such as when we read Alan Velie's statement that "most of the great contemporary Indian writers are mixedblood: Momaday, Welch, Silko, Vizenor, Erdrich, and Owens..." (170). Or when Joe Lockard's discussion of scholarly divisiveness around the analytic category of "mixedblood" derails from its lack of familiarity with Indigenous Studies touchpoints and frameworks. There is still work to be done to situate Owens's approach *in his time* without veering into defensive or celebratory gestures, which several essays do here. What might we say, for instance, beyond the biographical, for why Owens, like others in his generation and before, focused on metaphors of blood? Chad Allen's crucial work would be helpful here in thinking through what he terms the "blood/land/memory complex" to consider Owens's work in relation, for example with Momaday's "memories in the blood" and Welch's "winter in the blood."

Elsewhere in the volume some contributors note an unfinished reckoning with the roots and reach of Owens's articulations of identity and ancestry. In a footnote, David Carlson writes that Owens's "own critical reflections on 'mixedblood' writing are much more complex and nuanced than they are often caricatured" (118); Billy J. Stratton powerfully underscores how

Owens's deeply personal and often poignant exploration of the complexities of his own family history, detailed in *Mixedblood Messages* and *I Hear the Train*, give voice to an enduring sense of duty to the active sense of presence and agency of all of his relations from Oklahoma to Mississippi. These are kin that he acknowledges and honors simply as "human beings who loved one other while crossing borders and erasing boundaries and, despite immeasurable odds, *surviving...*" (133).

John Gamber extends Stratton's attention to the complexity of these lived histories of diaspora and survivance by considering anew the critical debates over key analytics in Indigenous literary studies at the turn of the twenty-first century. These debates, often framed between tribal nationalism and cosmopolitanism, hinged on conceptions of identity (especially the use of the term "mixedblood"), belonging, and home. Gamber thoughtfully revisits an earlier essay, revising his understanding of how Owens's final novel, *Dark River* (1999), provides a nuanced reading of belonging, community, and modes of tribal national "naturalization" (270). As his essay aptly details, Owens's protagonist, Jake Nashoba, is a "cautionary antihero who demonstrates potential

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flexibilities in belonging and citizenship primarily by failing to recognize or partake of them" (270).

Gamber attends to how Nashoba's "confusion over the land, his desire to experience it alone in the broadest sense of the term, reflects a misconception that Owens himself experienced" (284). In doing so, Gamber opens the door to what I see as another missed opportunity in this collection: to place into conversation Owens's deep engagement with Indigenous epistemologies of the environment with contemporary Indigenous scholars such as Dina Gilio-Whitaker, Kyle Powys Whyte, and Robin Kimmerer. As Gamber points out, "Owens contended with these ideas of the solitary male human out in the wilderness long before he published *Dark River*" (285). Indeed, Owens turned to the "Burning the Shelter" story again and again, polishing its meanings like a stone. How might that story shape our readings of his novel *Wolfsong*, first written in 1975, and finally published in 1991? James Mackay views the ending of *Wolfsong* as "validating an essentially selfish romantic and spiritual vision in which redemption will happen through individualized, context-less spiritual renewal" (156). But I wonder how that reading edges against Owens's critiques of his protagonists? More broadly, how might essays in this volume respond to Owens's concern with land dispossession, treaties, and the "lie" of the Wilderness Act? Owens claimed that *Wolfsong* was a response to depredations in the North Cascades in the 1960s by the Bear Creek Mining Company, in violation of the Wilderness Act of 1964. Owens once said to me that "It's just like every other treaty that's been signed with the Native American." The infamous Hamms's beer sign that travels from *Wolfsong* to *Sharpest Sight* to *Dark River* (and which is insightfully discussed in Gamber's essay) was Owens's favored trope for the toxic brew of settler colonialism, masculinity, whiteness, and wilderness thinking. Like "Burning the Shelter," Owens turned again and again to this sign to serve as an unsettling sign of settler colonial epistemologies. That "motionless sign" (*Dark River* 48) of a lone white man forever paddling a canoe in a land emptied of Indigenous peoples, served for Owens as a powerful visual metaphor for the perils of being stuck in one place of thinking, in one way of being. Let's not consign Owens's creative and critical work to scholarship that does not *move* us.

Time wounds all heels. The book's powerful two-part coda, poems by Diane Glancy and Kim Blaeser, attests both to the long wake of grief and to the intergenerational continuity of the words and worlds Owens spun into being. May the dedication of *Other Destinies*—"for mixedbloods, the next generation"—serve as urgent invitation to revisit his work anew. His gracious and generous note to the future merits our wider

listening. In their introduction, Lee and Lockard acknowledge a still “wide-open field for Owens studies” (7). I could not agree more.

*Susan Bernardin, Oregon State University*

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Louis Owens shared this story of first meeting Momaday at UC Santa Barbara many times. Here is the version I was told: “I immediately went to see Momaday, because I was so excited to find out there was an American Indian teaching on campus, even though he was teaching American romanticism and Emily Dickinson. That was really my awakening. It was the first Indian novel I had ever heard of, and I asked Momaday what the other ones were, and he didn't know of any. So I started doing research on my own at that point. I started turning the library over, and I found other books by Indian writers.”

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**Brummett Echohawk with Mark R. Ellenbarger. *Drawing Fire: A Pawnee, Artist, and Thunderbird in World War II*. Edited by Trent Riley, foreword by Lt. Col. Ernest Childers. University Press of Kansas, 2018. 248 pp. ISBN: 0700627030.**

<https://kansaspress.ku.edu/978-0-7006-2703-5.html>

*Drawing Fire* immerses readers in a meticulously detailed sketch of war, specifically, of the U.S. invasion of Sicily and Italy from 1943 to 1944, through the eyes of decorated Pawnee veteran Brummett Echohawk, of the 178<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team, 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division: the “Thunderbirds.” Like many memoirs of famous Native Americans, Echohawk’s experiences, while written by himself, have been edited and presented by another, in this case Mark R. Ellenbarger, along with historical guidance from Trent Riley. Ellenbarger pitches *Drawing Fire* this way: “this work serves the purpose of revealing for the first time what it was like for these young Native Americans serving among other American Indians in the European theater” (xvi). In terms of structure and content, Ellenbarger explains that Echohawk completed “chapters” of the manuscript that would become this book and gave a typed copy of this manuscript, along with “an old intelligence case,” to Ellenbarger after Echohawk’s stroke in 2005. Taking this manuscript, Ellenbarger relied on “oral history interviews and personal notes” to embellish the contents of Echohawk’s own contributions (xv). In an epigraph to the first chapter, Ellenbarger states “*This was his [Echohawk’s] legacy, and the thought of embellishment could not and did not enter his mind*” (1, italics his). Presumably, Ellenbarger means to convey that the content of the chapters themselves derive from Echohawk’s own manuscript. Like many such curated and edited memoirs, however, the extent to which the reader encounters the unvarnished “authentic” voice of the author remains somewhat ambiguous. Yet—as I will discuss later—*Drawing Fire* conveys a sense of immediacy and authenticity.

In terms of content, the book focuses on Echohawk’s experiences of combat, with only brief references to his life before, even to military life prior to the transport ship headed to Sicily. The first seven chapters cover the invasion of Sicily, (July 9/10–August 17, 1943); the eighth chapter covers the invasion of Italy (Sept 9, 1943); and the final chapter covers the Battle of Anzio (January 22–June 5, 1944, ending in the capture of Rome). I want to make the point here that my review approaches this book from the perspective of a literary scholar rather than an historian. The historicity of the book will be a project for others. Ellenbarger, and presumably public historian Riley, do offer a gloss of helpful tidbits which contextualize names, dates, references, and context; this gloss adds particular points of interest that would connect well with other course material in an Indigenous Studies history or literature class. The book also contains a

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helpful glossary and timeline along with a *dramatis personae* at the end of the volume, making it easily searchable and useable. As an example of what I mean when I suggest this book's potential interest for a class, Echohawk mentions the Thunderbirds' own version of the common military expression FUBAR: for Native American troops, he says, some situations were "Fouled up like the Bureau of Indian Affairs" (29). Without lengthy explanation of the BIA's complicated relationship with Indian Country, Ellenbarger adds a note that offers readers this insight: one issue of the BIA's vocational journal contains an enthusiastically admiring and yet uncomfortably racist depiction of Echohawk. They note that he, like other Native American service members, was a great soldier because of an "'enthusiasm for fighting'" (footnote, 14). One imagines that this memoir, read alongside other primary and secondary sources, would come alive for students in such subtle moments as these.

