

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Telling the Indian Urban: Representations in American Indian Fiction

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4x2231k8>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 22(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Miller, Carol

Publication Date

1998-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Telling the Indian Urban: Representations in American Indian Fiction

CAROL MILLER

End-of-century demographic information reveals that a surprisingly large number of Indian people—almost half of the approximately two million who identified themselves as Native American in the last census—now live away from reservation and trust lands. Except for the fact that the American Indian population is significantly younger and growing more rapidly than that of the nation as a whole—a fact which has been true for decades but is confounding to presumptions of doom and vanishing—a descriptive profile reveals information that mostly confirms what Indian people already know: Our population is significantly poorer and at greater risk than the nation's at large. The proportion of American Indian families living below the official poverty level is, in fact, almost three times that of all families taken together, and the per capita income of Indians is less than half that of Whites. Indians also have higher death rates attributable to accidents, suicides, and homicides; and the second leading cause of death for Native young adults is directly linked to the effects of alcoholism.¹

Frequently motivated by poverty at home and the promise

Carol Miller is an associate professor in the Program in American Studies and the Department of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota. She is a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

of greater economic opportunity elsewhere, Indian people, especially since World War II, have congregated in growing numbers in urban areas, where the particularities of their lived experience are either largely unexamined by non-Native American society or understood only within the broad categories of stereotype. Popular culture images of Indianness have infrequent association with town and city spaces, and yet for many individuals and families, those spaces are where they are living out their lives—and have done so for several generations. What does urbanization mean for cultural identities and tribal communities? How do ideas of homeland and ancestral values maintain themselves or shift their shapes when they are transformed within urban environments? To what degree, if at all, may this movement be understood as a “(re)taking place,”—a double breaking out—both from federally designated boundaries historically intended to isolate and contain Native people and from an equally pervasive confinement within the anachronistic fantasy-wildernesses of White imagination?

These questions have been consistently addressed by American Indian writers, who have long grappled with post-contact cultural interactions in all the settings—including towns and cities—in which these interactions have been acted out. Exploring some of these fictional representations, especially in their relation to one another, is instructive for several reasons. In addition to providing significant information about a consequential and ongoing Native American diaspora essentially ignored by mainstream White society, narratives about urban America as Indian country also reinforce the link between contemporary and ancestral storytelling traditions. And in doing so, they provide an important medium not only for sustaining culture but for creating a significant illustrative resource about the pragmatic business of “going along” in the world, just as the old stories always have done. Imaginative print-language “tellings” which explore intersections of Indianness and urbanization share the serious functionality of traditional Native storytelling, a functionality made even more important because of five hundred years of cultural disruption. The power of stories to influence actuality is certainly what Leslie Marmon Silko asserts in the poem that begins her 1977 novel *Ceremony*:

I will tell you something about stories,
 [he said]
They aren't just entertainment,

Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.²

This discussion argues that American Indian storytellers writing about urban Indian experience participate in specific struggles against illness and death by constructing increasingly diverse and transcending accounts that counter images of invisibility and victimization. Moreover, in doing so, they frequently reassert a particularly Native American idea of "urbanity" in terms of positive change and cultural vitality. And viewed within the context of the broader American literary canon, these storytellers contribute significantly to a function of literature that Elizabeth Cook-Lynn has recently lamented as going mostly unaddressed in this century: the power of narrative to "stir the human community to a moral view which would encompass all of humanity, not just selected parts of it."³

Even as Native writers represented them in early manifestations, towns were emblematic of both cultural alienation and physical risk and danger. In *Cogewea the Half-Blood*, for example, published in 1927 and credited as one of the earliest novels produced by an American Indian woman, Mourning Dove (Okanogan) constructs the town as a dehumanizing "othered" space which exposes her Indian characters to degradation and physical threat. Much of the novel, which concerns the conflicted identity and resulting life-choices of Mourning Dove's mixed-blood heroine, is set in the already disrupted middle ground of the privately owned ranch of Cogewea's sister and her white husband. Juxtaposed against this culturally mediated space, ancestral home and values are represented by two metonymical sites: the tipi of the Stemteema, Cogewea's traditional grandmother; and Buffalo Butte, the girl's favorite "haunt"⁴—an unspoiled natural space in which spirit voices still have the power to speak. The central problem of the novel is cast in the terms of post-Victorian domestic romance. Will Cogewea be seduced by the urbane but villainous Densmore, her fortune-hunting White suitor, or will she choose Jim, the mixed-blood foreman who loves her? Beneath the surface of melodramatic plotting, the novel's imagined physical spaces take on symbolic significance in their exploration of cultural conflict and integrity.

The town as symbolic space appears significantly in two narrative moments. In the first, Cogewea visits the town in order to compete in both the "Squaws'" and "Ladies'" horse races—significantly, part of the White community's annual Fourth of July celebration. Her winning of both races precipitates confrontations which at once call into question the supposedly civilized behavior of White society while foregrounding the alienating terms of Native and non-Native cultural conflict. Town is the place where, subjected to the sexual insults of the "gentleman whites," Cogewea reflects with regret on "the passing of an epoch, when there were no 'superiors' to 'guide' her simple race to a civilization so manifestly dearth of the primitive law of respect for womanhood."⁵ Town is also the place where the breakdown of Native traditions of communality is made evident by the bitterness directed at Cogewea by other Native women because of her mixed-blood status. And town is the place where blatant White racism cheats Cogewea of her deserved recognition as winner of the Ladies' race and threatens Jim with imprisonment and physical violence when he speaks up for fair treatment.

