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## Bridging the Gap: Strategies of Survival in James Welch's Novels

KARSTEN FITZ

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In their literary quests for cultural survival, contemporary American Indian writers have transcended the victim role, which had left its marks on earlier periods of American Indian fiction. Today, new ways to understand mixed cultural origins and to reconcile differing beliefs are superseding notions of assimilation, "precolonial purity," or mere resistance. A reading of James Welch's novels, *Winter in the Blood* (1974), *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), and *The Indian Lawyer* (1990) sheds light on this tendency.<sup>1</sup> Welch's protagonists, to a large degree, are able to reconcile the alienation that stems from living in contemporary U.S. society while drawing from traditions of a tribal past. They figure as cultural mediators who (re)connect with both levels of experience. There is a process of transformation that has the potential of creating a new and dynamic modern American Indian identity.

Through his fictional characters, Welch emphasizes the theme of survival—not by idealizing a tribal past, nor by simply rejecting the dominant culture. Instead, survival remains very much a personal and individual quest. What is of interest in this context is how, by what means, and at what cost ethnicity is constructed and survival is achieved. If we accept a wider definition of the term *survival*—dissecting it into its physical, spiritual, and ethnic components—we can make out different strategies. Within the

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variety of “an”—not “the”—American Indian experience in contemporary American society, Welch has depicted three very different American Indian realities.

In all of James Welch’s novels with modern settings, there is a distance between the protagonists and their past, their tribal heritage, and their family history. This distance has to be bridged in order to be able to develop future perspectives. Following the archetypal scheme of *Estrangement*, *Search for Self*, and *Return to the Indian World*,<sup>2</sup> Welch’s fiction shows that his protagonists “need the . . . past to survive . . . the present.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, Welch’s protagonists’ search is as much a search for identity as it is a search for wholeness. Surprisingly—particularly in this context but also generally—*The Indian Lawyer*, Welch’s most recent novel, has received hardly any critical attention.

This essay will analyze Welch’s methods of defining reconnection to the past, dealing especially with two motifs that are indivisibly connected to the phenomenon of survival: the function of the grandparent generation and the roles of land and reservation. In this context, the postcolonial dilemma of alienation and its “healing” through the recovery of ethnic identity and the return to tribal lands provide an essential approach. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin have pointed out in their study on postcolonial literatures, *The Empire Writes Back*, the elements of place and displacement are the most important features within the scope of postcolonialism: “It is here that the special postcolonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place.”<sup>4</sup>

The title *Winter in the Blood* suggests the exact state of mind of the thirty-two-year-old nameless narrator—half Blackfeet and half Gros Ventre like Welch—coming home from town to the reservation: “I felt no hatred, no love, no guilt, no conscience, nothing but a distance that had grown through the years. . . . But the distance I felt came not from the country or people; it came from within me. I was as distant from myself as the hawk from the moon” (*WB*, 2). The protagonist dislikes his mother, Teresa, who owns the ranch, because she is a convert to Catholicism, frequently drinking “with the priest of Harlem . . . who refused to set foot on the reservation [and] never buried Indians in their family graveyards; instead, he made them come to him, to his church” (*WB*, 4–5). And he is somewhat indifferent about his girlfriend Agnes (“the girl who was thought to be my wife” [*WB*, 2]), a Cree

Indian who left before his return from town, taking his gun and electric razor, both signs of masculinity.

As Kathleen Sands points out, the protagonist is "alienated from his family, his community, his land, and his own past . . . because he has lost the story of who he is, where he has come from."<sup>5</sup> He only has a fragmented knowledge of his tribal past: memories he recalls from stories told by his grandmother, who is now "almost a century old," deaf and dumb and almost blind (*WB*, 34). On the surface, as it later turns out, the protagonist's memories of a dead father and brother are his main problem, with the death of his brother Mose lying especially heavily on his conscience. The narrator clearly has "winter in his blood." Spiritually and culturally he seems to be dead; only physically does he still function. When he goes back to town to search for Agnes, he does not even know that he is actually trying to find some kind of meaning in his life.

