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The Book as a "Contact Zone" - Textualizing Orality in James Welch's Fools Crow

In the past four decades the U.S. cultural scene has witnessed a groundbreaking emergence of a number of Native American writers who have transformed the perception of minority literature, challenging Western audience to reconsider popular stereotypes and received assumptions of indigenous history, identity and culture. Today many of those writers hold prominent positions on popular bestseller and university reading lists, and interest in reading and studying their work is a mainstream trend. Committed to cultural and historical revisionism, they have also expanded the notion of a literary text, and the book as its traditional medium, turning it into a political weapon, a zone of conceptual contact, contestation and dialogue. With his third novel Fools Crow (1986) renowned Blackfeet author James Welch pointed his bow and pen in that direction as well.

Set in the 1870s, the period of Indian wars, Fools Crow is a story about the tragedy of Native Americans caused by the coming of the Europeans. It captures the lives of Lone Eaters band of the Pikuni people, one of the bands belonging to the Blackfeet tribe, living on the border between American and Canadian Rocky Mountains. Told from Native American perspective, describing the time of dramatic transformation after encountering the Europeans, the plot of the novel centers around the life of the main character White Man's Dog, later renamed Fools Crow because of his honorable performance in one of the battles. At the beginning he is just a young teenage boy, eager to finally set up his place as a successful warrior in his tribe. In spite of his initial insecurity and misfortune, he is growing into a successful warrior, hunter, leader, husband, and healer. Even though it seemingly follows Western tradition of the "identity narrative", Fools Crow is not just a story about the experience and growth of an individual character illustrative of Western narrativity. This novel in many ways affirms Owens's statement that "contemporary Native American authors are requiring that the readers cross over the conceptual horizon into an Indian world" (20). Right at

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the beginning, it invites a number of conceptual turns necessary for its understanding and interpretation. Blackfeet expressions and literal translations of words and concepts from the Pikuni culture blend with English sentences, making the novel a linguistic and conceptual amalgam. With no glossary provided, the text forces the reader to acquire the words like Napikwans (white settlers), blackhorn (buffalo), prairie runner (antelope), skunk ear (wolverine), ears-far-apart (owl), elk dog (horse), and accede to an anthropomorphic worldview in which swift silver people (fish) and the deities – Night Red Light (moon), Sun Chief (sun), Seven Persons (a constellation), Earth Mother and Wind Maker – are an integral part of human and earthly events. Throughout the novel, Pikuni words and cosmology continue to suppress Western ones, proving Onion's thesis that, by inserting Pikuni words, Welch not only translates and mediates between cultures, but also creates a contact zone, invoking and affirming Blackfeet worldview (cf. Onion).

Besides Pikuni linguistic and conceptual locutions, Fools Crow also contains numerous indicators of oral storytelling. Unlike Western cultures, Native Americans have a very long tradition of maintaining their history through oral storytelling. This storytelling is a memory of their heritage and this memory has been passed down from generation to generation (cf. "Native American Oral…"). Oral tradition is of big importance for Native Americans since it serves as a guideline for the tribes (cf. "Native American Oral…"). A person who passes down these stories is selected at an early age. He or she has to remember the stories and retell them many times to grownups and children who learn about their heritage in that way. The storyteller is one of the most respected members of the tribe. These oral stories include creation stories, legends about cultural heroes, instructions from spirit mentors and guidelines on how to perform a ceremony, adventures in marriage and love or explanations of the natural processes such as the inter-species relationship. Oral tradition is also linked to the culture of Native Americans and is important for preserving it. It also reflects Native American social and ethical principles, values and beliefs, and educates about their understanding and conception of the world (cf. Einhorn, Cavender). Similarly, Fools Crow conveys and preserves Blackfeet oral history and traditional worldview and teaches its reader about pre-contact culture, social organization and spirituality. Seen in that light, the story of the Lone Eaters band is more than just fiction or a story of an individual character – Fools Crow and his family. It can also be conceived of as a repository of cultural knowledge and identity.