Later, in another suggestion of urban place as symbolic space, the city is the intended destination of Densmore's and Cogewea's disastrous elopement. When the villain's plans are thwarted by the discovery that Cogewea has no wealth of her own, the city is the place to which the exploitative and abusive Densmore flees. It represents an alienated way of living that Cogewea rejects when she ultimately chooses Jim and reinserts herself into the "splendid world"⁶ of Buffalo Butte.

In this early representation, therefore, and also in almost every subsequent fictive intersection of Indianness and Euro-American urbanity, town and city spaces are, for Indian people, places of risk, separation, disillusion, and dissolution. Why? Perhaps because Euro-American urban spaces have evolved as sites in which genuinely fundamental differences of Native and non-Native conceptions of place, culture, and relationships of power are brought into sharpest relief. Historian Inga Clendinnen has pointed to the destructive contemporary consequences of centuries of what she identifies as "unassuageable" cultural otherness.⁷ Such worries might seem confirmed by quite distinct and contending ideas held by colonizers and Native people about nature in relationship to civilization and civilized behavior. Within the earliest images of the colonizers' appropriation of the American landscape—their "errand into

the wilderness" to construct an idealized "city upon a hill"—there is an implicit tension between nature and civilization, and a resulting projection of the need for transformation and cultural imposition. This tension is written indelibly in both the practical outcomes of colonization and in its resulting intellectual and artistic production. The American wilderness represented, after all, a complicated dichotomy within White imagination—of freedom, renewal, and unlimited possibility at one polarity—and anarchy, error, and disappointment at the other. From the beginning, the European sensibility both romanticized and abhorred the "New" world as at once paradisiacal and primitive—but inevitably posed in opposition to Western ideas of civilization. Among those already in residence in this world, there was apparently no such dichotomy. Inverting the categories of civilized and primitive by means of the hindsight of several centuries of postcontact experience, Luther Standing Bear would write, "Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people...."⁸

In its most fundamental character, the very act of westering—the European and later Euro-American drive outward toward the western horizon—involved aspects of separation, isolation, and disillusion which reinforced the dichotomous perspective of migrants to the "New World." The Jeremiad tradition of lamentation and unworthiness as accompaniment to exultant conquest, so apparent in the writings of so many early colonizers, is a reflection of this sense of dividedness. It is present as well in the symbolic and actual dysfunctions of the colonizers' first attempts at urbanity. Howard Kushner argues this dysfunction as an explanation of the surprisingly high mortality rate among settlers in Jamestown, one of the earliest "urban" settings established by English settlers, many of whom were apparently so disillusioned by a frontier that was supposed to provide laborless wealth that they starved to death unnecessarily. From the Indian point of view, there is an intriguing irony in Kushner's suggestion that the settlers' appropriation of serotonin-inhibiting maize as their undiversified dietary staple contributed to their dysfunction: "When the vision fell short of its promise, they became depressed and lethargic. Unable to return to a rejected past, they found in self-destruction a viable alternative."⁹

On one hand, then, were the physical and psychological separations the colonizers imposed upon themselves in order to

bring about their objective of establishing a purer civilization than that they were leaving behind. Even more consequential to tribal people of the time were the separations imposed on those already in possession of the American "wilderness" as they were systematically dispossessed of their precontact homelands. The resulting history of contention between the ideals of democracy and the interests of nationalism translated into a permanent psychological dualism which Dolores Hayden has called a "despair about placelessness ... as much a part of American experience as pleasure in a sense of place."¹⁰

Such a history of dividedness and contradiction is summed up by D. H. Lawrence's assertion that "the American landscape has never been at one with the whiteman,"¹¹ and it is manifested throughout much of the canon of several centuries of "masterwork" American literature predicated upon recursive versions of heroic alienation from place and culture. James Fenimore Cooper's ambivalent idealization of the heroic individualism integral to opening and civilizing the frontier, for example, could never quite be reconciled with his protagonist's elegiac nostalgia for primitive America as an unspoiled natural space. Thoreau, credited as the founder of American nature writing,¹² (ironically, from an American Indian perspective) promotes in *Walden* and other journal writing a self-reflexive model of the vision quest derived directly from the appropriative aesthetic authority he establishes at the cost of erasing prior Native presence and possession. Hawthorne's finely drawn tension between the repressiveness of Puritan town life and the liberating lure of the demonic forest creates another field for contradiction, in which the cosmopolitan is set *against* the "primitive," with characters such as Hester Prynne and Young Goodman Brown paying the price for daring to negotiate a morally and intellectually ambiguous middle ground. Melville's Ishmael survives Ahab's monomaniacal challenge of the natural world perched upon Queequeg's highly metaphorical coffin. And Twain's Huckleberry Finn, navigating the moral currents of the symbolically charged Mississippi, finally rejects his north/south exploration of the border between the frontier and the ethically flawed, "civilized" territory of nineteenth century America. Carrying on the westering fantasy of his progenitors, he strikes out alone toward an imaginary, untrammelled future in California. In the perpetual wilderness of the mythical West, he is the archetypal American cousin of Peter Pan, free of the obligations both of civilization and adulthood.