As a literary text, *Drawing Fire* has its limitations. Not only is the narrative weighted with minutiae, but there are some syntactically awkward moments as well. As they begin the ground offensive in Sicily, for example, Echohawk notes: "Ahead I don't see Last Arrow's squad," and two phrases later, "Ahead I spot green shrubbery" (33). Indications like this of a light editorial hand on Ellenbarger's part conveys a sort of authenticity, a lack of polish that creates a disarmingly "real" voice. The reader senses that they are in the hands of an artist and a soldier, not a wordsmith. Syntactic uniformity, a didactic tone that exposes Pawnee and other Native American words, religious practices, cultural reference points, and verbal repetitions bog down an otherwise high-octane and rewarding first-person narrative about the ground invasion in Europe.

That being noted, the narrative is rendered almost entirely in the first-person and the present tense, so that it reads like a combat diary. It's a narrative characterized by a deluge of specifics meant to convey accuracy and attention to historical and contextual detail. Echohawk's interspersed comments give little sense of personality, but are nonetheless vulnerable and profoundly human. For instance, as the landing craft approaches their target destination, the beaches of Scoglitti, Echohawk muses, "I am not a brave man... got to control my fear... got to control my fear" (16). In addition to these brief glimpses of profoundly human emotion, the narrative offers insight into Echohawk's personality and values—moments that are, again, brief yet luminous. When they're advancing toward Scoglitti, worried that they've overshot their LZ (landing zone), Messerschmitts start streaking by overhead. Echohawk remarks that he knows his men have practiced squad tactics, but he is reluctant to simply shout orders, even in

this fear-drenched moment. "I'm not a hard-bitten sergeant," he says. "I explain, then lead" (22).

Of most interest are the glimpses of the man's internal tension, the tension between warrior and artist. Toward the beginning of the ground invasion of Sicily, Echohawk and his squad have taken a structure they call the Pillbox. Echohawk goes into the building, which had been used as a bunker, and hears the drone of insects. He looks down and realizes that he's standing "in a pool of blood specked with the flies" (40). He dashes out of the building, wipes off his boots, and struggles to regain his composure. "I want to be a brave warrior," he reminds himself, and to do so, he must "[n]ever look back... Yet there is an urge to draw this" (41). But he and his men move on. Later, they find a recently abandoned command post, and Echohawk finds a drafting table. He stuffs several sheets of drawing paper and pencils into his shirt as they move through (69). The urge to record, the urge to capture the aesthetic and emotional viscera of this terrible and alien experience, and the urge to kill—to be a warrior—drive this narrative forward.

For the reader, however, it is Echohawk's artistic vision that renders his experiences uniquely disturbing, uniquely gripping. At one point, Echohawk shoots an enemy machine gunner (it's not specified whether the man fights for the Italian or German army). Turning to confront the enemy's assistant gunner, Echohawk notes this new man has a gruesome flap of his ear hanging in his face; he also notices that the assistant gunner "has a fresh haircut with sideburns shaved" (95). The intimacy of such a remark—and the vulnerability of that image, the raw pink skin of a new shave under the blood and grime of a severed ear—is haunting. In addition to artistic language, *Drawing Fire* contains reproductions of many of Echohawk's drawings; the book is worth the purchase for these astonishing works alone.

Even more than offering an artist's perspective of a particularly brutal ground invasion, *Drawing Fire* explores the war through the eyes of Indigenous Americans. Echohawk points out that their original division insignia was the swastika; it was changed to the Thunderbird because of Nazi German appropriation of the swastika (10). The degradation of such an ancient and meaningful symbol is not just a point of interest but a poignant reminder of how little time elapsed between the genocidal push against Plains nations and the service of Plains nations citizens in the U.S. Armed Forces. At one point, Echohawk talks about a Pawnee tradition in which the leader of a war party recites a poem of inspiration, as his father had told him before he left. He recalls that his grandfather had given those same words to his father before he served in World

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War I; as a young warrior, Echohawk's grandfather had heard the same recitation "on the Great Plains" (46). In the same way that beauty and horror collide in the image of the swastika, so much history is packed into these brief glimpses of Echohawk's relationships to the Pawnee nation and to the United States.

There are moments of raw honesty, but a careful reader will also note where Echohawk, patriot and warrior, chooses silence. He mentions, but does not explain, the Oklahoma allotment system (43), just as he brushes over the complicated history between the Pawnee on the one hand and the Cheyenne and Arapahoe on the other. At one point, missing the Pawnee Powwow, Echohawk and his fellow Native American soldiers recite stories they have heard from different elders about their elders' war stories. Echohawk recalls a Pawnee man who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor during the conflict on the Plains (138). The Pawnee Scouts worked with the U.S. federal forces, while others' elders would have been fighting against them. Yet these differences are erased, subsumed by the later shared history that forced their people to Oklahoma. He demonstrates common cause, affinity, and deep friendship with his Cheyenne and Arapahoe fellow service members and elides their complicated history between enmity and an alliance of loss. A patriot who relays his patrilineal heritage of war—fighting for the U.S. *and* against—he declines to talk about the invisible time period between the latter and the former.

Another intriguingly light touch appears in Echohawk's characterization of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. At one point, Echohawk calls the 45<sup>th</sup> a group of "cowboys, oilfield roughnecks, sunup-to-sundown farmers, and top-notch boxers" mustered to federal service, hardy and "good ol' boys at heart" (143). As evidence, he recalls a night when they were stationed in Boston, in 1942 (before deploying to Sicily). Echohawk describes how "we" got passes into town for a night out, although in the rest of the narrative he carefully avoids the personal pronoun so that the reader is uncertain what, if any, role Echohawk himself played in the events. In a bar called the Silver Dollar, a group of tall men from the company—Echohawk describes exemplars as "a 6'4" Sioux Indian, another a 6'6" Pawnee"—walk into the bar. A woman customer screams that there are "'Indi-yans!'" and a fight breaks out between cops, MPs, civilians, and the service members. He describes the "lively" fight, but also mentions that a nightclub "caught fire" and several people died that night. He is here referring to the Coconut Grove fire, in which nearly five hundred people perished. Concluding that abruptly violent story, he says that the 45<sup>th</sup> was indeed a "rough bunch" (143). From the narrative framing of the story, Echohawk seems to indicate that the rowdy bar fight he and his companions engaged in was somehow linked to the deadly Grove fire, although this does not

historically seem to be the case. It is unclear what his purpose is in this moment, unless it is to cement in his readers' minds the relatively less violent, racially-motivated conflict in which he was embroiled with the far more violent accidental fire, to suggest the complexity of Indigenous experience in wartime.

There is evidence throughout his narrative that Echohawk is crafting a particular image of himself as a warrior. He is careful to flavor scenes of combat with references to fear, to a desire to be brave—to the human attributes of war. Yet depictions of his own and other American troops' actions in battle are never depicted with brutality and savagery. He even, for the most part, avoids using slurs military personnel were encouraged to use for enemy combatants. One of the few times in which the narrator refers to German soldiers as "Krauts" comes after Echohawk finds the remains of a second lieutenant he knew (150). Shortly after this scene, Echohawk finds one of the most heartbreaking scenes in the memoir—a soldier from C Company and a part-Choctaw medic still in the process of unwinding bandages to treat him, both dead and slumped where they sit. German soldiers had shot down at them from a half-track with machine pistols. "A rage churns" in Echohawk as he witnesses this scene (156); his sketch of the scene is fantastically rendered, simple and devastating (155). Then, after he is wounded near Anzio, he survives the night while German soldiers ransack the belongings of his fallen companions; the next morning, crawling out to the road, he thinks "*Damn Kraut-head bastards*" (204). This is an understandable rage. Almost no other indications of rage, fury, anger, or any other form of violent emotion color his depictions of combat.

Instead, Echohawk's primary mode of communicating interpersonal interaction is humor. Even in cases where the reader might detect a hint of anger, Echohawk meticulously conveys it with a generous coating of sly fun or witty repartee. In response to an annoying (white) grunt who marvels to Echohawk that "Indians" are a "'kinda warrior-soldier,'" Echohawk replies dryly that he just "'shake[s] with patriotism'" (43). Later, the battalion medic, Medicine Man, commends their battalion for a successful night raid, but does so mocking U.S. cinematic depictions of American Indians. He describes how, in the movies, they never fight at night, but "'you 'skins did all right!'"—particularly considering they weren't in need of a shave, "'wearing a Sioux war bonnet, Kiowa war shirt, Cheyenne leggings, Cherokee moccasins, and Navajo jewelry'" as Hollywood stereotypes, usually performed by white actors, suggest (86). In this scene, the men guffaw, a release from the tension of the day at the expense of white American stereotypes. In another scene, Last Arrow (Potawatomi) and San Antone (Comanche) fake an attempted scalping to scare a German prisoner, both exposing

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pervasive racist stereotypes and providing a moment of levity at the expense of a German captive, but furthering U.S. military aims (166-7).

