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## Structures of Urban Poverty in Greg Sarris's *Grand Avenue*

REGINALD DYCK

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Greg Sarris's 1994 *Grand Avenue* offers tough urban stories about a long-fought, still-continuing struggle for survival and self-determination.<sup>1</sup> Following the Native population shift from reservations to cities, Sarris (Coast Miwok/Pomo), like many Native writers, has engaged urban Indian experiences.<sup>2</sup> In surveying this fiction, Carol Miller (Cherokee) explains that it provides "a significant illustrative resource about the pragmatic business of 'going along' in the world, just as the old stories always have done."<sup>3</sup> Sarris's stories fulfill this role by presenting the day-to-day lives of a contemporary, fictional Pomo community living in a multiracial neighborhood not far from their traditional homeland. Although displaced, they are still intact on "an in-town reservation: blacks, Mexicans, Indians" (198). The stories depict poverty, high unemployment, destructive sexuality, and parenting that provides little protection for children.<sup>4</sup> Conditions on Grand Avenue are the culmination of two centuries of exploitation. Recognizing this, Sarris has created a collection of complexly interrelated stories that are neither victim-blaming indictments nor voyeuristic accounts of dysfunctional families. He states, "My books are chronicles of survival, how a people survive for better and for worse. They light the dark places so we can all—all of us, Indian and non-Indian—see where we have been, where we are, and where we might go."<sup>5</sup>

To understand better the devastating conditions and the possibilities for hope that these stories depict, we need to consider how historically developed socioeconomic structures shape the characters' present choices. Forced onto the margins of economic production, Pomo individuals and communities face the profound cultural consequences of their position in US society. Without a historical perspective, readers can easily see the characters in *Grand Avenue* as hopelessly trapped in a world of their own making. Thus, this article

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first presents a history of Pomo peoples' engagement with dominant modes of production. This history registers the two-hundred-year transformation of self-sustaining, culturally integrated Pomo communities into embattled, economically dependent urban enclaves. The article then considers the ways in which Sarris's characters experience the present consequences of this history. One result is the absence of work, a determining factor for many poor urban Americans, minorities in particular. William Julius Wilson's influential *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, an analysis of high-poverty Chicago neighborhoods, offers a framework for understanding the relationship between Sarris's characters' immediate urban experiences and the structures that severely constrict their individual and communal lives.<sup>6</sup> As one young narrator learns, "Things was bigger than me" (72). Sociological investigations like Wilson's can alert us to contexts that may not be readily apparent and yet are powerful for understanding contemporary Native urban fiction, even as we recognize the distinct history and culture that shapes specific communities.

The multigenerational consequences of community joblessness are far-reaching. Sarris's stories show the impact of joblessness on characters' limited marriage prospects and relationships, destructive sexual practices, a diminished sense of self-efficacy, inadequate child-rearing, and children caught psychologically in a disempowering understanding of their world. Yet, as the sections that follow make clear, Sarris does not depict the Grand Avenue community as hopelessly trapped within its contemporary situation. In spite of two hundred years of exploitation and displacement, key characters are able to sustain themselves and adapt Pomo traditions to new circumstances. These characters' stories suggest strategies for strengthening Native urban communities because they provide models for finding wholeness in a troubled world.

Sarris has given us thickly textured, politically engaged ethnographic stories that show the generational and everyday consequences of the historically constructed, socioeconomic structures shaping a Native urban community. In depicting the characters' successes and failures at taking responsibility, Sarris, by implication, asks us as readers to take responsibility as well. The structures that shape the Grand Avenue community also shape our lives, although for many of us in quite different, more privileged ways. The strategies we use for understanding these stories—patterns we notice or ignore, details we find meaningful, emphases we give to individual characters or broader conditions—have direct implications for the ways we make sense of and respond to the world in which many urban Indians live today.

### POMO WORK HISTORY

The contemporary conditions that *Grand Avenue* depicts arose from historical processes shaped by the economic desires of dominant groups as well as the resistance of Pomo peoples. Forced to abandon their traditional subsistence economy, they adapted to new ways of sustaining themselves. The characters make historical references to forced removals, tribal division, and reservation termination (212, 48, 197). As a result of this colonization, Pomo

communities were pushed into alienated forms of labor that profoundly affected their cultural well-being.

Work for Pomo peoples traditionally meant hunting, fishing, and gathering, which allowed them to form self-sufficient communities.<sup>7</sup> Remnants of this work situation are hardly even a memory for Sarris's characters. Disruptions began with the 1811 establishment of a Russian commercial settlement, Colony Ross, on Pomo land. Sometimes through physical coercion, Indians in the area worked long hours for exploitative wages—"glass beads, tobacco, clothes, and 'bad' food"—while continuing seasonal hunting and gathering.<sup>8</sup> This began a long history of Pomo peoples working as farm laborers for others. In Sarris's stories, middle-aged characters remember working in orchards as teenagers. Their children, however, are thoroughly urban.

At about the same time as the arrival of the Russians, Spanish missions began recruiting Pomo converts and subjugating workers. More significant social changes resulted from Mexican land grants and military control as California became a Mexican Republic in 1822. Enslaved, displaced from their land, and treated cruelly, many Pomo Indians suffered great losses. This only increased with US occupation at midcentury, as "a pattern of semi-peonage" developed.<sup>9</sup> Because US farmers gained almost complete control of Pomo lands, Indians were segregated onto *rancherías*. Anglo farmers who needed readily available workers provided these small settlements, often part of the Pomo former homeland. Pomo peoples' loss of land ownership meant considerable loss of control over their own lives, a key factor in their moves that eventually led them to the city of Santa Rosa.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Pomo Indians had lost 99 percent of their land and faced increasing hostility from whites.<sup>10</sup> For the most part, the only work available was low-paying seasonal labor. The few Indians who did attend college or find work in the cities had no chance of gaining the wealth and power white people possessed.<sup>11</sup> As non-Native minorities increasingly entered the region, the larger pool of workers meant a shorter work season and reduced wages.<sup>12</sup> Competition for work created ethnic rivalries. We see, for example, in "Joy Ride" that Albert Silva's Portuguese father assuages the shame of his own low status by attacking others. While doing the same menial farm labor, he warned his son that Indians are "worse than niggers" and "lazy drunks" (94).

