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Subversion and reclamation: Indigenous languages in Power, Washburn, and Owens

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Subversion and reclamation: Indigenous languages in Power, Washburn, and Owens

by

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ABSTRACT

To call the reading audience of commercially published American Indian literature complex is an understatement. Unlike “mainstream” American writers, American Indian writers must shuffle between Native culture and Western culture, mediating the content and structure of their texts so that the information is not only comprehensible to non-Native readers, but also so that these novels circumvent exploitation or commodification of Indigenous cultures. In doing so, American Indian writers—within the commercial context—are required to appeal to three different audiences: a local one, a pan-tribal one, and a non-Native one. A specific place to begin looking at *how* American Indian writers appeal to all three implied audiences rests in specific language choices, particularly the authors’ inclusion of Indigenous languages.

In analyzing *how* Susan Power, Frances Washburn, and Louis Owens use both Indigenous and English languages in their respective novels, *The Grass Dancer* (1994), *Elsie’s Business* (2006), and *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), different forms of accommodation for all three implied audiences become clear. While each writer incorporates Indigenous languages in different ways, Power, Washburn, and Owens all convey that Native ways of knowing are not easily translatable for non-Native readers; however, through distinct treatments of Indigenous languages, each writer performs a different level of mediation. As a result, the different levels of mediation uncover the subversive power of language; the linguistic choices of Power, Washburn, and Owens work to both accommodate the three different sets of implied readers while also asserting political implications.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In my second semester as a Master's student, I enrolled in a course entitled, "Native American Fiction." While taking this course, I realized that in all my years as a reader—even while majoring in English Literature during my undergraduate career—I had *never* read an American Indian novel. While I am both sad and ashamed to admit this fact, and while it makes me cringe with a haunting sense of ignorance, it is the truth. I wondered why I had never studied an American Indian novel and I began thinking about readership and American Indian texts.

Louis Owens writes, "For American Indian novelists, the 'special conception of the reader' is obviously complicated, much more so than for mainstream American writers" (*Other Destinies* 15). This is because American Indian writers, unlike "mainstream" American writers, must shuffle between Native culture and Western culture, mediating the content and structure of their texts so that it is not only comprehensible to non-Native readers, but also so that it circumvents exploitation or commodification of Indigenous cultures. In addition, the implied audience of American Indian texts extends beyond the simplified binary of Native and non-Native readers. American Indian writers are actually writing for three different audiences: "a local one, a pan-tribal one, and a non-Native contemporary American one" (Ruppert 15). To juggle these angles successfully is not only a testament to skill, but also a *requirement* for American Indian writers who want to publish within commercial literary contexts. As a result, in appealing to all three potential factions of readers, American Indian writers perform complex mediational feats that are worth exploration.

One place to begin looking at how American Indian writers within the commercial market appeal to all three implied audiences rests in the writer's specific language choices. Between the role of English in American Indian history, the prevalence of Indigenous languages in American Indian novels, and the general unfamiliarity non-Native readers have with Indigenous languages, language performs a complex job in American Indian literature. Specifically, the linguistic choices of American Indian writers work to both accommodate the three different sets of implied readers while still asserting political implications.

Louis Owens writes, "For American Indians, the problem of identity comprehends centuries of colonial and postcolonial displacement, often brutally enforced peripherality, cultural denigration—including especially a harsh privileging of English over tribal languages—and systematic oppression by the monocentric 'westering' impulse in America" (*Other Destinies* 4). As Owens notes, the "displacement," "peripherality," "cultural denigration," and "oppression"—not to mention the horrific genocide—waged upon American Indians for the past several centuries is, simply put, complex. While I do not intend to dismiss or oversimplify the devastating impacts that colonization has wreaked upon Indigenous communities, to attempt to cover all aspects of colonialism surpasses both my current abilities as a student and the intended goals of this thesis. Instead, I want to briefly acknowledge *how* the complexities of colonialism linguistically affect contemporary Native-authored texts.

Owens goes on to note that American Indians "had their native languages ruthlessly suppressed to the extent that punishment for speaking 'Indian' represents a common denominator for Native Americans who have 'gone to school' (often in boarding schools where the process of displacement was most rapid and intense)" (*Other Destinies* 12). In

other words, Indigenous languages were decimated, along with American Indians' desire and ability to be fluent in their respective languages. While this routinization against Indigenous languages continues to manifest itself in multiple tragic ways, one specific circumstance in which colonization linguistically demonstrates itself is in the lack of commercial literary American Indian texts written entirely in Indigenous languages. In fact, as Gloria Bird notes in the introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*, "Within the written literary traditions of native people, we have *one* volume of poetry, by Diné poet Rex Lee Jim, written totally in a native language with no English translation" (25, italics original). While Bird fails to acknowledge the abundance of publications such as newspapers penned wholly in Native languages (perhaps sources she considers "unliterary"), her comment remains applicable when considering popular commercial novels and collections of poetry by American Indians. The truth is that there are very few of these specific literary forms written entirely in Indigenous languages. Bird goes on to state that even within the anthology of *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, while multiple writers "incorporate native language in their work, some of whom feel the need to include a glossary of terms in order for the work to be accessible to a larger audience. In many ways, we have a long way to go" (25). Bird's recognition of the lack of Indigenous language-based texts as well as her acknowledgement of Native writers' feelings of obligation to include definitions for Indigenous terms highlights the linguistic destruction begun so many years ago. It remains clear that the ways Indigenous languages were treated, and continue to be treated, are nothing less than complex and I do not wish to dismiss the immense intricacies inherent to thinking about Indigenous languages. For the goal of this thesis, however, the analysis focuses on *how* English and Indigenous languages function as

forms of accommodation for the three implied audiences of commercial American Indian novels.

Because colonization coerced American Indians to simultaneously adopt English and decrease usage of Indigenous languages, “the Native American writer, like almost all colonized people, must also function within an essentially appropriated language” (*Other Destinies* 12). While American Indian writers who wish to accommodate the three implied audiences rely on a language that represents centuries of devastations, the goal of this thesis is to explore *how* American Indian writers subversively mix Indigenous languages with English—or as Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird refer to English, “the enemy’s language.” In looking at the various choices American Indian writers make when fusing Indigenous languages with English, it becomes clear that American Indian writers ultimately use English as an act of subversive reclamation, as an act of political assertion; because of this, the political implications within the linguistic choices of American Indian writers are manifold.

To start, the most straightforward political implication that all Native writers employ is the act of speaking as a way to assert existence. As Joy Harjo writes,

to speak, at whatever the cost, is to become empowered rather than victimized by destruction. In our tribal cultures the power of language to heal, to regenerate, and to create is understood. These colonizers’ languages, which often usurped our own tribal languages or diminished them, now hand back emblems of our cultures, our own designs; beadwork, quills if you will.

We’ve transformed these enemy languages. (21-22)

Although the majority of commercially produced Native-authored texts rely on English as the main language, the very act of communication, as Harjo notes, works as an act of

empowerment. Furthermore, this act of empowerment extends beyond merely asserting continued existence; the act of communicating in English is a purposeful reclamation. Just because Native writers wanting to engage all three implied audiences rely on English—or, rather, are *forced* to rely on English—as a mode of communication does not disempower or depoliticize the messages conveyed in American Indian literature. David Murray writes, “The fact of having to use English does not entail a passive adoption of white values,” rather, “it is an act of cultural and political assertion” (77). In other words, using English is not an automatic transmittal of EuroAmerican beliefs and it is not a bowing down to colonization. Instead, American Indian writers, while working to include a non-Native and/or pan-tribal audience, also subvert and reclaim “the enemy’s language” to convey Indigenous values and Indigenous ways of seeing the world. Working within English allows American Indian writers to communicate that other modes of thought and ways of knowing exist, without necessarily having to fully articulate or interpret these beliefs for a reading audience.

In reference to letting non-Native readers become *aware* of Indigenous ways of viewing the world, James Ruppert notes in his book *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, “Whether as a result of a different world view, the influence of the oral tradition, or the politics of marginalization, the contemporary Native American novel is oriented toward a restructuring of the readers’ preconceptions and expectations” (ix). This “restructuring” is accomplished through the subversive use of English; in employing English, American Indian writers not only invite the non-Native reader to enter a world quite different from “mainstream” EuroAmerican culture, but the framework of English also “restructures” the non-Native reader’s conception of the world. While the use of English allows non-Native readers to *experience* worlds characterized by Indigenous modes of thinking, the use of

English does not inherently allow non-Native readers to completely understand these Indigenous worldviews. It is in this way that American Indian writers reclaim the enemy's language to express views, ideas, and perceptions of the world that rest outside the notion of English as a "national," "universal," or strictly EuroAmerican language. In American Indian novels, English does not work to communicate or corroborate "Western" ideas that non-Native readers already know; instead, in Native-authored texts, writers use English to convey "non-Western" ways of thinking.