As combat intensifies, Echohawk's narrative moves more swiftly through time. In late 1943, he is wounded and sent to the 33<sup>rd</sup> General Hospital in North Africa. He goes AWOL in order to return to combat in Italy (185). Shortly afterwards, he returns to active duty—just in time for the assault on Anzio, an important target on the way to Rome. Anzio, Echohawk says, is “an inferno” (187). During an all-out attack on “The Factory” outside Anzio, Echohawk and eleven others are gunned down. “[W]e have been slaughtered,” he says, with characteristic brevity and pathos (199). Last Arrow is killed in this onslaught, and the death of his close friend haunts the remainder of the narrative. From Anzio, Echohawk spends most of the rest of the campaign in a military hospital, so he offers little more than a historical overview of the offensive from the time between February 16<sup>th</sup> and May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1944. He concludes his memoir with a brief homecoming scene. Furloughed in 1944, Echohawk is greeted in Oklahoma with a ceremony in which he and two other Pawnee Thunderbirds are given a warrior's song. This scene, like the summarized narrative about the end of the campaign, is in the past tense. He concludes his memoir with the image of the Thunderbirds saluting an American flag, a flashback to bayonet charges in Sicily and Italy, and the “sweet call of a bobwhite” (215). The emotional vibrancy of this last scene characterizes the book as a whole. It is short, meticulously detailed about combat experience, but brief and suggestive in its treatment of its characters. This memoir would be enhanced by being read alongside other materials that offer historical context and draw out its evocative hints and references. On its own, *Drawing Fire* entertains and inspires. And readers may learn a little along the way. At the very least, it is a gift to know that this book, recounting the memoirs of a Thunderbird and offering several of Echohawk's stunning drawings, has made its way to our hands.

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**Jake Skeets. *Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers*. Milkweed Editions, 2019. 96 pp. ISBN: 9781571315205.**

<https://milkweed.org/book/eyes-bottle-dark-with-a-mouthful-of-flowers>

The English epigraph to Jake Skeets' debut, National Poetry Series Award winning collection *Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers* reads: "From here, there will be beauty again." The first word of this sentence indicates movement as well as inheritance. The second indicates the present condition in a specific location—here. The following three words indicate a state of being at some point in the future, but serve less as a prediction than as an assertion, as if by stressing beauty (the sixth word, the thing itself, the subject of the sentence), Skeets might bring it into being. But he will only be able to do so by acknowledging everything that came before, which he makes clear with the final word—"again": a word which simultaneously points to both the past (i.e. there has been beauty before) and the future as conceived in the present. In literally rounding out the sentence (i.e. from here might begin the sentence *again*), this final word indicates the cyclical nature of time, and specifically, its regenerative function. It is therefore *not* the final word—there is no punctuating period to terminate the sentence—and the utterance thus curls backward (or forward) upon itself to repeat ad infinitum.

The book likewise moves in a circle, for Skeets pulls the epigraph from the collection's last poem—one of the "In the Fields" series—which in turn, lifts lines from D. A. Powell's "Boonies." Powell's poem ends with the lines "we all are beautiful at least once. / And, if you'd watch over me, we can be beautiful again." In the epigraph, Skeets edits Powell's words to emphasize place—the setting of the collection—which becomes a fully embodied presence throughout the course of the poems:

This place is White Cone, Greasewood, Sanders,  
White Water, Bread Springs, Crystal, Chinle, Nazlini,  
Indian Wells, where all muddy roads lead from Gallup.  
The sky places an arm on the near hills. (4)

This place is "Drunktown" (1). This place is "*Indian Eden*" (1). This place is "split in two" (1). "Clocks ring out as train horns" (1), snippets of description crackle from the police radio—"Native American male. Early twenties. About 6'2", 190 pounds. / Has the evening for a face" (61)—and newspaper headlines in "The Indian Capital of the World" read:

man hit by train  
man found dead possibly from exposure in a field  
woman hit by semitruck attempting to cross freeway





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In this case, the shape of the poem itself seems to move—in time—with the landscape which it describes and, even as human presences blend back into the environment through the course of the collection, so the environment itself becomes a human presence.

Skeets manages to make geological words like “monocline,” “diatrema,” and “laccolith” ring with a humanoid sexiness in the poem “Maar,” which spills over with the fecundity of the earth. Geological, biological, climatological, and cosmological elements sing a pulsing lovesong to one another where “buffaloburr veins around siltstone / mounds on the monocline” and “flow rock smooths over into oar / cutleaf cornflower overgrown,” where “bulb liquid overflows into grasses,” and “blue flax left as moans / that foam into the sky” (28).

Like the elements in “Maar” the poems throughout this collection speak back and forth to one another. When the speaker in “Buffalograss” siphon[s] doubt,” from his lover’s throat, he recalls not only “his cousin trying to show him how to siphon” in “Siphoning” (25), but also the “Gasoline Ceremony” of the “boy’s first time watching porn. His mouth turned exhaust pipe” (26), and his “Virginity,” which he loses with “Clouds in his throat” (27). The reader recalls that “*Drunk is the punch. Town a gasp*” (1) and that the two boys at the “Afterparty” hunker into one another and “tank down beer” (7). The act of sucking air recalls all of the teeth in the poems, the open mouths, the whispers, the breaths sucked away. It highlights the constant metanarration about poetry itself and the concern Skeets has with the way things are said. The two “In the Fields” poems and “Comma” come to mind, but especially “Red Running into Water,” in which Skeets breaks down the pronunciation of specific Navajo diacriticals by using violently dynamic images that recall the poem “Naked” in which Skeets likewise uses Diné Bizaad. This is the language with which he also begins and ends the collection, the final salutation repeated four times—stacked one on top of the other—recalling “the creation story where Navajo people journeyed four worlds” (24). But even this story refuses the mythic label so often lobbed at Native America, and opts instead for a narrative of multiplicity and humor. “Some Navajo people say there are actually / five worlds,” Skeets writes, “Some say six” (24). The people disagree through dialogue in the present tense and pull the past along with them. Every “retelling”—every repetition—is a little bit different in this lovesong.

Images repeat themselves as well within the book, which is full of bottles, bones, and beetles. Full of boys trying to find their way among “the truck and the char and everything else” (16), boys who might “unlearn... how to hold a fist” by holding a hand

(76), boys who might learn “to be a man by loving one” (36). These poems, and the boys and men within these poems, must—of necessity—speak back and forth to one another because of the ever-present violence that threatens to split them all apart.

Settler colonialism makes myriad inroads within Skeet’s collection where the landscape’s economic exploitation mirrors the generational poverty, violence, and alcoholism that *plague* the Heart of Indian Country. In the first section of “Let There Be Coal,” “The boys load the coal. Inside them, a generator station opens its eye. A father sips coal slurry from a Styrofoam cup” (21). In the third “In the Fields” poem, “Pipelines entrench” behind a lover’s teeth, and the speaker hears “a crack in his lung like burning coal” (46). In “Truck Effigy,” a man “swallows transmission and gasket,” and “an eye alters into alternator” (13). In “Comma,” a toddler sleeps, “fetaled in big snow / beneath I-40” (48), and in “American Bar,” the speaker proclaims “this town will kill you,” its “steel talons thread[ing] raw wool into sidewalks” (69). In making the environmental degradation of the colonized space explicit, Skeets explains how

train  
tracks  
and  
mines  
split  
gallup  
in two (22)

Then he adds an aural image to the mix of the visuals of concrete, coal, and steel. After the speaker in “Glory” sees a young boy get hit by a train, the phrasing mimics the wheels on the rails, first in “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t/ know. I don’t know,” and again when “it sounds like a river,” “ariverariverariverariverariverariverariver” (62). These onomatopoeic phrases echo the “rail spike teeth” which “tsk tsk tsked” in the title poem, the train tracks telling the listening boy that they “would catch him if he would just only just only just only just only / jump” (60). Readers can hear settler colonialism chugging into this place upon the myth of progress, upon the empty promises of forever-expansion, upon capitalist industry hammered into the earth.

These fragmentary scenes lead us to reflect on the fact that Gallup, New Mexico is named after a railroad paymaster. The town reeks of colonization and is perhaps best known to white Americans as a setting for Hollywood Westerns, a stop on Route 66, or perhaps as the famous locale of the celebrity-frequented El Rancho Motel. Skeets alludes to all of these conceptions of this place as “white space” which mauls remains like dogs (11) or else provides a place for scavengers like crows and letters to do the

same (58). It is “white space” on which the poetic persona arranges his “father’s boarding school soap bones” in order to call the arrangement “a poem,” and “white space” on which the face of the persona’s uncle “becomes a mirror,” until a

train horn

punch shatters

the mirror

frees him from the page

my uncle leaps from the (56)

Here, the stanza breaks off mid-thought, and the facing page—a blank page—thus becomes the white space from which the uncle has left, or rather, *is leaping*. He exists in the present tense, moving beyond the “white screen,” “before” which he stands (52). Skeets’s use of the word “before” resonates in this instance with multiple meanings. The speaker sees his uncle *before* (prior to) seeing the white space which frames him; his uncle stands in the landscape *before* it becomes (prior to it becoming) a colonized white space; his uncle stands *before* (in front of) the white screen which erases the landscape—the context—in which he and the speaker have both existed and in which they both continue to exist.

