Louis Owens
by Linda Lizut Helstern

Western Writers Series
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“‘I prefer infinities to definitions,’” Alex Yazzie, the cross-dressing Navajo anthropologist in Louis Owens’ Bone Game, declares (46). So did Louis Owens. In his life, in his death, and above all in his writing, Louis Owens (1948–2002), novelist, essayist, literary and cultural critic, crossed boundaries and refused definitions. Born in Lompoc, California, Owens came to understand the arid landscape of the west through the lens of his early childhood in the Yazoo bottoms of Mississippi. He was a Native mixedblood who acknowledged not only his multi-tribal heritage, Choctaw on his father’s side and Cherokee on his mother’s, but the Irish heritage his parents shared. He was an academic with a fund of practical knowledge, from auto mechanics to woodworking, as much at home fighting wildfires as conducting research in a library archive. The man who was named Crosscut Saw Champion of the Prescott National Forest in 1977 received the American Book Award twenty years later.

Owens established his reputation as a scholar of both canonical American fiction, notably John Steinbeck, and the Native American novel. At the same time, he wrote fiction, taught fiction writing, and headed respected creative writing programs. His own novels, sophisticated explorations of mixedblood Native identity, are also pop culture thrillers that can be enjoyed for plot alone. They are thrillers, however, injected with a strong dose of satiric humor and slapstick comedy. With five novels, two multi-genre prose collections, four scholarly books, and more than a hundred
scholarly articles and book reviews to his credit, Owens' final act of boundary crossing ultimately reads as tragedy. On 24 July 2002, in the pre-dawn darkness of the terminal parking lot at the Albuquerque International Sunport, Louis Owens shot a bullet into his own heart.

Owens' stories are his legacy, stories like those in his last book *I Hear the Train: Reflections, Inventions, Refractions* (2001) that cross the boundary between fiction and nonfiction. There Owens said, "[W]e make stories in order to find ourselves at home in a chaos made familiar and comforting through the stories we make" (xiii). Owens' five novels speak to the burning issues of his generation, race and gender identity and the environmental crisis. Always just below the surface is the Vietnam War with its capitalist and colonialist underpinnings, the harbinger of more recent American wars. Together these novels reflect the seasons of a man's life from coming of age through death. At the heart of each stands a free-running river with its own life cycle, a reminder of the larger web of life in which humans participate. The major characters in his novels, Owens admitted, all bear some autobiographical similarities to their author. His novels center on the issue of Indian identity and, beginning with *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), more specifically on mixedblood identity. Without reservation connections himself and aware that just thirty percent of Native people today live on reservations, Owens was deeply concerned with how Indian identity is configured in the absence of a traditional tribal community. For Owens, it develops, just as it always has, through family and story.

While it is important to consider Louis Owens as a mixed-blood writer, it is equally important to consider him as a New West writer. He lived for significant periods in New Mexico, Arizona, and Washington, as well as California, and his award-winning fiction focuses on each of these landscapes in turn. His
creative oeuvre explores in depth three issues at the heart of New West writing: the relationship between peoples of differing racial and ethnic origins in the context of specific western places; the need for a truly respectful relationship between human beings and the natural world; and a reconsideration of male and female gender roles in the very region where traditional American notions of masculinity were defined. Owens’ focus on the American west converges with his keen interest in the international phenomenon known as postmodernism, where the carefully ordered coherence of modernism gives way to joyous fragmentation. Owens is a self-described story thief who sought to overturn the abiding myths and stereotypes of American culture by weaving a fictional pastiche from the strands of personal stories and traditional Native stories, as well as Euramerican classics and world mythology.

**MIXEDBLOOD OUT OF CALIFORNIA**

Nothing in Louis Owens’ childhood hinted at the trajectory that would see him rise to the rank of tenured full professor faster than any faculty member in the history of the University of California (Lee 45). Neither of his parents had more than a third grade education. As Owens so eloquently relates in essays such as “Motion of Fire and Form” and “Water Witch,” his family struggled on the economic margins, moving back and forth between the fields of California and the Mississippi Delta several times during his early years. While he played at picking cotton before he started school, at nine he went to work hoeing beans (Owens, “Louis Owens” 284). As the family grew to nine children and a ramshackle cabin gave way to a platform tent in a California migrant camp, a rental unit in the Atascadero projects, and an isolated chicken ranch in the southern Salinas valley, Owens and his brother Gene, two years older, remained inseparable, hunting, fishing, and working together. When Gene graduated from
Atascadero High School and shipped off to Vietnam, Louis expected to follow, but after receiving his diploma in 1966, he found himself enrolled in junior college. Owens' writing talent was quickly discovered by his freshman composition teacher, who also advised the school newspaper. As its editor the following year, Owens received statewide recognition for his editorial writing, the first of many writing awards (Lee 40-41).

With much prodding from his journalism advisor, Owens enrolled at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in the fall of 1968, receiving his B.A. in 1971 and his M.A. in 1975. His undergraduate years stand as a defining moment in American cultural and political history. Like the Summer of Love, Woodstock, and the Monterey Pops, Santa Barbara is etched in the consciousness of a generation. In January and February, 1969, midway through Owens' first year at UCSB, the devastation of the Santa Barbara oil spill was front-page news across the nation. The 800-square-mile slick, which devastated beaches from Pismo to Oxnard, killing 10,000 birds, catalyzed the U.S. environmental movement. A year later headlines blazed with the burning of the Bank of America by UCSB antiwar protesters.

Within the space of that year, two extremely significant, if less dramatic, events helped shape the future for mixed blood intellectuals. The militant new Mexican American student coalition MECHA published El Plan de Santa Barbara, which outlined its goals for Chicanos in higher education, including creation of the new discipline of Chicano Studies. Their voice was instrumental in changing the academy over the next quarter century, despite opposition that fueled the culture wars. In 1969, too, UCSB professor N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, the first ever given to an American Indian. Owens describes the meeting he initiated after reading about the award in the Santa Barbara newspaper as "a turning point" in his life ("Louis Owens" 292). Meeting
Momaday gave Owens the opportunity to talk about his own “part-Indian” heritage for the first time. Because the complexities of mixedblood identity never lent themselves to easy answers, Owens had declined to join the UCSB Native American Students Association. Meeting Momaday also renewed Owens’ interest in fiction writing. From that moment on, he read everything he could find by Native writers (Lee 49-50, 43). His pioneering scholarly studies, *American Indian Novelists: An Annotated Critical Bibliography* (1985), a collaboration with Tom Colonese, and *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (1992), the first book-length studies of Native fiction, helped to create a “usable past” for Native novelists, showcasing a significant body of work dating back to 1854.

During college summers until he enrolled as a doctoral student at the University of California, Davis, in 1977, Owens worked for the U.S. Forest Service in some of the west’s most remote and beautiful wilderness areas. He spent two summers on the fire lines in the Sierra Nevadas and later worked in the Sonora Desert of Arizona with the Prescott Hotshots, the only rock climbing hotshot crew in the country. He also spent two summers on the Milk Creek Trail Crew in the North Cascades near Darrington, Washington, and two additional summers there as a wilderness ranger (Owens, “Louis Owens” 293). This became the setting for his first novel, *Wolfsong* (1991). Drafted in 1976, its plot grew out of Owens’ personal environmental action plan to save the Glacier Peak Wilderness Area from a planned copper mine (Owens, “Louis Owens” 295-96). Even before he began writing, Owens had carefully removed the mine plans from Forest Service files. In 1980, while writing his dissertation on John Steinbeck and the Salinas Valley landscape both knew intimately, Owens revised his *Wolfsong* manuscript. His talent as a fiction writer came as a complete surprise to the Davis faculty, who also learned for the first
time about his mixedblood roots. William Kittredge, writer-in-residence at Davis that semester, passed the manuscript on to his agent, but though *Wolfsong* was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by Random House editor Gary Fisketjohn, it was not until after another major revision that the novel was published in 1991 (Lee 50-52).

*Wolfsong* features a young Indian protagonist named Tom Joseph, who abruptly ends his college career in Santa Barbara to return home to the North Cascades for his uncle’s funeral. The Josephs are the only Indian family left in an economically depressed logging community, and after his uncle’s death Tom stands alone against his brother and the community to oppose the development of a copper mine in the nearby wilderness, land that is sacred to his tribe. Without elders to guide him, Tom tries to understand what it meant to his uncle to be Indian and what it might mean to him. After he dynamites the water tower, flooding the mine construction site and accidentally killing the guard, Tom flees. Pursued and shot by men he has known his whole life, he disappears over an icy peak, leaving only the sound of the howling wolves that suddenly fills the night. Although his tribe, the Stehemish, is fictional, Tom’s family name reflects the valiant resistance and political leadership of Chief Joseph, perhaps the most famous Native leader in the history of the Pacific Northwest.