The use of English not only works as a subversion for non-Native readers though. Owens calls writing for multiple audiences a "hybridization" and that, at the very least, "one effect of this hybridization is subversive: the American Indian writer places the Eurocentric reader on the outside, as 'other,' while the Indian reader (a comparatively small audience) is granted, for the first time, a privileged position" (*Other Destinies* 14). One specific way American Indian writers use English to privilege Native readers, specifically local tribal readers, is through the insertion of Indigenous terms. The prevalent inclusion of Indigenous languages illustrates that stories of American Indian writers cannot be accurately told solely in English. The deliberate choice to include Indigenous languages asserts not only that Indigenous languages remain alive, despite colonization's attempt to destroy them, but also that these languages are essential to Indigenous modes of thinking, as ways to assert that Indigenous language has a primacy that English lacks. While the inclusion of Indigenous languages do not make texts inherently "Native," the use of Indigenous languages does proclaim the importance and necessity of a language other than English.

Even though this particular investigation of language can be applied to nearly all American Indian novels, my analysis revolves around the linguistic choices in three texts:

Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer* (1994), Frances Washburn's *Elsie's Business* (2006), and Louis Owens's *The Sharpest Sight* (1992). The examination of these particular texts occurs for two reasons; first, these three novels not only include significant amounts of Indigenous languages, but the authors choose to incorporate Indigenous languages in three very different ways. Power, Washburn, and Owens all convey that Native ways of knowing are not easily translatable for non-Native readers, but nonetheless each writer attempts different levels of mediations. The second reason I chose to examine these particular novels is that they have not received as much critical attention like highly-theorized or commercially popular texts such as N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), or Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984). In examining the specific linguistic choices of Power, Washburn and Owens, different mediational methods that Native writers use to reach (or not reach) all three implied audiences become clear. While my particular examination is not exhaustive of all possible techniques, the ultimate goal in examining these novels is to look closely at the immense balancing act Native writers are required to perform in order to reach all three implied audiences.

In analyzing how each writer incorporates Indigenous languages into their text, aspects such as visual representation, context, and whether or not direct definitions are provided all play a role in *how* each writer allows, or disallows, the non-Native reader to become aware of an American Indian worldview. The chapters move from the most mediated text, Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*, to a middle-ground mediated text, Frances Washburn's *Elsie's Business*, to a text that actively refuses—in terms of explaining Indigenous language—to accommodate the non-Native reader, Louis Owens's *The Sharpest Sight*.

To start, in *The Grass Dancer*, Power's seemingly straightforward linguistic choices allow the non-Native reader to comfortably encounter and wrestle with the Dakota ways of perception. Through visual representation and content—Power italicizes and provides seemingly simple definitions for nearly every Dakota word included—Power makes Indigenous language accessible to the non-Native reader without allowing the non-Native or non-Dakota reader to *completely* understand the complex cultural connotations of the terms. In doing so, Power illustrates that surface-level comprehension for non-Native readers is one of her goals as a writer; through her consistent translations, Power makes a gesture toward solidarity. At the same time, Power's seemingly simple definitions are not an attempt to explain Dakota culture; rather, they work to make the reader *aware* of a Dakota worldview. As a result, the linguistic choices in *The Grass Dancer* attempt to provide cross-cultural understanding, providing an opportunity for creating allies in non-Native readers. In fact, Power herself states, "I definitely want anyone and everyone to be able to enter into the world of my fiction. I don't write for any specific audience" (Power, e-mail). While Power ultimately privileges readers who are already familiar with Dakota modes of perception, she invites non-Native readers to *experience* a non-"mainstream" mode of perception: a Dakota perspective of viewing the world.

Moving from Power's novel to a book that is less mediated, in my second chapter I discuss Frances Washburn's novel *Elsie's Business*. Washburn narrates the text with second person, immediately plunging the reader into the world of *Elsie's Business* as if s/he were a character in the story. In this immersive and interactive process, Washburn also inserts Lakota language and Lakota oral tradition, but Washburn's inclusion of Lakota language and oral tradition works differently than how other American Indian writers use these details.

Unlike Power, who *consistently* provides seemingly simple definitions of Dakota terms in *The Grass Dancer*, and unlike Owens, who *consistently* denies translation of Choctaw language in *The Sharpest Sight*, Washburn refuses to adhere to continuity. Instead, Washburn sometimes provides explanations of Lakota language and oral tradition, while other times she denies translation. In so doing, Washburn trains the reader to recognize Lakota language and oral tradition, ultimately immersing the non-Native reader in an interactive Lakota world, requiring the reader to discern and recognize these elements throughout the novel. Through these interactions, by the end of the novel, the non-Native reader possesses an understanding of a few Lakota words, and has also gained experience in certain aspects of oral tradition. However, as with Power, Washburn's choices make the non-Native or non-Lakota reader *aware* of a Lakota perspective without attempting to *explain* it. As a result, the non-Native reader of *Elsie's Business* walks away with the understanding that some aspects of Lakota culture *can* be comprehended cross-culturally while other aspects of Lakota culture *cannot* be translated into "mainstream" perception. Washburn's treatment of Lakota language, while it ultimately remains accessible to the non-Native reader, does not convey a straightforward tone of solidarity like Power's novel does; Washburn allows non-Native readers to see *some* Lakota ways of perceiving the world, but she refuses to provide translations for *all* Lakota terms, privileging the Lakota reader and asserting the importance of Indigenous languages. Furthermore, Washburn's wavering treatment of language communicates a refusal to *go* to the non-Native readers, so to speak—like Power does—and that the non-Native reader needs to do a little work in order to understand the text; the non-Native reader must meet the text halfway, through interaction, understanding that English cannot explain all aspects of Lakota culture.

In the third chapter, I examine the least linguistically mediated text of the three in Louis Owens's novel *The Sharpest Sight*. How Owens treats Indigenous language is different than the ways Power and Washburn do. While Owens provides seemingly simple definitions of *some* Choctaw terms, that is where the similarities between *The Sharpest Sight* and the other novels end. For the most part, Owens inserts Choctaw terms without providing any sort of explanation or context. While content clues sometimes help the reader discern a pseudo-meaning, Owens, for the most part, refuses to accommodate the non-Native reader, ultimately creating two plots: first, the plot that all readers can understand, Native and non-Native alike, and, second, the plot that only readers with previous knowledge of Choctaw language and culture can understand. In this way, Owens demands the non-Native or non-Choctaw reader to meet him on his own terms; if the non-Native reader does not understand the Choctaw language included in the text, so be it. Unlike Power, Owens does not make the Choctaw world of *The Sharpest Sight* easily visible. Because Owens divides the book so cleanly into two separate plots—one dictated by a “Western” perception of the world and the other controlled by a Choctaw view—the non-Native reader will always pick up on the “simple plot” of the novel: that *The Sharpest Sight*, in its most simplistic form, is a murder-mystery story. The “complex plot,” on the other hand, is only accessible to those readers with understanding of Choctaw language and culture. Through the “complex plot,” *The Sharpest Sight* provides privilege to the Choctaw reader and makes no effort, besides the use of English, to allow the non-Native reader to become aware of the Choctaw world of the novel.

As a non-Native reader myself, the way I analyze the role of language in these novels is through the lens from which I initially encountered these texts. In other words, *I* am the implied non-Native reader around which my analysis revolves. With that in mind, I want to

let the texts/writers speak for themselves and I do not attempt to *culturally read* the Indigenous references in the novels. Rather, I am interested in examining *how* Native authors present both English and Indigenous languages. In performing this analysis, I must clarify a few things. First, I do not intend to undermine myself when I proclaim to analyze these novels without *culturally* reading these texts. By the term “*cultural reading*”, I refer to unpacking the multiple and complicated references to specific tribal cultures, histories, religious beliefs, etc. At this point in my studies, because my knowledge is still growing and I do not wish to misconstrue cultural references, I chose not to perform a *cultural reading* of these novels. In addition, I want to acknowledge that I do not intend to assert that *because* I am non-Native reader myself that I do not need to attempt to understand Indigenous cultures; I know that reading and writing about American Indian literature requires immense contextual knowledge, and, as already mentioned, my knowledge is still growing. Looking at the language choices from the perspective of a non-Native reader was an attempt to be politically responsible on my part. Furthermore, I attempt to be as sensitive as possible to cultural denigration by using sources written by scholars who are either American Indian themselves or who have done work that is respectful to Native communities—in other words, scholars who possess what I see as cultural sensitivity.