These lines appear in the poem “Drift(er),” which comes “*after* Benson James, Drifter Route 66, Gallup, New Mexico, 06/30/79 by *Richard Avedon*,” the photograph which Skeets uses as the cover image of his collection. The photograph itself brings to mind the pages in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* in which the repeated and ever-increasingly smudged phrases “I do not always feel colored” and “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” face one another across the spine of the book (Rankine 52-3). The utterances, which look as if they are stenciled onto brick, seem to reference *Citizen*’s own cover image, a photograph of David Hammons’s art pice, *In the Hood* (1993), which is comprised of a hood ripped from a hoodie and mounted on a white wall. But even this photograph includes a shadow which Avedon’s photograph of Skeets’s uncle does not. The observer of Avedon’s photograph, therefore, does not know from which direction the light comes. This throws into question the time of day, the time of year, and every other marker of setting, the photographer effectively erasing everything but the singular subject, and thus setting the subject adrift in a sea of whiteness.

Skeets argues through his poetry that this subject—his uncle, Benson James, the “man with shoulder-length hair / dollar bills fisted”—cannot be caught in a camera’s eye,

cannot be fixed in a space made up of erasure. The man moves beyond the framing device—a white sheet of paper taped to the side of a building—and beyond the lens (and the photographer behind the lens) that attempts to fix the man there:

See his lips how still  
 how horizon  
 how sunset [...] (52)

The man's face encompasses—and is encompassed, in turn, by—the landscape. Skeets frees him from the blank white space by placing him in context. To be liberated from "white space" means to return to the landscape. This book is a re-membering of the past—a past within the whole frame, the landscape writ large and all-inclusive. As Skeets has written of his book in "Drifting: A Cover Image Story": "I want to add what was made invisible. I want to bring the light back so we can have our shadows again. To give us back the morning so we can have the night."

The word "still" (qtd. above) crops up repeatedly throughout the collection, but it always refers to survival through an ever-changing present—a living continuity that is never stagnating, never immobile. These poems are not nostalgic. They vibrate with queer desire, the words coupling together in the landscape to make context for movement among them. Read "beardtongue," "pronghorn," "pigweed," "ricegrass," "snakeweed" (20), "Eyeteeth," "snowmelt," "tumbleweed" (76). Before "railroad" (45), "pipeline" (46), "sledgehammer" (21), "Drunktown" (1), is "larksupr and beeplant on the meadow" (28), is "sandbur" (30), "thunderhead" (31), "horseweed" (6), "horsetail" and "buffalograss" (39), is "the letter t vibrating in cottonwoods" (39). The reader can hear the "heartbeat" of the speaker like a "brushfire" (17) as it burns through this landscape of doublewords, a landscape which is always in a state of becoming. All of history piles into the present, and the speaker points out that it is "such a terrible beauty to find ourselves beneath things/ such a terrible beauty to witness men ripen" (68). Of course the word "ripen" implies the idea of cyclical time and the seasons, and Skeets complicates the idea of backsliding in such a schema by repeating Powell's "*We could be boys together,*" but adding the word "finally" (76). He suggests that to "unyoke," to "undress," to "unlearn" might provide a template for moving forward (76).

Skeets has been watching over the world from which he comes and is remaking it in the image of those who came before him, thus remaking it in his own image and in the images of those that will come after. The form of this book does not match its function; the form *is* its function. It does what it says will be done—the past, the present, and the future couple into doublewords and blend, couple and blend. The landscape and the people of the landscape—the people *from* the landscape—couple and blend, couple

and blend. The book becomes its own self-fulfilling proficy: it makes beauty again, from here

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**Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, eds. *A World of Many Worlds*. Duke University Press, 2018. 232 pp. ISBN: 9781478002956.**

<https://www.dukeupress.edu/a-world-of-many-worlds>

The responsibility for environmental collapse cannot be uniformly distributed – it is glaringly obvious which geographical regions and social segments benefited historically from the processes it set in motion – its consequences will be much more so: ... [it] points to a shared catastrophe. (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski, 173)

The Anthropocene marks a new geological epoch in which the planet is predominantly shaped by “the detritus, movement, and actions of humans” (Davis and Todd 762). As the result of “extractivism,” “the accelerated extraction of natural resources to satisfy a global demand for minerals and energy to provide what national governments consider economic growth” (de la Cadena and Blaser 2), there is an impending “shared catastrophe.” It is marked by quickly increasing and converging ecological crises due to which the possibility of the destruction of life on Earth is looming. However, the admission of culpability that holds humanity responsible serves to mask more than it reveals (Kirby 2018).<sup>1</sup> In response, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd (Métis/otipemisiw) ask: “if the Anthropocene is already here, the question then becomes, what can we do with it as a conceptual apparatus that may serve to undermine the conditions that it names?” (Davis and Todd 763).

Where one might call this *the end of the world*, the essays comprising *A World of Many Worlds*, productively invite us to consider the Anthropocene as *the end of worlds*, or “worlds whose disappearance was assumed at the outset of the Anthropocene,” as editors Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser write (2). While a “shared catastrophe,” it is also one that is felt unevenly: the Anthropocene disproportionately threatens large swaths of the Global South, endangered animal and plant species, Indigenous peoples, and marginalized communities of colour (both urban and rural) in ways that affluent colonizing communities in the Global North have purposefully ignored. Rather than linger in the space of critique, however, *A World of Many Worlds* moves into a space of critical affirmation: how might we create a heterogenous world of many worlds that does not require the destruction of other worlds as its mode of operation?<sup>2</sup>

Centering a notion of *political ontology* based on “the presumption of divergent worldings constantly coming about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings, and interruptions” (6), the book is organized around three differing yet co-constitutive

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orientations. These orientations aim to work within, against, and beyond the ethico-onto-epistemic theory-practices of modernity. This is of double(d) significance as modernity is both deeply entangled with the ways in which this contemporary moment came about, as well as collusive in shaping the ways that responses to the crisis are articulated and practiced: “many practices allegedly intended to save the planet continue to destroy it” (3).

As a world of many worlds is *always already* happening, the first orientation reworks and re-opens an imaginary of politics such that the possibility of a world of many worlds might be thought. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos states in “Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges,” “the critical task ahead cannot be limited to generating alternatives... it requires an alternative thinking about alternatives” (63). Towards these ends, in the first chapter of *A World of Many Worlds*, Marilyn Strathern opens up the question of knowledge in the anthropological tradition by asking if the concept of “knowledge” could be a means to knowledge through its doubling, duplication, and demarcation. Applying similar logics to relationality, she suggests that understandings of “relation” shape what relations are possible and possibly understood. Across encounters of difference (such as those that abound in the Anthropocene), incommensurable heterogeneities proliferate, and not-knowing becomes an important partial way-of-relating. Along similar lines, in the second chapter, Alberto Corsín Jiménez offers a consideration of the ways in which “modern knowledge is essentially a trap to itself” (56), caught in a relation of (fore)closure that prevents it from responding to (or even grasping) the particular challenges of our contemporary moment. Leaning into “trap” as a concept, Jiménez explores the ways in which art, architecture, and social movement organization can operate as traps that both host and hold hostage. These processes “capture, caution, and captivate” relations as they are designed in relation to their creators, their targets, and their desired futures-to-come (75).