The protagonist in *The Death of Jim Loney*, a thirty-five-year-old mixed-blood—his father is white, his mother Gros Ventre—is introduced as an occasional farm hand, earning money when he needs it "to keep himself for a while" (*JL*, 3). Loney is a quiet and tense drinker who drinks for "survival until next time" (*JL*, 5). Again, the name Loney is indicative of the state of mind of the protagonist. He is lonely, isolated, disconnected: "In the past several years he had become something of a non-person" (*JL*, 41).

Loney's first thought in the opening scene of the novel is of a passage from the Bible: "Turn away from man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?" He does not know what this phrase stands for or why he remembers it, but it is quite obviously a remnant of his upbringing in a Catholic mission school. Parallel to this Biblical passage, which he remembers frequently, is a vision of a bird that keeps popping into his mind every night. Loney is vaguely aware that the appearance of the bird is "a vision sent by my mother's people" (*JL*, 105). Thus the juxtaposition of the Bible phrase and the bird vision is a reflection of his inner struggle and ambivalence. Both his sister Kate and his lover Rhea want to take him away from Harlem, Montana, to offer him a new life, new opportunities. But Loney thinks that he can only "connect the different parts of his life, or the various people who had entered and left it" by staying there (*JL*, 20).

Sylvester Yellow Calf, the protagonist of *The Indian Lawyer*, was raised by his grandparents on the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, Montana. His grandmother had tried to educate him accord-

ing to Indian traditions, but, when he was a child, traditions to him seemed “foreign, old-fashioned, worthless . . . he could not see what they had to do with his immediate life” (*IL*, 156). The thirty-five-year-old protagonist has made it in “the outside world, the real world” (*IL*, 156): All-Conference in basketball, Stanford Law, a rising career in the most powerful law firm in Helena, and now the prospect of a seat in Congress. It is easy to attribute all the traits of a role model to Sylvester Yellow Calf. When he was playing basketball, a journalist wrote a special column on Sylvester, turning him into a “winner for all minorities who fight the endless battle for respect and honor [while the other members of his team] will fall by the wayside” (*IL*, 103). Yet he felt different living on the reservation, where he had first been stigmatized as a role model, and he feels different now, being part of the white business world “that had little to do with his people” (*IL*, 38). He is a rarity and often feels as though he is in a “monkey cage” (*IL*, 101).

With *The Indian Lawyer*, Welch strongly challenges the function of the role model in American society, alluding to the postcolonial tendencies that are attributed to it, since only the dominant society has the power to “create” role models and to define their limits. People who are role models, he argued in an interview, run the risk of becoming alienated from their own culture and dependent on the dominant society. Thus Welch hints at the paternalism inherent in this concept: Society is “suppressing you on the one hand, making you dependent, and on the other hand they’re telling you to become independent, to dream and to look upon this role model as somebody that you can possibly become.”<sup>6</sup>

Whatever term is used to describe the state of mind of the Welch hero at the outset—*estrangement, alienation, isolation, or distance*—there is continuity: All the main characters feel isolated, even as children; they all come from fragmented (*Winter in the Blood* and *The Indian Lawyer*)—if not absolutely wrecked (*The Death of Jim Loney*)—families; they all are bereft of identity, either because they have, at least momentarily, lost touch with their tribal tradition or because there is just no connection to whatever could provide this identity.

The second stage through which each of Welch’s protagonists goes is the search for self. In *Winter in the Blood*, this stage consists of drinking and drifting in the small towns of Malta and Havre, interrupted only by short periods of working on the ranch. It turns out that the narrator’s search for Agnes is only part of his own inner search for belonging and warmth: “In her black eyes, I could

see the reason why I had brought her home that time before. They held the promise of warm things, of a spirit that went beyond her miserable life of drinking and screwing and men like me" (*WB*, 113).

Slowly he becomes aware that he will not find the key to his problems in town. He will have to "go home," back to the reservation, to find what he is looking for. Not that this idea is glorified in any way; there is just no alternative: "I should go home. . . . It wasn't the ideal place, that was sure, but it was the best choice. Maybe I had run out of choices" (*WB*, 120). It is this awareness he needs—the recognition that he must "go home"—to facilitate the step out of an existence that spells spiritual and cultural nonexistence; and the awareness that he has to do it himself. It is the urge to survive—and not to die like his father "'lying in that ditch with his eyes frozen shut, stinking with beer . . .'"—that brings about this awareness (*WB*, 20).