While my desire to be culturally sensitive as a non-Native reader and to use culturally responsible scholars proved necessary to my endeavors, at times, it almost seemed like I was grasping at straws. One of the other major problems I encountered during this process dealt mostly with the amount of available or existing scholarship about these particular texts. In consciously pursuing the exploration of lesser-theorized texts though, this was a foreseeable and predictable obstacle. For example, with *Elsie's Business*, no published pieces of analysis

exist to date and it became difficult to decide from which angle I wanted to approach the text. Once I decided which angle to pursue, it then became difficult to support my conclusions. However, the lack of existing scholarship works as a double-edged sword: while the absence of scholarship made it difficult to enter a conversation about *Elsie's Business*—since the conversation had not yet been started—the lack of scholarship also allowed me to carve my own path. It permitted me to *start* the conversation about *Elsie's Business*, and that was a powerful feeling. Additionally, while the lack of discussion surrounding *Elsie's Business* proved to be a problematic aspect of my research, it is also important to acknowledge that even though analysis exists about both *The Grass Dancer* and *The Sharpest Sight*, the amount of scholarship about both texts is not abundant. Again, the lack of literary criticism made it difficult to write about these texts, but it also allowed me to forge my own path.ⁱ

Admittedly, my research fails to provide a clear or straightforward answer to the question that initially begot this exploration: I still don't know why I had never read an American Indian novel before coming to graduate school. However, in this pursuit, I have explored *one* aspect of commercial American Indian literature: complex linguistic meditational choices that American Indian writers include to appeal to all three implied audiences. In examining the role of Indigenous languages and English in American Indian novels, various ways in which Native authors choose to mediate (or not mediate) their texts for all three potential audiences become evident. These meditational choices are required but skillful feats not to be overlooked when studying commercial American Indian literature and considering its role in the “mainstream” literary canon.

CHAPTER 2

ONE TRANSLATION, TWO LANGUAGES: LINGUISTIC MEDIATION AND DAKOTA PERCEPTION IN *THE GRASS DANCER*

Early in her novel *The Grass Dancer* (1994), Susan Power writes, “Mercury Thunder was the reservation witch. Had she practiced good medicine, people would have called her a Dakota medicine woman [...] But Mercury practiced selfish magic” (13-14). Without explaining what she means by “witch,” “medicine,” or “magic,” Power communicates to the non-Native reader that some aspects of *The Grass Dancer* rest outside of “mainstream” or Western culture. As a result, Power also conveys that some of the non-“mainstream” aspects of *The Grass Dancer* will remain unexplained. In fact, Power’s inclusion of Dakota medicine and ceremonies has been the focus of current scholarship concerning *The Grass Dancer*, leading some critics to call these details “magical realism,” while others recognize them as “alternate,” or “parallel realities.”ⁱⁱ Terms like “magical,” “alternate,” and “parallel” imply that the Dakota characteristics in *The Grass Dancer* rest outside of not only “normalized” or “mainstream” *literary* techniques, but also that the Dakota details exist outside of “actual” reality, and because of this, the labels often thrust upon *The Grass Dancer* by other critics are problematic. Even though it can be argued that non-Native readers will fill their own interpretations of the novel with stereotypes, the supposed “realities” that Power includes in the novel are not unreal; in fact deeming them “realities” or “realisms” is just as problematic as using the terms “magical,” “alternate,” or “parallel.” The aspects of the text that have caused so much controversy in current scholarship are aspects that are inherent to and wholly a part of the Dakota perspective, and because of this, I propose a new label for these characteristics: *Dakota perception*.ⁱⁱⁱ Instead of presenting some type of “unreal reality,”

Power presents a Dakota perception of the world, allowing non-Dakota readers to become *aware* of this worldview without completely understanding it.

While Power's inclusion of Dakota perception certainly presents the non-Native reader with complicated and unfamiliar concepts, Power is able to integrate Dakota perception into *The Grass Dancer* by juxtaposing its complexity with seemingly straightforward and accessible linguistic choices.^{iv} Because Power immediately defines the included Dakota terms, the non-Native reader does not spend time trying to contextualize or synthesize this *other* language; instead, Power allows the non-Native reader to expend that energy toward experiencing a Dakota view of the world, even if the non-Dakota reader does not fully comprehend this Dakota perception. In fact, in order to let the non-Native reader *see* or become aware of Dakota modes of perception, I argue that Power provides ostensibly simple translations of Dakota language in three different ways. First, Power includes immediate and seemingly direct definitions of Dakota terms; second, Power avoids using Dakota language when explaining Dakota songs; and, third, with the character Red Dress, Power only provides the English version of her Dakota translations. As a result, Power tells a culturally complex narrative in a linguistically accessible way—allowing the non-Native reader to see outside “mainstream” culture, even if the non-Native reader does not fully comprehend this way of viewing the world.

Because my analysis of *The Grass Dancer* focuses on the role of language and its relationship to accessibility for non-Dakota readers, it is necessary to first acknowledge Power's overarching use of English in the novel. Like Washburn and Owens, and most American Indian writers for that matter, Power relies on English as the primary language of the story, allowing readers, Native and non-Native alike, to enter the world of *The Grass*

Dancer. While this seemingly obvious accommodation is full of political implications, such as illuminating the oppressive history American Indians have experienced and continue to experience today, for example, the use of English is also subversive. The framework of “the enemy’s language”^v allows Power to reach a wide audience and to express views, ideas, and perceptions of the world that rest outside the notion of English as a “national,” “universal,” or strictly EuroAmerican language. Power uses English not to communicate or corroborate “Western” ideas that non-Native readers already know; instead, she uses English to convey a “non-Western,” specifically Dakota, way of thinking. The familiarity of English allows non-Native readers to enter the world of *The Grass Dancer*, but Power’s use of English does not work to privilege the EuroAmerican viewpoint or to even fully explain the Dakota perception. Instead, the interaction between English and Dakota languages in *The Grass Dancer* lets the non-Native reader experience a Dakota world while also communicating that the Dakota way of thinking serves as the primary worldview in this text. In other words, through the use of seemingly simple linguistic translations, Power communicates a Dakota worldview that non-Native readers are unfamiliar with, are maybe even skeptical to accept, and are unable to completely understand.

To attempt to provide a synopsis of *The Grass Dancer* is a difficult task, if not an impossible one, since, as Brianna Burke notes, *The Grass Dancer* is “Often mislabeled a collection of short stories because each chapter is a complete narrative on its own” (13). With numerous characters, multiple narrators, several complicated and interconnecting story lines, and Power’s choice to move backward in time, both the content and structure of *The Grass Dancer* reject traits commonly seen in other novels; however, these seemingly individual stories come together to share one narrative—albeit a narrative that proves difficult to

succinctly summarize.^{vi} Essentially, Power's novel traces the history of about a dozen characters on one of the Dakota reservations. Power starts the novel with an undated prologue, moving to 1981 in the first chapter, continuing to move backward in time with each chapter, all the way to 1864, before eventually returning to 1982 in the final chapter. Of the eleven chapters, six are told in the first person narrative, by five different characters; Anna Thunder, who is also known as Mercury, is the only character to narrate two chapters. The remaining chapters, as well as the prologue, are told from the third person omniscient perspective. As a result, Power creates a polyphonic text that includes multiple voices, multiple stories, and multiple languages; a text that juxtaposes the "mainstream" reader's notion of standard literary conventions—such as a single narrator and moving chronologically—with seemingly straightforward linguistic choices. Power's language choices are what allow the Dakota perception to be, at the very least, *visible* to the non-Native reader, if not completely understandable.

The first way Power mediates Dakota language for the non-Native reader is through seemingly direct translations, usually of individual words, but occasionally of phrases as well. In my third chapter, I analyze the three different ways Owens refuses to define Choctaw words in *The Sharpest Sight*, and I must acknowledge that Power's first form of mediation functions similarly to the first way Owens mediates Choctaw language: both writers present Indigenous terms and provide seemingly simple English definitions. However, the difference between the two novels is that Power provides translations at this one level alone, while Owens incorporates two other gradations of mediation. As a result, because Power provides seemingly simple definitions for nearly all of the included Dakota terms, non-Dakota readers can wrestle with the Dakota worldview presented in the novel. Owens, on the other hand,

provides seemingly simple definitions for only a few terms, leaving most of the included Choctaw terms either only slightly explained or completely undefined, ultimately refusing to let the non-Choctaw reader experience the Choctaw worldview of the novel. In consistently providing seemingly straightforward definitions, Power allows the non-Native reader to gain a superficial understanding of Dakota language, as well as to *experience* a Dakota worldview.