During World War II, many Pomo people left their rural *rancherías* for opportunities in the armed forces and defense plants. Their movement to urban areas for jobs intensified after the war as the federal government started its termination policy and harshly reduced its economic support.<sup>13</sup> Also, technological changes in agriculture lessened work opportunities and created deeper forms of rural poverty. Faced with these conditions, many Pomo Indians moved to cities, but most found only marginal employment. Economic necessity forced them to establish communities in high-poverty, low-rent neighborhoods. In Sarris's stories, seasonal work in the cannery and government checks account for most characters' income.<sup>14</sup>

Because characters have little power to escape their situation they adapt to Grand Avenue in positive and negative ways. "A low status typifies Indian livelihood in the cities. It was a status that they learned to live with, and often they were not dissatisfied. As long as they had family and friends, they remained content," Donald Fixico (Sac and Fox/Muscogee Creek/Shawnee/Seminole) has observed about urban Indians.<sup>15</sup> This is the experience of many on Grand Avenue. Characters do find a form of contentment, in spite of their depravations, because they spend considerable time together. The Grand Avenue community is an extended family, displaced by migration but not dismantled. They support each other in significant ways, in spite of many interpersonal tensions provoked by their circumstances. Nevertheless, the fact that none openly rebel and few fight for change results from their sense of powerlessness, as Sarris makes clear. Grand Avenue was not the characters' destination of choice; it is the consequence of a two-hundred-year history that drastically changed the way Pomo peoples work and, as a result, where and how they live.

#### NEW URBAN INDIAN REALITIES

*Grand Avenue* provides a fictional model of the conditions Pomo peoples came to experience as they moved into a poor, multiracial, urban neighborhood. Sarris's representation has significant aspects in common with the high-poverty, inner-city, African American neighborhoods that sociologist Wilson analyzed in *When Work Disappears*, published two years after *Grand Avenue*, and in his more recent book, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*.<sup>16</sup> Important differences exist, to be sure. Sarris's characters are shaped by Pomo peoples' particular experiences, as the above-mentioned work history suggests. They live in an extended family/tribal community with a shared past and a common, if fractured, cultural memory. Although displaced, they live close to their traditional homeland, a place all except the youngest generation remember. In spite of these cultural distinctions, they confronted working and living conditions common to other minorities as they moved to similar urban areas. By using Wilson's analysis as a lens through which to view Sarris's ethnographic fiction, we can better recognize the ways that socioeconomic structures that create a jobless community have shaped his characters' lives.<sup>17</sup> Sarris shows these structures having a range of consequences: the absence of marriage, strained extended-family and community solidarity, weakened parenting, and troubled adolescent sexuality.

Wilson summarizes the "hundreds of studies" on the consequences of living in high-poverty neighborhoods like the one described in *Grand Avenue*. These studies find that "concentrated poverty increases the likelihood of social isolation (from mainstream institutions), joblessness, dropping out of school, lower educational achievement, involvement in crime, unsuccessful behavioral development and delinquency among adolescents, nonmarital childbirth, and unsuccessful family management." These conditions are often inherited; that is, children will generally experience the same neighborhoods that their parents did.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the challenges in creating change, as Sarris's stories suggest, are complexly multigenerational.

Focusing on inadequate jobs and housing, Fixico explains that “substandard living conditions became a way of life for most urban Indians. Like the majority of minorities, Indian Americans have become identified with poverty in the cities.” To this he adds distinctively Native factors such as the “loss of contact with nature and the land” and the challenge of tradition. Fixico observes, “It is too difficult to live in the traditional reality of tribalism, a reality that does not exist for many urban Indians and about which they know very little.”<sup>19</sup> Many characters in *Grand Avenue* experience their world this way; however, some are able to escape this oppression, as the “Alternatives” section demonstrates.

The behaviors associated with poor urban communities are not merely personal preferences or individual moral choices. Fixico states, “External factors tend to provoke internal ones.” In *Race, Class, and the State in Contemporary Sociology: The William Julius Wilson Debates*, Jack Niemonen similarly explains that “structural disadvantages precede, rather than follow from, a particular set of values, attitudes, and behaviors.”<sup>20</sup> Wilson argues that joblessness is the central constraint shaping the experiences, behaviors, and cultures of people living in the urban ghettos he analyzed. He boldly states that “the consequences of high neighborhood joblessness are more devastating than those of high neighborhood poverty.” Scarcity of work is also a key constraint for the Grand Avenue community that Sarris depicts. Social segregation means that characters have minimal connections to “informal employment networks” and thus little opportunity to gain “the human capital skills, including adequate educational training that facilitate mobility in a society.”<sup>21</sup>