Moby Dick and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are both representative American “great books,” constructed upon alienated sensibilities and set in action within fragmented landscapes in which nature and civilization are never fully reconcilable. Reconciliation, made even less possible by the exacerbated insecurities of twentieth-century modernism and post-modernism, is also largely unattainable within the pantheon of more contemporary “masters,”—for example, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Salinger, Pynchon—whose most indicative works focus on the failures of individuals to come to terms either with each other or with the corrupted natural, urban, and even entropic galactic landscapes that surround them. Their storytelling offers a vicarious projection of the alienation which results when individualism cannot be integrated into community, or when community is finally imagined but fails to mesh with the actual shortcomings of lives lived within it.

Our Indian ancestors who might have been contemporaries of Ishmael or Huckleberry Finn, and who were engaged in life and death struggles to preserve the integrity of their own particular communities, would surely have considered such contradictory being as pathological—some form of soul sickness. They would not have understood a view which considered individuals unconnected to their societies or which divided the natural world from the human one or from that of the other sentient beings, human or otherwise, who “peopled” the immediate environment. This is the distinction critic William Bevis introduces as a part of the context of his examination of “homing” as a distinctive structural and thematic feature of many contemporary narratives by American Indian writers. “Native American nature is urban,” Bevis writes. “The connotation to us of ‘urban,’ suggesting a dense complex of human variety, is closer to Native American ‘nature’ than is our word ‘natural.’ The woods, birds, animals and humans are all ‘downtown,’ meaning at the center of action and power, in complex, unpredictable and various relationships...”¹³

If human and natural worlds are unified rather than divided, traditional cultures have no impetus for conceiving nature as wilderness or as in any sense primitive. Within the relational epistemologies of most Native peoples, the earth is almost universally mother; the sun may be father; the moon, grandmother; and human and non-human entities are bound together in ancestral kinships and clan connections based upon inter-

dependence and obligation. Place and person are inextricably bound. The elements constituting place are as much character as setting, participants in complex and unifying systems of kinship which help to define how civilization itself is constructed and maintained. Culture exists within what Keith Basso has called a "place-world,"¹⁴ significant because "what people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the earth."¹⁵ It is not illogical, then, that traditional Indian communities situated in their natural settings of complex activity and interrelationship would have considered that very quality of culturally determined and specialized urbanity an essential component of their conception of themselves as civilized.

Exemplary portraits of the traditional Dakota camp circle as urban in precisely the sense of Bevis' dense and varied social constructions are presented by Dakota writer and ethnologist Ella Deloria in two books, *Speaking of Indians* and *Waterlily*, both apparently drafted in the 1940s but published more than forty years apart. In the former, Deloria describes an ideal community based on a "scheme of life that worked,"¹⁶ a community that understood itself to be highly civilized, that prized that civilization as crucial to functional existence, and that had developed sophisticated social codes to maintain that civilization. "I can safely say," Deloria writes,

that the ultimate aim of Dakota life, stripped of accessories, was quite simple: One must obey kinship rules; one must be a good relative.... Without that aim and the constant struggle to attain it, the people would no longer be Dakotas in truth. They would no longer be even human. To be a good Dakota, then was to be humanized, civilized. And to be civilized was to keep the rules imposed by kinship for achieving civility, good manners, and a sense of responsibility toward every individual dealt with. Thus only was it possible to live communally with success; that is to say, with a minimum of friction and a maximum of good will.¹⁷

Deloria had been a field worker for Franz Boas, and she uses the skills of both storyteller and ethnographer to show how this ultimate aim of civilized behavior was pragmatically attained in people's everyday interactions. In the extended fictional narrative *Waterlily*, unpublished until 1988, the voice is the teller's. The story centers on the personal, family, and com-

munity interrelationships of a young Dakota woman residing in a traditional camp circle seemingly untouched by cultural disruption. As such, it presents a detailed portrait of the complex and indissoluble interdependencies of individual and communal well-being, based on an unshakable premise of biological and social kinship relations and an economic system of distributing wealth by "giving to get." Significantly, in the cosmology of the observing Dakotas, it is Whites who are considered primitive because of their inhumane treatment of their own children. And when smallpox introduced by Whites decimates the tightly bonded social circle that cannot imagine the necessity of isolating those who are ill, the epidemic works as a figure foreshadowing broader philosophical tensions between individualism and communality which distinguish non-Native and Native cosmologies. Deloria's narrative illustrates how the very essence of civilized conduct within traditional Native societies derives from that particularized sense of communal urbanity in which, Bevis argues, identity becomes "for a Native American ... not a matter of finding 'one's self,' but of finding a 'self' that is transpersonal and that includes a society, a past, and a place."¹⁸