For example, Burke looks at Power's initial use of the word "*waštunkala*," which Power defines as "Sioux corn soup" (22, italics original).^{vii} Burke writes "translating the source language, Dakota, into the target language, English, isn't hard in this case because 'waštunkala' is a simple noun, a thing" (16). However, just because *waštunkala* is a noun, Power's seemingly straightforward English definition of "Sioux corn soup" fails to encapsulate the complete Dakota meaning of *waštunkala*. Just like when translating an English term into another language, the Dakota words that Power translates possess multiple meanings, cultural and connotative, that the non-Dakota reader cannot glean from the simplified English definition; for the Dakota reader, *waštunkala* means more than just "Sioux corn soup." While the notion of multi-layered meanings is important when examining Power's seemingly straightforward translations, I am more interested in *how* a non-Native reader gleans meaning and *how* supposedly straightforward definitions aid in allowing the non-Native reader to experience a Dakota worldview.

In *The Grass Dancer*, the linguistic translations that Power performs throughout the novel generally adhere to the same type of seemingly "direct one-to one correlation" like Power provides for *waštunkala* (Burke 16). Using Burke's example as a starting point, Power uses the term *waštunkala* four times throughout the novel, each time providing either a direct

definition or contextual clues to help the reader identify the meaning. The first time Power weaves *waštunkala* into the text—which is also the first italicized Dakota word in the novel—she writes, “Herod held out a steaming plastic bowl, filled to the rim with *waštunkala*, Sioux corn soup” (22, italics original). From this seemingly simple and direct translation, Power communicates to the reader what *waštunkala* means in English. However, Power does not assume that the non-Native reader will remember the definition of *waštunkala* after one use. As if providing the reader a lesson in Dakota vocabulary, the remaining three times that Power includes *waštunkala* in the text she continues to provide translations and context. For example, the second time Power weaves the term into the novel, she writes, in reference to the character Margaret Many Wounds: “she requested a last bowl of *waštunkala*, Sioux corn soup” (99, italics original). Again, Power replicates the structure used the first time she inserted *waštunkala* into the text; she provides the Dakota term, follows it with a comma, and then gives the English translation. In the following two times that Power includes *waštunkala*, while she provides explanations, she does not give the reader a complete translation. Specifically looking at the third inclusion of *waštunkala*, Power writes, “Margaret Many Wounds decided to die early: before a last taste of *waštunkala*” (117, italics original). Instead of explicitly telling the reader again that *waštunkala* is Sioux corn soup, Power alludes to the fact that *waštunkala* is a type of food with the verb “taste”; while this definition is not as direct, the basic meaning of *waštunkala* remains clear. By not providing the complete definition here, Power, in a way, quizzes the non-Native reader about the definition of *waštunkala*—providing an informal lesson in Dakota vocabulary. Finally, the last time Power uses the term in the novel, she writes “‘Mama, your soup is ready.’ Evie brought the *waštunkala* into her mother’s room” (118,

italics original). Again, while Power does not provide the direct definition, here she makes it clear that *waštunkala* is soup through the context and structure of these sentences. In this instance, Power both tests the non-Native reader's memory of Dakota vocabulary, while also nudging the non-Native reader—with contextual clues—toward the correct definition.

Because Power weaves a significant amount of Dakota words into *The Grass Dancer*, *waštunkala* serves as just one example of *how* she provides seemingly direct definitions of Dakota language. With her inclusions and definitions of multiple Dakota terms comes a consistent structure, generally falling into one of two categories: Power uses either dashes, setting the English translation apart, or a comma, placing the English translation immediately after the Dakota term. For example, Power includes the term *tunkašida* in the novel twice, each time providing a direct definition. The first time the reader encounters *tunkašida*, Power uses the dash structure to define the word: “I’d imagined my grandson in the field, nearly hidden by tall grass, crowing, ‘*Tunkašida*’—grandfather—‘I can see it!’” (90). The second time, Power uses the comma construction: ““When I was little, my *tunkašida*, my grandfather, woke me up in the middle of the night”” (113). Both times, Power’s language makes it clear that *tunkašida* means “grandfather.” While Power includes direct definitions of multiple other nouns such as “*wožapi*, a berry pudding” (104), and the concept of male homosexuality, ““*winkte*—a man who loves other men”” (107), Power also provides seemingly direct translations for other types of words. For example, Power writes, “He thought she was *unšika*. Pitiful” (57). Then later in the novel, she writes, “He stepped close to me and whispered in my ear. ‘*Unšika*.’ Pitiful” (252). Even though the structure Power uses to define *unšika* strays from her use of dashes or the comma, the translation remains immediate. Power also provides the Dakota form of “yes”: ““*Hau*,’ Harley answered in

Dakota. Yes” (327). Finally, one of the last Dakota terms Power weaves into the text is actually a phrase. Power writes, “*Iyotiye wakiye*, echoed in Harley’s ears. *I am sad*” (332, italics original). Again, Power makes the translation self-evident. While this collection of terms is not comprehensive of all the Dakota words that Power includes and seemingly defines in the novel, these examples illustrate how supposedly accessible Power makes Dakota language in *The Grass Dancer*.^{viii} Like *waštunkala* though, the seemingly direct definitions Power provides for these terms fail to signify their complete meanings; all these words are embedded with cultural significance that a non-Native reader is unable to obtain. In using the Dakota terms, Power illustrates how English falls short; Power uses the Dakota terms instead of English, because the Dakota terms encapsulate what English cannot—even if the non-Native reader is unable to glean those culturally informed Dakota connotations

In addition to providing supposedly straightforward explanations for Dakota words, Power also includes seemingly simple explanations of some Dakota cultural codes. For example, Power takes the time to explicate the meaning behind a particular Dakota gesture. In reference to Anna Thunder and her dislike for her daughter’s boyfriend, Martin Lundstrom, Power writes, “the most she would do was flick her fingers—the rudest gesture a Dakota Indian could make” (136). Even though Power does not explain the detailed cultural meaning behind this particular gesture or its origin, she directly translates it for the non-Native reader in terms of what Anna is communicating to Martin: dislike. A few pages later, Power references this gesture—the flicking of fingers—and it makes sense, on one level, even to the non-Native reader unfamiliar with Dakota culture, because of Power’s previous explanation. When Crystal and Martin get married at the courthouse, Power writes, “One pink secretary, fluffy as a lamb in a cashmere dress, stared the longest, her jaw opened so

wide I could count her fillings. Just before we turned a corner and left her sight, I flicked my fingers at her” (144). The choice to include and elucidate this detail works in the same way that Power defines Dakota terms; the non-Native reader can understand the translation of the gesture and, as a result, why these characters perform this specific motion. Even this small detail allows the non-Native reader to experience the Dakota world of *The Grass Dancer*. Again, however, similar to the seemingly simple translations of terms like *waštunkala*, Power’s explanation of this gesture only provides the reader with part of the picture, instead of the whole image. Power provides the non-Native reader enough of an explanation to understand this movement at a surface level; to the Dakota reader, this gesture encapsulates more information than Power needs to share to allow the non-Native reader to experience a Dakota worldview.

While Power provides seemingly direct definitions for the majority of the Dakota terms included in the novel, it is necessary to also acknowledge that Power refuses to provide seemingly straightforward explications for *all* of the included Dakota terms. Intercultural translations of Dakota terms and Dakota ideology into “the enemy’s language” are not always simple, and potentially not even possible. While *waštunkala* is a term that is embedded with meanings more complex than “Sioux corn soup,” some Dakota terms cannot be translated into a seemingly simple definition. In his article “Uncomprehended Mysteries: Language and Legend in the Writing of Zitkala-Ša and Mourning Dove,” Harry Brown plainly states that “authentic intercultural understanding is impossible” (68). While Power’s inclusion and explanation of terms like *waštunkala* possess seemingly effortless transitions from one culture to another, a few terms in *The Grass Dancer* lack this seamless translatability. Burke notes, in reference to *The Grass Dancer*, that the idea of “‘translation’

is not limited solely to linguistic translation but also to [...]‘cultural translation’—that is, the transference of complicated cultural meaning from one culture into another which may not have the referents at hand to decode such a concept” (16). Despite the fact that English language and “mainstream” EuroAmerican culture lack the terminology to elucidate some of the Dakota concepts included in *The Grass Dancer*, Power uses “the enemy’s language” as much as it allows her to explain the included Dakota language, without exploiting Dakota culture. In this way, Power makes the political assertion that English, “the enemy’s language,” can only be used to transmit ideas and ideologies that rest outside of “mainstream” culture to a certain extent: non-Native readers can only understand the Dakota terms on a surface level.