Jim Loney's search for self consists of drinking at home, sitting at the window, and looking at Snake Butte on the reservation. It is this place, where his Indian ancestors are buried, to which he feels intuitively and continuously attracted: "[H]e never got over the feeling that there were lives out there" (*JL*, 47). When Jim tries to explain to his sister Kate that he cannot leave Harlem, she does not understand his "attempts to create a past, a background, an ancestry—something that would tell him who he was" (*JL*, 88). "We have no past," she answers simply (*JL*, 91), indicating that she has distanced herself completely from her ethnic background but also demonstrating that she has found her individual compromise.

It is Kate's and his father Ike's refusals to answer his questions about the past and the inner isolation of being neither Indian nor white that keep him in a state of constant searching. He knows what Indians are—"reservation families, all living under one roof, the old ones passing down their wisdom of their years, of their family's years, of their tribe's years, and the young ones soaking up their history, their places in their history, with a wisdom that went beyond age" (*JL*, 102)—but he does not feel he is one of them. In connection with this cliché, Louis Owens states that "Loney is a victim of discourse that has turned 'real' Indians into artifacts." Thus, "Loney cannot move beyond the authoritative discourse's static definition" of "Indian authenticity" as determined from the outside.<sup>7</sup>

The fragmented—if not rudimentary—memory of the protagonist's ethnic background that cannot be completed resur-

faces in another context. The killing of Myron Pretty Weasel, his friend of old times, when Loney mistakes him for a bear during a hunt, is also preceded by an act of fragmented memory. Loney whistles a hunting signal he still knows from his childhood days, but he cannot recall it completely: "He thought, if I could remember, if I could complete it, Pretty Weasel would either say, 'Come ahead,' or whistle back that the hunt was still on" (*JL*, 120). But there is no answer from Pretty Weasel; Loney misidentifies his friend and shoots him. His fragmented memory causes the lack of communication that contributes to the death of his friend. This situation can be considered a metaphor for his fragmented knowledge of his own past, and the result is ultimately destructive in both cases. His detachment from nature and tradition is also seen in his vision of Pretty Weasel as a bear: An Indian "in touch" with nature would not confuse a human being with a bear. Louis Owens suggests that, in believing there is a bear, "Pretty Weasel identifies with the bear spirit, and he becomes the bear," whereas "Loney cannot accept himself as Indian—or mixedblood—[and thus] cannot accept the presence of the bear."<sup>8</sup> This interpretation makes sense, especially if we consider the significance of the bear in Blackfeet mythology.<sup>9</sup> All this leads up to the realization that "[s]omewhere along the line he had started questioning his life and he had lost forever the secret of survival" (*JL*, 155).

In *The Indian Lawyer*, when Sylvester Yellow Calf is about to enter a political career, he feels uncomfortable with the fact that it has always been help from the outside, mostly white people, that has turned him into a "winner." It was also this help that alienated him from his ethnic background. Ironically, his original motivation for starting a law career was to become a "new warrior," about whom he had once read in an article: "The article called [Indian lawyers] the 'new warriors' and predicted that Indian law and water law—both of which figured prominently on reservations—were the fields to choose in the seventies and eighties" (*IL*, 106). This turns out to be exactly his dilemma: As a politician, Sylvester would have to compromise with groups he was fighting as a lawyer and as an American Indian—"organizations, special interest, a few fat cats" (*IL*, 52). His inner struggle is how to help his people while remaining the role model he has become. The political arena seems to be the adequate instrument for Sylvester to realize his ambitions, until his doubts increase.

Only back home on the reservation does Sylvester get a clearer look at his life and at himself. After all, since leaving the reserva-

tion, he has been dependent on the white system. Buster, his boss, who has been his patron during his career as a lawyer, needs a competent partner in the law firm; the Democrats think it is time for "another Indian in Congress" (*IL*, 55); and, in his basketball days, he was turned into a "winner for all minorities" by a white sports journalist (*IL*, 103). On the surface, the blackmail in which Sylvester is caught for getting involved with a client forces him to drop out of the congressional race. But this only constitutes the framework of this thriller; it is quite obvious that "[t]here will be other chances" for him (*IL*, 336), if he wants them. Yellow Calf's development demonstrates his gradual realization that he can free himself from the dominance of his white benefactors while continuing to appreciate what he has gained through them. Thus his awareness of the need to escape from being a role model coalesces with his awareness of the necessity to escape from being dominated.