What happens, however, when this exemplary idea of indigenous urbanity grounded in the matrices of communality, tradition, and homeland is exposed to the stresses of Westernized urbanization? Deloria addressed that question in *Speaking of Indians*, published, significantly, in 1944 towards the end of World War II, which dramatically accelerated the urbanization of Indian people as large numbers of Native men and women entered the armed services or moved to the cities to work in war industries.¹⁹ Speaking of—talking about rather than to—Indians, Deloria attempted to predict the impact of these changes from the perspective of an insider and to speculate about their effects both on those left in traditional communities and those who have "moved into the cities and are meeting problems they have never faced before."²⁰ Her purpose is not merely to valorize the traditional past but to contextualize that past by referencing it against the present and future of postwar America. She imagines a model of sojourning rather than of permanent migration, since "many Indians cannot yet feel complete with just their little family, their spouse and children."²¹ Of those who had become city dwellers, Deloria argues that their traditional backgrounds include virtues that make them excellent workers. Demands non-Natives take for grant-

ed, however—paying rent, handling larger amounts of money than have ever been available before, securing child care—are foreign and discomfiting. Acknowledging and to some degree even welcoming intensified pressures to assimilate, Deloria also imagines new demands for agency and authority as Native people claim what their recent investment in the preservation of democracy has earned them:

...the right to talk the common language of America, and I don't mean just literally, but figuratively as well. That is to say, they will want to participate in the larger thought and life of the land and not be given special work scaled down to their abilities, as if those abilities were static, or to their needs, as if those needs must always be limited to tribal life.²²

Successful adaptation will depend upon White society's willingness to forego paternalism and to provide genuinely equal opportunity and participation. But it will also depend upon a transposition of the elemental parts of that Dakota scheme of the life that worked—those qualities of civilized and fully human community—into the new locations of contemporary experience. Native people, Deloria asserts, must be allowed the motivation of their own values—especially ancestral allegiances to kinship and to the well-being of future generations. Deloria's representation of movement from tribal to urban communities is important for its perception that the culturally specific urbanity of the traditional past offers an effective foundation to create a coherent and productive urban present. But writing at yet another diasporic moment for Indian people, what she cannot, or perhaps chooses not to, anticipate in any detail is a future in which that foundation is ongoingly undermined by a materialist environment of sustained racism, poverty, and cultural denigration. Succeeding generations of American Indian writers would address that future. Two of the most successful, writing from the empowered center of what has been called a renaissance of American Indian narrative, undertake constructions of the city in relation to Indianness that may seem on the surface to reiterate each other, but more accurately illustrate an evolution of narrative purpose upon which other writers continue to build.

Both Scott Momaday in *House Made of Dawn* and Leslie Marmon Silko in *Ceremony* present post-World War II America as a critical moment of dislocation. Both tell highly intertextu-

al stories engaging the questions posed at the beginning of this discussion. In their contemporary representations, what happens when Indian people leave their traditional communities for new lives in the city? What does city life mean—for them and for the communities they leave behind or to which they return? Momaday, acknowledging the centrality of oral traditions upon which Silko draws in *Ceremony*, has called her book a telling, but he might as correctly have called it a re-telling, since, at the surface, the plots and protagonists of Silko's novel and his own seem to echo each other. It may seem, in fact, that in many ways the two stories are actually the same story. The points of plotting and characterization at which they converge, however, suggest older storytelling traditions and employ deliberate recursiveness to mark the importance of the story both writers choose to tell. Extending from those convergences, Momaday and Silko ultimately draw quite distinct, although complementary, narrative conclusions.

For Momaday, the city represents a site of ultimate exile, the place where his protagonist Abel hits a rock bottom even more destructive than his experience in prison, which Momaday doesn't describe at all. One of Momaday's targets is "relocation"—the federal policy which supposedly attempted to hasten assimilation but which resulted instead in the accelerated development of an urban Indian underclass. In Los Angeles, surely among the most alien of alien environments for tribal people, Abel, his friend Benally, and Tosamah, Momaday's urban trickster/Priest of the Sun, each represent aspects of the dysfunction resulting from this dis/relocation. Abel and Benally are assigned dead-end jobs which lead neither up nor out. Tosamah preaches to his displaced "congregation" that they have come to live in the white man's world, and on that ground they are "as children, mere babes in the woods."²³ In the reverse-wilderness of the city, they are bombarded by White ways conveyed by the White "Word," which is empty, incomprehensible, and from which the truth has been extracted. Benally describes downtown in just those terms—as an alien space where "it's dark ... all the time, even at noon"²⁴ so that the lights are always on, where the old men who sell papers are always yelling at you but you don't understand what they're saying. "You know, you have to change," he says. "That's the only way you can live in a place like this. You have to forget about the way it was, how you grew up and all."²⁵

Benally has internalized contradiction, separating himself

from place and its associations of family and home. He wants—at least he tells himself he does—what the city seems, but actually fails, to offer—“money and clothes and having plans and going someplace fast.”²⁶ He tries to convince himself that in the tribal place he has left behind, “there’s nothing there ... just the land, and the land is empty and dead. Everything is here. Everything you could ever want. You never have to be alone.”²⁷ Benally seems oblivious of the values Bevis associates with the older indigenous urbanity, attaching his aspirations instead to the material version he finds in Los Angeles. But his life in the city is actually despairingly lonely and hopeless, forcing escape into alcohol and pipe dreams. Occasionally, however, another sort of escape still may be attained when he allows himself to call up childhood memories of his grandfather telling stories in the firelight of his family’s sheep camp. There, he had been “right there in the center of everything, the sacred mountains, the snow-covered mountains and the hills, the gullies and the flats, the sundown and the night, everything—where you were little, where you were and had to be.”²⁸ For Benally, the city represents an infectious and deadening environment of alienation.