According to Holm, Native American oral tradition, which he calls “sacred history”, besides stories about creation, ceremonies, origin of sacred ways, also includes stories about cultural heroes. Such stories are not only reflective but also formative of the world; they recreate the world for those who listen to them, make sense of their day-to-day experiences, placing them in a larger non-temporal and universal context. They also serve to educate their recipients and integrate them into communal values and mores. Likewise, Fools Crow accurately illustrates traditional Blackfeet lifestyle. Members of a typical Plains tribe, the characters live in tepees and move from place to place depending almost completely upon the buffalo to survive. In Plains cultures, “hunting was important for meat and skins. Most men left the villages during winter to hunt” (Pritzker). Hunting was also one of the ways people interacted with nature and their surroundings. Along with weapons men used for hunting, special skills and knowledge of the animals, land and territory were also needed. Many tribes depended almost entirely on hunting to survive (cf. Frison). Buffalos, or blackhornss as they are named in Welch’s novel, meant the life for the Pikuni: “without the blackhorns, the Pikunis would be as sad as the little bigmouths who howled all night” (Fools Crow 47). Around the year 1870, there were loads of buffalos causing “the plains to be black as far as one could see” (Fools Crow 123). This animal was of utmost significance to the Blackfeet people. Besides being used for food, buffalo:

> *…skins provided covering for a type of tent called a tepee. The Blackfeet made robes and moccasins of buffalo skins to use during the winter. Blackfeet soap came from buffalo fat. The Blackfeet carved eating utensils, sewing needles, and tools from buffalo bones. The buffalo stomach and bladder made good containers for liquids. The Blackfeet even used dried buffalo manure as fuel for fires. (Gibson 14-15)*

Thus, every part of the animal was used for something useful so “they depended on the buffalo for almost everything they ate, wore and used” (Norris 20)[1] . Pikuni mixed buffalo meat with other ingredients to get some delicious dishes: “The meat was often dried in the sun or over a fire. Sometimes it was mixed with dried berries to make a food called pemmican” (Lambert). Pemmican was very often brought on long journeys, since it could last for a very long time. The bison and other large mammals were fatter animals which meant a substantial source of energy for the

people who consumed them. Some parts of the animals, such as tongues, were often eaten when people celebrated something special in their lives. Similarly, “the families and friends feasted on boss ribs and tongues and buffalo hump” (Fools Crow 107) on the night when White Man’s Dog and his wife Red Paint celebrated their future life. Consequently, hunting was one of the principal activities in the Pikuni community and a test of one’s manhood. As a young man, White Man’s Dog hunts and prepares for his future role as a provider for his family: He “killed many animals on his solitary hunts and he left many of them outside the lodge of Heavy Shield Woman” (Fools Crow 47). Bringing home anything to eat was welcomed; however, bringing home one or even more blackhorns was a great success “for only the blackhorns could provide for all the needs of a family” (Fools Crow 47). For a young boy, the experience of hunting, especially for the first time, meant the whole world. White Man’s Dog described how he felt when he hunted for the very first time: “He remembered his first lone hunt as a youth, the giddiness with which he stalked the deer for a whole day, the thrill he felt when he held its liver in his hands, still warm and steaming in the winter air” (Fools Crow 211).

Fools Crow also conveys precious cultural information on Pikuni social and gender roles. Foundations of the Blackfeet society, the families, were organized into bands which “could be as small as nine or ten lodges with about eighty people or as large as thirty lodges, with more than 250 men, women and children” (King 15). These bands were typical nomadic groups that hunted big animals such as buffalos. At certain ceremonies or social gatherings bands would meet together and form a tribe. Each band had its own chief. He was chosen by the band for his leadership qualities. He did not have any real power over his followers but was rather accepted due to his wisdom and leadership abilities. At the end of council meetings he would make a decision based on the wishes of the whole band. The social classes among the Plains tribes did not exist, but one could gain wealth through accomplishment through war or sharing the goods with relatives (cf. “Plains…”, “The Plains…”). Some Plains tribes were bilateral. Others were matrilineal or patrilineal, tracing kinship through the female or male line. Children were usually raised in extended families and older children were charged with taking care of their younger brothers and sisters. Many Plains tribes practiced polygamy, by which a man had more than one wife. This helped the band to survive by ensuring that every woman of childbearing age was bearing children

(cf. “History…”, “Plains…”). Men were seen as protectors of their family and village. From the young age they were developing the skills in order to become later successful warriors, hunters, and leaders. Men always had strong, dominant and powerful tasks. Their most important role was to provide food for their families. They needed to be fierce enough to survive in the wild surroundings and always come home with food. Protecting their camp and looking after the horses and their family were tasks they fulfilled daily:

Men’s hunting and fighting roles were associated with life taking, with its ironic relationship to the life-sustaining acts of procreation, protection and provision. Earth and corn symbolized women, but the weapons of the hunt, the trophies taken from the hunted, and the predators of the animal world represented men. (Shoemaker 51-52)

Women were of a high status in the Blackfeet society, respected for their domestic and economic roles, responsible for preserving their culture and customs. Power, autonomy and equality were their features. Although the roles of men and women in Fools Crow are so distinct from one another, women’s roles are not seen as inferior to men’s. Women are capable of doing the physical work and are highly respected for keeping up their duties and roles, for nourishing the spiritual life of their tribe, and preserving their culture and customs. According to Shoemaker:

Indian women were responsible not only for reproducing the traditional features of their culture, but for much of its adaptive capacity as well. As agriculturalists, women must have had great influence over decisions to move to new grounds, to leave old grounds fellow, and to initiate planting. As producers and consumers of vital household goods and implements, women may have been among the first to feel the impact of new technologies, commodities and trade. (51)

They had to raise and educate children and still be on the move the entire day fulfilling their chores such as preparing food for their family or making clothing. The amount of food women cooked and prepared every day decided on their status in the society. Calloway observes that “in societies where women produced food as well as prepared it, their economic role seems to have translated into higher status than that of their European or colonial counterparts” (191). Women gathered berries, roots and seeds from different plants, which means that “they performed horticultural activities as well; this includes maintaining knowledge of herbs and their uses in both medicinal

and culinary arts" (Bales), but they also accompanied the hunting parties, mostly to attend to the meat and skins along the way" (Pritzker 548). Hunted animals, such as buffalos, were used not only for food but also for a wide range of things, necessary for the daily life. In Fools Crow the Pikuni women literally use every part of the animal and transfer it into something:

Although the women possessed kettles and steel knives, they still preferred to make spoons and dippers out of the horns of the blackhorns. They used the hair of the head and beard to make braided halters and bridles and soft-padded saddles. They used the hoofs to make rattles or glue, and the tails to swat flies. And they dressed the dehaired skins to make lodge covers and linings and clothes and winding cloths. (Fools Crow 47)

Thereupon, even though men and women differed in their tasks and assignments, there was no gender hierarchy in Blackfeet culture. Both genders possessed necessary skills, knowledge and capability that gave them an equal role in basic survival[2] .

Recreating traditional cultural identity, Welch's magnificent and emotional story of the Pikuni people also vividly demonstrates Blackfeet philosophy, traditional beliefs, and their spiritual life. The whole story is framed around many dreams and visions, presented as true, realistic events. Like in oral stories, in Fools Crow too dreams are a road to the spiritual world. Dreams also foretell some of the future events and keep up one's inner health. Dreams and visions often warn people or help them find the right way, make good decisions and right choices. Almost all main characters, some more and some less, have some kind of a dream or a vision and are influenced by supernatural power. They feel a certain power behind each dream and never neglect it. The dream about the ice spring is one of the most important dreams in the book. In the dream, Cold Maker, the deity that controls Winter, demands from Fast Horse to find an ice spring and remove a large rock that stops water from flowing and prevents him from drinking it as usual. If he finds it, his group will be very successful at the raid, but he is also warned:

if you don't, you must not go on, for I will punish you and your party. Either way, because I offer my help, you must bring me two prime bull robes for my daughters during the helping-to-eat moon. It will go hard on you if you do not do this. (Fools Crow 14)

Yet, the ice spring is not found. Consequently, even though they manage to take many horses and the raid is successful, a tragedy happens. Their leader Yellow Kidney disappears. On their return home Eagle Ribs dreams of:

a small white horse wandering in the snow. Its hooves were split and it had sores all over. It was wearing a bridle and the reins trailed after it. But it was the eyes. I looked into the eyes and they were white and unseeing. As I drew closer I saw across its back fingers of blood. (Fools Crow 36)

They all get scared because they interpret the dream to mean that their leader, Yellow Kidney, is dead. They are not far from the truth since he is dying from smallpox, but is still alive. A couple of days later Yellow Kidney appears in his wife's dream:

…covered with old skins and rags. He had told her that he was wandering in the land of the Crows, that he could not return yet, that he could not return until Heavy Shield Woman agreed to perform a task which only the most virtuous of women could accomplish. He said he would be home in time to see her do this thing but he could not say exactly when. But she must set his food out for him each night so that he could keep up his strength. (Fools Crow 42)

Thus for Blackfeet people dreams are important guidelines for individuals and the whole group, a part of their reality and something they take very seriously.