This situation severely limits the life choices of most of Sarris’s characters. For the unskilled workers that make up most of the Grand Avenue community, the only job available, with few exceptions, is at the cannery: “It was the worst work ever. . . . All of us women were packed in there . . . cramped together along a conveyor belt spilling apples faster than we could grab them and peel them. The place was a hellhole, a furnace kept hot and humid by the leaky pipes overhead carrying hot water from the boiler. Eight hours, sometimes ten” (179–80). That Sarris’s characters take a job with these unsafe, nearly intolerable conditions suggests their desperation to find work. Because cannery jobs last only half a year, unemployment checks sustain workers, and thus cannery profits, the other half. Fixico, discussing postwar employment, notes that “Native Americans were pushed into unskilled occupations with high rates of layoffs and seasonal work.” Low-wage work like this does not “foster respect, build status, or offer opportunity for advancement.”<sup>22</sup> Because this is the most common work available, the Grand Avenue community faces the common, psychologically destructive stereotype of “being non-aggressive, non-ambitious, and shiftless because of their Indian ancestry.”<sup>23</sup>

In addition to seasonal work at the cannery, one character finds a job as a convalescent-home aide, and some are sustained by prostitution.<sup>24</sup> A few minor characters are involved in drug dealing and petty larceny (148). Healing and basket making are economically significant work for one or two of the older generation, but elders are generally more valued for their social security checks (153, 31, 43, 143). The importance of government programs

to the community's economy indicates characters' difficulties in finding full-time, permanent employment. It also plays into derogatory stereotypes of urban Indians as welfare recipients.<sup>25</sup>

### A COMMUNITY WITHOUT WORK

What predominates on Grand Avenue is the absence of steady work. Its insidious consequences have become widespread. For one thing, there are comparatively few men in the community. Very few long-term male/female relationships exist in the novel. Men are an absent presence for most women characters, prized status symbols desired as a means of self-affirmation but unavailable as partners or parents. Wilson explains: "As employment prospects recede, the foundation for stable relationships becomes weaker over time. More permanent relationships such as marriage give way to temporary liaisons that result in broken relationships, out-of-wedlock pregnancies and births." As one eighteen-year-old unmarried father of a two-week-old son stated, "If I couldn't take care of my family, why get married?"<sup>26</sup>

This is exactly what occurs on Grand Avenue. Trying to maintain a steady relationship makes no sense when men cannot fulfill their role in it. The result in the stories is women having children by many different men, not out of promiscuous desire but from a common need for acceptance that is thwarted by economic circumstances. This thwarted desire for a permanent relationship is poignantly illustrated by Zelda, mother of the Toms sisters, who as a young woman tattooed her legs with the names of the men she had been with and hoped would stay (88). Her daughter Mollie follows her example of multiple insubstantial relationships, and yet, like her mother, she clearly desires more. This is seen when she finally finds a relationship that, as her own daughter states, is a home (227–28). As with Wilson's study participants, Sarris's characters may be forced to go against middle-class values and respectability, but that does not mean they reject them.<sup>27</sup>

The absence of men available to create long-term relationships makes it difficult for women characters to offer each other mutual support. A desperate and painful competition for male attention divides and distracts them. We see this in "The Magic Pony" as the Toms women develop strategies for stealing their sister Faye's man away from her: "Nothing stops them when they get ideas, and nothing gives them ideas like a man does" (6). Attracting a man is a weapon against the sense of powerlessness they experience at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Because of this position, the sisters' behavior is not restrained by the social rewards of respectability because those rewards are unattainable. Thus, fights spill out of their houses and into public places like Cherri's Chinese Kitchen, where the cops must come and break up the fight by taking one of them to the station (7).

Faye, nevertheless, does strive for middle-class respectability, yet she presents to the younger generation a disturbing lesson about the social costs of attempting to improve their situation materially.<sup>28</sup> She wears "clothes like a lady in a magazine" and maintains a clean, orderly house so different from the others' houses (9). Also, she is the one who gets the boyfriend, at least

temporarily, and a regular job. Yet rather than reducing her marginalization or gaining a sense of self-efficacy, Faye's difference only isolates her from the Grand Avenue community, with few compensating rewards from the dominant society. As her niece observes, "she looked so small, sitting there dressed just so."<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, Faye's daughter Ruby grasps at magic solutions to fulfill her desire to shape her life circumstances. Instead she ends up in juvenile detention and later in prostitution (26, 71).

Unstable work opportunities also impinge on the few who do marry. Describing herself as having a "blinding drive against hard luck," Anna summarizes the economics of her marriage to Albert Silva by stating, "Two kids become eight, and a husband's earnings become a welfare check" (47, 42). She dreams of an empowering normalcy, yet her hopes diminish as the family struggles to maintain its middle-class status.<sup>30</sup> Like the other women characters, Anna finds employment only at the cannery. With her husband out of work, the family depends on her mother's social security check. Among other consequences, Anna cannot afford alternative medical treatments for her daughter's cancer (41). This is one more price of living in a jobless neighborhood.

Albert's lack of work leads to his insignificance as husband and father, as seen in his absence from Anna's story, "The Progress of This Disease." His own story, "Joy Ride," depicts his separation from his wife and family as nearly complete. Having failed to differentiate himself from his dissolute and irresponsible brother, he lives in a world of lost dreams. The conclusion to Albert's story captures his multifaceted failure. As he drives around his own house with a young Indian girl (Justine) he has picked up, he feels trapped, unable either to take the girl to a motel or rejoin his wife and family (117). Similar to many of the women characters, Albert transposes his economic dilemma into a sexual one. Failing at his family responsibility, he impotently attempts to use sexuality to reassert his masculinity. Within their strained circumstances, neither Albert nor Anna can offer the other emotional support, and Albert barely mentions that his daughter Jeanne is dying of cancer. At the end of his story, his passive and paralyzed response to the girl he has picked up—"If. . . . Maybe. . . . I'd like to. . . ."—suggests that his life has reached a debilitating stalemate. Again we should note, however, that Sarris, like Wilson and Fixico, is not making accusations of personal or cultural failure but rather is depicting the consequences of structurally determined urban joblessness.