The second stage, the search for self, is a period of indecisiveness, a constant physical and spiritual wandering. This wanderer theme is reminiscent of the traditional vision quest, in which a warrior searches for a vision to give him strength and power. During this process of wandering, the fragmented knowledge, the memory, is linked with the consciousness of the present. Only the capability of "responsible and self-directed action," as Elaine Jahner puts it,<sup>10</sup> renders possible the liberation from the stasis of the victim role.

Returning home from town, the narrator of *Winter in the Blood* visits Yellow Calf, the ancient Indian whom he remembers having visited with his father when the protagonist was a little boy. The old man tells part of the history of the Blackfeet, of how they ended up living on the Fort Belknap Reservation, which is Gros Ventre and Assiniboine country, and of the cruel winter in which they starved.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the protagonist gets more details about his tribal and family history. The retelling of his grandmother's story by Yellow Calf recalls the old woman's struggle to survive a difficult winter, which connects the narrator with his own struggle for survival. Finally, the narrator recognizes the truth—that Yellow Calf was the hunter who provided his grandmother with food to survive the severe winter and the following ones. More than that, he was her lover and, much later, the father of her child, the protagonist's mother. In his "laughter of one who understands a moment of his life" (*WB*, 158), the narrator is joined by the old Blackfeet, his grandfather, and gains a completely new identity.



The "halfwhite drifter named Doagie" is not his real grandfather (*WB*, 37); his maternal grandfather is full-blooded Blackfeet. Grandfather and grandson share a part of the past. The shared knowledge of their place is passed from grandfather to grandson: "The oral tradition of the people has been passed on to the alienated, isolated Blackfeet man and given him a continuity of place and character."<sup>12</sup>

Returning to the ranch, the narrator steps out of his lethargy and takes full responsibility by trying to save a cow that is about to drown in the mud during a storm. "Freed from the stasis of non-identity," as Jack Davies phrases it,<sup>13</sup> the protagonist eventually rises to a positive action for the first time in the novel. With his life spirit reanimated through the act of saving the cow and through the clean and purifying rain, he can now think of his father and brother without guilt or negative feelings and can accept their deaths. In this very moment, he feels something like a oneness with nature he has never felt before. The narrator's last act in the novel, throwing the medicine pouch into his grandmother's grave, suggests a reconciliation between him and the Blackfeet past personified by his grandmother.<sup>14</sup>

For Jim Loney, who has never lived on a reservation and has never felt Indian, the decision to go to reservation land to die is a very conscious one. Having felt displaced earlier, he experiences a moment of connection, belonging, comfort, when he enters the reservation. He reflects on his Indian ancestors who used to inhabit this place, and "[t]hese thoughts made him comfortable and he wasn't afraid anymore" (*JL*, 168). He ultimately knows what he has been looking for all along:

[T]here had to be another place where people bought each other drinks and talked quietly about their pasts, their mistakes and their small triumphs; a place where those pasts merged into one and everything was all right and it was like everything was beginning again without a past. . . . There had to be that place, but it was not on this earth. (*JL*, 175)

When Loney shoots at his pursuers, he makes sure that they find him easily. It is important to note here that the protagonist is "in control" of the situation or, to use Welch's own words, that he "orchestrate[s] his own death."<sup>15</sup> To be in charge of one's own life, as Dexter Westrum describes it, is a "major survival tactic in any time and any place."<sup>16</sup> When Loney dies, he is at peace with himself: "This is what you wanted, he thought . . . and the last

thing he saw were the beating wings of a dark bird as it climbed to a distant place" (*JL*, 179).

One critic has suggested that "Jim Loney has only the tools for escape, none of the means of survival."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the stark facts support just that. However, the fact that he does not survive physically does not necessarily mean that he has not learned to survive spiritually. The other characters in the novel find more ordinary ways to solve their problems: Kate escapes east to get away from her Indian past; Rhea is a "southern belle" only temporarily stranded in Harlem, Montana; the same is true for her friend Colleen; Ike "vanished" for more than twenty years to hide out from his son; Painter Barthelme, the town cop, ran away from a relationship in California. Compared to these, Loney's decision is the ultimate failure to escape. He does not choose to run away as they do; instead, he reconnects to some degree with his tribe in that he decides to die on reservation land. Unable to negotiate a personal compromise between what he perceives of as the way of his tribal ancestors and his actual situation, and bereft of an elder or any other spiritual guide, he at least transcends the victim role insofar as he is in control of the events.