**VIETNAM AND THE WOUNDED WARRIOR**

At a time when many young men were fleeing to Canada to escape the draft, Owens became a war resistor. At Santa Barbara, he flirted with radical politics (Owens, “Louis Owens” 291-92). While he ultimately found the SDS too ideological for his taste, he told A. Robert Lee that he was nearly killed by a falling girder inside the Bank of America as it burned, watching as rock-throwing demonstrators held police at bay (41-43). The young man who had
once planned to follow his brother to Vietnam was prepared to enter prison after his draft board refused to grant him a third deferral. Only President Nixon’s cancellation of the draft that quarter spared him (Owens, “Louis Owens” 290-91). His brother Gene, meanwhile, had returned after three tours of duty in Vietnam only to vanish. The war had left him, like so many other young and disproportionately minority men, with the deep emotional scars of post-traumatic stress disorder. Gene’s absence haunted Owens, who did not see his brother again for nearly three decades. He made Gene’s disappearance central to the plot of his second novel, The Sharpest Sight (1992). The novel played a key role in the brothers’ reunion after Gene somehow managed to find and read a copy (I Hear the Train 12).

The Sharpest Sight intertwines the dual mysteries of mixedblood identity and disappearance as it brings the draft-age Cole McCurtain, who has grown up in California near Atascadero, into dialogue with his Mississippi Choctaw roots. The novel ends with a contemporary retelling of the Choctaw origin story. Fleeing the draft at his father’s behest, Cole is given the unexpected responsibility of finding and returning his brother’s bones to the Choctaw homeland. Attis, who returned from Vietnam suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, had disappeared mysteriously from the local mental hospital where he was committed after murdering his high school sweetheart. He himself has been murdered. Cole receives more help than he knows from his Choctaw elders, who bring their life-affirming humor to bear on this deeply painful situation. Meanwhile, Attis’s best friend and Vietnam buddy Mundo Morales, now a deputy sheriff, conducts his own search along the Salinas River, paralleling Cole’s. Mundo, too, gets help, though the advice given by El Viejo, the spirit of Mundo’s grandfather, is often at odds with that of Cole’s Uncle Luther. Ultimately, Mundo discovers the tangled web of his own mixedblood Chicano identity.
As the novel ends, the conspiracy of silence about the human tragedy of Vietnam effectively foiled, Cole and his father Hoey are on the last leg of their return home to Mississippi with Attis’s bones.

By fits and starts, after dropping out of graduate school more than once, Owens moved toward an academic career, though he missed the first day of classes at his first tenure-track teaching job at California State University, Northridge, in September of 1982. His wife Polly was giving birth to their older daughter, Elizabeth (Lee 44). In 1975, Owens married Polly Pipkin, whom he had met at Santa Barbara in 1970 (Lee 48). He followed Polly to Berkeley, and while she finished her degree at the University of California’s flagship campus, Owens worked as history department secretary. By the time he was awarded his PhD by University of California, Davis, in the fall of 1981, he and Polly had seen much of Europe together. In 1980–81, he taught as a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Pisa, returning to teach at Davis the following year (Lee 45).

Owens, however, had misgivings about his career choice even after he began teaching full time. He applied to study forestry at Utah State with the intention of making the Forest Service a profession. An invitation to join the English faculty at University of New Mexico in 1984 and the opportunity to teach both literature and creative writing changed his mind (Lee 44-45). At UNM, Owens directed the creative writing program, whose faculty included such Native writers as Luci Tapahonso, Joy Harjo, and Patricia Clark Smith. His own short fiction began appearing in respected literary journals even as his first scholarly books were published. In 1986, the year his younger daughter Alexandra was born, Owens was named both a Presidential Lecturer at UNM and Outstanding Teacher by the International Steinbeck Society. His two full-length studies of the California-born Nobel laureate, *John*
Steinbeck’s Re-Vision of America (1985) and The Grapes of Wrath: Trouble in the Promised Land (1989) only begin to suggest the importance of John Steinbeck’s influence on his own oeuvre. The two writers shared not only a profound concern for the relationship between human beings and the land they inhabit but a hard-edged lyrical style and a penchant for stories with a deceptively simple surface.

In 1989, Owens accepted a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and an appointment as full professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz. At Santa Cruz, where he taught until 1994, receiving both the Alumni Association Distinguished Teaching Award and the Student Alumni Council Favorite Professor Award, Owens’ tenure overlapped with that of Gerald Vizenor, the Anishinaabe novelist and theorist who was asserting his own mixedblood identity through trickster liberation, a blend of gentle humor and fierce satire built on the irony inherent in the telling of traditional tribal trickster stories. Vizenor excoriated any need to prove one’s tribal identity by attempting to look or act traditional. Although such performances might satisfy white expectations about “real Indians,” Vizenor noted it was whites who had invented the “Indian” to begin with. Owens’ novels and cultural critique owe much to Vizenor, perhaps his closest professional friend.

In the early 1980s Owens had found a kindred spirit in Vizenor’s first novel. He also found himself in hot water after assigning it to his first American Indian fiction class at Northridge (Owens, Afterword 247-48). Santa Cruz was equally ripe for liberation from “Hollywooden Indians,” and in his only essay on pedagogy, “Moonwalking Technoshamans and the Shifting Margin: Decentering the Colonial Classroom,” Owens describes the fashion show Native students at UCSC organized to alter prevailing notions about “real” Indians and how they should look. In 1992,
Owens received the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles Award jointly for The Sharpest Sight and for his seminal scholarly study Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel (1992), both published as part of the American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series that Gerald Vizenor had started at the University of Oklahoma Press. Owens later joined Vizenor as series co-editor.

**THE TIME COME ROUND AGAIN**

UCSC and the coastal mountains where Owens lived with his family became the setting for his third novel, Bone Game (1994), recipient of the Julian J. Rothbaum Prize for best book published by the University of Oklahoma Press that year. Although it prominently features a mixedblood Choctaw full professor of English, who, not unlike Owens, teaches both Native American and modernist literature, Bone Game should perhaps be read as the compression of a lifetime of academic experience, undergraduate, graduate, and professional. Here Owens, who elsewhere tells readers “all time is one,” telescopes two violent episodes of Santa Cruz history into an agonizing present. When Owens wrote Bone Game, twenty years had passed since the serial murders that rocked Santa Cruz in the early 1970s, and some two hundred since the Indian uprising against the local mission. Within this space–time landscape, Owens locates the unspoken story of California mixed-blood identity.

Bone Game continues the dialogue between Cole McCurtain and his Choctaw elders. A successful academic with a less successful private life, Cole, now teaching at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is haunted by a recurring nightmare, both asleep and awake. As he comes to understand how much he needs help, Native helpers begin to assemble around him, first his Navajo trickster colleague Alex Yazzie, then his college-aged daughter Abby, and finally his Mississippi Choctaw elders, who now include
Cole's father Hoey, as well as Uncle Luther and Onatima. Uncle Luther sees Cole's dream as part of a much larger story, and he and Hoey, in a comic sequel to Ceremony's witchery story, take time en route to California to rescue a young Navajo woman from her three kidnappers, using such unlikely strategies as a piss hex. Meanwhile, Onatima intervenes directly with the Native gambler of Cole's dream, symbolically painted half black and half white. What this powerful and vengeful spirit wants is his world back. In Santa Cruz, not one but two serial murderers are targeting young women, including ultimately Abby and the cross-dressed Alex. Both are capable warriors, but no gun will save Abby when the spirit himself invites her to gamble. In this moment, Cole discovers his own power, the power of the word. Speaking the gambler's name, he gives voice to the story of the 1812 uprising at the Santa Cruz mission and the killing of the abusive priest whose sins include the sexual coercion of Native women. Leaving California to return home, meaning New Mexico for Cole, Abby, and Alex and Mississippi for the three elders, affords the only real measure of safety against the recurrent violence of this place.

Owens himself returned “home” to the University of New Mexico English department in 1994, settling with his family in the Manzano Mountains east of Albuquerque. The novelist was actively mentoring the next generation of Native writers and scholars even as he was gaining an international reputation as a writer. Over the next several years, he made a series of book tours in France to promote new French translations of his work. Invoking Mark Twain in an essay he titled “In a Sense Abroad,” Owens lampooned such adventures in publicity as his French television appearance “with Shirley MacLaine, men in drag, and lifesized puppets” (I Hear the Train 110). Nonetheless, his work was accorded serious attention. In 1995 The Sharpest Sight won the Roman Noir, France's top prize for mystery fiction. Owens' work was being translated into German and Japanese as well.
His writing took a new turn in his fourth novel as Owens set out to explore his Cherokee roots and the all-but-hidden Cherokee presence in New Mexico, a state famous for its indigenous Pueblos, Navajos, and Apaches. Nightland (1996), the only novel Owens published with a commercial publishing house, received the American Book Award in 1997. This updated ranch western exposes Indian anger and Indian greed as dual motives for contemporary cocaine trafficking. When Cherokee mixedbloods Will Striker and Billy Keene, lifelong friends and hunting buddies now in their late forties, find a suitcase full of money in the wilds, Billy wants to use his share to subsidize his marginal ranch. Will, respectful of the old stories Grampa Siquani has told with wisdom and humor, hides his half, but both men find themselves targets in the power struggle between the Pueblo drug lord and the Apache woman who finds money more attractive than the drug lord himself. Billy falls in love and expects to marry Odessa White Hawk, but she kills him in cold blood. Will survives Odessa’s murder attempt to find something infinitely more precious than the money that has vanished from his well: renewed fertility. After years of drought, water has returned to his land. Will’s wife has returned home to her wounded husband, reaffirming her commitment to a problematic marriage, and their married daughter is expecting their first grandchild.