The plot of the novel constantly switches between the real and the mythic world. Just like in sacred histories, in Fools Crow the mythic, human, spiritual and animal worlds interact on the same level. Similarly to oral stories, in this novel too animals carry a great amount of power and rarely have pure animal characteristics. Very often they interact with people and often change between human and animal form with some human traits such as talking or smoking (cf. "Native American Mythology"). They talk to people and inform them about good and bad events and fortunes. Just like cultural heroes from Pikuni oral histories, Fools Crow also interacts with animals that are a powerful source of his spiritual and physical strength and his good fortune. When he searches for his helper – Raven, the anthropomorphic Raven addresses him in his own language:

It surprises you that I speak the language of the two-leggeds. It's easy, for I have lived among you many times in my travels. I speak many languages. I converse with the blackhornss and the real-

bears and the wood-biters. Bigmouth and I discuss many things. I even deign to speak once in a while with the swift silver people who live in the water, but they are dumb and lead lives without interest. I myself am very wise. That is why Mik-api treats me to a smoke now and then. (Fools Crow 56)

Fools Crow also treats animals with respect. When he hunts, he asks the animals for permission and always honors the animal he kills. Animals are an important part of his spiritual life as well, serving as guides, teachers and companions in difficult situations, dreams and visions (cf. Cole). While Mik-api, the Medicine Man, was dreaming, Raven came to him and told him that wolverine got stuck in the trap set by a Napikwan and did not have any strength to set himself free. He demanded that he sends someone who is "strong and true of heart" (Fools Crow 52). White Man's Dog was the person he was aiming at to come and release the wolverine. Although White Man's Dog felt afraid and weak, he followed Raven's directions and got a promise from Raven to get wolverine's power to protect him from fear in the future and so have his own personal animal helper.

Everyday lives of the people in the novel are almost completely controlled by supernatural events and powers. They are also interrelated with rituals and ceremonies. Some reasons to perform a ceremony are to connect a person with the spiritual world or honor the spiritual beings, to bring victory, to heal a person, to maintain balance or honor an important event in a person's life. Ceremonies are a vital aspect of the characters' daily lives, performed for treatment of ill people, for hunts and for religious purposes. Very often they include dancing, feasting and singing. Ceremonies are also a link between the material and spiritual, human and non-human realms. All Native medicine is based on the premise that every man is part of nature and that health is related to balance. Native Americans believe that the supernatural world cannot be seen but can be experienced through various ceremonies, dreams, visions and their relationship with their surroundings. Another important principle of their philosophy is the fact that all things are interrelated. Everything that surrounds us is a part of a single whole and it is not possible to understand something if one does not understand how it is connected to everything else. Thus, in Native American worldview there is no division of nature and no separation of spirit and matter. The individual is seen as a part of all creation. They also believe the Great Spirit is a part of all

living things, animals and plants and that is the reason why they show great respect for nature (cf. Vento). Consequently, one of the most important things for Native Americans is to be balanced with oneself and one's surroundings. It is believed that imbalance causes all the problems, from those related to one's inner state to the disturbance in behavior (cf. "Traditional…"). Every time a character from Fools Crow gets sick, he or she relies on ceremonies to cure him. When a bad spirit is believed to cause pain and misfortune, a huge ceremony needs to be performed correctly in order to cure a person and remove the bad spirit from his or her body. A person who conducts many of the ceremonies in Fools Crow is Mik-api, the medicine man. He holds a special status in his tribe and is respected and admired by everyone. Finding the imbalance in people's minds or bodies which causes the illness, Mik-api cures it by connecting the supernatural and natural realms. Mik-api's ceremonies include herbs, animal parts, singing, dancing, and praying. All the animal tools used in this ceremony serve to awaken the spirit of the animal a tool is made of, since it is believed that the spirit of the animal evoked will heal the body. After the Napikwans shoot Fast Horse, Fools Crow takes him to Boss Ribs' lodge where together with Mik-api he performs a healing ceremony:

Mik-api performed the healing ceremony as though only he and Fast Horse were in the lodge. The only time he looked away from the youth was when he needed something from his bag or told Fools Crow to boil water or grind leaves. He seemed to be in another world as he chanted and sang and beat the small stretched skin with his blackhorns-scrotum rattle. Once he stood up and circled Fast Horse, swooping and diving, imitating the eagle's flight, blowing on his eagle-bone whistle. Then he dropped to his knees and fanned Fast Horse's body with an eagle wing. He blew the whistle over the body, and a thin yellow stream of paste dribbled on the chest and stomach. He put away his eagle things and applied a third compress on the wound. All the while he chanted, "Eagle spirit, heal this body, each death makes me poor." (Fools Crow 184)

Mik-api also performs a ceremony on White Man's Dog to release the bad spirit that caused his misfortune:

Mik-api had dabbed water on the hot stones with his blackhorns-tail swab and the steam took their breath away. Mik-api sang and prayed as the purifying sweat rolled from their naked bodies. White Man's Dog had felt then that the bad spirit that caused his misfortune had left his body. He had felt

empty and content as the infant who just enters this world. After they had bathed in the Two Medicine River, Mik-api led them to his lodge. There they smoked to the four directions and to the Above Ones, the Below Ones, the Underwater people. Then Mik-api had given White Man's Dog the yellow paint and the instructions for its use. If he painted himself exactly as Mik-api had told him, he would gain the strength and cunning necessary to be successful. (Fools Crow 23)

Just like traditional oral stories, Fools Crow also teaches that every step people take or decision they make can create balance or imbalance and consequently lead to health or illness. Recreating the oral tradition of Pikuni people, it upholds a holistic view and a state of universal balance in which all elements of creation mutually interact by means of ceremonies. Ceremonies thus restore the bond of life and foster the interrelationship between people and all other living creatures from the non-human and spirit world (cf. Hopfe and Woodward 37).

However, Fools Crow's oral mould not only imparts traditional cultural knowledge and identity, but also serves as a counterhistory. According to Peterson, contemporary literary production has been marked by a crisis of historical memory, reflective of the tendency to mythologize and erase history from the discourse of American culture, which she calls "American amnesia" (4-6). Similarly, as Renwick points out, the meta-narrative on American history has been marked by "'selective remembering' or 'active forgetting' inherent in the formation of America's identity" (14-15). Yet, for many writers, especially ethnic writers, history is a wound, warns Peterson, and the collective memory is an important strain that permeates their works. Therefore, the texts by contemporary ethnic writers represent an unofficial ground for re-writing history, "they attempt to intervene in official versions of American history and identity by bringing to consciousness counter-histories that trouble the conventional narrative" (Peterson 5). Similarly, Thomas Couser pinpoints the importance of the collective historical memory in American Indian writing:

Reviving such memories is necessary, however, precisely because, at least for groups whose traditional culture is primarily oral, the only history is memory. Not to remember is to accede to the erasure or distortion or collective experience; to repress memory is to reenact and perpetuate oppression. (107)

According to Peterson, the literary discourse is perhaps the most powerful counterpart to the official history "for only literature in our culture is allowed the narrative flexibility and the willing suspension of disbelief that are crucial to the telling of these histories" (7). Similarly, for Homi Bhabha and Edward Said, literature possesses the ability to reinscribe, reactivate, and resignify history (cf. Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between" 59):

> *The post-imperial writers of the Third World therefore bear their past within them – as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a postcolonial culture, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory reclaimed as part of a general movement of resistance, from the colonist. (Said 212)*

Likewise, Fools Crow's oral matrix revives the wounds of history and suppressed cultural memory, and thus functions as a counter-narrative to the dominant history. According to Holm, Native American oral tradition is not only factual, but it also represents an alternative to the dominant narrative of history. Even though their creation stories do not mention any dates of creation (Pritchard xxiii), many Native Americans take those stories as the authentic history of their people and culture[3] . On the other hand, some historians and anthropologists understand Native American history only through the written narrative. They claim that "all oral history needs to be validated by written sources, without which oral narratives constitute unverifiable legend and are therefore unreliable sources" (Wilson). Disputing such claims, in his "America's Histories" Krupat disagrees with the fact that "traditional Native historiography – history 'in the native sense of the word' – cannot or does not produce factually accurate accounts of events in time – history in Our sense of the word" (48): "it is necessary that we stop using terms like 'myth,' 'anecdotes,' and 'mystical happenings,' as standing in simple and subordinate opposition to 'history' – a category that We think cannot exist apart from empirical, factual accuracy" (71).