Having rejected the old traditions while growing up on the reservation, Sylvester Yellow Calf, as an adult, develops a growing awareness of his Blackfeet heritage by reading books and maps and remembering stories told by the old people. When he finds himself in trouble, he runs "away to the only home he had ever known" (*IL*, 157)—the reservation. Here he feels at peace, and here he can find the people whose advice he seeks: not his promotor and future associate partner Buster Harrington, nor his girlfriend Shelley, but his grandmother Mary Bird and his former high school teacher Lena Old Horn.

Another indication of the protagonist's return to American Indian values is his decision to keep the war medicine of his great-great-grandfather, which he refused when he was younger: "It had belonged to [his grandmother's] grandfather and had protected him back in the days when a warrior needed protection when he went off to battle" (*IL*, 162). Later, when he publicly announces his candidacy, he is glad "to have it in his possession. Just knowing that it was there made him feel aggressive and confident" (*IL*, 293).<sup>18</sup> Touching the medicine pouch reawakens his tribal memory; he begins to ponder the history of his people, what life was like in the past. He even remembers the tribal traditions he found strange during his adolescence. However, his

memory provides only fragments of old traditions; without the knowledge of the elders, they gradually will be lost.

In the final chapter of the novel, Sylvester has been working on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota for three months, defending Sioux land in "a landmark case in Indian Country" (IL, 305). This signifies that, in the future, he will be one of the "new warriors." Here the wheel comes full circle. Sylvester entered "the outside world" seventeen years ago to become a "new warrior," but without any connection to his tribal background. Now he returns, although to a different reservation, to represent American Indians in the "legal war" against the special interest groups of the United States. His political activism and sense of ethnic (pan-Indian) responsibility demonstrate that he now knows his place in time and history. In this arena, Sylvester can help preserve Indian land, which is the foundation for the survival of the American Indian nations today. By doing so, Sylvester has not only completely rejected the idea of being a victim; he is also prepared to sustain the "emic" and economic basis of American Indian self-determination and survival in the future.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars Anna Lee Walters and Peggy Beck explain that "survival means to seek life."<sup>20</sup> Physical and cultural survival, as James Welch seems to suggest in his novels, is possible only through a kind of transformation. For his protagonists, this transformation is inextricably connected with Indian land and the presence of an ancestor. It is on the reservation, or in a decision connected with the reservation, that the Welch hero discovers the potential ultimately to find his roots, his ethnic identity. The elders facilitate this return in that they operate within the traditional Blackfeet function of "spirit guides." Until the protagonist "discovers" the ancestor, he is lost. In Loney's case, without an ancestor to discover, he can only remain lost.

Yet we have to be careful. Welch has not espoused an anachronistic approach. It is important to note that the elders represent not only their tribal tradition but the ability to adapt to certain changes. They are not only witnesses to and producers of history via storytelling, but they are also products of this history. Without the ability to adapt, survival would not have been possible for any generation throughout the history of white-Indian contact. Such adaptability is evidenced, for example, by the narrator's grandfather in *Winter in the Blood*: Yellow Calf thinks it would be convenient to have a car, to be able to move around more indepen-

dently, just as the warriors of the Plains made use of the horse for their traditional way of life. Also, when the old man was still able to see, he used a calender. Thus, progression and data are also important to him to some extent. In *The Indian Lawyer*, Mary Bird rejects a traditional funeral service for her husband, "because Earl had long ago rejected the traditional way of life" (IL, 344). This openness to change is also demonstrated by Earl's habit of watching television when Sylvester returned home from school. Adapting to changes and absorbing differences are basic to survival. Being in touch with the old ways—and the elders in Welch's novels symbolize that contact—helps one cope with the present.