Momaday refuses to present, however, a one-dimensional image of urban Indianness in unequivocal or stereotypical terms of victimhood. Abel’s experience of urbanization appears potentially even more injurious than Benally’s since it accelerates a virulent soul sickness already established by a lifetime of fracture and disrupted attachments. But Abel, the Longhair, resists the city. His city time in fact brings on a crisis that can only be resolved through resistance and that will lead either to annihilation or to reintegration with his traditional world. Far away from his desert home, beaten almost to death by a sadistic cop, lying in a liminal space where he is reached by the sounds of both the sea and the city, Abel feels, hears, and sees something else as well: a restoring vision of the runners after evil who, within the traditional belief system which he has previously found impenetrable, give design and meaning to the universe. This vision will eventually turn him homeward, away from the city. But it does more, suggesting a transcending cultural and spiritual agency with the power to link tribal and urban, ancient and contemporary, landscapes.

Even in the city, Momaday insists, visions are possible, people come together to chant and pray, peyote rituals are conducted, and, amidst the cacophony of brassy music and street

traffic, the Priest of the Sun serves notice that “something holy was going on in the universe.”²⁹ Tosamah preaches that, within the White world, the Word, ubiquitous and unreliable, has “as an instrument of creation ... diminished nearly to the point of no return.”³⁰ His re-membling of his grandmother as storyteller illustrates, however, that for Native people, consummate being may yet be derived from the uses of language. Story is the medium that allows the past and those who lived within it to take hold of the imagination so that the listener may confront that which is sacred, eternal, and timeless. Momaday’s novel is itself in this sense just such an instrument of creation, and it points the way to other stories which may function similarly to show Native people how to, as Tosamah says with only partial cynicism, get theirs.

If, in Momaday’s cosmology, language is potently creative, it may also be an instrument of destruction, an idea Leslie Marmon Silko takes up in her 1977 novel *Ceremony*. Witchery—a human capacity for destruction and violence in dimensions both personal and political—is the name Silko gives to what she sees as an escalating threat to the survival of all living things. The origins of this capacity are unknowable, but it is set in irrevocable motion by Destroyers who imagine it first in a story—the particular story of the European conquest of the New World. Once in play, Silko imagines, witchery is carried forward in an expansive design of accelerating violence deriving from personal, transpersonal, and transnational culpability. The novel’s central narrative strand is how this design must be countered by a process of ceremonial regeneration which rejects violence and internalized guilt and restores ancestral balance within human and natural worlds.

Silko’s story is set mostly in and around the pueblo community to which her protagonist Tayo returns after his service in World War II, but some of the story unfolds in city spaces—this time Gallup and Albuquerque—presented as dehumanizing outlands which pervert and destroy those who are attracted to them. Tayo’s mother is one of those who is destroyed, and Tayo’s memories of his time with her living in a tin shelter thrown together in a vagrant camp in Gallup are nightmarishly sordid: a toddler’s bewildered endurance of neglect, alcoholism, promiscuity, and violence. In the bars of Gallup where his mother leaves him, “He could not remember when he first knew that cigarettes would make him vomit if he ate them. He played for hours under the tables, quiet, watching for someone

to drop a potato chip bag or a wad of gum."³¹

The meanness of Gallup is far removed from the civilized society Deloria had described—a society based, at least in the ideal, upon the premise of striving to treat everyone as a relative and motivated by its dedication to future generations. Dakota or Pueblo, the fundamental tenets of civilized behavior have been dependent upon communality. Over thousands of years, Silko explains, Pueblo people had shared the same consciousness. "The people had known, with the simple certainty of the world they saw, how everything should be."³² But the entanglement of tribal and European values has resulted in many kinds of separation:

all creation suddenly had two names: an Indian name and a white name. Christianity separated the people from themselves ... because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family.³³

Gallup is a foreign, removed site in which the radical breakdown of traditional communality is acted out. But remnants of that shared ancestral consciousness are still strong enough to engender an individual and collective internalization of guilt. Tayo's mother internalizes what the teachers and missionaries tell her about "deplorable ways of the Indian people"³⁴ and is ashamed enough to break away and go off with the White men in Albuquerque who smile at her as if she were White. Shame will deepen her isolation and seal her destruction, but, significantly, it is a collective guilt which will infect not only her family but the entire community who wants her back. "For the people," Silko writes, "it was that simple, and when they failed, the humiliation fell on all of them; what happened to the girl did not happen to her alone; it happened to all of them."³⁵ The novel's narrative movement is about how this internalized guilt and humiliation in all its forms must be purged by a process of ceremonial reintegration. A detail of significance and irony, however, is that one of the principal agents of this reintegration, the mixed-blood medicine man Betonie, resides tenaciously in the hills directly above Gallup. "It strikes me funny," the medicine man said, "people wondering why I live so close to this filthy town. But see, this hogan was here first. Built long before the white people ever came. It is that town down there which is out of place. Not this old medicine man."³⁶ Like

Momaday, Silko is not willing to surrender place, even urban place, as a domain in which ancestral authority is without power and provenance. Like Momaday too, however, her resolution involves her protagonist's necessary return to a contained tribal community. Only the murderous Emo stays outside, migrating to California, which is, we are told, a good place for him. Westering for Silko clearly suggests something Mark Twain wouldn't have imagined: a destination of poetic justice for those who perpetuate witchery.