### GROWING UP UNDERCLASS

The consequences of this joblessness for child-rearing practices are also significant. We see mothers' lack of control over their children most painfully in the relationship between Mollie and her daughter Justine. The context for this relationship is established in Albert's story, in which we learn that Justine has followed the pattern of her mother's desperate promiscuity. In "How I Got to Be Queen," Mollie's other daughter Alice narrates a harsh interaction between the two: "'Damned black-neck squaw,' Mom says [to Justine]. 'Dirty fat Indian, you don't even know which Filipino in that apple orchard is my



father,' Justine says. . . . And if Justine goes on long enough, Mom goes out or watches TV. Like nothing was ever started. Like she does with just about anything else" (120).

This painful encounter shows Mollie's sense of powerlessness as a parent. The story ends with a racial confrontation that also demonstrates her ineffectual parenting. Someone throws a rock through their window, and Justine walks out the door, knife in hand, ready to fight a black girl she insulted earlier. Alice in desperation shoots a shotgun in the air, and middle-class Auntie Anna finally eases the situation by strategically telling the cops the stereotypical explanation that they and society expect to hear: "It's a single-parent family. . . . It's an Indian family just moved to town" (138–39). Although probably present at the conclusion of this scene, Mollie is not mentioned. Because she has established a pattern of absenting herself from family situations that she has little power to impact, she cannot help her daughter in this crisis.

The close-knit extended family on Grand Avenue can also offer little help because it has few resources for supporting the younger generation. For some time traditional family structures have been fragmenting under the pressure of the shifting yet constantly harsh circumstances described above. Sarris depicts the older generation of Zelda and Old Uncle as helping with children's physical needs, but in this urban setting they seem irrelevant as role models or agents of family order. Anna offers important help to her cousins' children when they are in trouble but can provide little else to most of them. Without adequate extended-family support and overwhelmed by her own problems, Mollie is ineffective in helping Justine negotiate a difficult adolescence. Fixico explains that "feelings of self-doubt led to psychological maladjustment that yielded an inferiority complex for many urban Indians." With little control over their own lives, parents have difficulty exerting appropriate influence on their adolescent children.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Sarris shows the troubled ways that Mollie's daughter learns the class-inflected behaviors of a parent, one more way that the absence of work shapes generations of lives in the Grand Avenue community.

"Class comes to children through families," Sherry Ortner observes. However, as her adult-study participants looked back on their childhood, their explanations of individual family problems had "almost literally replaced stories of class deprivation as possible explanations for later life experiences." They did not recognize that their present circumstances—"lesser material success, depression and unhappiness, a diffuse sense of personal failure"—originated from the class positions they experienced as children.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Justine does not connect her deprivations—the absence of homeownership, their lack of a car, health disparities, and other material hardships—to her family's marginal status. Part of the difficulty in recognizing class deprivations is that people (and characters) define success in comparison to others and to the status with which they began.<sup>33</sup> For Justine, finding clothes at thrift stores is normal in her neighborhood, so she does not see this experience as a mark of poverty. Rather she takes pride in finding the right clothes and knowing how to mix and match them (122). Justine also unreflexively adapts to the family's not having a car by buying food at a neighborhood shop. She

is unaware that its comparatively high prices exacerbate the family's poverty. More importantly, she (along with the adult characters) does not see the relationship between their not owning a car and the adults' inability to travel to the suburbs where jobs are more likely available.<sup>34</sup>

Yet Justine's inability to understand her class deprivations does not mean that she does not experience them or that she does not attempt to resist class strictures. From her mother and aunts, she has learned classed ways to strike back with her most readily accessible weapon, her sexuality. In communities like hers, sexuality is not controlled by status aspirations, as is common in middle-class contexts.<sup>35</sup> Social rewards for sexual repression hardly exist on Grand Avenue; abstinence will not be rewarded by social advancement. Most characters have come to realize that changing their status, no matter what their behavior, is unlikely. Without decent and dependable work, they are trapped in their racially and economically segregated neighborhood. Because their home place is a constant reminder of society's rejection, these characters' experience of sexuality is more insistently tied to personal affirmation, that is, to being desired. "For many, person-to-person relationships compensate for society's rejection," Wilson explains.<sup>36</sup> This is the compensation Justine seeks, just as her mother and aunts have. Justine becomes the queen of a continuing summer house party for young black men from the neighborhood. In her adolescent world, they have privileged status, and she gains by her association with them. When school starts again in the fall, she plans to maintain that status with a calculated strategy: "'I'll show them snobby white girls,' she said. . . . She pictured herself walking down the hall with Ducker [a young black man]. She was going to lose fifteen pounds. She was going to wear all kinds of makeup on her face. People would be shocked. They'd be scared of her" (130). Part of the pathos of Justine's plan is that she has "internalize[d] the objective limits" of her social position.<sup>37</sup> Knowing she will not find acceptance from the white girls, she can only imagine a social defiance that may seem empowering but is economically destructive. In *Poverty and Place* Paul A. Jargowsky explains, "Social isolation in high-poverty neighborhoods helps to create and maintain an 'oppositional culture' that makes it difficult for children to succeed in school."<sup>38</sup> This lack of social and academic success leaves characters like Justine deeply alienated and unprepared for adult life outside of her parent's circumstances.

Unable to recognize her conflict as a class struggle, Justine experiences her adolescent sexuality as burdened with misplaced class anger. In her research Ortner found that students seldom recognize high school social groups as class enclaves. Instead, class injuries are "almost entirely embedded in narratives of snobbery and humiliation." Dominant groups, Justine understands, police their boundaries through clothing, language, and sexual stereotyping. "Middle class kids, both male and female, define working class kids as promiscuous, highly experienced and sexually unconstrained," Ortner observes.<sup>39</sup> This association of sex and status would be even stronger for minority adolescents from the jobless underclass. Racial stereotypes intersect with class ones to make Justine's form of resistance even more futile and frustrating. She attempts to ameliorate her social injuries with counterproductive displays of

aberrant (from a middle-class perspective) sexual displays. Yet rather than challenging class hierarchies, Justine reinscribes them with her “choices.” Although her sexuality seems empowering to her, it actually brands her as belonging to the bottom of her high school’s and society’s status hierarchy.