In reference to the culturally complex ideas present in *The Grass Dancer*, Burke writes that there are “spiritual concepts in this novel which elude translation entirely, such as the religious figure Ghost Horse who is a *heyo’ka*” (34, italics original). Burke goes on to state that *heyo’ka* is “something that cannot be reduced to language” and that Power attempts to define it three times throughout the novel without truly succeeding (34). While the notion of *heyo’ka* exists outside of non-Native culture and while it encapsulates an idea truly inexplicable and untransferable to English, I argue that Power provides as much of a definition as the English language and “mainstream” culture allow her to. Furthermore, Power’s explanation of *heyo’ka*, while culturally incomplete, provides the non-Native reader *enough* information to still comprehend the novel as a whole, like she does for terms such as *waštunkala*. For example, Power writes, “‘Ghost Horse was *heyo’ka*, one of our old-time clowns. Today people refer to them as contraries, because they had to work in opposites” (171, italics original). From the perspective of the non-Native reader, a more complex or

culturally complete definition of *heyo'ka* possesses the potential to distract from the plot of *The Grass Dancer*. Power not only decides to provide just as much of a simple definition as “the enemy’s language” allows her to include, but also only as much of a definition as she wants to incorporate. In this way, instead of attempting to explicate the social functions of *heyo'ka* to the non-Native reader, Power provides only the necessary information, preventing non-Native readers from becoming wholly confused while also avoiding redundancy for readers already familiar with *heyo'ka*.

In considering Power’s first form of mediation—seemingly straightforwardly defined Dakota terms—*how* Power visually integrates Dakota terms into the text presents another layer of political implications. When it comes to the Dakota words that Power translates, they are, for the most part, italicized; however, some Dakota terms are visually integrated into the text. In an e-mail correspondence, Power writes, “When the book was in manuscript form I chose to italicize every word that wasn't in English simply because I'd seen that done in books (I was copying a publishing choice made by others)” (e-mail). However, this choice was altered once a copy editor started working with Power’s manuscript; Power writes, in reference to the copy editor’s choices, “I think she did not italicize when dealing with a proper noun” (e-mail). For example, Power uses the proper noun “Wakan Tanka,” which is defined in English as the Great Spirit, multiple times throughout the book, and not once is the term italicized. The first time she includes it in the text, Power writes, “Herod thanks Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit, for bringing them all together” (24). Even though the term is left unitalicized, it is clear that it represents an aspect of the Dakota perspective; first, because the words “Wakan Tanka” are most likely unfamiliar to non-Native readers, and second, because Power holds true to one of her consistent forms of defining Dakota language: she follows

Wakan Tanka with a comma and then the English definition. Even though Power admits that “this aspect of the book (whether to italicize or not) is something I wasn't invested in one way or the other,” this choice in dealing with Dakota language expresses a political message (e-mail).

For non-Native readers familiar with Judeo-Christian beliefs, Wakan Tanka could be considered comparable to the concept of God. Explaining the concept of God—in English—is no simple task. However, in defining Wakan Tanka as the Great Spirit, Power provides as much of a definition that English allows her to and as much of a definition that most non-Native readers need in order to understand the basic concept of Wakan Tanka.^{ix} In doing all of this, Power circumvents exploitation and commodification of Dakota culture. Again, though, in refusing to explain *all* the connotations of Wakan Tanka, Power only provides the non-Native reader with a surface level translation. In fact, the other unitalicized, yet simplistically defined Dakota proper nouns work in the same way; they are concepts, or even just formal names of characters or things, that can be seemingly straightforwardly translated, but only in terms of context.^x For example, Power immediately defines Šunka Sapa as Black Dog, which not only informs the reader the name of the animal, but also that the animal referred to is a dog (107). Power even notes that:

I absolutely included brief translations in most places where I thought non-Natives, or just non-Dakota people might not know what the specific words meant. I left a few untranslated (like Wakan Tanka) where I felt they'd be able to understand from the context what/who was being referenced. I definitely want anyone and everyone to be able to enter into the world of my fiction. I don't write for any specific audience. (e-mail)

Whether Power italicizes various included Dakota terms or not, the political choice remains the same: through inclusion, Power declares the primacy and survival of Dakota language and knowledge. English fails to explain these concepts. Using Dakota terms instead of relying on the English definition allows Power to let the non-Native reader experience *other* ways of *seeing* the world: through a Dakota perspective, even if the non-Native reader does not gain the cultural knowledge to completely understand the Dakota worldview.

The second way that Power makes Dakota language accessible to the non-Native reader is through her use of English to translate Dakota songs. For instance, in the first chapter at the powwow, Power writes,

It was a Dakota song, rather than the usual intertribal using vocables in places of words and it dated back to World War II. The men launched enthusiastically into the chorus, and it took Charlene a moment to translate the lyrics into English; she was becoming less proficient in the Dakota language after so many years of school. (31)

In this example, instead of providing the reader with the Dakota version of the song, Power only includes the English translation: “*They’re sending Sioux boys to Germany— / Hitler better look out*” (31, italics original). Because Power does not include the Dakota version here, the reader receives a different experience than the characters in the book. Power tells the reader that Charlene hears the Dakota words and *then* translates them—almost like the way Power gives the reader a Dakota term and *then* seemingly defines it. While Power communicates the primacy of Dakota language in both forms of translation, in the second type of mediation, the work is done for the reader, off the page, because Power does not provide the Dakota language. In only providing the reader the English translation of this

song, Power privileges a Native reader familiar with Dakota language; while all readers can comprehend the English translation, only readers with knowledge of Dakota language or readers who know the original song in Dakota can translate this song *back* into Dakota. This choice prevents the non-Native reader from *seeing* Dakota language and creates a direct and simple translation, allowing the non-Native reader to focus on the Dakota perspective.

Power's choice here also keeps the power of Dakota language in Native hands.

Furthermore, Power's acknowledgement of Charlene "becoming less proficient in the Dakota language after so many years of school" references the effects of colonization (31). In this brief statement, Power provides an explicit political comment about language. Despite the fact that Power uses English to narrate the majority of the novel, and despite the fact that Power provides surface-level English translations for nearly every included Dakota term, in this moment, Power acknowledges that the adoption of English was forced upon Indigenous peoples and that the overall construct within which Power is forced to work to appeal to the three implied audiences is one of the many horrific and long-lasting effects of colonization.

Later in the novel, Power again refuses to provide the Dakota lyrics to a song. She writes, in the voice of Anna Thunder, "I was busy braiding the tassels of wild turnips to chain their bulbs together. I sang an old Dakota song to encourage the sun in its rising: *She came in a red dress, / that sacred woman. / She was a warrior in a red dress*" (167, italics original). Power writes that Anna sings an old Dakota song, which would presumably be in Dakota; however, the lyrics that Power provides are in English. Power's choice to leave out the Dakota language in this instance, just like the example at the powwow, allows the translation to occur off the page. Instead, the non-Native reader, or non-Dakota reader, only receives the English translation. Rather than *showing* the reader the Dakota version, Power chooses to

not only make it accessible to the non-Native reader by providing it in English, but she also avoids exploiting Dakota language. In refusing to provide the Dakota version of the song, Power keeps the power of Dakota language in the hands of those who speak it; instead of commodifying it by allowing non-Native readers to see it, Power prevents readers who are unfamiliar with Dakota language from re-performing a Dakota song. Additionally, Power once again ensures that the work of translation is performed by the characters, and not by the reader. Unlike Washburn's novel *Elsie's Business*, which immerses the reader in the text as if the reader were a character in the novel and which I turn to in my next chapter, Power provides translation that takes the guesswork out of the reader's experience and allows the reader to experience the Dakota ways of perceiving the world.

In addition to providing seemingly straightforward definitions of many Dakota terms as well as using English to explain Dakota songs, the third way Power makes Dakota language accessible to the non-Native reader is through the character Red Dress. In reference to the chapter that Red Dress narrates, which is chapter nine, entitled "Snakes," Burke writes, "Red Dress acts as the translator and everything in the chapter is automatically in a Dakota framework, rendering translation into Dakota unnecessary" (37). While the notion of "rendering translation into Dakota unnecessary" is an idea that can be applied to the entire novel, it is especially relevant in the parts of the book that Red Dress appears—even places outside of "Snakes." Red Dress haunts the novel (literally), and the first time that Power introduces Red Dress's ability to simultaneously speak English and Dakota occurs in Lydia's chapter, "Honor Song." Calvin tells Lydia about his vision, and he explains that in the midst of it he proclaimed aloud, "I don't see any spirits" (206). To his complaint, Calvin relays to Lydia that he then heard someone say, "*That's because you are impatient*" (206, italics

original). He goes on to explain, ““It was a woman’s voice, and the strange thing was, I could swear she spoke in English and Dakota simultaneously. Not *translating* but two messages at once”” (206, emphasis mine). Calvin’s focus on the fact that Red Dress was not *translating* is significant, because, in this way, for both the Native and non-Native reader, Power *is* Red Dress. Through the use of both English and Dakota, Power not only exists in two cultures at once but Power simultaneously speaks two languages, successfully reaching all three implied audiences of American Indian literature.