The affinity to home and reservation is the perspective most clearly stressed by James Welch. Sylvester Yellow Calf, Welch's most autobiographical character, feels this attachment to the land, no matter where he is: "A place where you saw a badger or a golden eagle would be there always in your mind, even if you were a thousand miles away" (IL, 158). This connection to the land seems to be implanted within his cultural heritage. Consequently, after he makes the mistake of getting involved in a love affair with a client, Sylvester runs "away to the only home he had ever known." He does so intuitively, because "[h]ome is where they have to take you in" (IL, 157). Later, working on the Standing Rock Reservation, he feels the "same sense of peace" (IL, 341). For Sylvester, when he comes home to Montana for the funeral of his grandfather, "North Dakota, Bismarck, Standing Rock seemed a long way away" (IL, 345). Helena, where he lived and worked for twelve years, is "farther away" than the geographically much more distant Bismarck, North Dakota. Spiritually and culturally, however, the Sioux reservation is closer to him now than Helena. It is exactly at this point that Welch's protagonist manifests an ethnic closeness that seems to be transcendental ("always in your mind, even if you were a thousand miles away"). Here, Welch merges the function of the elders in helping to keep their grandson's tribal heritage alive with Sylvester's own attachment to the land: The emic and political perspectives, the traditional and the modern ways of life, unite.

We must be cautious, however, not to get trapped in just another vein of romanticism. All three of Welch's protagonists suffer at the beginning from the postcolonial dilemma of alienation. Jim Loney is perhaps the best example of the far-reaching, devastating consequences of the colonial experience for American Indian people until this day. His notion of what actually is

Indian is rigid, and “real Indians” seem to have become extinct for him: “[T]hose days were gone to Loney. Everything was changed and the old ones did not exist” (*JL*, 102). A view such as his makes it impossible to discover a dynamic ethnic identity, because the necessary element of change is ruled out. For Loney, the postcolonial trauma of alienation is an ultimate one.

Jim Loney becomes subject to the knowledge and meaning produced by the dominant society. Eduardo and Bonnie Duran, in their recent study *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*, remind us of the devastating influences of the social sciences and anthropology, which “have produced meaning that has changed and distorted tribal understandings or forced them underground.” The authors conclude that the historical conditions of colonization must be taken into consideration in order to “illuminate the knowledge/power construction of the native subject that has infiltrated native subjectivity and identity.”<sup>21</sup> In Loney’s case, this resurfaces in a perverted manner. Here is a young American Indian whose perception of “authentic Indians” is determined by a socialization—memories of living with a white social worker, years spent in mission schools, his sister’s attempts to educate him according to what she had learned at school—that has “shaped him into” alienation and isolation. So strong are the dominant society’s forces that they even determine Loney’s self-knowledge. Of course, he is not alone in his dilemma, but he might be the most extreme case in contemporary American Indian writing. Also, the “role model situation” that is thrust upon Sylvester Yellow Calf by his social and professional environment in *The Indian Lawyer* demonstrates the postcolonial dilemma. However, like the narrator of *Winter in the Blood*, Sylvester can escape by “negotiating” a compromise.<sup>22</sup> This negotiation, which is less clear in *Winter in the Blood* than in *The Indian Lawyer*, can be understood as an act of decolonization. At the same time, Jim Loney is an important, if not indispensable, character—the antithesis of those who recover from their crises.

The “back-to-the-reservation” approach that is so central to James Welch and other contemporary American Indian writers must be understood clearly in light of the past and present sociopolitical and historical conditions with which American Indian cultures have been confronted. Writers such as Welch (born in 1940) have personally witnessed the impact of the government’s termination and relocation policies of the 1950s and early 1960s. Measured against the reality of the present, the return

to the reservation is an idea, a construct of the mind, "an act of the imagination." It is a result of the destruction of the original way of life, and it is a corrective to stereotypical depictions of the reservations as mere scenarios of misery, even if this is the stark reality on a lot of reservations. Welch knows that the conditions on some reservations are devastating,<sup>23</sup> but he focuses on the cultural and spiritual dimensions. Therefore, it would be more precise to interpret the "return" as part of a transformation or "transculturation," as John Scheckter has defined it.<sup>24</sup>