We can easily imagine Justine growing up to become like her mother or aunts rather than the “snobby white girls” she naively tries to challenge. Yet the racially intersected class injuries she experiences can have more serious consequences. In his related novel *Watermelon Nights*, Sarris presents an even bleaker future for Justine. One of its narrators mentions that Justine, sixteen years old, “got herself killed” when she was caught in the cross fire of automatic rifles (8). The narrator’s offhanded phrase suggests not blame for her own victimization but rather the tragic ordinariness of this event in a multi-racial, underclass neighborhood where work has disappeared and characters experience the devastating results.

Using Wilson’s, Fixico’s, and Ortner’s analyses as a lens for seeing the community on Grand Avenue, we can understand the larger causes of specific behaviors. Justine’s destructive sexuality, her mother’s ineffectual parenting, Zelda’s tattoos of men’s names, Anna and Albert Silva’s failing marriage, and the Toms sisters’ desperate struggle to steal Faye’s boyfriend all have their roots in dominant socioeconomic structures that are destructive of individuals and communities in multiple ways. A key aspect is the joblessness (or seasonal, low-wage, demeaning work) that prevails in their communities and deeply shapes their lives.

### ALTERNATIVES

*Grand Avenue* gives full weight to the burden of socioeconomic conditions that its characters face yet Sarris has also created characters that nevertheless have the agency to sustain or develop positive Indian identities while living on Grand Avenue. Through key characters Sarris depicts various strategies for positively confronting the consequences of colonial history. Alice stands out as a character of hope in bleak circumstances. Although she has an unsupportive mother, she has others in the community (Anna and Nellie) who model ways of resisting the destructive consequences of her circumstances.

Her sister Justine fights to gain higher status within a teen culture stratified by class and race; however, Alice avoids this competition. In part because her body does not match dominant standards of beauty, she avoids the destructive sexual competition that entraps her sister. Instead, taking pride in being responsible has become her way of confronting antagonistic, poverty-driven conditions. “How I Got to Be Queen,” the story Alice narrates, opens with the family having moved again (126). Because her mother Mollie is working at the cannery during the day and playing cards with her sisters in the evening, Alice takes charge. Acting on values uncommon in this context, she demonstrates hard work, order, organization, responsible child-rearing, and conservative dress. She appreciates the difference between her mother and her mother’s middle-class cousin Anna: “Auntie Anna cooks good. She’s got recipes. And she’s classy. Slender-bodied, not like me and Mom. She knows

how to talk to social workers, those kind of people" (127). Anna models for Alice different ways of maintaining dignity in the face of the economic hardships caused by joblessness. Alice seems to have learned from Anna a way of avoiding the destructive alienation that her mother and most others in the community experience.

Alice does not condemn her mother Mollie for adopting a strategy for living on Grand Avenue that is nearly the opposite of Anna's. Alice sees that Mollie "doesn't know what a place to live is. That's what happened to her. She never had a home" (220). In this statement, Alice astutely summarizes the consequences of two centuries of colonization. With this recognition, so different from Justine's understanding, Alice can accept her mother's limited ability to care for the family, takes on this responsibility, and gains a sense of efficacy few others in the novel have.

Along with Anna, Nellie Copaz has a positive influence on Alice. Anna's influence is indirect; she is an example of order, strength, and self-assurance. Nellie offers Alice an example and a relationship that in the end becomes mutually supportive. Both characters are strong enough to learn from each other.

Like Anna's three-bedroom house, Nellie's well-kept place stands out from the others' disorderly barracks. Like Anna, Nellie is seen as an outsider. Because Nellie came to Grand Avenue as an older woman, she observes community conditions but is not absorbed by them. She is ostracized from the community by a troubled past even though she is connected to the others by blood, history, and beliefs. Seen by some characters as a "poisoner, witch, white-man Indian," she gains our sympathy with her Native-centeredness (211). Faced with suspicion and suspicious herself, Nellie nevertheless remains connected to the community as best she can. Nellie lives out traditional beliefs through her healing songs, basket weaving, and storytelling. Her sense of history grounds her understanding of the present: "Look at what the Spanish did, then the Mexicans, then the Americans. All of them, they took our land, locked us up. Then look at what we go and do to one another" (222). She is the only character that understands Grand Avenue with historical reflexivity. Yet she sees a larger context beyond material circumstances. Her first story, "Waiting for the Green Frog," concludes, "The window was open and I could see the sky. I took a deep breath, then another and another, marveling at the endless stars" (91). When she concludes her second story, the one that includes Alice, by saying "I'm not too old for miracles," we do not take this as the author's wishful dash of sugar added to a bitter cup but rather as a sensible sense of hope (229).