As a realistic portrait of the period of Indian wars, told from Pikuni point of view, Fools Crow serves as an antipode to the imperial narrative, as well. It gives the reader a historical view of the European invasion from a different perspective, showing the struggle of the Pikunis to maintain their culture and land and resist the pressure to adjust into the dominant society. It also shows the

disastrous impact of the settler culture upon Native Americans[4] . When the first Europeans came to the American continent, Native Americans treated them with generosity and respect, and helped them survive in the new surroundings. Without their help, the first settlers probably would not have survived since they came to a place so different and far away from their own. Likewise, the Pikuni shared their resources and knowledge with the first settlers and established a trading relationship with the white people:

When the wagons came filled with crates, the people gathered around and the Indian agent began to hand out small things. Cut beads, iron kettles, knives, bells, the ice-that-looks-back, carrot and twist tobacco, a few blankets. All the chiefs got Napikwan saddles to go with their medallions. Then the Napikwans gave the people some of their strange food: the white men would come often to hand out their goods. (Fools Crow 16)

However, the settlers not only brought weird new goods, gadgets and their technology; they also transmitted many deadly diseases such as smallpox, cholera, yellow fever and measles. According to Cronon, the Europeans brought:

…not just new economic institutions, new markets, and new ways of bounding the landscape, but other things that are less easy to attribute to the direct agency of "capitalism". The devastating effects, for instance, of the disease organisms which wrought such havoc with Indian populations were primarily a function of the Indians' isolation from Old World disease environments, and would have been similar no matter what the economic organization of the European invaders. For the Indians, new diseases were one of the clearest consequences of European settlement, but once present, their effects had more to do with biology than economics.

Since Europeans had developed a stronger immunity to a range of illnesses, they mostly survived in much greater number than Native Americans. This intensely decreased the Native American population and literally erased a lot of tribes and villages. According to Mauk and Oakland, "[d]emographers estimate that North America's pre Columbian population of 10 million shrank to between 2 and 3 million by 1750 " (55). Similarly, in Fools Crow the plague of the white scabs (smallpox) started to spread among the Pikuni people after Fools Crow had had a vision that foretold its arrival. The disease killed many Lone Eaters together with their chief Three Bears:

There were still many sick and dying, but the number of new victims had gone down. It seemed impossible that it would last such a short time and leave so many dead or scarred for life by the draining sores. There was none of the bustle that usually occurred on a morning of winter camp. The people did not greet each other. If they met on the path to the river, they would move off the path and circle warily until they were well beyond. But it was one old woman, the only survivor of her lodge, who sat and wailed and dug at the frozen ground until her fingers were raw and bloody – it was this old woman who made the people realize the extent of their loss. Gradually, they emerged from the deep void of sickness and death and saw that they had become a different people. (Fools Crow 371)

Fools Crow also depicts the Napikwans as greedy and arrogant conquerors of Pikuni land and territory: "They wanted the Pikuni lands. They wanted the blue-coated seizers to ride up and shoot all the Pikuni so that they could graze their whitehorns" (Fools Crow 15). Wealth is what the settlers saw when looking at their forests, animals and the rest of their surroundings. Although different groups of Europeans came with different motivations and objectives, they all had one common interest and that was to turn Native Americans into Christians. They believed it was the right thing to do, because they considered Native Americans as superstitious primitive people with a very unusual lifestyle, unlike themselves who were "civilized":

Europeans viewed natives as heathen and savage, their cultures as lacking religion and their gender relations in complete opposition to European norms for civilized behavior. Since they did not find the mineral wealth so abundant in Central and South America, Europeans began to focus on the acquisition of land and the consequent dispossession of Native Americans. (Bales)

As Cronon explains, Europeans and Native Americans had a completely different attitude toward the land. Europeans viewed the land as something that belongs to humans. They used the land for their own benefit. Owning a piece of land in their eyes represented power, wealth and independence. On the other hand, Native Americans had a completely opposite stand. They believed the land was there to be shared with others. They respected everything the land gave them, because they depended on it.