The second orientation explores political ontology as a field of both study and intervention. Extending Jiménez’s notion of modern thinking as a “trap” in the third chapter, Isabelle Stengers enquires into Western modern science specifically and the ways in which science cannot be wholly separated from an imperialist project that maintains its hegemony in multiplicitous and pervasive ways. Importantly, she suggests that this is more than “only a question of the long entrenched life of colonial thought habits” (95). Instead, possibilities of science being otherwise and dialoguing across difference require that ontology be (allowed to be) more than the object of epistemology. The very possibility of ontological politics in this encounter requires that

scientists (and those who inherit their legacies; see Higgins and Tolbert) actively engage in a form of “slow science” which attends to the embodied sense of fright that comes with taking seriously other-than-human agency as well as the ways in which the modernist imperative “do not regress” (i.e., a teleology of progress) that we possess also possesses us (see also Stengers 2018). Digging deeper into the importance of epistemologically slowing down modernity in the fourth chapter, Helen Verran explores not only how modern subjects should treat their own ways-of-knowing but also how modern subjects could approach knowledge existing beyond their own. Particularly, she asks what encounters are possible between Western modernity and Indigenous ways-of-knowing-and-being by exploring what can be learned from the development and delivery of a Yolngu Aboriginal Australian mathematics curriculum. She analyses the politics and possibilities of working differing ways-of-knowing-and-being together while keeping them apart. Specifically, Verran suggests a double(d) practice of “bad faith” and “good faith.” Of the former, the knower remains hyper-vigilant of their own knowledge practices, “refusing to go along with what everyone knows” (114). Of the latter, there is a trust that we know what we know and how we know, and that those we encounter do as well. Verran ponders what might allow for the possibility of transformative coming-to-know in which the *there-then* of knowledge is simultaneously maintained and dissolved in pursuit of a practice of knowing together *here-now*.

The third orientation of *A World of Many Worlds* sets out that political ontology is “a modality of analysis and critique that is permanently concerned with its own effects as a worlding practice” (6). In the fifth chapter, John Law and Marianne Lien rejoin Stengers in examining the ways in which science maintains hegemony through examining the multiplicity of ways that networked discourses about Norwegian fish farming and fly fishing converge and diverge. Importantly, in revealing how modernity renders itself singular(izing) in this context (e.g., how escaped farmed salmon caught by tourists trouble a “pristine” Nature/Culture divide), they challenge modernity as monolithic since there are resources for resistance that can be found within it. In chapter six, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski take up the question of the Anthropocene more explicitly (e.g., addressing a whole page to the symptoms of our epoch). They suggest that we are facing—and must face—this destruction that is waged in the name of progress even if it is not often named as such. Further, after Stengers, the call to not regress is ever present. They suggest a bifurcated new worlding that accounts for and is accountable to the ways in which this epoch could never be relegated to the “anthropos.” There are those who are responsible for the Anthropocene (i.e., “the humans” [181], having denied both the Earth and their belonging to it) and those who must live with its effects (i.e., “the Terrans” [181], other-



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than-humans and humans Othered by Western humanism). As this new dualism becomes the terms of refusal, Viveiros de Castro and Danowski urge those identifying and identifiable as “humans” (i.e., subjects of modernity and Western humanism) to learn from “Terrans”: particularly from Indigenous imaginations that have “already started to think the reduction or slowing down of their Anthropocene” (190).<sup>3</sup>

As a whole, the collection is important in numerous ways. Perhaps most significantly is how it responds to one of the central ironies of the ontological turn – manifestations of responsibility to the other-than-human are often not always able to respond to those othered by Western humanism. The first decade of the ontological turn is marked by calls and efforts to reconsider the primacy of the Nature/Culture divide, which is deeply entangled with the (re)production of the Anthropocene. However, it bears remembering Todd’s (2016) critique that the ontological turn might be but another expression and enactment of (neo-)colonialism should we not attend to the ways in which Western theories, including more progressive ones at this turn (e.g., post-humanism, new materialisms, science and technology studies, or STS), run the risk of subsuming, subsuming, or suturing over Indigenous ways-of-knowing-in-being (see also Watts 2013). In outlining the purpose of *A World of Many Worlds*, the editors expand:

To open up the possibility of a world where many worlds fit, it is not enough for the Anthropocene to disrupt the nature and culture divide that makes the world one. Rather, the practices that render the Anthropocene visible – as well as proposals for survival – must also disrupt such a divide (15).

Stated otherwise, the ontological turn reproduces (albeit differently) logics and practices of power if those doing the work cannot learn to listen to those who have been most affected by said systems (e.g., Indigenous peoples). Particularly, the Anthropocene is becoming an incomprehensible nightmare for those who have been doling out dread and destruction for years through practices that are at the intersections of colonialism and capitalism, as well as those affected who are now denouncing louder than ever these means of destruction. An inherent paradox is present therein: “could the moment of the Anthropocene bring to the fore the possibility of the pluriverse?” (de la Cadena and Blaser 17). The Anthropocene is a reckoning without a road map: we must learn to respond differently to the deeply situated and contingent project of refusing the one world which caused this destruction and slowly, yet urgently (re)open the possibility of a world of many worlds.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Relevant here are conversations about *when* the Anthropocene began. General consensus is that that Anthropocene began in the 1950s with geological markers such as rising “carbon dioxide levels, mass extinctions, and the widespread use of petrochemicals, ... and radioactivity left from the detonation of atomic bombs” (Davis and Todd 762-63). However, others invite consideration of the multiplicitous moments in which Indigenous ecologies (i.e., humans, other-than-humans, and more-than-humans) were at risk of extinction from “Man” with planetary consequences (e.g., the “Orbis spike” of 1610 [Lewis and Maslin 2015] in which atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels drastically dropped as a result of the genocide of Indigenous peoples) (see also Yussof 2018). What distinguishes the contemporary moment is that “the colonizers are threatened[,] as the worlds they displaced and destroyed when they took over what they called *terra nullius*” are at risk (de la Cadena and Blaser 3).

<sup>2</sup> There is much to be critical of, namely the way(s) in which *all* humans are held equally responsible under the signifier that is “anthropos,” which gestures towards a universalizing image of “Man.” Response is then framed outside of or beyond the capitalist and (neo-)colonial relations of power through which the Anthropocene came about, such that “Man” is off the hook for the material and cultural erasure of difference (Davis and Todd 2016; Whyte 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Importantly, this is not to make the essentializing suggestion that there are no Indigenous humanities (e.g., Battiste et al. 2005) or that Indigenous peoples cannot (problematically or strategically) occupy the position of subject of modernity. Rather, the “world-forming, world destroying aliens, the Europeans” (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski 190-91) are more often than not the usual suspects of the Anthropocene, or those who are not *with* the “Terrans” and Gaia (i.e., the Earth) but rather against them. The point made is that there is a distinct need to learn from Indigenous philosophies and practices, whose present holds futurities in which the extractivist project of settler colonialism is no longer a primary force that shapes what possibilities are possible.

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**Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue. *Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive*. Edited by Elizabeth Yeoman, University of Manitoba Press, 2019. 280 pp. ISBN: 9780887558405**

<https://uofmpress.ca/books/detail/nitinikiau-innusi>

In *Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive*, Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue shares the intimate details of her lifelong activism, advocacy, and deep love for Innu people, lands, and culture. In my estimation, there really is no better name for the memoir than *Nitinikiau Innusi* because it captures the extent of love, respect, and reciprocity that a steadfast and challenging journey of protecting lands, waters, and peoples requires. The memoir illustrates the range of experiences and emotions that Penashue confronts and endures while advocating for Innu lands; at the same time, the memoir also makes clear that these lands form the author's sense of identity. The most salient theme throughout the book is the conception of land not as an object or commodity but as the central being through which all is connected and made possible. Indeed, Penashue's activism and advocacy for Innu culture is intimately wrapped up with how the land is identified and what the land does. People are not separate from the land; rather people work either for or against the land, which makes Penashue's memoir and activism a touchstone text for land protection and Indigenous resistance.

To understand how Penashue's advocacy works with Innu culture and land protection, it is important to examine how she understands the impact of settler colonialism and land development. Many of Penashue's entries both touch upon and also rely on an understanding of the importance of land as *nutshimit*. Early on, editor Elizabeth Yeoman flags the importance of *nutshimit*, as well as the complications in adequately translating it. *Nutshimit* has been translated into English as "in the bush," which may also recall words or concepts in English such as "wilderness." However, Innu leader Tanien (Daniel) Ashwini understands these translations as reductive and unable to capture what the word actually means in Innu, which is more expansively an expression of being-at-home-in-the-world or land (xxvii). The understanding of the world *land* in English faces the same issue, with land largely being reduced to its noun status and not as a site or process of becoming—a verb—as it is within many Indigenous philosophies, including Innu. Other conventions of English also pose issues in understanding land or *nutshimit* precisely because English relies on inanimate nouns to refer to animate and agential beings, such as land (Kimmerer). This often imposes an understanding that humans are the beings that *do* things to land and land is a passive recipient of human action. This could not be farther from the truth and from the

understanding that Penashue so consistently expresses. Keeping the land, the people, the culture, the Innu alive is a reciprocal process of all the beings living on the land. Penashue describes nutshimit as home, as the place where she and Innu culture, custom, and being are most alive and most authentically related. Nutshimit, in some ways, is the lifeline and lifeblood of what it means to be Innu and protecting nutshimit is the possibility of continuance for Innu peoples and culture. In describing pressures from dominant Canadian society to have Innu children formally educated in Canadian schools instead of spending time in nutshimit learning the land, Penashue writes,

yet they learn so much there: how to find their way, how to use an axe and a gun, when it's safe to walk on ice, so many things. Innu-aitun and Innu-pakasiun—Innu ways of doing things, independence and survival. The women teach the girls how to fish and get boughs for the tent and set snares. The men teach the boys to canoe and hunt. We have to teach them our culture—they need to know who they are (7).