In the more recent *Almanac of the Dead*, Tucson, where Silko herself lives, has become an even more surreal location of perversion and violence, an unredeemable "city of thieves."³⁷ For Silko, however, the ultimate urban metaphor of post-colonial devastation is real estate developer Leah Blue's dream city: Venice, Arizona. Leah Blue and the capitalist establishment she represents don't care that their faux-Venice, intended for the wealthy and complete with canals and waterways, will require deep-water drilling—the ultimate penetration and despoiling of the Mother for profit. Silko elevates the imagery of the American urban to the level of parody—a decadent city of the future imagined as a baldly materialist resuscitation of the European past. In doing so, she undercuts centuries of nationalist exceptionalism and illustrates her largest theme. The compounding destructive synergy of the original theft which implicated the colonizers' first images of virgin territory made to give way to a city on a hill can be averted only by a reversal of history and a restoration of tribal land. In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko's representations of the intersections of Indianness and urban America serve a larger visionary purpose engaged with the preservation of the sacred earth.

Momaday and Silko have created influential representations in which urbanization is essentially figurative: a destructive process culminating in an ultimately universal fatality. Cities in these foundational novels are places to go home from if you can because your own life and those of others depend on it. As the demographics remind us, however, more and more Indian people are living urban lives. Many others have established a pattern of movement between tribal and urban communities. Many do not come from contained tribal communities, do not perceive themselves as sojourners but as permanent city dwellers, and may in fact be several generations into complex urban experience in which identity, tribal connections, and notions of culture are shaped anew. Fifty years from the post-

war moment of Ella Deloria's gaze, other narrative representations are beginning to emerge which acknowledge that staying within or reintegrating with traditional homeplaces is not the only option for the preservation of viable personal and cultural lives. This discussion concludes by examining two alternative views of how traditional Indian "urbanity" is transformed within contemporary city spaces.

Ojibwa writer Ignatia Broker's little known narrative *Night Flying Woman* is a genre-stretching blend of fiction and memoir whose central subject is the process of postcontact change and adaptation endured by her several-generations-removed Ojibwa ancestors. Broker asserts the ties of the traditional past to a personal/transpersonal urban present by re-membering that past but finally returning to the context of the contemporary moment. Her narrative strategy is deceptively simple. She uses a series of sequential flashbacks to slip the reader back in time as she recalls the stories her grandmother told her, which her grandmother in turn heard from her grandmother. These stories center upon the lives of Oona and her family as they first flee from, but eventually have to negotiate, initial experiences of cultural disruption which begin with relocation to reservation villages and which are then compounded by Christianization, boarding school experience, and loss of language and traditional practice. Broker's strategically important narrative springboard for this story of the past, however, is an introductory prologue—a brief description only a few pages in length—about the quality of postwar urban life for Indian people who collect in Minneapolis and St. Paul. *Night Flying Woman* problematizes stereotypes of vanishing and victimhood, in part by its use of this prologue to counter the essentializing tendencies of previous urban representations.

The Prologue's title, "The Forest Cries," appears to point to the woodland past of Broker's Anishinaabe forebears, suggesting familiar themes of dislocation and loss while simultaneously recalling the animate urban complicity of human and natural worlds. But, since the prologue is set not in the forest but in the city, where Broker lived for more than forty years, the title actually works to contextualize present time and place by suggesting its connection to the time and place of the ancestral past. Referring to her more recent personal past, Broker acknowledges the power relationships affecting life in the urban neighborhood to which she brought her children in the 1950s:

That day thirty years ago when we moved here, me and my children, we were the aliens looking for a place to fit in, looking for a chance of a new life, moving in among these people, some of whose "forefathers" had displaced my ancestors for the same reason: looking for a new life.³⁸

However alien the city might make Indian newcomers feel, it is potentially a location of opportunity. Over time, their urban neighborhood does not represent for Broker's family contamination or danger. It becomes the place her children go to school and church and marry from. Even though as adults they may be "in faraway places they seem to have their roots here, for they had lived in no other place while growing up."³⁹

Broker's initial experience of the city might be viewed as providing a more detailed account of Deloria's suppositions about war-industry migrants. Moving from the reservation in 1941, she writes that she worked in a defense plant by day and took classes to supplement inadequate schooling at night. But if the city offered opportunity, it also subjected Indian people to all sorts of discrimination, especially in housing where they were often turned down by landlords or forced to share illegal rentals of substandard housing in overcrowded conditions. Broker refuses, however, to emphasize the victimization of urban Indian experience, concentrating instead on the traditional values of communal sharing and respect and the economic system of giving to get which could still be sustained and nourished.