Land in New England became for the colonists a form of capital, a thing consumed for the express purpose of creating augmented wealth. It was the land-capital equation that created the two central ecological contradictions of the colonial economy. One of these was the inherent conflict between the land uses of the colonists and those of the Indians. (Cronon)

Claiming the authority of oral history, the novel vividly depicts how in the late nineteenth century, the Blackfeet were forced to leave their land, memories, past and future, and were forced to adapt to white cultural practices. Most of them accepted and followed the European pace of life, accepted their customs and lifestyle. Yet, traditional values persisted nevertheless. The following words, part of Mountain Chief's speech to his people, show that even though he is aware of his people's black future, he does not want to make a compromise: "They say that Napikwan is a way of life now. Some even suggest that we go to his schools and his churches. They say if we learn his language, we can beat him with his own words" (Fools Crow 122).

As presented in the novel, Blackfeet societies, rich with tradition, were smashed by white ignorance and greed. The plundering of the Europeans almost abolished the rich civilization of the Blackfeet nation. In the face of a catastrophe, threatened by physical and cultural extinction, its main protagonists – Blackfeet men and women – exactly know what their roles are. They see their culture as a vital part of their existence, and try to preserve it, facing their fate with dignity. Many of the Pikuni rebel against the Napikwans. Throughout the novel an obvious conflict between the Pikuni and the Napikwans becomes evident. Several confrontations arise which make it difficult to settle the dispute peacefully. Yet, in the end, Blackfeet are faced with the decision to resist or to adapt for the sake of survival. Aware of a radical change facing his people, of the fact that the further intrusion of the Napikwans into their land and lives might eventually lead to their extinction, Fools Crow's father Rides-at-the Door tries to make clever decisions for his people and secure their physical and cultural survival: "if we treat wisely with them, we will be able to save enough for ourselves and our children. It is not an agreeable way, but it is the only way" (Fools Crow 89-90). Similarly, Mountain Chief too opts for a non-violent way. "We will counsel with the whites, and if they do not want too much, we will make a new treaty. My heart is not in this, but I will accede to the wishes of my people" (Fools Crow 122). The chiefs are also aware that "any day the seizers

could ride into our camps and wipe us out. It is said that already many tribes in the east have been wiped away. These Napikwans are different from us. They would not stop until all the Pikuni had been killed off" (Fools Crow 89). Yet, even though they accept the fact that adaptation is the only way to ensure their own survival, the Pikuni also show that they are not giving up their culture. It is precisely Fools Crow's rite of passage that helps keep Pikuni culture resilient and strong. Like his counterparts from tribal lore, Fools Crow becomes the archetypal cultural hero who embodies the collective identity and the universal values of Pikuni character. From a shy young man he transforms into a brave warrior, a leader of his people whose wise altruistic decisions reflect larger communal needs. Humble, respectful and pure-hearted, his actions and intentions are always directed toward the well-being of others. With the help of the wolverine, his power animal, and Nitskoan, the dream helper, he undertakes an epic journey that lasts for six days and seven nights, on which he visits the dreamland and meets Feather Woman, a mythic character from ancient times. Through that journey Fools Crow establishes himself as a savior of his people, a leader needed in hard times.:

I had a dream. Nitsokan instructs me to make a journey. I will be gone for seven sleeps. For now, I must do as Nitsokan says. I myself do not understand, but if my journey is successful, perhaps it will help the Lone Eaters find a direction. (Fools Crow 315-316)

With the help of Feather Woman's painted buffalo skin, Fools Crow is given a vision of his people's future, foreseeing the fate and all the troubles and challenges that expect them, concerning white people. The aim of this vision is to instruct Fools Crow to be a hero who can lead his people and teach them how to deal with all the troubles and changes they will have to live through. He goes home to find out that many of his people have already died from white scabs. Although he realizes he cannot do anything to stop bad things from happening, he can still "prepare them for the times to come. If they make peace within themselves, they will live a good life in the Sand Hills. There they will go on to live as they always have. Things will not change" (Fools Crow 359). The importance of storytelling hides behind this vision also, as Feather Woman wants to show Fools Crow how important oral tradition is for keeping their history alive and that "stories will be handed down, and they will see that their people were proud and lived in accordance with the Below Ones, the Underwater People – and the Above Ones" (Fools Crow 360).