The publication of Owens’ multi-genre essay collection Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place (1998), for which he was named Writer of the Year by the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, suggests the transition Owens was making from academic to public intellectual. Many of the sixteen essays in this volume, which range from intensely lyrical to highly theoretical, were originally drafted as speeches. Through them, Owens forged a powerful kaleidoscopic exploration of Native heritage, America’s perception of it, and its implications for the
larger world. He takes to task Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s notion that reservation-based literature about contemporary tribal problems, what she calls *tribal realism*, is the only authentic Native literature possible. Just as masterfully, he indictsthe Hollywood messages of John Wayne and Kevin Costner. Owens also importantly suggests that mainstream environmentalism needs to move beyond the separation of “human” and “wild” while pointing to the traditional tribal values of careful attention, reciprocity, and respect as the only antidote to the greed that continues to wreak environmental havoc.

**TRICKSTER AND THE TRIBE OF FICTION**

In his last novel, *Dark River* (1999), Owens turns his kaleidoscope to reconfigure literature, film, family, and place ironically, borrowing, like Gerald Vizenor, from the traditional genre of the trickster story, a genre shared by Native storiers across the Americas “to amuse, surprise, shock, outrage, and generally trick us into knowledge” (Owens, Afterword 248). Set on the fictional Black Mountain reservation in the very real Apache country of eastern Arizona, this is as close as Owens will come to tribal realism. Another, older Vietnam vet stands at the center of the plot, his psychic wounds never fully healed. Choctaw mixedblood Jake Nashoba has lived at Black Mountain for twenty years, trying to distance himself both from tribal politics and the deadly politics of racism. A Vietnam legend, Jake married into the tribe but could never adjust to family living Apache-style. His job as tribal ranger keeps him, for the most part, in the wilds of the Dark River canyon that he loves, but when someone shoots at Jake as he investigates the latest in a series of elk poaching incidents, Jake decides that he has no real reason to stick around, even after Shorty Luke confesses that the elk poaching has been concocted by the
tribal elders to remind their Harvard-educated tribal chairman about the consequences of greed.

Jake Nashoba lacks the sense of irony that marks the tribe. Shorty, an “only surviving twin” and inveterate story thief, liberally peppers tales of his long career as a Hollywood extra with Sicilian phrases. Shorty’s closest friend is the tribe’s resident Jewish anthropologist, gone native right down to his authentic breechclout. Shorty’s young tribal protégé Jessie James guarantees the paying clients of his Vision Quest Enterprises a vision, donning a polyester wolf suit whenever the need arises. Ultimately, Jake cannot leave Black Mountain without saying goodbye to his honorific granddaughter. The sixteen-year-old Alison, he discovers, is on a identity quest, seeking her vision at Jessie’s urging in the Dark River canyon. She, fellow quester Sandrine LeBris, and Jake are all taken captive by a citizen militia that has secretly rented the canyon for weekend maneuvers. When a hardcore ideologue overthrows the militia command structure, Jake becomes their living enemy. Despite the help that converges from all quarters, Jake cannot win against this evil gambler. All the odds are against him. Although his lengthy death dream confirms his Choctaw identity, Jake will find his first real home in tribal story as the six remaining characters, led by Alison, head out of the canyon.

In the fall of 2000, Owens returned to teach and direct the creative writing program at the University of California, Davis. His dual appointment in English and Native American Studies was designed to give him longer periods to concentrate on his own writing. Owens’ family remained in New Mexico, where his daughters were finishing high school, and Owens became a long-distance commuter. Even as his return to Davis brought his academic career full circle, his last book, I Hear the Train: Reflections, Inventions, Refractions (2001), brought Owens’ life in writing full circle. It begins with the story of his reunion with his brother
Gene and includes ten “mostly true” narratives of summer jobs, wilderness hikes, trips to Europe, and visible links to a long-missing Cherokee great-grandmother. Owens also collected his early published fiction in this volume, as well as critical essays that locate Native American literature within the frames of American and postcolonial literatures. In this volume Owens carefully and purposely obscures the demarcation between nonfiction and fiction, remarking, “Together, I believe they form a pattern, one turn and twist of the labyrinth leading to another. At the center, of course, is the hybrid monster of the self, the ultimate cannibal to which all stories lead” (xiv).

John Steinbeck had played a major role in Owens’ story, and the 2002 celebration of the Steinbeck Centennial was another kind of homecoming for the novelist and critic who claimed he had read each of John Steinbeck’s novels two dozen times. Owens was featured that spring in a two-hour discussion of Steinbeck’s work that aired on national television. Accepting an invitation to Harvard as a visiting scholar for 2004, it seemed that a mixedblood ever on the move had finally arrived. Instead, like his first protagonist Tom Joseph, Louis Owens vanished from our sight, but the many timbres of his voice—his humility, his reverence, his passion, his anger, his love, and his irrepressible humor—can still be heard with profound clarity.

BEYOND STEREOTYPE: THE MYSTERIES OF IDENTITY

Louis Owens’ novels have frequently been described as thrillers, and although all with the exception of Nightland were originally published under university or small press imprints, they have, as often as not, been reviewed as genre fiction. “Part whodunit, part spiritual quest” is the way the Washington Post reviewer described The Sharpest Sight, though ultimately advising readers, “For a good murder story that responsibly handles the interplay between
native [sic] American and white cultures, stick to Tony Hillerman” (Howard 11). What does it mean for a Choctaw/Cherokee/Irish mixedblood to employ, for the purpose of creating an avowedly American Indian literature, the fictional genres most closely associated with the American west, genres enshrined in Hollywood film: the noir detective novel pioneered by the California trio of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain, and the western of Zane Gray and Louis L’Amour? Owens has done nothing less, to borrow a phrase from his admiring essay on *The Crown of Columbus*, than “defiantly, even subversively, seized the low ground of American literature” (*I Hear the Train* 250).

Owens’ strategic use of the thriller genre, perhaps the most widely read form of literature in Europe and America, allowed him to revise the stereotyped ideas about Indians that have dominated Euramerican understanding of tribal peoples for some three hundred years on the very ground—popular culture—where these stereotypes have been created and perpetuated. The same brutality that marked George Montgomery Bird’s fictional Shawnees in the 1830s, indeed, configured the television Apaches of the 1950s. The static image of the “Indian,” stereotyped noble and savage in the forum of popular culture from the seventeenth-century captivity narrative to the dime novel to the movie and television western and the eco-commercial, has been documented by such respected scholars as Roy Harvey Pearce, Robert Berkhofer, and Philip Deloria. By adopting and adapting the plots of formula fiction, Owens asks readers to rethink the philosophical assumptions at their heart, Euramerican assumptions about ethical behavior, rational thought, and the nature of reality itself. He reveals a Native world grounded in a rather different understanding of ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics.

Owens, of course, was not the first mixedblood writer to borrow the conventions of popular literature for his own uses. He worked
in a tradition that began with the publication of the very first American Indian novel in 1854, John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*, with its California bandit hero hell-bent on revenge against the Americans who have stolen his land, raped his lady, and killed his brother. Three quarters of a century later, Mourning Dove set out to rehabilitate the stereotype of the notoriously mistrusted half-breed in *Cogewea, the Half-Blood*, adapting the western romance and giving the lead role to a young woman. Owens paid tribute to both writers in *Other Destinies, Mixedblood Messages*, and *I Hear the Train*. For him, the fiction of Ridge and Mourning Dove exemplified one way that Native novelists have shaped the English language to make it bear the burden of Native experience.

A second way, equally important to Owens, is the updated version of the traditional trickster story pioneered by Gerald Vizenor. In his own fiction, Owens managed to fold ironic trickster humor into the plots of genre fiction, appropriating every recognized permutation of the thriller. He followed his detective thriller *The Sharpest Sight* with a supernatural thriller, a western, and a war story. No one makes his rationale for appropriating these familiar plots clearer than *The Sharpest Sight*’s dream sender and elder humorist Uncle Luther. When Luther’s confidante and companion Onatima asserts that, except for her college education, Luther might still “be reading shoot-'em-ups instead of stories that count,” Luther explains patiently that these stories do count, every bit as much as the classic fiction Onatima prefers. The heroes of popular fiction are the real heroes of the dominant culture—irresponsible Kids with no homes and no mothers, in whose image Indian identity has been configured by Euramericans. “That’s why they made up all the great-white-father stuff,” Uncle Luther insists, “to turn us into kids so’s we couldn’t know who we really was” (*The Sharpest Sight* 109).
Uncle Luther points to the twofold problem Owens faced in constructing new roles for Indians within the context of the popular thriller. He first had to deconstruct the familiar gendered stereotypes that render young Native men either the white man’s sworn enemy or his faithful helper, that make young women both desirable and sexually available to white heroes, that make old men the exclusive source of tribal wisdom, old women earth mothers, and half-breeds (and by extension, all mixedbloods) eternally distrusted. Then, simultaneously, Owens had to convey for a readership both Indian and white a sense of “who we really was”—and still are. In his novels, Owens did not simply substitute racial others for white heroes. He reconceived the iconic thriller protagonist, the rugged individualist perennially marked, John Cawelti suggests, by his “unsullied isolation” (151). Whether detective, cowboy, or soldier, this lone hero has no one but himself to depend upon, physically and emotionally.