I think now that maybe it was a good thing, the migration of our people to the urban areas during the war years, because there, amongst the millions of people, we were brought to a brotherhood.... And because we, all, were isolated in this dominant society, we became an island from which a revival of spirit began.⁴⁰

New communities, "vibrant with sharing,"⁴¹ began to be formed, and they stimulated activism and agency.

After that, the tide of Indians moving to Minnesota's urban areas increased, and today there are ten thousand of us. As the number grew, new-fangled types of Indian people came into being: those demanding what is in our treaties, those demanding service to our people, those working to provide those services—and all reaching back for identity.⁴²

Although Broker does not ignore aspects of alienation and inequity in city life, she does assert the good of urban migration. Her larger story may be about how her people's present evolved from and maintains relationship with their past. Her book also provides an overview, if not a detailed examination, of the creation of urban pockets of community where political and cultural power can be nurtured and where the meanness of contemporary urbanization may be mitigated by traditional values.

That more detailed examination, although drawn from another geographic and cultural landscape, is what Greg Sarris provides in *Grand Avenue*, a first novel about the tangled lives of Pomo families living in "the Hole," the worst part of Santa Rosa, California, fifty miles from San Francisco. Grand Avenue is far from grand; it's the synecdochic marker of an Indian ghetto, and Indian people would easily be able to substitute other such street names for similar neighborhoods in any city or town in America with a significant Indian population. Like most of those other neighborhoods, Grand Avenue is a racial mix—Indians, African Americans, Mexicans—of those on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. One feature of the neighborhood is a park frequented mutually by old people, children, and gangs; another is a slaughterhouse whose owner uses it at night as a place of assignation for the neighborhood girls he recruits into prostitution. Work for most of those who live on Grand Avenue is seasonal, low-paying, and punishing—picking fruit in the apple fields or packaging in the local cannery. Indian families form and re-form as economic needs demand in overcrowded "apartments" which are actually refurbished army barracks separated by mud tracks. Sarris' portraits of dysfunction—alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, family breakdown—are a realistic representation of the circumstances of many Americans, whatever their ethnicity, race, or economic circumstances. But it is a distinctly Indian—distinctly Pomo—version of contemporary life that Sarris constructs. Within this version, there are new complications attached to the possibilities of separation and reintegration, and new circumstances to factor into equations describing the values of culturally determined concepts of urbanity.

In some of the ways Sarris' stories detail and reinforce by their particularities the destructive toxicity to which these characters are exposed, they may seem reiterations of already established cultural parameters. Sarris' "poisoners," for example,

converge with Silko's notions of destroyers and their witchery. As in Silko, the struggle between the poisoners and those who use their medicines to heal rather than hurt has been carried on from time immemorial. Both writers invest this struggle with an ironic agency, decentering Whiteness as neither cause nor effect. Another feature which Sarris' portrayal of contemporary community shares with those previously imagined by Momaday and Silko is the exercise of a hybridized spirituality. In *Grand Avenue's* opening story, "The Magic Pony," for example, the mother paints on her livingroom wall a mural that appears to conflate traditional and Christian symbolism: a green forest demarcated by fingernail polish pink crosses to protect her family against the sources of trouble and poison.⁴³

In other ways, however, Sarris destabilizes conventional expectations about the features of Indianness. Sarris' Indians are far from a universal sharing of a sense of reverence for and relation with the natural world. "I'll leave you in the woods, you hear! I'll leave you with the white people,"⁴⁴ one mother threatens her daughter, indicating the degree to which nature and Whiteness have taken on a similar bogeyman alienness. How could such a breakdown have occurred? Significantly, for Sarris' Pomo families there is no ancestral homeplace, no traditional tribal community, to return to. Santa Rosa Creek is the home from which, generations ago, these clans have been dispersed, split up, driven out; and contemporary Santa Rosa is where they have returned to a present now bewildering in the ways it intermingles with the past. Sarris' interweaving stories of five generations build a complicated composite allowing him to feature complicated contemporary issues—the consequences of mixed-race identity, cross-group racism, internal exploitation, even inadvertent incest resulting from the breakdown of kinship systems in an urban setting outside the coherent social structures to which they were so important. On Grand Avenue, rare are those who do not make hate and insecurity "best friends,"⁴⁵ who do not open their hearts to poison, the "misuse of power,"⁴⁶ who overcome loneliness to find even temporary tenderness, who reject the escapes offered by alcohol, sex, violence, or fantasy.

For Sarris no less than for other Native writers, the past impinges on the present, but the intersections of cultural transformation and permanent urbanization he addresses seem to preclude previous outcomes, which involved reintegration in traditional homeplaces or acknowledgment of shared commu-

nal consciousness. Particularly in the concluding narratives, however, we begin to see how older values reconfigure themselves as the tools that might be used to construct a more hopeful contemporary urban place-world. Sarris' last three stories make this point.