Calvin continues explaining his encounter with Red Dress to Lydia. Power writes, ““*My name is Red Dress*, she told me in both languages”” (207, italics original). And later, ““*You look so much like your uncle*, she cried in her two voices”” (207, italics original). The idea of simultaneously speaking two languages correlates to many of the seemingly disparate binaries that occur in the novel: “mainstream” perceptions of the world vs. Dakota perceptions of the world, the story of the past (Red Dress) vs. the story of the present (most of the other characters), and Dakota language vs. English language. While these dualities initially appear to represent opposites, in actuality, they exist simultaneously, complementing each other; the story of *The Grass Dancer* cannot be told without acknowledging both “mainstream” culture and Dakota culture; the text must present both the past and the present; and, finally, the novel cannot rely on either English or Dakota alone. Through including these seemingly polarized aspects, *The Grass Dancer* inhabits a bi-cultural space that not only successfully reaches all of the three implied audiences of American Indian literature, but it also conveys that colonization has not triumphed in decimating Dakota culture and Dakota ways of perceiving the world.

After frequently alluding to Red Dress throughout the book, Power finally provides the reader with Red Dress's personal narrative in chapter nine, entitled "Snakes." Red Dress is taken under the wing of Father La Frambois because, according to him, "It is God's will" (242). He teaches her "to read, to write, recite, to form my thoughts into plain, desolate English until I could speak in terms more lovely than could the priest," with the hope that he could convert Red Dress to Christianity (239). In teaching Red Dress how to speak English, Father La Frambois can communicate with the tribe at large—or so he thinks. In an attempt to spread the word of the "True God," Father La Frambois asks Red Dress to tell the village crier that he will be saying mass and that all need to attend; instead, Red Dress tells the crier that "Tomorrow Father La Frambois will dance for us on the grass" (242). While Red Dress's words may appear to be a deception—she calls it "a minor deception"—her "translation" manages to garner a large crowd for Father La Frambois (242). He tells her, "You will be my voice" (242). While Red Dress is not *literally* Father La Frambois's voice, she does act as his only way of communicating with her tribe. Father begins the mass by saying, "Welcome to your grass church. The Lord is all around you—let Him into your hearts. You have been a stubborn people, a great challenge to me. I have come this year, and in past years, because your souls are in jeopardy and I care about you" (242). Red Dress translates Father's message into Dakota; however, Power, once again, provides the reader with only the English translation. Power writes, in the voice of Red Dress, "Welcome, friends. The past winters we spent together have been very pleasant. I've learned a great deal from these visits and I have respect for you. You are a strong people" (243).

Red Dress acknowledges her dishonest translation and tells the reader, "Mind you, when I translated inaccurately it was not out of carelessness or spite. Father was tactless, but

had been a friend to me. It was loyalty that led me to overlook his indelicate remarks and *“speak in a voice of my own”* (243, emphasis mine). In stating that these particular words come from “a voice of my own,” Red Dress directly acknowledges *how* she speaks two languages simultaneously; while the words coming out of her mouth are *literally* her own—because she physically speaks them and because she actively chooses to alter Father La Frambois’s message—the only reason she speaks to her people in this context is because of Father La Frambois, because of colonization, because of “the enemy’s language.”

Furthermore, because Power provides the reader with only the English translation, Father La Frambois experiences the moment quite differently than the non-Native reader. Father does not attempt to learn Dakota and he remains unaware of Red Dress’s translation; the reader, on the other hand, gets both perspectives—through the role of English—and Power’s decision to do so is political. In painting the picture of Father La Frambois as not an evil man, *per se*, but an ignorant, racist, and judgmental one, the non-Native reader can understand *why* Red Dress translates his words the way she does. Additionally, because Power presents Father La Frambois through the eyes of Red Dress, she creates a distance between the non-Native reader and him, allowing the reader to escape judgment of both Father’s actions as well as Red Dress’s.

In addition to using English when sharing Red Dress’s translations for Father La Frambois, Power also includes Red Dress’s feelings about English. When Red Dress goes to Fort Laramie, she somewhat befriends a white widow named Fanny. Fanny tells Red Dress that the others are calling her a princess, and Fanny proclaims, ““I think it’s because of your remarkable English”” (260). Red Dress thanks Fanny for the “compliment” about her English and says to herself, *“look at this sullen brown grass, dispirited because winter is coming to*

punish it. This, to me, is English. It is little pebbles on my tongue, gravel, the kind of thing you chew but cannot swallow. Dakota is the lush spring grass that moves like water and tastes sweet" (260, italics original). Power communicates the distaste Red Dress feels for English, the "enemy's language." Red Dress does not prefer speaking English over Dakota; however, it is a skill she acquired and it not only allows her to speak two languages simultaneously, but also to exist within two cultures simultaneously. Later in the text, Power writes, in the voice of Red Dress, in reference to Dakota, "I saw the language shrivel, and though I held out my hands to catch the words, so many of them slipped away, beyond recall. I am a talker now and chatter in my people's ears until I grow weary of my own voice" (282). Red Dress's acknowledgement of the disappearance of Dakota language is repudiated by the fact that Power, over one hundred years after the time in which Red Dress's story is set, incorporates a substantial amount of Dakota terms in the novel; a choice that proves even if the language has shriveled, Dakota is not dead. Dakota language is both alive and inherently necessary to a Dakota perception of the world.

Keeping in mind the three ways that Power makes Dakota language accessible to the non-Native reader, it is interesting to consider whether these choices correlate with the book's popularity. Power's novel, in comparison to *Elsie's Business* and *The Sharpest Sight*, is a commercial success. In addition to being published by a mainstream press—G.P. Putnam Sons did the hardcover edition, and the paperback rights were sold to Berkeley Books, which is within the same corporate umbrella as Putnam—*The Grass Dancer* is the winner of the Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award for First Fiction. In addition, not only does the book jacket boast positive comments from the likes of "popular" and "mainstream" multi-ethnic writers like Louise Erdrich and Amy Tan, but also from "reputable" news sources like the

New York Times Book Review. Furthermore, the first three pages of the book are filled with “Phenomenal Praise for Susan Power’s *The Grass Dancer*,” from sources such as *People* and the *Los Angeles Times*. While Power’s subversive use of a Dakota worldview might confuse “mainstream” readers, her consistent and seemingly straightforward translations of Dakota language work to accommodate the non-Native reader into experiencing, but not completely understanding, a Dakota perspective.^{xi}

Even though Power works hard to make Dakota language ostensibly understandable to non-Native readers, it is a reality that not all non-Native readers will be open to accepting the Dakota perception within *The Grass Dancer*. In her article, “‘I am not a fairy tale’: Contextualizing Sioux Spirituality and Story Traditions in Susan Power’s *The Grass Dancer*,” Vanessa Holford Diana discusses her experience of teaching Power’s novel to “a predominately white undergraduate multicultural American literature class” (2). Diana shares that “some students were resistant to its spiritual elements, which they labeled as superstition,” and other students “explained these elements as magical realism,” while “those who expressed openness to the novel’s representation of a Dakota spiritual worldview demonstrated a romanticized and generalized view of Native American cultures” (2). Diana goes on to write,

If my students can be considered a representative sample of Power’s non-Native implied readers, then the ways in which many of them responded to the spiritual and supernatural elements of the story raise a series of questions about how Power goes about changing her readers’ thinking and what additional information readers of *The Grass Dancer* might need to enhance that understanding. (2)^{xii}

While not everyone who reads *The Grass Dancer* will be open to understanding a Dakota mode of perception, the fact that Power has written a book—in such clear language—that exposes non-Native readers to the *possibility* of a Dakota worldview is the subversive power of the text. While Power’s use of seemingly simple definitions as well as her inclusion of English allow the non-Native reader to see the Dakota modes of perception, Power does not explain the Dakota worldview, preventing the reader from *fully* understanding it; rather Power allows the reader to experience a perspective outside of the mainstream, while not burdening her novel with too much explanation. In thinking about Diana’s comment about what Power might do to “enhance” the understanding of the novel, it is also important to consider the converse: what could Power have done to make the content less clear? Power could have refused to explain or define any of the Dakota language present in the text—much like I will later discuss in reference to Louis Owens’s treatment of Choctaw language in *The Sharpest Sight*. Had Power decided to only include untranslated Dakota language, *The Grass Dancer* would not be as accessible to all three implied audiences of American Indian literature.