In Wolfsong Tom Joseph does stand alone against the human community, but in The Sharpest Sight, Owens adopts two strategies to configure the world as a web of relationships, the central principle of traditional tribal life. These stand as hallmarks of his subsequent work. First, Owens pairs major characters, sometimes brothers, sometimes friends, sometimes father and son or granddaughter. Often there are multiple pairings within the same text. Not only do these pairs remove the lone hero from center stage, but many Native origin stories feature a hero pair, who may be friends, brothers, or twins. Second, Owens begins the development of what might be termed the group hero. The elders, Uncle Luther, Onatima, and El Viejo, provide the will to action, while Cole and Hoey McCurtain, deputy Mundo Morales, and his nemesis Jessard Deal act. It takes all of them, indeed, to enact the many variants of justice depicted in this novel, ranging from vigilante justice to
justice tempered with mercy. While Owens’ group hero suggests the human interdependence that sustains tribal communities, it also resonates with John Steinbeck’s concept of the group man.

While it is easy to think of The Sharpest Sight as Cole’s story, as Cole’s quest for his brother’s bones and the meaning of his Choctaw identity, a close look reveals just how little action Cole himself engages in. Punching FBI agent and Indian “authority” Lee Scott for telling Indian jokes is the sole action Cole initiates in the entire novel. What Cole does do is obey his elders, which is perfectly appropriate for a young Indian man. Cole’s flight to Mississippi is his father’s idea. He returns to California in FBI custody to begin the search for his brother’s bones at the behest of Uncle Luther and Onatima. Mundo Morales is Cole’s mirror image as he discovers his own mixedblood heritage. To the readers of traditional detective fiction, Mundo, the independent lawman with a mind of his own, is the obvious candidate for hero, but he, too, breaks the mold. The deputy sheriff declares his stake in solving his best friend’s murder, but when he speaks the much-used line about bringing the killer to justice, it rings false even to his own ears. Like Cole, what Mundo really wants is to find Attis’s body. When he goes after Jessard Deal for the rape of Diana Nemi, Mundo is saved in a barroom brawl by a man old enough to be his father. Here Hoey McCurtain comes closer to traditional heroics than either Cole or Mundo, but his prayers over Diana in the hastily improvised sweat lodge, wordless though they are, have already set Hoey apart from violent heroes who lack compassion. It takes every man in this novel, and two women as well, to enact justice in its many permutations.

Justice is served in Bone Game only when Cole McCurtain steps in to save his daughter from the danger of independent action that ultimately threatens her. Abby has fearlessly taken responsibility for saving herself and Alex, and the pair seems about to bring one
of Santa Cruz’s serial murderers to justice when another lone gunman intervenes. Though Abby ultimately kills him in self-defense, no gun can save her from the gunman’s spirit double; she is saved by her father’s words. The Choctaw elders, too, have a role in bringing justice in this novel, albeit one that hints at how the Choctaw concept of justice has changed over the past two hundred years. The premier example of the group hero in Owens’ fiction, however, comes in his last novel, *Dark River*, where Owens counterpoints a very contemporary multigenerational tribe against a mixedblood thriller hero of the more traditional mold. Jake Nashoba is *The Searchers*’ Ethan Edwards and Rambo rolled into one, but his nickname—Lone Ranger—signals the irony of his loner position in a tribal community. Not only can Jake not save his granddaughter from the vision she is seeking, however untraditional, he himself is killed in the process. Jake is no match for evil, here manifest as a militia ideologue. Only a collective effort that brings together every character in the Black Mountain community to enact old stories and imagine new ones ends the holocaust in the Dark River canyon and brings Jake, after his warrior’s death, into the tribe.

**NATIVE AESTHETICS AND FORMULA FICTION**

While Native oral tradition seems at the opposite end of any spectrum from American popular fiction, some important similarities between them should be noted. These similarities make the thriller in any of its subgenres an ideal carrier for mixedblood messages. First, the defining aesthetic of the both the thriller and the traditional Native story is their focus on action. What happens to move the story along is far more important than any subtleties of character psychology. In *Artistry in Native American Myths*, Karl Kroeber notes that in the case of Native oral story,
the singular focus on plot excludes description as well as “motive analysis, philosophizing, and figures of speech” (70).

Even the ironic, laughter-provoking trickster story bears an important similarity to the thriller genre, for both stand as expressions of a moral universe even as they seem to emphasize the reverse of culturally accepted moral norms. Despite the glorification of immorality and violence in the thriller, immoral and violent acts are ultimately contained by the moral code that motivates the hero to action. The thriller hero’s responsibility is, after all, to restore the status quo (Cawelti 35). Trickster, much given to sex and violence, often suffers the natural consequences of his own actions, which retain their ability to teach by negative example because of a tribal community’s shared moral perspective. Finally, both popular fiction and Native story incorporate such a high degree of predictability that great significance inheres in slight variation. It might even be suggested that genre fiction depends for its effect upon the same critical faculty that Karl Kroeber postulates among tribal people listening to traditional stories. Because they know the stories already, listeners derive new meaning from the subtle or not-so-subtle differences in the telling of a story (69). Readers come to appreciate the new twists in the handling of formulaic plots; such appreciation makes it possible for non-Native readers to engage in something of a Native experience of story because their knowledge of a genre engages them in its unspoken cultural dimensions.

Considering these affinities, it is perhaps not surprising to note that Owens’ technique typically involves balancing genre plot and traditional tribal story, but his subversion of the thriller ultimately does more to underscore cultural difference than to enhance cross-cultural similarity. In The Sharpest Sight, when Cole McCurtain carries his brother’s bones from the far west back to Mississippi, he enacts the very story that grounds Choctaw tribal
identity. In *Nightland*, Owens’ Cherokee New Mexicans simultaneously enact their roles as marginal ranchers and the Thunder Boys, whose story gives ethical dimension to Cherokee life and identity. In *Dark River*, Mrs. Edwards, Avrum Goldberg, Shorty Luke, and Domingo Perez are more than simply Apache elders. They are the four First Persons, the persons without parents, of Apache origin story, Black Metal Old Man, Big Black Spider, Black Whirlwind, and Mirage. (Alternatively, or simultaneously, Mrs. Edwards, Avrum, and Shorty can be read as the three First Persons, for the number varies from band to band among the Apaches.) Because Owens does not call attention to his strategy in any obvious way, Native readers who know the traditional stories, however briefly told, stand as the privileged readers of his fiction. Members of the dominant culture are for once effectively marginalized, a fact confirmed again and again by reviewers without a clue to the Native grounding of Owens’ novels.

For non-Native readers, perhaps the most obvious signal of Owens’ mixedblood messages lies in his endings. The expectation of genre fiction readers is that justice will be served, the good guys will win, and all loose ends will be neatly tied up in the process. Justice for Owens, however, is largely accidental, and there are always loose ends. Further, Owens insists that readers consider what justice means for Native peoples, personally and historically, for never in his fiction is it the consequence of law. Uncle Luther offers an elder’s perspective on the position of Indians vis-à-vis the U.S. legal system when in *Bone Game* he urges his nephew to help him track down the trio that has kidnapped Katherine Begay. Hoey wants to call the police. “The police don’t care about Indians,” Luther asserts. “This town is full of drunk Indians. The police will look at you and see you’re just a Indian too. Mixedbloods and fullbloods is all the same” (117). Although the Native community benefits when Hoey and Luther design a non-
lethal punishment to fit the kidnappers’ crime, in a Santa Cruz terrorized by serial murders, justice is the result of unpremeditated impulse. One serial killer kills the second when his plans are threatened, Abby McCurtain shoots this rapist/killer in self-defense, and Cole speaks the unspeakable to save his beloved daughter from the evil gambler spirit, revealing in the process the sordid history of injustice to indigenous Californians.

Owens also complicates the dominant culture’s notion of justice by weaving traditional tribal notions of justice into his plots. From the perspective of thriller justice, the conclusion of The Sharpest Sight is highly problematic as young Diana Nemi, who has masterminded the murder of Attis McCurtain, heads off to the University of California, Berkeley, instead of to jail. Femme fatale that she is in the best noir tradition, she will never be called to face charges in court, all knowledge of her guilt forever buried with barkeeper Jessard Deal. Considered from the traditional Choctaw perspective, however, justice is served in a roundabout way. While Diana is punished for her earlier crime, sexually betraying her sister with Attis, her father’s death atones for Attis’s murder. Among the Choctaw, according to John Reed Swanton, fornication was traditionally punishable by notoriously brutal public gang rape (110-11). Diana’s rapist Jessard Deal is no Indian, but he is a wannabe with links to revenge. His horse, like arch-avenger Joaquin Murieta’s, is named Bucephalus. Deal’s own name links him to the evil gamblers of Native story, traditional and contemporary, including the Gambler who has hidden the rainclouds in Silko’s Storyteller and the evil gambler of Vizenor’s Bearheart. When he subsequently kills Diana’s father, Deal exacts the traditional Choctaw punishment for murder, which mandated the death of either the murderer or a member of his family (Swanton 104-10). Dan Nemi’s death would have cleared Diana of her crime. According to Choctaw tradition, it would have been
Hoey McCurtain’s responsibility to seek justice for his son, not Deal’s. This change is significant. Hoey acts with compassion, conducting an impromptu sweat for Diana, though he unwittingly avenges her rape, accomplishing Dan Nemi’s original goal when he kills Jessard to save Mundo.