The first of these, "The Indian Maid," is told from the point of view of Stella who, in order to make a better life for herself, has to struggle against the grain of her sisters' envy and her mother's failures. Leaving Santa Rosa for a good job in even more urban Tucson is for Stella a sign of possibility rather than betrayal, but a mishap on the eve of her departure helps her to recognize the depth of her connections to family. Stella will be able to leave, but she will take with her a clear understanding of the content of her mother's dream on the night years before when she had returned to her own family: "They were all happy, I might have told my mother that night. They didn't fight. It was simple, a lesson an eight-year-old could discern. Appreciate one another. Get along. Share."⁴⁷

In "Secret Letters," the apparent success of postal-carrier Steven and his teacher-wife Reyna in securing a good life away from Grand Avenue—a life which includes acknowledgment of their cultural ties—is threatened by Steven's concern for Tony, an illegitimate son conceived unknowingly years before with his own sister. Contradictory loyalties lead Steven to deceive his wife and children about why he wants to move back to Grand Avenue where the boy lives. A disastrous attempt to shore up the boy's self-esteem by sending him a series of letters in which Steven pretends to be an anonymous admirer ends with a brush with the law and the revelation of his secret. Sarris offers no easy solutions to the entanglements of Steven's past and present, but the final scene allows a reconciliation of Steven's divided loyalties and an assertion of the power of love over blame and betrayal:

At the dinner table tonight my two children, Shawn and Raymond, seem unusually calm, given what happened.... I must tie up the story for them. But how do I begin? Where?

"What's the lesson in this story?" I ask, unable to think of anything else.

But my children are way ahead of me.

"When's Tony coming to dinner?" Shawn asks.

"Tomorrow," my wife says.

"Tomorrow," I say.⁴⁸

And finally, in "The Water Place," the healer Nellie Copaz, ostracized by her family because of her medicine powers and marriage to a White man, is able to form a bond with Alice, her gentle, overburdened young relation, which revitalizes ancestral power and passes it forward in the service of simple happiness and the cessation of recrimination. If the urban has been an ultimate site of triumph of the machine over the garden, in this story, Nellie's riotous garden is a reversal of that triumph, a symbolic evocation of the tenaciousness of nature, and the first thing that attracts Alice to Nellie's door. Even, and especially, in the blight of Grand Avenue, Nellie exhorts Alice, "It's important to talk. Us Indians here are all family. That's the trouble, no one talks. Stories, the true stories, that's what we need to hear. We got to get it out. The true stories can help us. Old-time people, they told stories, Alice. They talked. Talk, Alice, don't be like the rest."⁴⁹ Alice does talk, but Nellie comes to value something else as more important: Alice's gift for making—and creating new designs for—the baskets which are one of the traditional sources of Pomo tribal identity and power. In the midst of a dispiriting town/city environment which breeds anger, self-loathing, and fear among the young and the old, Alice is "as clear as water, as open as the blue sky."⁵⁰

No matter how mean the streets, how deep the wounds of separation, how far removed from their original time and place and contending conceptions of wilderness and civilization, these evolving representations converge on the power that remains in relational being, in family, and in the stories by which these are conveyed. In that convergence is a healing functionality that can indeed help to build the resilience that urban Indian people need to challenge the demographics. More universally, these stories of the urban Indian answer Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's call for narratives capable of stirring the human community to an encompassing moral view.

NOTES

1. "We the ... First Americans," 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Racial Statistics Branch, Population Division, Bureau of the Census (Washington, DC, 1990), 1. All demographic data cited is based on the 1990 census.
2. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 2.
3. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 64.

4. Mourning Dove, *Cogewea the Half Blood* (1927; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 280.
5. *Ibid.*, 65.
6. *Ibid.*, 284.
7. Inga Clendinnen, "'Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty': Cortes and the Conquest of Mexico," in *New World Encounters*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 41.
8. Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 50.
9. Howard I. Kushner, *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land: A Psychocultural Biology of American Suicide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 184.
10. Dolores Hayden, "The American Sense of Place and the Politics of Space," in *American Architecture: Innovation and Tradition*, ed. David G. DeLong, et al. (New York: Rizzoli International, 1986), 185.
11. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1961), 56.
12. Don Scheese, "Thoreau's *Journal*: The Creation of a Sacred Place," in *Mapping American Culture*, eds. Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 139.
13. William Bevis, "Native American Novels: Homing In," in *Recovering the Word*, eds. Brian Swan and Arnold Krupat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 601.
14. Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 6.
15. *Ibid.*, 7.
16. Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (New York: Friendship Press, 1944), 24.
17. *Ibid.*, 25.
18. Bevis, "Native American Novels: Homing In," 585.
19. Alison R. Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 68.
20. Deloria, *Speaking*, 145.
21. *Ibid.*, 146.
22. *Ibid.*, 148.
23. N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 94.
24. *Ibid.*, 140.
25. *Ibid.*, 148.
26. *Ibid.*, 158.
27. *Ibid.*, 181.
28. *Ibid.*, 157.
29. *Ibid.*, 114.
30. *Ibid.*, 95.
31. Silko, *Ceremony*, 108.
32. *Ibid.*, 68.

33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 69.
36. Ibid., 118.
37. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 610.
38. Ignatia Broker. *Night Flying Woman* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1983), 2.
39. Ibid., 2.
40. Ibid., 5.
41. Ibid., 6.
42. Ibid., 7.
43. Greg Sarris, *Grand Avenue* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 9.
44. Ibid., 34.
45. Ibid., 39.
46. Ibid., 21.
47. Ibid., 183.
48. Ibid., 208.
49. Ibid., 219.
50. Ibid.