From Nellie, Alice learns stories of the past and the tradition of basket making. As a result, Alice can maintain positive Pomo traditions as she adapts them to new conditions. Sarris reassures us of this by creating two moving vignettes that reveal Alice's strategy of resistance as well as the possibilities for community healing. One depicts her creating a basket. It is traditionally constructed, as Nellie has taught her, but the design is Alice's own. This personal yet Pomo basket has power enough to bring about Alice's wish for her mother's happiness, as Mollie finds a home in the love of an African American neighbor (228). Alice's basket making also helps Nellie recognize

that in her own community conflicts, "Fear had clogged my mind so I couldn't see what was happening." Observing the positive power in Alice's work and realizing that her young friend does not define her mentor by her past, Nellie too finds healing from her haunting personal and family history as well as from her "own loneliness and rejection" (229). The healing associated with Alice's basket is traditional if we recognize tradition as adapting to changing circumstances. Poisoning had been a precontact cultural practice that helped keep people together as a community, but it had become a destructive force under colonial conditions, as Nellie has experienced. She has been ostracized and accused of being a poisoner because she went against community mores; she had seen poison's power misused with deadly results by her rival Mary Hatcher (211, 85). Poisoning split the community apart by creating bitter rivalries.<sup>40</sup> The power of poisons, songs, and baskets still remains, but through Nellie and Alice this power is being used to rebuild rather than destroy the community experience.<sup>41</sup>

The other reassuring picture of Alice comes in typical Sarris form, a story about listening to a story and finding out what the listener understood.<sup>42</sup> Nellie tells Alice family stories about poisonings, suicide, a love song stolen, a *rancheria* lost, and more. Not really understanding her own stories of loss and separation, Nellie "frantic[ally]" asks, "Alice, do you hear me? Do you understand?" (222). Alice says yes, and then seemingly incongruously adds, "I made a new casserole." This casserole tastes good and is cheap, Alice explains. More importantly, all the children helped make it. In hearing this account of a family making supper together, Nellie realizes that Alice's vision is not clouded by old stories of her as poisoner. Instead, Nellie is "only the old woman sitting across from her" (222). In Alice's cooking-story response to Nellie's stories of poison and healing, Nellie sees that past conflicts and present conditions do not have to trap either her or Alice. Communal well-being here takes the form of a family of kids who, although their mother is out looking for love, can still cook a good meal together. It also takes the form of an elder teaching and learning from a young character, which represents a hopeful alternative for her Grand Avenue community.

These contemporary ways of providing for individual, family, and community needs echo the traditional work activities of self-sustaining Pomo tribes that flourished before other, alienating structures were imposed. These ways are possible because two older characters are a part of the Grand Avenue neighborhood and yet, because of circumstances and a different set of values, are able to have a transformative influence on a younger member, who in turn creates a nourishing home for her siblings. Others like Steven Penn act in similar ways to support younger characters as well as the group as a whole. In Sarris's stories, hope lies with characters committed to, yet on the margins of, their Pomo community.

#### WRITING AND READING RESPONSIBLY

Although the efforts of characters like Nellie, Anna, and Alice model individual strategies for community building, *Grand Avenue* also alerts us to the

socioeconomic structures that must be confronted for the health of the community. By using Pomo work history and insights from Wilson's, Fixico's, and Ortner's analyses, this article has argued that we must recognize the causes and the often-insidious consequences of living in a poor, urban community from which adequate work has mainly disappeared. The destructive effects of joblessness that Sarris's stories depict are rooted in the economic desires of the dominant culture. Because community problems are shaped by structural exploitation, they require, in addition to communal and personal responses, structural interventions adapted to Pomo peoples' specific situation.

I have emphasized the historically situated, socioeconomic structures because this perspective is often absent from readings of Native fiction. In the introductory essay to *Reasoning Together*, Craig Womack (Muskogee Creek/Cherokee) calls for an ethical criticism that has "a commitment to theory rooted in activism." He critiques the narrowly cultural focus of most criticism because it looks only at ethnography without engaging political issues. Womack explains that "a resistance literature is building that argues that sovereignty is not an isolationist position, since tribal governments exist in complex relationships with municipal, state, and federal powers that demand constant movement between and across borders."<sup>43</sup> One of the great strengths of *Grand Avenue* is its effectiveness at negotiating this dilemma. Sarris astutely demonstrates the consequences that Pomo peoples have experienced as they have been forced away from traditional means of production on their homeland and into the impoverished neighborhoods of northern California cities. He does this through complexly interwoven narratives that richly describe contemporary characters and the sometimes humorous, often-painful situations they must negotiate. In doing this, Sarris shows that his characters are casualties and resisters in "the wars of the dispossessed . . . relegated to the margins of society where their struggles against invisibility are undermined by poverty, disease, and inadequate education."<sup>44</sup>

Making oppressive structures visible is an important strategy for bringing resistance literature and activist criticism together. In commenting on Wilson's analysis, Niemonen explains, "In the end, perhaps the most fundamental question raised by the debate initiated by [Wilson's earlier work and continued in *When Work Disappears*] is the extent to which Americans are willing to confront a *structuralist interpretation* of the social world and its radical policy implications."<sup>45</sup> This has important implications for the ways we choose to understand Native urban fiction and experience.

Wilson's analysis rekindled the "culture of poverty" debate, a controversy centering on the causes of conditions in urban neighborhoods like the one Sarris depicts.<sup>46</sup> Some social analysts have asserted that people in poverty are to blame for making choices that perpetuate their underclass condition. Others, like Wilson, have argued that structural change rather than moral crusades are needed because the fault fundamentally lies in the unjust US economic and political system. The solutions we espouse, directly or through our silence, for the problems depicted in Native urban fiction such as *Grand Avenue* will be shaped by our understanding of poverty's causes.<sup>47</sup>

Sarris intends his fiction to affect more than readers' understanding. By helping us grasp past and present realities, his "chronicles of survival" help us see what actions we need to take. In our work as citizens as well as readers, scholars, and teachers of Native literature, we must responsibly and structurally address the problems Sarris presents while recognizing the effective strategies of resistance some characters enact. Otherwise in neoliberal victim-blaming ways, we misread our texts, our society, and our privileged relation to both.