In Owens’ novels, the relationship between good and evil is far more complex than in the genre thriller. No one is without guilt. While in Wolfsong Tom Joseph has no regrets about destroying the mine construction site in his mission to save the wilderness, he does regret taking a man’s life in the process. Nightland showcases a drug ring hit man with strong environmental sentiments, a suggestion in the context of Owens’ oeuvre that he can’t be all bad. Here the obvious bad guys, including the Pueblo crime family, their wannabe-Indian enforcer, and the Apache femme fatale, all die, but the good guys who survive are, without exception, morally flawed. Despite his compunctions about taking the money that has fallen out of the sky, mixedblood rancher Will Striker does not hesitate to hide evidence to protect himself when he kills the man sent to recover it. His crime, committed in self-defense, remains hidden only through the complicity of the local sheriff. Even Grampa Siquani, the moral center of the novel at three or four hundred years old, could be arraigned on charges of concealing a body.

While the thriller hero makes the eradication of evil his mission, Owens demonstrates that this may ultimately be impossible in the larger material/spiritual world of Native understanding. In Bone Game, both of the young killers who haunt Santa Cruz die. They are not, however, the ultimate villains of the novel. This is the role of the revenge-bent gambler spirit. In his lifetime, Venancio Asisara avenged the priest’s rape of his young wife, but he did not succeed in eradicating Euramericans from his tribal homeland. When Abby McCurtain, whose fast action with a gun has just
saved her from death at the hands of a man indistinguishable from the gambler, begins to test her power against the gambler's, Owens offers a lesson at odds with the traditional expectations of genre fiction readers—that words may have greater power than violence itself. Words brought the indigenous world into being. When Cole breaks the Ohlone taboo and speaks the gambler's name, Asisara responds with his own brief words, "'Eran muy crueles [They were very cruel],’" thereby revealing his motive, revenge against the cruelty of the colonial enterprise. He retires from the scene but may return at any time.

Evil cannot ultimately be killed in Dark River either. Here, however, the women, warriors in the tradition of Geronimo's sister Lozen, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Vivian Twostar, karate expert of The Crown of Columbus, give the fictional Black Mountain tribe a degree of control by capturing the evil gambler in his militia ideologue guise. New plots for Natives become possible, Owens suggests, only when loner heroes like Jake Nashoba discover that death is not the end of the story, just the end of one particular chapter.

**COYOTE WAITS FOR TONY HILLERMAN**

Even in Nightland's jacket blurb, Louis Owens was unable to escape comparison with fellow New Mexican Tony Hillerman, whose bestselling mysteries are set on the Navajo reservation. "The most successful 'Indian' writer of all," Owens called him in Mixedblood Messages, with no small irony (16). Hillerman has provided the armchair tour of Indian Country that Owens explicitly resisted. "Literary terrorism is preferable to literary tourism," Owens insisted (Mixedblood Messages 46). Appealing to America's preference for brand names, Hillerman frequently uses the term traditional to stamp his texts with an aura of authentic Indianness. This should signal a warning. Owens, attuned to the dangers of
representations that trap tribal peoples in their past with no opportunity for change, noted, “For Native Americans, the term ‘Indian’ is a deeply contested space, where authenticity must somehow be forged out of resistance to the ‘authentic’ representation” (Mixedblood Messages 13). In Bone Game Owens features many different Navajos, treating each as an individual, and showcasing the ironic lens through which Native people view dominant culture expectations of Indian traditionalism. The campus cross-dresser, Navajo trickster anthropologist Alex Yazzie, laughs about his dance on the lawn of the faculty housing complex, a parody designed for white eyes. So does his colleague Cole McCurtain, Choctaw and less traditional, but perfectly capable of parody himself in his academically acceptable explanation of Alex’s inexplicable behavior. However, real Indians do not need to explain themselves to anyone, Owens suggests. Indeed, when Alex asks if Cole wants to know any more about seven arrows he is making, Cole declines. “No?” Alex responds, “I guess you might really be an Indian. White people always want to know the mystical secrets. All the Indian hocus-pocus!” (30).

Owens revels in Hillerman parodies. Tribal wisdom is serious business in Hillerman’s novels, which always contain a textbook definition of the Navajo concept of hohzho or, in a word, balance. While sex never enters a Hillerman scene, Owens’ wise elders are downright bawdy, the kind of Native elder men Keith Basso remembers teasing him in public about the most private aspects of his personal life (40-41). In Nightland, Grampa Siquani is full of advice about Billy and Will’s sex lives. Men and women belong together, he notes. Will, estranged from his wife, understands the importance of family ties and male/female balance, but Billy is still a bachelor looking for a good time. One day he turns up at Will’s house with a copy of the personals from an Albuquerque tabloid and waxes enthusiastic about an ad from a “nice girl”
seeking “to explore sexual fantasies such as two men at once.” Billy is careful to explain why he finds this ad so interesting: “‘See, I’ve been thinking about you out here all alone, Will. It’s not natural. A man needs balance’” (66).

Hillerman often provides an academic frame for his discussions of Indian traditionalism, yet another technique for suggesting authenticity. In Coyote Waits, linguists, historians, and a comparative mythologist all have ties to Hillerman’s chief suspect, a shaman named Ashie Pinto. This old man never has the opportunity to speak for himself. Readers hear only his academically authentic tape recorded voice kept in the archives of an academic library. Even his murder confession is lost in translation. In Bone Game, Owens uses an academic setting to frame a discussion of the Native world as a dynamic world. First, however, he challenges the very assumption that the academic world is a rational world. Nothing on the Santa Cruz campus is rational, from the cross-dressing anthropology professor to the students who leave offerings in a wooded spot called Elfland. Only after the stage has been set does Professor McCurtain engage in a discussion of his academic specialty, Native American literature. He and his wannabe Indian graduate assistant debate which version of Black Elk’s story is more appropriate to teach first. The discussion is very short, privileging those readers who already know how John Neihardt’s editorial hand shaped the story, just as tribal insiders are privileged by the many abbreviated versions of stories that exist in the Native oral tradition. The story of Black Elk recovered by Raymond DeMallie effectively calls the whole notion of authentic traditionalism into question: Black Elk, in fact, consciously gave up Lakota spirituality to devote himself to Catholicism.

In his later novels Owens reworks a number of Hillerman’s themes in ways that de-essentialize Indian identity. Indian drinking is perhaps the most obvious example. There is no marker of
authentic, tragic Indian identity so readily recognizable in white America as alcoholism. When Hillerman introduces Navajo criminals into his fiction for the first time in *Coyote Waits* and *Sacred Clowns*, their sole criminal motivation is alcohol. In Hillerman's oeuvre, no Indian drinks who is not a criminal. It would be difficult to find another detective novel that ties criminal motivation to alcohol. The one social moment in *Coyote Waits* when a guest is offered anything besides coffee or tea becomes the occasion for a warning that Indians and alcohol don't mix. Greed and revenge are more typical criminal motivations, and these are the motivations of all Owens' Indian criminals, at least those who are not engaged in acts of civil disobedience. Alcohol in these novels is part of normal social experience for Indians and non-Indians alike, whether the drinking is done in a bar, at home, at a barbeque, before sex, or with dinner. It is certainly implicated in antisocial behavior—of whites and Indians both. Owens' small town bars are notorious for their brawls, but tribal attendees at the reservation resort cocktail party in *Dark River* affect country club mannerisms. Most of Owens' Indians drink, but others like Uncle Luther do not. The older Cole McCurtain of *Bone Game* clearly abuses alcohol, but he also stops when called to accountability. Alcohol requires careful distinctions, Owens suggests, but these are distinctions between good and bad wine, not good and bad Indians. Stereotyping, especially the Noble/Savage variety, is unacceptable in any manifestation.

**THE NEW WEST FRONTIER**

Owens locates the mixedbloods in his novels in a west where decidedly different cultures encounter each other and mingle, a place he calls the frontier. As Owens defines it, extending the thinking of Mary Louise Pratt and James Clifford, the frontier "is always unstable, multidirectional, hybridized, . . . and indeterminate"
It is full of surprises, definitely not the safe territory of containment. In showcasing the indigenous landscape of this frontier west, Owens reminds us that tribal cultures themselves were very different, that intertribal solidarity was never automatic and sometimes hard won. In all of his novels, however, he constructs alliances between minorities across racial and ethnic boundaries, hinting at the larger pattern of stories shared by minorities across America but unique to each.

Owens’ goal is a nuanced exploration of the ethnicity of place. This is perhaps most obvious in *The Sharpest Sight*, where two young Californians learn important truths about their mixedblood cultural identities. Through the story of Mexican American displacement in California, Owens suggests the pattern of Choctaw displacement in the southeast. Although his family once held title to much of the county, deputy sheriff Mundo Morales knows little about his family history except their claim to be “pure Spanish” and that the loss of their old Spanish land grant was tied to alcohol. When the ancient Mondragon sisters present him with a family tree constructed with help from the most authoritative possible sources, their dead ancestors, Mundo can trace his family back to a primal pair: the *patrón* and the young Chumash woman he took from the mission. The mestizo lineage, so often unacknowledged before it was reclaimed by the Chicano movement, is here clearly visible, along with a less visible web of “secret joy” that includes “a Chinese gentleman from Canton [who] planted the seed of future Moraleses with interesting eyes” (229-30).