Welch's protagonists want to know who they are and where they belong. By participating in the past, they make this self-discovery. They are able to achieve this understanding only by accepting the contemporary sociopolitical conditions as a part of reality and by leaving the straitjacket of the victim role behind. This act of liberation also is an act of decolonization. It is important to note that Welch promotes a return to American Indian values and beliefs—in the sense of becoming conscious of one's own tribal and cultural background—that still exist in the modern world, even if only in fragments. These fragments have to be recovered in a sometimes painful, sometimes futile process. At this very point, when possible, Welch's protagonists make the step toward not only physical but spiritual and cultural survival. It is here that Welch, as a writer of stories for and about his people, reconnects with the storytellers of the past, for he also perpetuates ethnic and tribal survival. However, much of the traditional way of life has disappeared; it has been changed, transformed, as the elders in Welch's novels demonstrate. Thus, without romantic impulses, the idea of a return and the location to which one can return should be read as dynamic, not static, entities. If we fail to see that, we might end as Jim Loney does, disillusioned with the romantic expectations that are forced upon us from the outside and that do not fit the demands of contemporary American Indian reality—at a dead end.

## NOTES

1. *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988); *The Death of Jim Loney* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987); *The Indian Lawyer* (New York: Norton, 1990). Here I will be focusing on the novels that take place in a contemporary setting, each one on or close to the Blackfeet or Fort Belknap Reservations in Montana. However, the rewriting and reliving of Blackfeet history through the

historical novel *Fools Crow* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) is just another sign of Welch's efforts to keep the tribal heritage alive within himself and thus to contribute to the element of survival. Hence the author's and his contemporary protagonists' struggle to discover the old traditions as perspective-giving ultimately merge into one.

2. David M. Craig uses this pattern in his analysis of *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney* in "Beyond Assimilation: James Welch and the Indian Dilemma," *North Dakota Quarterly* 53:2 (Spring 1985): 182–90. The idea of a "return to the Indian world" can be understood only in a metaphorical sense or as a return to whatever is associated with it by the protagonist, since the traditional "Indian world" does not exist anymore.

3. Nora Baker Barry, "Winter in the Blood as Elegy," *American Indian Quarterly* 4 (1978): 149. At this point, I should mention, however, that not all critics evaluate Welch's novels as examples of a return to Indian heritage. Nor do some critics accept the ethnic theme of these works of fiction. William F. Smith considers the quest of the narrator of *Winter* as "the struggle of Everyman." See William F. Smith, Jr., "Winter in the Blood: The Indian Cowboy as Everyman," *Michigan Academician* 10 (Winter 1978): 300. David B. Espey sees the same book as "a novel in which the Indian past is essentially dead itself." See David B. Espey, "Endings in Contemporary Indian Fiction," *Western American Literature* 13 (August 1978): 137. Critic Peter Wild articulates his criticism more plainly: "Critics who insist on seeing 'Indianness' where there is little of it to be found, who feel compelled to praise a novel because of their own cultural sympathies, do a disservice to James Welch and to other Native American writers." See Peter Wild, *James Welch* (Boise, ID: Boise State University, Western Writers Series no. 57, 1983), 45.

4. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 8–9. Although nobody would seriously deny the historical experience of colonization and dominance that was forced upon the original cultures of the United States, it always comes as a surprise to me how hesitantly scholars approach American Indian literatures from the point of view of postcolonial theory.

5. Kathleen M. Sands, "Alienation and Broken Narrative in *Winter in the Blood*," in *Critical Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. Andrew Wiget (Boston: Hall, 1985), 230.

6. Bill Bevis, "Dialogue with James Welch," *Northwest Review* 20 (1982): 166.

7. Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 152.

8. *Ibid.*, 153.

9. "The Medicine Grizzly of Cutbank Canyon" (see Walter McClintock, *The Old North Trail; or, Life, Legends and Religion of the Blackfeet Indians* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968], 51–57) tells the story of an extremely courageous Gros Ventre warrior with very strong grizzly medicine. This might be purely accidental. Yet it is obvious that Loney, the mixed-blood, is Gros Ventre on his mother's side. Another tale, the "Legend of the Friendly Medicine

Grizzly" (pp. 468–73) also supports this interpretation. Here, a young Blackfeet warrior is saved by a grizzly, and the tale ends with the words, "For the sake of the Medicine Grizzly, that saved the life of Nis-ta-e, the Blackfeet will not kill a hibernating bear." However, that is exactly what Loney does: He shoots at a hibernating bear. Whether the bear really exists or has the potential to be medicine for Loney, it is winter—clearly the hibernating period—during which the Blackfeet, according to their mythology, should not kill bears.