Penashue's concern illustrates simply and clearly the complex entanglement of who the Innu are with the land itself. The land is not just a resource for survival, but also the basis for a particular way of being-in-the-world *through relationship*. What is more, Penashue resists the dominant Canadian culture's imposition of ways of knowing or being-in-the-world by advocating for what Innu children need to know—how to survive on the land. What it means to be Innu cannot be separated from what is necessary and useful to know to be able to exist and flourish in nutshimit.

This is further addressed when Penashue begins her campaign of advocacy for the land, and nutshimit in particular, against the military campaigns of bomb testing and low-flying jet drills. These war games include the excursions of other European powers that essentially rent the air space/land from Canada for these destructive purposes. Yet, as Penashue explains,

[t]he military don't understand what they're doing to us. They're destroying everything we have—our land, our rivers, our animals, our happiness. Don't they care? So many people are crying in their hearts. We can never relax [...] They just point at the map—with one wave of a hand they decide where to go. To them it's an empty space. They don't care about the people hunting here, teaching their children how to live, or about the animals. They have no idea what this means to us or even whether anybody is here at all (17-18).

Central to the conflict between the Innu and dominant Canadian society are conflicting worldviews and conceptions of land. Penashue describes explicitly the way the land is viewed and understood by the military as a means to an end, an "empty space" as she puts it: something uninhabited by people who matter (including animals and the land

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itself that suffer from the same stresses as their human counterparts), something that can be used for the purposes of practicing and perfecting war-making.

This understanding of land and *nutshimit* as the heart of Innu culture and people is also reflected in the types of resistance and activism that Penashue and other Innu women craft in response to the threats to their existence and their lands. Penashue writes repeatedly of her campaigns to demonstrate to others—Canada and the world—what the land means to Innu peoples and to the future and continuance of Innu culture. This activism largely took the form of walks and marches, mostly composed of Innu women, to demonstrate the love of land and the unity of purpose in defending Innu lands and *nutshimit* from the destruction of dominant forces.

When I walk in *nutshimit* with my people, I'm showing how much we respect Innu culture, the natural world, and all the living things. I want people to know we won't give up our land. We won't allow the government to damage it with mines and dams and bombs. If I was elected to the Innu nation or the band council, I'd put all my energy into this and I'd look after the people walking in *nutshimit* (130).

Throughout her writings, Penashue demonstrates an expert understanding of resistance to the dominant forces of destruction that the Canada government poses to Innu existence. Her campaigns of marches represent and demonstrate a counterpoint to the disrespect the military levels upon *nutshimit* through awareness of and attention to the peaceful ways Innu coexist with and live with the land. Penashue's marches reinforce the fact that the Innu culture and *nutshimit* are mutually co-forming as well as mutually endangered. Penashue understands the severity of the threat of the military trainings: they are blowing up the land to destroy the Innu. As the land and Innu are not separate, a threat to the land is a threat to all that the land encompasses, all that the land is.

A final observation about the memoir is the honesty and vulnerability that Penashue shares in her exhausting fight and advocacy for her people, her culture, and her lands. Penashue does not just tell us the stories of her and her community's victories, but of the everyday challenges and exhausting struggles of doing this work. She shares her tears, her sorrows, her anxieties, her frustration, her anger, and her fight to hold on with all of her responsibilities as a relative, a mother, a grandmother, a sister, a caretaker, a provider, and so much more. She speaks of the delights in being with her family and the exhaustion that care work requires. She speaks of the isolation and depression she feels by being unsupported in much of this work by her friends,

comrades, allies, and her own band council as well as the supreme joys of coming together when it works out.

I cannot really express what an honor it was to journey with Penashue through her diaries and entries. I felt like I was listening to a friend and learning such incredible wisdom from a dear elder. As Esselen writer and scholar Deborah Miranda states,

[c]ulture is ultimately lost when we stop telling stories of who we are, where we have been, how we arrived here, what we once knew, what we wish we knew; when we stop our retelling of the past, our imagining of the future, and the long, long task of inventing an identity every single second of our lives[...] Culture is lost when we neglect to tell our stories, when we forget the power and craft of storytelling (xiv).

Here, Miranda argues that culture is cradled in our stories and kept alive through the steadfast telling and retelling of our stories. In her own story, Penashue chronicles her life and advocacy for Innu land, life, and culture. In doing so, she keeps the land, which is bound up and interwoven with Innu culture, alive. For readers, her stories can kindle the flame of hope and resistance in many the hearts of other land and water protectors. We need everyone to fight for the life of the land, for the future of earth, and for the flourishing of all peoples, who—whether they acknowledge it or not—are land.

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**Laura Harjo. *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity*. The University of Arizona Press, 2019. 303 pp. ISBN: 0816541108.**

<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/spiral-to-the-stars>

Laura Harjo's *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity* (2019) is a loving and insightful book that innovates pathways toward bright futures for Indigenous communities without diminishing or downplaying the grim complexities of settler-colonial hegemony in the contemporary world. Harjo is an associate professor of community and regional planning at the University of New Mexico, and she was also appointed the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's Ambassador to the United Nations. In *Spiral to the Stars*, she proposes four concrete intersections of theory and practice that can guide Mvskoke futurity: "este-cate sovereignty, community knowledge, collective power, and emergence geographies" (24-25). Each of these tools draws upon traditional and contemporary Mvskoke knowledges and life practices, as well as Harjo's own training in geography and community planning, to offer vectors of transformative praxis that are both theoretically sophisticated and also accessible for non-academic readers. (This accessibility is vital given that *Spiral to the Stars* emerges from specific conversations with Mvskoke communities and aims to help people in these communities create realistic pathways toward better futures.)

One of Harjo's central arguments is that Mvskoke communities "already have what they need to live, shape, and imagine many modes of futurity" (46). Mvskoke people, in other words, do not need to wait for or depend upon the recognition of the settler-colonial state in order to take meaningful steps toward what Mvskoke poet laureate Joy Harjo calls the "lush promise" of a better world (50). *Spiral to the Stars* acknowledges the need, at times, for political action within existing settler-colonial legal systems, yet Harjo echoes Glen Coulthard's warning that the "politics of recognition" forced upon Indigenous peoples frequently enforce colonial modes of governance that do not ultimately benefit Indigenous groups (63). She therefore suggests that Mvskoke people act boldly—without waiting for anyone's permission—to create new social possibilities using tools that are already available.

The first tool of futurity that Harjo explores is "este-cate" or "radical" sovereignty, a transformative agency that emerges from the physical capabilities of both human and non-human entities. From one perspective, este-cate sovereignty might be thought of as the straightforward understanding that "everyone carries the power to act" (38). Sovereignty, in other words, does not descend from authorities on high; "action, power, and agency," Harjo argues, are instead available at the scale of "the body,



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household, and community” (77). Such an embrace of embodied agency “resists the narrative of broken community, authored by outsiders, that becomes internalized and enacted by community members” (78). Este-cate sovereignty, then, renounces what Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor refers to as “victimry” and emphasizes instead the transformative agency that is always available to Mvskoke communities (Vizenor 15). Harjo captures this rejection of victimry (and a survivance-oriented celebration of agency) within the future-oriented optimism of her project: “futurity means that despite the nation-state’s projects to eliminate us, here we are – living!” (198).

Although este-cate sovereignty might at first seem like a straightforward concept, Harjo’s insistence that spiritual ancestors and non-human entities (such as plants and animals) embody powerful capacities for transformative action provocatively aligns her work with key critical currents in posthumanism, speculative realism, ecocriticism, and affect studies. At several points, for example, she argues that the work of creating better futures involves “the enactment of theories and practices that activate our ancestors’ unrealized possibilities” (5). When reading this, I couldn’t help but think of Deleuze’s notion of the *virtual*, which Brian Massumi describes as a “mode of reality implicated in the emergence of new potentials” (16). Harjo argues, in essence, that a better world is possible—all the material conditions for its emergence *already* exist—but this world remains virtual, unactivated, and unrealized. Este-cate sovereignty involves taking action to awaken these immanent, already-available possibilities rather than allowing them to remain slumbering. Furthermore, Harjo theorizes each of her tools of futurity using what she refers to as “the Mvskoke lens of energy transfers,” a paradigm that recognizes “the power and life in all things” and foregrounds ways in which “energy is transmitted from being to being, including plants and animals” (21; 53; 101). Humans, in other words, are not the only beings with the capacity to affect and to be affected: our lives are shaped in powerful ways by plants, animals, and the legacies of our ancestors—and we touch and transform all of these things, in turn, through our actions.