Owens emphasizes the isolation of minorities in academia when Cole McCurtain finds himself back in California in *Bone Game*. Lest the moment of bonding between the only two Native faculty members on campus appear too simple through the easy erasure of Choctaw and Navajo tribal difference, Owens puts Alex Yazzie’s gender into question. Cole must overcome his gender distrust
before he can develop a real friendship with his colleague. Even before Cole meets Alex, however, the novel frames the issue of masculinity in a multicultural context. The poster Cole reads in the campus coffee shop, advertising a graduate student performance piece entitled “Ricedick: Selling my Asian Body,” recalls the discussion of racial effeminization in Asian American literary circles. In *Nightland* and *Dark River*, Owens seeks to dispel the notion of automatic pan-tribal unity in other ways. Old friendships across ethnic lines, like Will Striker and Billy Keene’s friendship with Mouse Melendez, can survive and thrive even after a bar-room knife fight, but the Cherokee ranchers share no community of interest with the local Pueblos and Apaches. The elders on the Black Mountain Reservation, meanwhile, are willing to give their unqualified acceptance and friendship to outsiders, regardless of race, religion, or tribal affiliation. While Choctaw mixedblood Jake Nashoba never allows himself to become an insider in the community where he has lived for twenty years, Jewish anthropologist Avrum Goldberg does, even if he dresses like a wannabe.

While the death of Jake Nashoba honors the tragic history of Native tribes, Owens understands the need to heal the guilt of perpetrators and survivors alike. Nothing crosses ideological boundaries more effectively than shared laughter. Perhaps Owens’ most important contribution to reshaping genre fiction as a vehicle for Native survivance—the continuing evolution of tribal culture—comes in the creation of elders who are simultaneously sources of wisdom and humor. Like Keith Basso’s Western Apache mentors, Uncle Luther, Onatima, Grampa Siquani, and Shorty Luke are frankly sexual and pointedly funny (Basso 41-42). In their presence, slapstick humor grows out of the collision of material and spiritual worlds, as when Grampa Siquani backs through the barn door as he learns to drive under the tutelage of the ghost of Arturo Cruz. Here, even the serious matter of returning Arturo’s
bones to the earth becomes an act of survivance at odds with stereotyped notions of shamanic power and Indian nobility. Owens is not even afraid to poke fun at one of the traditional taboos of thriller writing as he points a finger in Tony Hillerman’s direction. “Don’t make any facile jokes,” orders the hovering spirit of Jessie James with the capture of arch-villain Lee Jensen at the conclusion of Dark River. “Violent scenes shouldn’t be tempered with wit or jokes, or they lose their force, right, Uncle Luke?” (281). By infusing the thriller with a spirit of comedy, Owens creates not only a new genre hybrid but a community of readers carried by their laughter across cultural boundaries.

**TRICKSTER AND THE GENDERED WEST**

With his singular ability to resist the dangerous sex that Diana Nemi offers him in The Sharpest Sight, Mundo Morales is the first and almost the last happily married man in Owens’ oeuvre. Men and women in these novels seldom occupy the same domestic spaces. Even elders like Luther and Onatima, lovers for most of their lives, keep separate households. Boys lose their mothers, and men lose their wives, often to careers in law. Owens hereby affirms female agency and gender equality in the New West, traits that characterize traditional tribal gender relationships. Furthermore, his novels focus on men without women not to replicate the Old West mythos—in which women represented law and civilization and impeded male accomplishment and male bonding in lawless territory (Heatherington 86-87)—but to revise the assumptions of a binary gender system and showcase men’s emotional vulnerabilities, a prominent feature of post-Vietnam New West masculinity. Alex Yazzie, the crossdresser who declares, “Outside the law is my middle name” (Bone Game 26), clearly relishes the opportunity to challenge normative male–female
gender dualism, and Owens' middle-aged protagonists struggle to redefine their masculinity in the wake of feminism and loss.

Associating sex and gender with trickster acts, Owens overturns the power relations between men and women in the conventional Old West in favor of complex, fluid, and egalitarian sexual identities influenced by tribal traditions. This looks like a new phenomenon in *Wolfsong*, where Aaron Medicine runs sweat ceremonies and "welcomes everyone—men, women, Indians or whites" (189). Through the characters of Onatima and Mrs. John Edwards, Owens in later novels emphasizes the traditional importance of women in tribal spiritual practice and governance. That tricksters in his novels are as likely to be women as men is entirely in keeping with traditional trickster stories in a number of tribes, stories noted for lust and violence (Cox 17). While his female tricksters are closely associated with the femme fatales of thriller fiction, they also reflect the sexual liberation that radically altered the landscape of gender relationships in the 1960s and 1970s. Sex, almost always initiated by women in Owens' novels, is likely to be a dangerous, if not fatal, trick.

Owens' first female trickster is Diana Nemi, who in *The Sharpest Sight* tricks her sister's boyfriend into making love to her in her sister's own bed and later orchestrates Attis's death. Diana is closely associated with coyotes, perhaps the best known of all traditional tricksters. The female trickster who seduces Alex Yazzie in *Bone Game* is Cole's own daughter Abby. Although she has outgrown her wild adolescence, Abby is an erotic magnet for all the young men in this text. She is also extremely skilled with firearms and quick to defend herself, killing Robert Malin before he can consummate his intended rape. Though Abby is unaware of the fact, in the woman she calls grandmother she clearly has a trickster elder to guide her. Onatima ran away with the passion of her youth and ultimately killed the abusive husband she was
forced by her father to marry. She still delights in the pleasures of sexuality. Nightland's Odessa White Hawk is a trickster who uses men to accomplish her own ends, and when her significant sexual power is insufficiently persuasive, she has no compunction about shooting them. Mrs. John Edwards of Dark River is the matriarch of a veritable tribe of tricksters. Her sexual prowess is legendary, the reason, ostensibly, that her white preacher husband suddenly abandoned the tribe after three days of marriage. She holds Jake Nashoba's life in her hands but refuses to cure his ghost sickness because he never asks her to.

Owens also uses the lens of Native culture to examine the taboos associated with male relationships. Few scenes in American fiction are so poignantly funny or so uncomfortable for so many readers as the ultimate moment of male bonding in Bone Game when Alex Yazzie, in his resplendent black dress, and the divorced, insomniac Cole McCurtain end their first collegial evening together dancing thigh-to-thigh in the privacy of Cole's living room. Cole initially objects, but he does lead when Alex tells him he should. As Alex nestles close, Cole loses himself in the erotics of landscape, "the night air stirring the tops of the redwoods, the wide, smooth bay cupped by the mountains, and the vast, open sea." When their one dance ends, Alex makes his departure by way of a confession, "I think I'm in love" (56). Cole gets the last, definitively heterosexual, word, but the power of the sensual moment holds sway.

This brief scene encapsulates the difficulty, indeed the threat, central to the project of transforming the male-dominated space of the Old West into the New West, even as it lays bare the very ground of male homosociality. Alex is dangerous because s/he cannot be reduced to a single gender category, a trickster in an updated version of perhaps the most widely disseminated of all Native trickster stories. In the Winnebago version, when Trickster falls in love with the chief's son, he reinvents himself as a woman
in order to marry the young man, taking great pains to fashion breasts and a vulva from elk kidneys. It’s an audacious trick, but it works, at least until the elk kidneys begin to rot (Radin 22-23). Owens pushes beyond the tricks of disguise to the very heart of this story, to the mystery of desire itself. Cole knows the intimate details of Alex’s bra stuffing. The very frankness of Alex’s desire, however, distanced but not rejected outright by Cole, repositions the Indian male both as desiring subject and as the dangerous object of desire, even as it calls out the intimate intertwining of embodied identities, at once racial and sexual.

Ultimately, Alex is kin to the contemporary feminists who confound cultural expectations of feminine submissiveness. The full-blood who desires Cole is not afraid to articulate his desire. Still, Alex frames his desire as romance, keeping a very delicate balance. Through Alex, Owens destabilizes even the notion of the cross-dressing trickster as a metaphor for mixedblood identity, familiar from the seminal writings of mixedblood novelist/theorist Gerald Vizenor. Alex is a Navajo full-blood, but perhaps his closest kin is the Zuni We-wah, the best-known exemplar of Native third- and fourth-gender persons, genders not accounted for in the dominant culture’s male-female binary. Invoking a traditional tribal understanding of gender, Owens makes space in the New West for all those marginalized in the Old West by virtue of race or gender.

**THE QUINTESSENTIAL ENVIRONMENTALIST**

The heart of Louis Owens’ fiction is the western landscape he loved so profoundly, the mountains and rivers of northern Washington, of coastal California below Monterey, of New Mexico and Arizona. Owens said that in his first novel he wanted to write about the wilderness itself, “making the place the real protagonist of the novel and the characters ways of giving trees and
mountains and streams and glaciers a voice” (Purdy 7). In this he emulated John Steinbeck. In a television interview produced during the Steinbeck Centennial, Owens described the shock of recognizing, in his first reading of “Flight,” a coast trail that he himself had climbed. It was then that he set out to discover just how Steinbeck had given this familiar landscape such dimension and power (National Steinbeck Center). Owens developed his craft in the context of the environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s. In the 1990s he served on the Art of the Wild faculty, dedicated to helping other writers develop their own environmentally sensitive voices.