In using Dakota terms like *waštunkala*, Power makes Dakota language primary, illustrating that English fails in communicating some aspects of a Dakota worldview. Through the choice of including seemingly straightforwardly translated Dakota terms, English language to describe Dakota songs, and English to share Red Dress’s translations, Power declares that Dakota culture and the Dakota way of perceiving the world is different from “mainstream” culture and “mainstream” perception—that in Dakota culture, the term for “Sioux corn soup” is first and foremost *waštunkala*. But, in doing so, Power also communicates that *waštunkala* means so much more than *just* “Sioux corn soup”; for the

Dakota reader, the meaning of the term surpasses the English definition Power provides.

Using “the enemy’s language” allows Power to reach a wide audience, allowing non-Native readers to experience the Dakota mode of perception, without completely understanding it.

Admittedly, while I, as a non-Native reader myself, do not wholly understand Mercury

Thunder’s medicine practices, or some of the other aspects of the Dakota worldview within

the novel, I do know that details such as these are not “magical realism” or “alternate

realities.” They are a part of the Dakota perspective, a perspective that is not unreal; rather, a

perspective that challenges “mainstream’s” notion of reality.

CHAPTER 3

THE INTERACTIVE PRESENTATION OF LAKOTA LANGUAGE AND ORAL
STORYTELLING IN *ELSIE'S BUSINESS*

In the first chapter of *Elsie's Business* (2006), which is entitled *Anukite*, Frances Washburn immediately immerses the reader in a Lakota world populated with Lakota language and Lakota oral tradition; *Anukite* is not only the first Lakota term in the text, but it also references the first Lakota oral story presented in the novel. While many American Indian writers weave Indigenous languages and the oral tradition into their novels, Washburn's treatment of both in *Elsie's Business* is unique. Instead of uniformly providing seemingly straightforward definitions of the included Lakota terms—like Power does with the Dakota language in *The Grass Dancer*—and instead of consistently refusing translation—like Louis Owens's continual refusal to define Choctaw language in *The Sharpest Sight*—Washburn wavers in her contextualization of Lakota terms. While she provides supposedly simple explanations for some Lakota words, Washburn refuses to provide any context for others, rejecting adherence to the continuity seen in other American Indian novels. In addition to her varying treatment of Lakota language, Washburn also fluctuates in how she includes the oral tradition; at the beginning of the novel, Washburn visually separates oral stories for the reader, but by the end of the novel, she visibly integrates oral tradition into the text. Despite Washburn's shifting treatment of Lakota language and oral storytelling, the novel remains accessible to readers unfamiliar with Lakota culture. In fact, in this chapter I argue that Washburn's treatment of both Lakota language and the oral tradition works to *transform* the non-Native reader, ultimately immersing the

non-Native reader in a Lakota world by providing an “invisible”^{xiii} and interactive education in Lakota language and oral tradition.

While Washburn’s inconsistent treatment of Lakota language and oral tradition present unique decisions, these choices currently remain unexamined, because, to date, no published scholarship exists about *Elsie’s Business*.^{xiv} While critics have yet to turn to Washburn’s novel, her evolving treatment of both Lakota language and Lakota oral tradition not only distinguish *Elsie’s Business* from other Native-authored texts, but her linguistic choices also illuminate specific political implications, such as how American Indian writers use “the enemy’s language” subversively. In simultaneously providing straightforward explanations for some Lakota terms and refusing to provide any information for others, Washburn mediates *Elsie’s Business* so that it exists in the middle of the spectrum between Power’s largely mediated *The Grass Dancer* and Owens’s unmediated *The Sharpest Sight*. In providing a middle-ground approach to mediation of Indigenous language and storytelling, Washburn immerses the reader in an interactive Lakota world, not only allowing the non-Native reader to question “mainstream” culture, but also training the reader to discern and recognize Lakota elements throughout the novel. In this chapter, I will examine *how* Washburn weaves both Lakota language and oral tradition into the novel, not only by looking at *how* she transforms the presentation of both, but by also looking at the potential political implications behind these transformed choices.

Before analyzing *how* Washburn mediates Lakota language and Lakota oral tradition in *Elsie’s Business*, though, it is essential to first acknowledge the main political implication behind the role of English in the text. As with *The Grass Dancer* and *The Sharpest Sight*, the majority of Washburn’s novel is in English, and as mentioned in my introduction, the

American Indian writer's reliance on "the enemy's language" results from the horrific and long-lasting effects of colonization. However, in appealing to all three implied reading audiences of American Indian literature, Washburn's decision to use "the enemy's language" to tell the majority of *Elsie's Business* does not disempower the other linguistic political implications within the text. Washburn, like Power and Owens, uses English as a subversive tool, allowing Washburn to include Lakota language and Lakota storytelling—aspects that are not always clearly explained and aspects that some non-Native readers will be unable to comprehend. The uses of Lakota language and Lakota oral storytelling also communicate that English alone cannot express the story of *Elsie's Business*. In using the framework of "the enemy's language" to insert Lakota details, Washburn reclaims English to perpetuate a Lakota perception of viewing the world, ultimately immersing the non-Native reader in an interactive Lakota world, without necessarily fully articulating these Lakota beliefs.

Published by the University of Nebraska Press, *Elsie's Business*, is set in both Mobridge and Jackson, South Dakota. The novel follows the titular character, Elsie, who is American Indian and African American, through multiple instances of sexual assault and domestic violence. Eventually, and sadly, Elsie is mysteriously murdered. Nearly a year after her murder, a man from Mississippi named George Washington comes into town to attempt to uncover the details surrounding Elsie's disappearance and death; George is not only African American, but he is also Elsie's father. As George enters the Lakota world of *Elsie's Business*—a world as unknown to him as it is to the non-Native reader—the evolved inclusion of Lakota language and the transformed presentation of Lakota oral stories immerse George in an interactive world dictated by Lakota perception, ultimately helping him to navigate this unfamiliar culture. At the end of the novel, even though George never discovers

who killed Elsie, he gains closure about Elsie's death by learning more about the Lakota community in which she lived.

While the non-Native reader and George Washington are immersed in the world of *Elsie's Business* through the use of Lakota language and Lakota storytelling, Washburn adds another level of immersion for the reader: Washburn uses second person narration throughout the novel, referring to George Washington as "you." In the first sentence of the novel, Washburn writes, "If you want to know more about Elsie's story than just the official reports you have to ask one of the grandfathers, because they know all the old stories as well as the new ones, the latest gossip, and sometimes it's all the same stories happening over and over" (1). Washburn's purpose of using second person narration in *Elsie's Business*, in her own words from an e-mail interview, is "to put the readers *into* the story" (Washburn, italics original). Washburn continues, "it seems to me that the use of second person, where the reader is hearing 'you think' 'you want' 'you this or that' echo in their heads, is a way of putting the reader into the story" (Washburn). Furthermore, in the same e-mail, Washburn states that the second person "is a technique often used in oral tradition storytelling, which is what I was trying to replicate in print" (Washburn). Washburn's technique echoes what she and Stratton state about characteristics of the oral tradition in their article "The Peoplehood Matrix: A New Theory for American Indian Literature": "Native authors often adapt aspects of oral tradition into their own written texts" (61). Washburn's inclusion of "you" remains constant throughout the novel, continuously involving the reader with the text, and making the included instances of oral tradition seem as if they are being *performed for* "you," instead of being *read by* "you"; in other words, "you" are immersed in a Lakota way of knowing and understanding the world. The non-Native reader is challenged to interact with a culture that

rests outside of the “mainstream,” even if the non-Lakota reader does not fully understand this world.^{xv}

With the role of English and second person narration in mind, the first transformative aspect of *Elsie's Business* that I want to look at is Washburn's presentation of Lakota language. While the majority of the novel is told in English, Washburn purposefully uses Lakota words to frame the novel—immediately immersing the reader in a world dictated by “foreign” terms. In fact, even the terms Washburn uses to frame the novel illustrate her refusal to adhere to continuity when it comes to defining Lakota language. As mentioned earlier, Washburn starts *Elsie's Business* with a Lakota word serving as the title of the first chapter; *Anukite* not only refers to the first example of oral tradition but it is also the first Lakota term in the novel. *Anukite* serves as a character's name and Washburn explains it to mean “*The Double Faced Woman*” (7, italics original). While Washburn provides a seemingly simple definition for *Anukite*, a reader unfamiliar with Lakota culture remains unable to discern what *Anukite* represents; like Power and Owens, Washburn only provides a surface level translation for this term. While Washburn does not elucidate the cultural meanings of *Anukite*, her brief definition provides more information than what is provided for other Lakota terms. For example, Washburn ends the novel with a Lakota phrase: “*He ha'yela owi'hake*” (212, italics original). Washburn does not use this phrase anywhere else in the text and she provides no explication of its English meaning, leaving the reader unfamiliar with Lakota language clueless. Billy J. Stratton and Frances Washburn discuss how N. Scott Momaday makes the same choice in his novel, *House Made of Dawn*: “the first and last words of the book are from the Tewa Language spoken at Jemez Pueblo” (60). Stratton and Washburn go on to say that by using Indigenous terms to frame the story, “Momaday is

alerting the reader that s/he is entering another world, an American Indian world, made of words that contextualize and inform the English narrative that is framed between these two powerful expressions” (60). Washburn’s choice to frame her novel with Lakota words expresses a similar political message: *Elsie’s Business* is first and foremost an Indigenous world, specifically a Lakota one.