On a deeper level, then, este-cate sovereignty offers a transformative perspective regarding the emergence of the new: the best kinds of futurity blossom when we awaken to our already-existing power to act *in concert* with others (human and non-human, living and non-living). This central emphasis on relationality is my favorite aspect of *Spiral to the Stars*: in addition to the powerful community building tools she offers for Mvskoke praxis, Harjo also demonstrates what critical theory can look like when we reject the isolation and alienation endemic to late-capitalist settler-colonial epistemology and instead put *relationships* at the center of our critical concerns. In this

regard, *Spiral to the Stars* offers a vital paradigm that is desperately needed within the context of the Anthropocene, where the global drive to exploit people, animals, and natural resources too-often crowds out efforts to create ecological sustainability and social equity.

Harjo expresses the importance of relationality with the Mvskoke term *vnokeckv*, which refers to a “love that cares for and tends to the needs of the people”—and, as noted above, her sense of who counts as “people” is radically more inclusive than settler society often allows (20). *Vnokeckv* is foundational to the second tool of futurity that *Spiral to the Stars* explores: community knowledge. If este-cate sovereignty rejects the feeling that Mvskoke people are powerless and encourages them to recognize their already-existing capacities, community knowledge overturns the idea that Indigenous ways of knowing are valueless and emboldens Mvskoke people to love and honor the truth of their individual and collective experiences. Community knowledge, Harjo suggests, is “embodied” and “felt,” and it is “realized in daydreams and interstices” (116). It is a knowledge found in smells and dreams, and it is gained from observing the natural world, watching for signs, and gazing at the stars. Centrally, it is a knowledge that emerges within kinship networks; it rejects the epistemological poison of “settler knowledge production” and instead offers “a wayfinding tool back to the things we know and hold as valuable” (107; 117).

When individuals within a community recognize their power and honor their own knowledge and wisdom, they have an extraordinary capacity to come together and express collective power: Harjo’s third tool of futurity. Collective power, she argues, is “community knowledge operationalized” (118). It is felt in the utopian space of stompdance, it is woven when Mvskoke people craft community quilts, it is expressed in the “generative refusal” of settler regimes of oppressive power (124), and it can be discovered within “alterNative” economies of sharing and exchange that reject practices of exploitation (such as predatory lending) (141). Ultimately, collective power pushes back against the fragmentation and alienation imposed on Indigenous communities by settler society, and it rekindles the idea “that the collective working together can accomplish more than one person” (145).

Finally, Harjo proposes that collective power can be expressed within emergence geographies, or the “spaces and places that Mvskoke people carve out, despite forced removal and land dispossession, to produce the social relations they need to thrive” (38). She offers the example of how one of her own communities—the Sapulpa Creek Indian Community—met at a “Jiffy laundromat in town and at a now-defunct mall”

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before it was formally recognized as a chartered community (151). Although the formal recognition accorded to tribal towns and chartered communities offers access to important resources, Harjo notes that “not all communities have the time or ambition to operate a chartered community,” and she also argues that the normative forms of governance required to gain recognition may prevent Mvskoke people from “fully creating the kind of community they desire” (154).

Emergence geographies, then, are the informal (rather than formally-recognized) spaces where Mvskoke people come together to form powerful and transformative kinship relations. In addition to laundromats and shopping malls, emergence geographies can also be “ephemeral” spaces that occur “seasonally or intermittently,” such as stompdance ceremonies, festivals, softball games, and wild onion dinners (155). They might also be “virtual” spaces—where Mvskoke people connect using Skype, FaceTime, or Facebook—or they might include “metaphysical” spaces, such as the sacred burial sites of deceased ancestors, where people can “connect to a spiritual realm” (155). Emergence geographies, Harjo argues, “make space for Mvskoke ways of being in the world” without the need to wait upon formal recognition or approval from the settler state. There are spaces available right now, she suggests, where community relations can blossom and where the possibilities for better futures can be forged.

One odd organizational quirk of *Spiral to the Stars* is Harjo’s inclusion of a detailed summary of the results of her Creek Community Survey (a study conducted to “reveal what tribal members find important” at various scales) entirely *within* the pages of her chapter on emergence geographies (165). The survey is smart, methodologically sensitive, and vital to the book as a whole, but it’s not always entirely clear how the discussion of the survey results supports the chapter’s focus on alternative spaces, and it feels at times (to me) like Harjo’s analysis of the survey may deserve a separate chapter of its own.

The results of the survey, however, are thought-provoking: Harjo shows that many Mvskoke people feel that they have a sense of agency at the scale of their bodies, their households, and their local communities, but they often do *not* feel that they have agency within the tribal structure of the Muskogee (Creek) Nation or at larger scales beyond this. Harjo therefore concludes that “community-based methods” (182) offer the most powerful pathways toward futurity: Mvskoke people can exercise este-cate sovereignty and honor community knowledge within emergent spaces in order to achieve “the collective power of self-determination, respect, love, and consent” (181).

This is certainly true, and *Spiral to the Stars* offers an empowering vision and concrete tools that can help achieve meaningful change. One question that remains unexplored, however, is how such tools might scale up to enable change at larger levels. This is not a critique of Harjo's excellent study, but rather a concern that arises for me, personally, as I ponder the implications of her work. In essence, Harjo argues that, rather than waiting for the settler colonial state to enable new possibilities or struggling to force it to transform through grievance processes, Mvskoke people might instead step away from settler society—or work within it—in order to maximize the unactualized possibilities that are already available to create better futures at the local scale of the body, the household, and the community. While this may be one of the best options available (and it certainly beats a paralyzing sense of powerlessness and futility), the problem of settler hegemony remains.

Harjo provocatively mentions the possibility of “jumping scale,” or bypassing deadlocks that have occurred at certain scales by connecting with allies who can act at larger levels (44). She gives the example of students, unable to influence decision makers at their school, who might use social media to connect with state legislators (or other decision makers) who can enact change. This makes me curious: is it possible that the tools of futurity outlined in *Spiral to the Stars* might catalyze larger transformations if conjoined with strategies for jumping scale? Harjo emphasizes starting from the body and scaling up to the level of the community; she touches upon the possibility of jumping scale in a larger sense only briefly. It would certainly be impossible for transformative efforts to jump scale without a strong foundation of individual and collective agency, and for this reason I think *Spiral to the Stars* offers a perfect wayfinding tool in its intended context. I also yearn for the day when Harjo's guiding *vnokeckv*, and her celebration of human and non-human relationality, can find a way to jump scale in the grandest possible way, guiding us all toward the loving possibilities for futurity she envisions.

*David Higgins, Inver Hills College*

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**Jan Peter Laurens Looers. *Reading Life with Gwich'in: An Educational Approach*. Routledge, 2020. 264 pp. ISBN: 9781138616691.**

<https://www.crcpress.com/Reading-Life-with-Gwichin-An-Educational-Approach/Looers/p/book/9781138616691>

In *Reading Life with Gwich'in: An Educational Approach*, Jan Peter Laurens Looers revisits two years of ethnographic fieldwork and historical research that he undertook with Teet'it Gwich'in people living in Fort McPherson, in Canada's Northwest Territories. This book makes contributions to ethnographic and historical anthropological work with and about Gwich'in people and their lives historically and presently. The ethnographic component of Looers' discussion focuses, and reflects, on his own experiences of learning from Teet'it Gwich'in people on and through the land. Looers frames his discussion by introducing two concepts he developed based on his own observations and his engagement with relevant scholarly literature. The first he terms an "educational approach towards life" that embodies both (Gwich'in) knowledge transmission and the process of learning and being taught where "you have to live it" (3). The second concept he terms "reading life," where he expands the definition of "reading" to include reading the land and reading texts as "ways of conversing" (emphasis in original; 3). Both these concepts make an appearance in the book's title, *Reading Life with Gwich'in: An Educational Approach*.

Structurally, this 264-page book is divided into four thematic parts titled: "Introduction to an Educational Approach," "A Sentient History," "Losing Elders, Keeping Life Going," and "Life on the Land." Each part is comprised of either two or three chapters that fall within the section theme. At the end of the book there are two appendices. Appendix A ("Dramatis Personae") details the names and descriptions of Teet'it Gwich'in community members and other people mentioned in the book and is followed by Appendix B ("Note on Gwich'in Topology") which details Gwich'in place name meanings, spellings, and translations taken from the Gwich'in Online Atlas. The book ends with a bibliography and an index.