Throughout his oeuvre, Owens sought to articulate an environmentalist position consonant with New West writing. Like Edward Abbey, he explored the geography of the west through the eyes of environmentalist outlaws and wilderness rangers, the eyes, indeed, of his own experience. As his work evolved, however, Owens used the familiar rhetoric of environmentalism to question Old West notions of individualism and to showcase the importance of community. According to Native understanding, humans are but one of the earth’s peoples, and all peoples, human and non-human, must work in concert, for they share mutual responsibility for sustaining life. In Ceremony Leslie Marmon Silko demonstrates the profound connection between human health and the health of the land at the local level. Owens’ oeuvre explores this connection in its continental dimension.

In the west, the environmental movement coalesced around wilderness issues, the loss of irreplaceable wild lands and wild rivers, and this is where Owens’ novels begin. Even his first novel, however, is grounded in issues deeper than the nonutilitarian land use ethic espoused by environmentalists. The land he speaks for in Wolfsong is not only federally designated wilderness but sacred land that stands at the center of tribal origin stories, which his
protagonist Tom Joseph respects though he knows but their barest outlines. Native protests aimed at protecting other sacred sites, including Yucca Mountain and Devil's Tower, have made this issue a familiar one, but tribal peoples face the same opposition as environmentalists when land use restrictions are proposed. Most members of the logging community where Tom grew up, including his own brother, see the nonutilitarian land use ethic as a direct threat to their livelihood. Tom adopts a direct action, monkey-wrenching strategy to oppose a planned copper mine, then flees from civilization and development, disappearing in ambiguous triumph as the howl of the endangered wolf resounds across a landscape of peaks and glaciers.

The issue of environmental action was never a simple one for Owens. Wilderness, by contemporary legal definition, is a landscape bearing no trace of human presence. For Native peoples, this same landscape has always been an inhabited landscape, the landscape of home. Owens describes grappling with this conflict in two rather different narrative treatments of the same incident. “Shelter” in *I Hear the Train* and “Burning the Shelter” in *Mixedblood Messages*, written a decade apart, relate an encounter between two elderly Native women and the young Owens, a wilderness ranger who has just destroyed the last trace of a log shelter built by their father. How cultures live within the landscape they inhabit becomes the ultimate issue in Owens’ novels, an issue that he also addressed in his critique of revisionist environmental histories, “‘Everywhere There Was a Life’: How Native Americans Can Save the World.”

Owens’ fiction emphasizes the relationship between a culture’s land use ethic and its operative myths. After *Wolfsong*, he demonstrated increasingly sophisticated techniques for articulating his environmental concerns in a voice simultaneously white and Indian. *The Sharpest Sight* offers non-Native readers important
clues to Owens’ mythological project, for Native and classical European myths run beneath the surface of this novel like the unseen underground Salinas River in the dry season. Here Owens embeds the Phrygian myth of Attis and Cybele—Virbius and Diana in the Roman pantheon. Also at the heart of T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*, this myth stands as a warning in Owens’ novel. *The Golden Bough* tells us that the Romans adopted the goddess Diana, the power of reproductive fertility in the wilds, in the midst of a debilitating drought. Her power was such that men gave themselves over to violent madness at her shrine on the shores Lake Nemi, sacrificing their sexual parts to become her priests and succeeding to leadership as King of the Wood in a kill-or-be-killed ritual (Frazer 309-16, 3-4). Giving his central characters the names Attis and Diana, Owens forces readers to consider the ethos underlying Euramerica’s relationship with wilderness, the connection between violence and passionate desire. Attis McCurtain, Dan Nemi, and Jessard Deal all succumb to violence. Hoey and Cole McCurtain and Mundo Morales survive. Only by abandoning the myth of Diana and the world created through it, however, do Owens’ mixedbloods recover the Native stories that will sustain their lives. When Hoey and Cole make their way toward the Choctaw homeland, Owens’ young femme fatale Diana Nemi finds herself abandoned, alone and unworshipped, beside the last pool of water in the dry summer landscape.

When Owens returns more explicitly to the question of land use economics in *Nightland*, he sets the likely bankruptcies of two small ranchers against the quick profits turned by a Native drug cartel. The Cherokee story of reciprocity stands at the ethical heart of this novel, which opens with an out-of-season deer hunting expedition into the Cibola National Forest. Mixedblood hunting buddies Will Striker and Billy Keene bring home not a big buck, but big bucks—literally a suitcase full of money. Billy, who wants
to keep the money, and Will, who does not, are the contemporary embodiment of the Thunder Boys from the Cherokee story that Jack and Anna Kilpatrick in *Friends of the Thunder* called “one of the greatest of all American Indian myths” (51). While hunting one day, the two boys find a hungry snake. They keep it well-fed until the day they find it coiled around the powerful Thunder, who is fighting for his life. Both opponents appeal to the boys’ friendship, but ultimately they help Thunder, who reminds them that he always helps them. Indeed, even when the snake is dead, Thunder continues to help them, protecting them from its toxic fumes even as he reaffirms the importance of helping and protecting one another until this world ends. If the name of the drug ring hit man, *Scales*, points back to this story, the snake Billy and Will nurture is Odessa White Hawk, an Apache woman who wants all of the drug profits stashed in the suitcase and knows how to use her sexuality to get what she wants.

When Indian greed of all stripes is laid to rest, at least temporarily, with Odessa’s death, and water miraculously returns to his drought-stricken spread, Will finally acts on his life’s desire to give up land-based capitalism for fishing. In the medieval grail romances, the literary legacy of sacrifice at the altar of Diana, the freeing of the waters that restores the earth’s fertility comes with the healing of the Fisher King. *Nightland* ends not only with the freeing of the waters but with a miraculous healing of the marital rift that has kept Will Striker and his wife apart for years. Grampa Siquani, who knew the problem needed resolution, once briefly mentioned all the trouble First Man got into during his time alone. What he did not say in his elliptical version of this old Cherokee story was that First Man entertained himself by killing animals wantonly until the animals complained to the Creator. It was only then that First Woman was created. This story, suggesting that sexual pleasure and human fertility grew out of the need
to curb human thoughtlessness and enforce reasonable environmental limits, offers an important Native counterpoint to the violence of the myth of Diana. About to become a grandfather as *Nightland* ends, Will Striker even decides to sell the bulldozer he has used principally on Forest Service fire lines, a source of cash that often made the difference between profit and loss for his marginal operation. Fire suppression, another contentious issue in the contemporary west, is not only profit-oriented, Owens hints, but inherently anti-environmental.

### SPEAKING FOR THE LAND

Perhaps the most difficult issue Owens faced in articulating an environmentalist position through his Native characters was avoiding the stereotype of the Indian as the quintessential outdoorsman or "genetically predetermined environmentalist" (*Mixedblood Messages* 220). He adopted several strategies to counter this stereotype in his fiction, calling attention to it through non-Native environmentalist characters even as he created Native characters who defy every dominant-culture expectation.

The link between Indians and the environment in the white imaginary has a long history, delineated by scholar Shepard Krech. Indeed, generations of Boy Scouts have emulated the outdoor skills Natty Bumppo learned from the noble Indians of Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, where the vanishing Indian clearly lived in a vanishing wilderness. In the 1970s, in a nation shocked into recognition of its pending environmental crisis, the Crying Indian became the media icon of Keep America Beautiful. From their college reading, many young adults recognized his kinship with John Neihardt's Black Elk. The Crying Indian ads ran for eight years, longer than any ad campaign in American history. The ads were so successful that twenty years later, in 1998, Keep America Beautiful executives considered running them again.
without a single change (Krech 15-28). Here, quite literally, is the image of the Indian frozen in time, denied any possibility of change, the cultural ideology that Native writers confront whenever they seek to affirm the vitality of contemporary tribal survival or Native environmentalism.

The most obvious environmental spokesmen in Owens’ later novels are not Indians but wannabes. Their direct critiques reflect an important cultural difference in the preferred mode of expressing opinions on controversial subjects. On the other hand, when Native characters speak out on environmental issues in Owens’ novels, they almost always use irony to render their critiques indirectly. In Bone Game, while traveling west of Albuquerque through Laguna, a sacred landscape familiar to all readers of Ceremony, Navajo hitchhiker Robert Jim ironically reconfigures it as a white man landscape (88-89). They are traveling, he insists, through a sacred nuclear landscape, bounded by Los Alamos to the north, the Trinity Site to the south, Sandia Labs to the east, and the uranium mine that fueled all of this destructive power to the west (88-89).

Drawing from tribal tradition, Owens also revises the false association of the environmental movement between Indians, wilderness, and social isolation. Many of the voices that shaped the environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s, including Edward Abbey, consciously linked the environmentalist position to Native tradition, without, however, understanding or articulating the Native basis for ethical action, reciprocity. According to this tradition, all beings have been given certain gifts and the responsibility for sharing these gifts with other beings. This makes life on earth possible. In the environmental movement, archetypally American rugged individualism found its space in the wilderness, which had to be closely guarded from the incursions of civilization. It was a place to visit infrequently, not to inhabit. In Dark River, Lone
Ranger Jake Nashoba’s devotion to wilderness at the expense of community underscores the difference between life-enhancing Native values and dominant-culture simulations, a distinction important to Owens. Until he has taken the lesson of reciprocity to heart, Jake is quite correct in insisting, as he does to Mrs. Edwards early in the novel, “‘Look Grandmother, I’m no Indian’” (42). It is a lesson that Owens’ wannabes never learn.