Welch's novel in many ways incorporates and continues this tradition. Like Blackfeet sacred histories, it too upholds traditional values and worldview, and serves as a nucleus of collective healing and cultural resilience. Recreating the pre-contact lifestyle of the Pikuni people, Welch created a non-Western conceptual space. In order to understand the novel, we are required to enter that space, to learn and accept the values and the worldview different from our own. Positioning the reader as the recipient of oral storytelling, Fools Crow teaches about Blackfeet philosophy, cosmology, social organization and core cultural values, allowing for an individual understanding of nonphysical states such as talking with animals or dreaming. Thus, Fools Crow not only invites readers to absorb a remarkable collection of Native American background, but also transports them to the indigenous world of the nineteenth century Plains, until they start feeling as if they themselves have lived through it. In that way, navigating between the two symbolic systems, the novel achieves the postcolonial effect of "appropriation", "abrogation", and "rearticulation" of Western symbols (cf. Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 38). It appropriates Western narrative form, but fills it with indigenous content, re-writing/righting history and preserving cultural identity for the generations to come. Therefore, for writers like Welch, the book is not just a medium of Western narrativity and textuality, but is also an effective tool of conceptual translation and ideological contestation.

ABSTRACT

The paper examines strategies of cultural and historical revisionism in James Welch's novel Fools Crow (1986). Maneuvering the conventions of Western narrativity and its most popular agency – the book, the novel exhibits what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin term as "abrogation" and "appropriation" of Western symbols. The most dominant such strategy in Fools Crow is the textualization of oral tradition. Even though it seemingly follows Western tradition of the identity narrative, Fools Crow suppresses its conventions through a number of conceptual turns. Bringing to life a whole tribal tradition of rituals, hunting, storytelling and dreaming, Welch's text accurately illustrates Native American history, culture, social organization and gender roles, recreates the ancient world of oral wisdom and cosmology, and draws us into Blackfeet conception of the world.

Blurring the boundary between the narrative and the myth, history and ceremony, it creates a resonance between the material, spiritual and mythopoeic immanent to the indigenous worldview, paralyzing the intention of the dominant genre. Thereupon, as oral tradition in disguise, Welch's book both probes and expands the limits of textuality and Western discourse. As a counter-history, incorporating suppressed cultural memory and "the wounds" of history, the oral matrix destabilizes the authority of the colonial meta-narrative, as well. As such, it serves as an effective tool of both conceptual and anti-imperial translation.

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[1] Unfortunately, after the arrival of the horse, which made their hunting ability more effective and changed their hunting techniques, more and more buffalos were killed. The guns, which came a bit later, increased the precision of the shots and an even greater number of these animals started to disappear. However, the white people were the main reason why these animals gradually died out. Killing these animals was their answer to the refusal of the Natives to give their land away. White hunters and marksmen hired by the U.S. government reduced the number of buffalos from more than sixty million that roamed the Plains before the arrival of the Europeans (Cobbs et al. 193) to only one herd of around one thousand at the end of the nineteenth century (Holm – lecture). Killed by marksmen, buffalos:…were left to rot on the land. Only the tongue was cut out as it was a delicacy for the white settlers and hunters. The killing was vast and relentless. By 1885, the government estimated that only 200 buffalo were alive in the wild. In 45 years (1840 to 1885) the huge herds had been destroyed with the numbers declining from millions to barely nothing. It is likely that such slaughter has not seen a parallel in History. (“Buffalo”).

[2] With the coming of the Europeans, the roles of the men and women in Native American societies experienced some transformations, which led to a cultural change (cf. Holdsworth, Carroll 335). Nevertheless, Native women have stayed strong and important even after the meeting with Europeans. It was their daily work that enabled the survival of the culture and they still “continue to shape the earth through producing food, making ritual and everyday items, and reclaiming their status within their own nations and the United States” (Bales).

[3] Many Native Americans, for example, dispute Western historical theories, such as the Bering Strait theory. According to that theory, the indigenous population of the Americas came there from Asia by way of a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska during the Ice Ages 13,000 years ago (Mann 174). Although it is supported by biological and geological evidence, this theory “contradicts the creation stories of many Indian tribes maintaining that the first humans were created in their homelands. This theory is also at variance with Native American religious tradition, which asserts that Native Americans have always been on the American continent and did not migrate from Asia” (Sonneborn 3).

[4] Welch himself was a member of the Blackfeet community. His great grandmother survived the massacre at the Marais River in 1870 and told the stories to Welch's father who passed them down to his son James (cf. Susag 2).



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