10. Elaine Jahner, "Quick Paces and a Space of Mind," *The University of Denver Quarterly* 14 (Winter 1980): 36.

11. The winter of 1883–84. See A. LaVonne Ruoff, "History in *Winter in the Blood*: Backgrounds and Bibliography," *American Indian Quarterly* 4 (1978): 170.

12. Sands, "Alienation and Broken Narrative," 235.

13. Jack L. Davies, "Restoration of Indian Identity in *Winter in the Blood*," in *James Welch*, ed. Ron McFarland (Lewiston, ID: Confluence Press, 1986), 41.

14. Anthropologist Clark Wissler points out that, in traditional Blackfeet society, "[p]ersons usually make requests of their families that certain personal belongings are to be buried with them." See Clark Wissler, "The Social Life of the Blackfoot Indians," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 7, part 1 (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1911), 31.

15. Bevis, "A Dialogue," 177.

16. Dexter Westrum, "The Art of Survival in the Contemporary West: The Fictions of Thomas McGuane, James Welch, and Edward Abbey" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1985), 8.

17. Elizabeth I. Hanson, *Forever There: Race and Gender in Contemporary Native American Fiction* (New York: Lang, American University Studies, series 24, vol. 11, 1989), 40.

18. In his study of traditional Blackfeet bundles, Clark Wissler states, "All the bundles . . . are subject to transfer. Indeed to the Blackfoot a bundle without this quality would be an absurdity. . . . Whatever may have been the origin of the transfer conception, it eventually became a system with religious, social, and economic functions. It is regarded as desirable to own and transfer many bundles, chiefly since it is a religious duty, gives social prestige and because it is usually a good investment." See "Ceremonial Bundles of the Blackfoot Indians," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 7, part 2 (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1912), 273.

19. The term *emic* was first coined in anthropological discourse. Steve Talbot uses *emic* to express the "native's" categories of meaning or the distinctly American Indian viewpoint. See Steve Talbot, "'Sacred Mother Earth'—Indians and the Land," in *Native Americans: Chicanos und Indianer in den USA*, ed. Dieter Herms/Hartmut Lutz (Berlin: Argument, 1985), 60.

20. Peggy V. Beck and Anna Lee Walters, *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life* (Tsaile, AZ: Navajo Community College, 1977), 50.

21. Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran, *Native American Postcolonial Psychology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 25–27.

22. I go along with Martina Michel's approach to postcolonial literatures; she states that they should be read "as literary attempts at *negotiating* rather than



defining differences and . . . [thus] highlight the numerous points of intersection which shape the formation of subject position." Incidentally, she mentions neither American literature in general nor American Indian literature in particular. See Martina Michel, "Postcolonial Literatures: Use or Abuse of the Latest Post-Word," *Gulliver* 33:1(1993): 17.

23. Welch best represents this reality (a reality evident in stark statistics) in *The Indian Lawyer*, through Lena Old Horn's reminiscences of a rape of a drunken woman by several drunken men (pp. 168–69). Sylvester's reference to the reservation's "illusion" of peace also documents this: "But there was an illusion of peace here—and he knew it was an illusion, behind which were men drinking in alleys, fistfights, knife fights, domestic fights, suicide, rape, murder, a whole panoply of violence that lay on the outer edges of that illusion" (p. 175).

24. John Scheckter, "Now That the (Water) Buffalo's Gone: James Welch and the Transcultural Novel," in *Entering the 90s: The North American Experience*, Proceedings of the Native American Studies Conference at Lake Superior State University, 27–28 October 1989, ed. Thomas E. Schirer (SAULT STE. MARIE, MI: Lake Superior State University Press, 1991), 101–107. What Michel has called "negotiating rather than defining differences" we can also find in Scheckter's definition of *transculturation*: "A truthful contemporary rendering of a post-traditional culture must recognize both the continued and vital influence of tradition and the evolution wrought by unprecedented interchange among cultures. The artist is the mediator of these recognitions, claiming the risky borderline in order to negotiate and somehow link the complex oppositions of old and new, lost and hopeful, unfranchised and privileged, historical and aesthetic." See Scheckter, "Now That the (Water) Buffalo's Gone," 101.