The Prologue opens with a vignette of a chilly (and ultimately educational) snowmobile trip into the "bush" that Looers took with Neil Colin during his dissertation research (xv). Looers explains that this account illustrates five themes he addresses in this book: knowing, reading, travelling, the land, and Gwich'in teachers. Based on these themes, Looers writes that the following pages of the book will "outline an educational approach towards life and (indirectly) exemplify what methodological-theoretical implications this has on writing scholarly books and doing anthropological

research" (xvii). In a footnote, Loovers briefly discusses his "inner debate" about whether to call this approach "pedagogical" instead of "educational," and that regardless of what terminology he uses, his "intention is to underscore that the approach is processual and incorporates the practices of learning, teaching and being taught, and becoming knowledgeable", all in a culturally-grounded context (xxii).

After reading the Prologue, I was keenly interested to know more about the specific methodological aspects of the "methodological-theoretical implications" Loovers mentions and how he himself is (indirectly) exemplifying them. Loovers does not include a conventional methodology section where he explicitly outlines his research methodology and/or his methodology for writing about his research. In the first chapter, "Ecology, Education, Collaboration," Loovers orients his work in relevant theoretical and scholarly literature and briefly explains several of his methodological choices, such as to do few formal interviews and to share drafts of his written work with concerned Teet'it community members in order to incorporate their feedback. As such, I would have welcomed and enjoyed a discussion of the specific "methodological-theoretical" decisions Loovers made in structuring his text and in how he presents his research, his arguments, and his claims.

With the exception of the Introduction and Conclusion, each chapter in this book either focuses on elements of Teet'it Gwich'in history or Loovers' own fieldwork. In the history chapters, Loovers weaves together different historical records and shared memories to give a history of Teet'it Gwich'in people and their histories with, and connections to, their land and place. He also addresses the history of literacy and change within the community. In the chapters where Loovers discusses his own fieldwork, he focuses on his experience of learning with and from Teet'it Gwich'in people both on the land and through the close relationships he built while an engaged participant in daily community life. Throughout the book, Loovers includes Teet'it Gwich'in words, phrases, and place names in Gwich'in first and English second, which both foregrounds Gwich'in language and knowledge systems and regularly reminds the reader of the physical, cultural, and historical space being discussed. With regards to language, in different chapters and footnotes, Loovers briefly discusses the history of Gwich'in language documentation, particularly as it pertains to the different orthographies (writing systems) that have been used to write the language historically and presently. As such, and as a linguistic anthropologist, I would have appreciated a section where Loovers explains and reflects on his own orthographic decisions, particularly in relation to why he generally chooses not to mark tone in the Gwich'in words he includes.

Each chapter of this book is uniquely engaging and informative, but, at times, I found it difficult to identify the ways in which the chapters individually, and as a whole, come together to support Loovers' central arguments for "an educational approach towards life" and "reading life." At first, I wondered whether there was a specific, and not immediately transparent, motivation behind the way that Loovers chose to structure each chapter and the book as a whole. About a third of the way through reading, I started contemplating whether this opacity was in fact a methodological decision on Loovers' part, where he set out to use a sort of Indigenous pedagogy that entails "teaching" the reader through example and stories rather than through direct explanation as a way of supporting and illustrating his central arguments. I wondered whether in the conclusion he might explain how the teachings from each chapter work together to indirectly exemplify and illustrate his observations and claims. This type of explanation was not the focus of the Conclusion or Epilogue. However, in a footnote to the Conclusion title, Loovers explains that "the conclusion has been very much a collaborative and *edited writing* with Tim Ingold as we were trying to piece together different chapters in my postgraduate thesis" (emphasis in original; 231). It seems that the relatively individual nature of each chapter and section of the text may not reflect a methodological or stylistic decision on Loovers' part, but is more likely a product of the fact that the book is comprised of sections previously published separately and other sections adapted from Loovers' dissertation. This does not detract from the relevance or importance of the work Loovers has done or the claims he makes; rather, it means that, for the most part, each chapter in the book operates well as a somewhat standalone piece which contributes in different ways to further ethnographic and historical knowledge about Teet'it Gwich'in people, their lives, and their pedagogies.

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## Contributors

### Guest Editors

A. ROBERT LEE formerly of the University of Kent, UK, was Professor of American Literature at Nihon University, Tokyo, 1997-2011. His writings include *Designs of Blackness: Mappings in the Literature and Culture of Afro-America* (1998), *Multicultural American Literature: Comparative Black, Native, Latino/a and Asian American Fictions* (2003), an Edinburgh University Press publication which won the 2004 American Book Award, *Gothic to Multicultural: Idioms of Imagining in American Literary Fiction* (2009), *United States: Re-Viewing American Multicultural Literature* (2009) and *The Routledge Handbook of International Beat Literature* (2018).

JAMES MACKAY is assistant professor of British and American literatures at European University Cyprus, who has published widely on contemporary Native American writing and representations of First Nations peoples in popular culture. Most recent publications include a chapter on Louis Owens and Ken Kesey in *Louis Owens: Writing Land and Legacy* (2019), reviewed elsewhere in this issue, and the article "[NDNGirls and Pocahotties: Native American and First Nations representation in settler colonial pornography and erotica](#)" (with Polina Mackay) for the journal *Porn Studies*. He is one of the founding editors of *Transmotion*.

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CRYSTAL ALBERTS is an associate professor of English and the director of the UND Writers Conference, which she has directed or co-directed since April 2009. She is the co-editor of William Gaddis, "The Last of Something:" Critical Essays. Her scholarship has also appeared in or is forthcoming from *The Salt Companion to Diane Glancy*, *Transatlantic Literature and Culture After 9/11*, *Transmotion*, *Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon*, and *Don DeLillo in Context*. Her book *Art & Science in the Works of Don DeLillo* is under contract. She is a digital humanist, who is the primary builder of the UND Writers Conference Digital Collection, which has been supported by multiple grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

ELEANOR BERRY is a former teacher of writing and literature at Willamette University, Marquette University, and other colleges. She has served as president of the National Federation of State Poetry Societies and of the Oregon Poetry Association. Her essays on the prosody of American free verse have been widely published in journals and anthologies. She has three collections of poetry: *Green*

*November* (Traprock Books, 2007), *No Constant Hues* (Turnstone Books of Oregon, 2015), and *Only So Far* (Main Street Rag Publishing Co., 2019).

MIRIAM BROWN SPIERS teaches in the English and Interdisciplinary Studies departments at Kennesaw State University. Her research and teaching interests include Indigenous literatures, science fiction, comics, formal and generic experimentation, 20th and 21st century American literature, gender studies, and Native American studies. Her current book project, *The Sovereign Other*, examines the ways that American Indian and First Nations novelists have adapted the generic tropes of science fiction as a means of resisting cultural assimilation and reasserting the value of Indigenous knowledges in the twenty-first century.

CATHY COVELL WAEGNER taught in the English Department of the University of Siegen in Germany until her retirement in July 2013. She obtained degrees from the College of William & Mary (BA) and the University of Virginia (MA, PhD). In addition to her work on William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, she has published on Native American themes, transculturality in the ethnic bildungsroman, minstrelsy, AfroAsian “postmodernist passing,” 400 years after Jamestown, “hybrid tropes” in film, new diasporas, palimpsestic trajectories on the “ethnic shore,” and the interaction between American and European cultural phenomena. Waegner has recently coedited a volume with Daniel Stein, Geoffroy de Laforcade, and Page R. Laws, *Migration, Diaspora, Exile: Narratives of Affiliation and Escape* (Lexington Books, May 2020), as well as one with Yiorgos Kalogeras titled *Ethnic Resonances in Performance, Literature, and Identity* (“Routledge Indisciplinary Perspectives on Literature” series, December 2019). She edited a volume in the American Indian Studies Series (Michigan State University Press) in 2015 called *Mediating Indianness*, co-edited a project volume with Norfolk State University scholars, *Transculturality and Perceptions of the Immigrant Other: “From-Heres” and “Come-Heres” in Virginia and North Rhine-Westphalia* (2011), as well as, with colleagues from Université d’Orléans, *Literature on the Move: Comparing Diasporic Ethnicities in Europe and the Americas* (2002). She served as MESEA (Multi-Ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas) treasurer for four years. Her current research focuses on contemporary Native American literature, specifically in connection with issues of globalization and justice.

INGRID WENDT is the author of five books of poems, a book-length teaching guide, one chapbook, and numerous articles and reviews. Co-editor of two anthologies—*In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts* and *From Here We Speak: An Anthology of Oregon Poetry*—Ingrid’s poetry and prose appear in such magazines and anthologies as *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Antioch Review*, *CALYX*, *Terrain*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *No More Masks! An*

*Anthology of 20th Century American Women Poets*, and many more. To see her fuller biography, visit her website: <https://ingridwendt.com/biography/>