### NOTES

1. Greg Sarris, *Grand Avenue: A Novel in Stories* (New York: Hyperion, 1994); all subsequent references to *Grand Avenue* will be cited parenthetically in the text. Sarris's 1998 novel *Watermelon Nights* also describes this struggle. As it opens, a fictional tribe is living on Grand Avenue and struggling to regain federal recognition. The goal is to strengthen its self-determination or sovereignty. For a discussion of the debate regarding sovereignty, see Reginald Dyck, "Practicing Sovereignty in Greg Sarris's *Watermelon Nights*," *Western American Literature* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2011): forthcoming.

2. The 2000 census reported that 61% of Native people were now living on Native lands, an increase from 38% in 1970. National Urban Indian Family Coalition, "Urban Indian America: The Status of American Indian and Alaska Native Children and Families Today" (A Report to The Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2008), 8, <http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid=%7BCCB6DEB2-007E-416A-A0B2-D15954B48600%7D> (accessed 4 January 2010).

3. Carol Miller, "Telling the Urban Indian: Representations in American Indian Fiction," in *American Indians and the Urban Experience*, ed. Susan Lobo and Kurt Peters (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), 30.

4. "Urban Indian America" provides useful statistics for understanding Native urban communities. In 2000, American Indians and Alaska Natives (hereinafter referred to as AI/AN) had a poverty rate of 20.3%. Compared to the general US urban population, the urban AI/AN unemployment rate is 1.7 times higher. Urban Indians are 1.7 times less likely to graduate from high school. The rate of child abuse and neglect for off-reservation Native children is 5.7 per 1,000 children per year, as compared to 4.2 for the general US population: National Urban Indian Family Coalition, "Urban Indian America," 11.

5. Greg Sarris, "A Conversation with Greg Sarris," *Watermelon Nights* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 9.

6. William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1996). Niemonen summarizes the historical situation out of which the contemporary urban underclass developed. Although American Indians were affected in somewhat different ways than African Americans, the basic pattern is relevant: "Structural changes in the economy since 1970 included the shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries, relocation of manufacturing industries out of the central city, increasing polarization of the labor market into high-wage and low-wage sectors, innovations in technology, periodic recessions, and wage stagnation. These changes accelerated the rate of joblessness among inner-city blacks. . . . Housing markets, geographic segregation, skills mismatches, and

inadequate public transportation combined with job discrimination to create high levels of black unemployment. The problem was exacerbated by government policies of industrial and urban *laissez-faire* that channeled a disproportionate share of federal, state, and municipal resources to the more affluent" (148).

7. Mary Jean Kennedy, "Culture Contact and Acculturation of the Southwestern Pomo" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1955), 14.

8. Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 186, 179.

9. Lowell John Bean and Dorothea Theodoratus, "Western Pomo and North-eastern Pomo," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 8: *California*, ed. Robert F. Heiser (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 299.

10. Alfred Kroeber estimated that from 1770 to 1910 the Kashaya Pomo population had been reduced to between 2% and 9% of what it had been. *Ibid.*, 236.

11. B. W. and E. G. Aginsky, *Deep Valley* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), 209–10.

12. Elizabeth Colson, "The Pomo," in *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women*, recorded and ed. by Elizabeth Colson (1956; repr., Berkeley: Archaeological Research Faculty, Department of Anthropology, University of California, 1974), 27.

13. Alice Littlefield notes that analysis of Indian policy has emphasized "individual reformers and politicians" and "good intentions gone awry." Instead, she argues that policy changes resulted from "significant restructuring of the national and international economies" and "served the interests of the dominant sectors of capital emerging in each period." Alice Littlefield, "Native American Labor and Public Policy in the United States," in *Marxist Approaches in Economic Anthropology*, ed. Alice Littlefield and Hill Gates (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 229.

Pomo Indian *rancherias* lost their federal recognition under the California Rancheria Act of 1958. The Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, the tribe for which Sarris is chairman, "continued to protect the cultural identity of their people" and fought for restoration. The tribe regained federal recognition in 2000. The federal legislation also provided a process for regaining their land. Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, "Timeline," 2004, <http://www.gratonrancheria.com/timeline.htm> (accessed 7 March 2008).

14. Although most characters struggle with the poverty of under- or unemployment, the novel's community does include a few members who are comparatively middle class. Steven, a mailman, has a steady job; his wife is licensed to teach preschool and therefore has more education than most (195). Stella works as a secretary (179–80). Anna has seen her family's comparatively strong economic situation deteriorate because her husband Albert is now not making enough money to keep the family off welfare. He had worked at the cannery, a male non-Indian who is the only character to have had a permanent, full-time job there (107). Steven and some other middle-class characters take leadership roles in the tribe. Stella, however, leaves the region for a job opportunity.

15. Donald L. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 84.

16. William Julius Wilson, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009).



17. Urban anthropologist Sherry Ortner asserts, "Novelists, or good ones anyway, are the traditional ethnographers of their own cultures." Sherry B. Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 20. For further discussion, see "Ethnography as Fiction" (179–85) in Sherry B. Ortner, "Reading America: Preliminary Notes on Class and Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991), 163–89.

Sarris acknowledges that he literally is an ethnographer because he has graduate training in anthropology. More important, though, is his commitment to the particular place he writes about. All his writing is oriented to Pomo places. This commitment motivated his move from Los Angeles back to Sonoma County, where he grew up (Greg Sarris, interview by author, 29 November 2006). Having grown up in Santa Rosa, CA (the setting for the book), partly raised by Indians in the area, and now chairman of the Federated Indians of the Graton Rancheria, Sarris presents in *Grand Avenue* an engaged depiction of Native continuance.

18. Wilson, *More Than Just Race*, 46, 52.

19. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America*, 84, 106. See Bonita Lawrence (Mi'kmaq), *"Real Indians" and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). Lawrence's study, describing the challenges of sustaining traditions and identity in the Toronto Native community, has important implications for the understanding of urban Indian communities.

20. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America*, 105; Jack Niemonen, *Race, Class, and the State in Contemporary Sociology: The William Julius Wilson Debates* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 150.

21. Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, xiii, 24. Wilson uses the term *joblessness* rather than *unemployment* because it includes not only those looking for work but also those who have lost hope and dropped out of the job market or who work outside of the labor market: Wilson, *More Than Just Race*, 65.

22. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America*, 75; Wilson, *More Than Just Race*, 63.

23. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America*, 37.

24. Faye gains her job as an aide through her boyfriend Jerry (10, 16). She has what the others do not, a (quite small) social network that links her to job opportunities. Most employers of low-skilled workers depend on referrals rather than advertising. People living in poor neighborhoods with high unemployment have little access to these informal networks. Wilson, *More Than Just Race*, 91–92.

The story "Slaughterhouse" shows the role of prostitution in the community (51–72). In an earlier generation, Mary Hatcher achieved middle-class status by running a brothel in town (84). As a young woman, Zelda is forced by poverty into prostitution in spite of her hard work, education, and middle-class values ("Indian Maid," 163–83, esp. 177).

25. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America*, 74.

26. Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 105; Wilson, *More Than Just Race*, 121. Wilson acknowledges that "research on the relationship between male employment and rates of marriage and single parenthood has yielded mixed findings." He defends his claim, however, by stating that the research providing these mixed findings uses data that was not based on inner-city neighborhoods, which experience race and poverty. They are

also longitudinal studies, which complicates their results. In Wilson's Chicago study, "marriage rates had dropped much more sharply among jobless black fathers than among employed black fathers." Another study found that employment increased the likelihood of single black fathers aged 18 to 31 getting married by 8 times. Wilson, *More Than Just Race*, 107–8.

27. Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 84.

28. Stella, the youngest Toms sister, also stands out because of her middle-class values and aspirations. She has had different family experiences than her older sisters, having grown up after Zelda quit bringing men home. Although she has a junior college education, her work options are limited because of racial discrimination in hiring, as her story "Indian Maid" shows. She can only get positions in government agencies for Indians. As with Faye, Stella's success, and the values that create it, alienates her from her sisters.

29. Faye's social isolation creates cultural isolation as well. Faye is left "lonely, scared" by Pomo traditions as she has individualistically adapted them in her stories and wall painting (9). For Faye, traditional beliefs about poisoning are no longer about respect, balance, and humility (acknowledgment that one does not know everything about the world) but about an alienating fear. This understanding of the changing nature of poisoning is based on my phone interview with Sarris (Greg Sarris, interview by author, 29 November 2006).

30. I use the term *middle class* relationally. As Heather Howard-Bobiwash notes in describing middle-class members of the Toronto Native community, "What is defined as 'middle-class' among Native people may be set at a 'lower' bar than in the rest of the Canadian population. That is, it is not merely determined by salary, but by perceived prestige associated with jobs such as secretarial or office work." Heather Howard-Bobiwash, "Women's Class Strategies as Activism in Native Community Building in Toronto, 1950–1975," *American Indian Quarterly* 27 (2003): 570–71. Anna and her family's cultural capital is an important aspect of their middle-class status.

31. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America*, 6; Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 91.

32. Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming*, 40.

33. *Ibid.*, 5.

34. See Wilson, *More Than Just Race*, 10.

35. Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 108.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming*, 78.

38. Paul A. Jargowsky, *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997), 194.

39. See Ortner, "Reading America," 185; Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming*, 41; Ortner, "Reading America," 178.

40. Colson, *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women*, 18–20; Bean and Theodoratus, "Western Pomo and Northeastern Pomo," 297.

41. Sarris creates Anna with another side as well. Her strength, understood by others as a sense of superiority, isolates her from her husband and the Grand Avenue community. Anna sees them as "slightly stooped, bent in a way each and every one of them understood" (43). Rather than bend, she breaks in a weak moment and accepts

their submissive, guilt-ridden form of Christianity (46). Her daughter Jeannie's cancer becomes too much to bear; yet she has no one else to turn to (49).

42. E.g., Sarris states that with his biography of Mabel McKay, "the written text becomes the story of my hearing her stories." Greg Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 4.

43. Craig S. Womack, "A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism between 1986 and 1997," in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, ed. Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 8, 18, 37.

44. Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, 55.

45. Niemonen, *Race, Class, and the State in Contemporary Sociology*, 12; emphasis added.

46. Susan Lobo notes that the "culture of poverty" concept continues to influence research and policy related to poor urban communities: Susan Lobo, introduction to *American Indians and the Urban Experience*, ed. Susan Lobo and Kurt Peters (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), xiii.

47. In emphasizing the socioeconomic aspects of Pomo revitalization, I do not mean to dismiss the importance of cultural renewal. The Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria's strategy of engaging both is reflected on its Web site, which includes "Culture" and "Economic Development" as main headings. Together with language classes and other revitalization efforts, the tribe is developing a resort casino that will help financially sustain the tribe as a tribe and continue its cultural work. See Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, "Culture" and "Economic Development."

Sarris emphasizes both of these as he explains why regaining federal recognition was so important for the tribe. First, it has to do with cultural and historical identity. Second, it will provide "educational, medical and housing benefits" through the US government. See Sarris, "A Conversation with Greg Sarris," 10.

For a culturally inflected formal reading of *Grand Avenue* that links Sarris's storytelling to Pomo basket weaving, see Michelle Burnham, "Pomo Basketweaving, Poison, and the Politics of Restoration in Greg Sarris's *Grand Avenue*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 2nd series, 14, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 18–36.