As his fictional oeuvre developed, Owens changed readers’ expectations about the Indian as a trustworthy guide to the wilderness. Although in Wolfsong Tom Joseph helps ranger Martin Grider map the route to his next wilderness destination, such help is notably absent from Owens’ subsequent novels. In The Sharpest Sight, Uncle Luther takes inordinate pleasure in the fact that FBI agents Hicks and Harwood find themselves going in circles during their extended midnight tour of the Mississippi swamps. In Bone Game, grave danger inheres in following the only Native Californian who presents himself, the dream figure of Venancio Asisara, who crystallizes not beneficence, but deep anger and the will to vengeance in the hauntingly beautiful landscape. Santa Cruz-born graduate student and wannabe Robert Malin, the only character in the novel with intimate knowledge of this landscape, is also the only person who trusts this particular guide. The only way to take responsibility for a world where “every minute element is interrelated inextricably with every other element,” Malin insists, is to “make offerings, and propitiate the only forces that can help us, the way Native Americans have always known we must. The spirits guide us” (103).

As it happens, Malin’s perspective on tribal peoples is precisely defined by the stereotype of the Ecological Indian. Cole McCurtain’s ponytailed teaching assistant has read Black Elk Speaks, his favorite book, a dozen times and claims to have studied Lakota spirituality. Appearing mysteriously beside the
mountain stream where Cole’s daughter Abby is fishing, he explains his vision of the world as unending sacrifice: “It’s like the way your people, Native Americans, know that animals give themselves to the hunter” (102). The irony is extravagant, for this has earlier been a joke between the only two Indian faculty members on campus. In Cole’s final analysis, Malin is “a white Indian, the Natty Bumppo of Santa Cruz,” “in love with mother earth” (206). He proves, of course, to be one of Bone Game’s two serial murderers. The second is the environmental nihilist Paul Kantner, who sees in a circle of redwood sprouts the perfect Faulknerian mother, an empty center, “dead and vanished . . . Like God” (183).

Nightland’s most outspoken environmentalist, also a wannabe, is a killer-for-profit, through whom Owens ironically underscores the ethical grounding of environmentalism. Paranoid, cynical, and opinionated, Duane Scales, the top enforcer and the only white man in a Pueblo-run drug ring, has no kind words for the ongoing experiments to fill empty niches in the western New Mexico ecosystem with species native to other continents, for ranchers who graze their cattle on public lands, for wolf extermination, or for the prospect of an Apache nuclear waste disposal site. While these much-discussed environmental issues of the contemporary west take on a new patina of evil through their association with Scales, his principal motivation is capitalistic greed, Owens’ ultimate target, the antithesis of traditional Native reciprocity. Tribal peoples were introduced to market capitalism, as Shepard Krech suggests, through the fur trade, a killing-for-profit scheme that disrupted the respectful reciprocal relationship between hunter and food animal.

Owens’ commitment to the environment never wavered, although the ethical position he articulated grew more nuanced in the course of his writing career. In this it paralleled the development of the environmental movement itself as chaos theory changed our
most fundamental scientific understanding of ecosystem development, revealing that no ecosystem is ever stable, and as our appreciation for the long history of positive human environmental impacts grew. The death of Lone Ranger Jake Nashoba, indeed, might be viewed as the death of environmentalism itself narrowly defined as wilderness preservation. The Black Mountain elders understood, as environmentalists have come to understand, that humans must be considered a part of the living, changing environment, not separate from it. Owens' novels demonstrate a careful attention to and respect for the nonhuman world, leading to an ethics of reciprocity as the basis for all life on earth.

ETHICS IN THE NEW TRIBAL LANDSCAPE

In *Dark River*, mindful that earned profit could serve either the good of the whole community or the greed of the isolated individual, Owens made Apache myth the ethical baseline for interrogating emergent Native capitalism. A gambling casino and trophy elk hunts are both part of the multi-faceted economic development plan on his fictitious Black Mountain reservation. Although casino gambling, controversial both on and off the reservation, is the best-known capitalist enterprise in contemporary tribal communities, Owens was far more interested in the ethics and environmental impact of less visible enterprises, including guided hunting trips and recreational tourism, which assign dollar value to animals and undeveloped wilderness. Elk hunting traditionally sustained Apache communities since the time when elk people accepted responsibility for providing them with food. Through a series of ironic reversals, Owens turns the origin myth of reciprocity into a traditional trickster critique, aimed principally at the tribal chairman who is lining his own pockets by permitting secret hunts. Trophy hunters, who care nothing about meat, pay ten thousand dollars for the chance to take home a rack, but when the
Black Mountain elders go trophy elk hunting, they leave behind the racks and distribute the meat to needy families in a wild food bank scheme.

It is tribal ranger Jake Nashoba's job to stop the poaching even though he sympathizes with the elders. The Choctaw mixedblood is the ultimate Ecological Indian. Jake loves the wilderness, but his loner tendencies threaten the very idea of community. While Mrs. Edwards, the venerable Apache matriarch, sees Jake as a trustworthy guide for the tribe's younger generation, Jake does not see himself that way. He has cut himself off from his family relationships and the reciprocal responsibilities they entail. It is clear that Mrs. Edwards could heal Jake's post-traumatic stress and make him a full member of the tribal community, but she refuses to intervene for one simple reason: Jake has never asked. He has yet to learn the lesson of reciprocity, the lesson of gifts and responsibilities that guides all behavior in a world where everything is connected.

The land Jake loves is the very ground where the debate about the ethics of Native capitalism in its many manifestations plays itself out. The tribe's economic development plan incorporates not only a casino and trophy elk hunting but a resort hotel and trophy trout fishing. Although the profit from these ventures funds important educational and social services for the tribe, they are not without controversy. One voice in Dark River calls the ethics of all these tribal enterprises into question: the voice of Black Mountain's live-in, Jewish-from-New York anthropologist, Avrum Goldberg. Avrum, who dresses in leathers, lives in a wickiup, and gathers his own food, is the ultimate Indian wannabe, but he has through the years, in an ironic twist, gained full acceptance as one of Black Mountain's tribal elders. Avrum proposes turning the entire reservation into an authentic Apache theme park, although he has not quite resolved the problem of how a tribe of new
traditionals could spend their hard-earned cash. Jake Nashoba discovers that the Dark River canyon is the site of two equally untraditional profit-making ventures, Vision Quest Enterprises, which funds college scholarships for younger members of the tribe, and the tribal chairman's secret land rental scheme. He meets his death when he chooses to confront head-on the dangers they pose. Jake's ultimate failure, however, is a failure of communication. Unlike the elders, who are expert in the subtleties of trickster discourse, he is unable to communicate his meaning indirectly.

Perhaps the most important way Owens controverts the Ecological Indian in his oeuvre is by giving Native voices the full range of possible positions on any given issue. No matter how small, Owens' Indian communities are never unified. It is, therefore, impossible to posit the dualism Shepard Krech finds at the heart of the Crying Indian's plea: ecological Indian/nonecological white man. Tom and Jim Joseph, the only two Indians left in Forks, disagree about the mine development in the nearby wilderness. Although Will Striker has no aspirations to wealth, Odessa White Hawk aspires to great and visible wealth, which she fully intends to enjoy south of the border. As long as his operatives have what they need, drug lord Paco Ortega is perfectly content to live a life that in no way distinguishes him from his Pueblo neighbors. Having money in his pocket makes Billy Keene anxious to use it, but only for ranch essentials like a reliable pick-up truck. Individual perspectives, as well, are increasingly nuanced rather than ideologically driven. Jake Nashoba has a range of reactions to the tribe's various capitalist endeavors. Often these mirror the views of the larger Black Mountain community. He abhors the guided elk hunts and views the casino as a kind of living hell. Jake tolerates the resort hotel, however, and waxes enthusiastic about trophy trout fishing. About Vision Quest Enterprises, Jake can never make up his mind.
When all is said and done, however, Owens generally removes his protagonists from the vastly beautiful western landscapes of his fictions, or at least he removes the line that divides human from landscape. Tom Joseph is lost from view when the wolf song rises out of the night. Cole McCurtain and his family head back east, not once but twice, beyond reach of the seductive power of revenge and violent death that claims coastal California. The Strikers and Grampa Siquani continue their lives on the land, but when water flows abundantly once again, the ranch is left to revert back to native landscape. Jake Nashoba’s romance with the river is finished. Those who survive the militia carnage head out of the canyon. Owens’ endings are perhaps the ultimate statement of a quintessential environmentalist. He concludes Mixedblood Messages, its fourth and final section devoted to the environment, with a call to action that is at once a call to listen. He invokes the gifts of close attention, reciprocity, and respect not only as powerful medicines but as “the only medicines that may, perhaps, save humanity from itself. This is a lesson Native Americans and all indigenous peoples have to teach, and it is time the world began listening carefully” (236).

The words are deceptively simple, as fragile as the hope of water in the desert of Eliot’s Waste Land, as strong as the need. The web of words that Louis Owens constructed was often deceptively simple, but it was also as complex as the natural world understood through the lens of chaos theory, with seemingly infinite potential for interaction and dynamic change, beyond any illusion of balance. “There are five layers in the book,” John Steinbeck once said in a letter that Owens quoted in his critical study of The Grapes of Wrath. “[A] reader will find as many as he can and he won’t find more than he has in himself” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 179). The words describe the challenge Louis Owens posed for readers of his own work.
Selected Bibliography

Louis Owens' papers are held in Special Collections in the General Library at the University of California, Davis.

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