While Washburn shifts between explaining and ignoring the included Lakota terms, when she does provide definitions, she includes them differently than Power does. Unlike Power, who immediately and directly translates the included Dakota terms into seemingly simple English, Washburn relies on contextual clues to explain the included Lakota terms. For example after providing the English definition of *Anukite*, the next Lakota term that Washburn explains is *Ina*. Washburn writes, in reference to Elsie speaking, “‘*Ina*, help me.’ Elsie’s mother takes a long step into the mud” (25, italics original). From this particular instance, a reader unfamiliar with Lakota language can figure out that *Ina* must mean “mother.” However, Washburn makes sure the definition is clear because later on that page, as Elsie continues to speak to her mother, Washburn writes, “‘*Ina*, look!’ She loses her grip on the fabric, and there inside are three tiny turtles” (25). A few pages later, Washburn again uses *Ina*; she writes, Elsie’s “calling for her mother, but it isn’t her mother’s name she’s trying to say. She’s not calling *Ina*, *Ina*” (28). If the translation of *Ina* was unclear from the first two instances, the third time elucidates that *Ina* means mother. From these three examples, Washburn provides a mini-lesson in Lakota language, and a reader unfamiliar with Lakota language *knows Ina* means mother.

Washburn provides contextual explanations for several other Lakota words, and interestingly, two of the other terms presented with seemingly straightforward definitions

refer to words for kinship. For example, Washburn writes, in the words of Oscar, ““My daughter, Irene. We say *cunksi*”” (103). Later, as Irene leaves, “Oscar reaches up his arms, and she leans over and kisses his cheek. ‘*Cunski*,’ he says” (108, italics original). Like with *Ina*, Washburn makes it clear that the English definition of *cunksi* is daughter. The other straightforwardly contextualized familial Lakota word is *takasi*. Washburn writes, “some *takasi* of the wife wanted that land, too, so the old man gave up his claim and let his wife’s cousin have it” (193). From context, Washburn makes it easy to discern that *takasi* means cousin. Between *Ina*, *cunksi*, and *takasi*, which in English mean mother, daughter, and cousin respectively, Washburn provides seemingly simple definitions. However, Washburn also illuminates the inherently cultural ties that definitions of kinship possess. Early in the novel, Oscar tells “you” in regard to “your” question about Elsie being his niece, ““You know, it’s the old kinship way of thinking about people. We are all related in that way, so Elsie was my niece in that Indian way, but not white man way. Indian way makes her your cousin, everybody’s relative – cousin, niece. Indian way, makes me your grandfather, and everybody’s grandfather”” (4). Both English and Lakota contexts signify kinship, which is something that, on one level, appears to be easily understood cross-culturally; however, like the other Lakota terms that Washburn includes in the novel, the terms *Ina*, *cunksi*, and *takasi* encapsulate so much more than the English translations Washburn provides. The significance and meaning of kinship is cultural, which exemplifies why Washburn uses the Lakota terms instead of English. In fact, at the very end of the book, Washburn writes “You turn around and glance back at Elsie’s coffin in the back, remembering that word that Oscar said to Irene. *Cunksi*. *Cunksi*. We’re going home, daughter” (212, italics original). George’s decision to

adopt the Lakota term indicates a change in him—he sees his relationship with Elsie within the Lakota context, which requires Lakota terminology.

In addition to Washburn's use of familial relation terms, she also includes the terms *wasicu* and *wasicun* multiple times, providing seemingly straightforward context for the reader unfamiliar with Lakota language. Washburn includes *wasicu* for the first time about halfway through the book. Oscar tells “you” that if “you’ve” spoken to one person at the courthouse, “you’ve” spoken to them all, because word travels fast. Oscar continues, “I don’t tell any of my stories to *wasicu*, not the important ones, anyways” (107, italics original). While the translation of *wasicu* is initially unclear, shortly thereafter, Oscar states, “Don’t be flattering yourself [...] Ain’t no way you’d ever pass for a *wasicu*,” implying that *wasicu*, on one level, means white person or white people, because as an African American man, George Washington could never pass for white (107, italics original). On another level, Washburn also implies here that *wasicu* encapsulates more than just racial identification and that “passing” also refers to possessing a specific (EuroAmerican) worldview. Washburn corroborates the complex meaning of *wasicu* when she weaves it into the text again in the oral storytelling of Two Boys; during this short narrative, Washburn uses *wasicu* eleven times and *wasicun* twice. Again, from repetition and context, Washburn makes it clear that both *wasicu* and *wasicun*, on a surface level, refer to white people. Washburn writes, in the voice of Oscar, “Long time ago, the government divided up our land and gave pieces of it out to the people, because there were few of us. The *wasicu* knew if they made the pieces they gave out to us small enough, there would be lots of big pieces left over for them” (193, italics original). In this instance, the structure of the sentence implies that *wasicu* refers to the government—while *wasicu* does not *literally* mean government, Oscar uses the term because

wasicu encapsulates so much more than just racial identity. *Wasicu* not only refers to a specific way of life and a certain perspective, but it also references colonization and the complex implications that are associated with the havoc EuroAmericans have wreaked upon Indigenous peoples: events in which the U.S. government has been heavily involved. The examples of *wasicu* and *wasicun*, like the translations of *Ina*, *cunksi*, and *takasi*, make it clear that Lakota terms, on a surface level, possess seemingly simple translations; however, Washburn also hints at the immense complexity of these terms, complexities that the English language fails to elucidate. In providing seemingly simple definitions, Washburn allows the non-Native reader to experience a Lakota worldview, without necessarily fully articulating the details of the Lakota perspective.

In providing an *invisible* education and immersing the non-Native reader in a Lakota world, Washburn often refuses to translate all of the included Lakota language. For example, Oscar is talking to “you,” advising “you” to relax, and enjoy “your” time. Washburn writes, “Family. Well, you don’t have any here, that’s for sure. He catches your eye, and probably your thoughts, because he says softly, ‘*Mitakuye oyasin*’” (92, italics original). Washburn continues, “All right, you think, whatever he means. If he says so” (93). “Your” response implies that “you” might know the meaning of Oscar’s phrase; however, *Mitakuye oyasin* has not been previously included in the book and it is not used after this instance. The “context” Washburn provides here fails to give the non-Native reader any clues as to what the phrase means. The refusal to provide any sort of definition works to privilege the reader familiar with Lakota culture and language as well as to challenge the non-Native reader’s perception of “mainstream” culture.

Washburn refuses to provide explanations for multiple other Lakota terms in the novel, but the majority of these unexplained words occur toward the end of the book when “you” attend the “ghost feast, a wiping of the tears ceremony” for Elsie (195). In providing the reader with an immersive experience, Washburn provides no translation and no context for a conversation that occurs around “you” at an event heavily populated with Lakota people. Washburn makes it clear that “you” are the outsider here. Washburn writes “*Ho eyes, tokeske oyaunyanpi huo?*” (198). The response to this question, which is “*Hena, waste yelo,*” also remains untranslated (198). In juxtaposition to the seemingly easily translated terms like *Ina*, Washburn’s decision to leave these phrases completely unexplained might also have to do with the fact that they possess untranslatable cultural concepts. While the lack of a clear, obvious translation has the potential to throw non-Native readers into confusion, Washburn’s choice to deny explanation immerses the reader in Lakota community, as if “you” were truly at the ghost feast. As a non-Native person at such an event, it is more than likely that “you” will not be conversant in Lakota, and “you” will hear people speaking to each other in a way that will not be mediated for outsiders. This purposeful choice is powerful because how Washburn inserts “you” into this scene exemplifies the interactive nature of the novel; Washburn makes it so that not only “you,” the non-Native reader is truly *at* the ceremony, but she also circumvents redundancy for readers familiar with Lakota language.

Another instance of untranslated Lakota language that occurs during the ghost feast happens when Washburn writes, “The *wicasa wakan* as Oscar points him out to you, doesn’t look like anybody special, just an old man, older-looking than Oscar even, with a red wool scarf tied on his head under a battered cowboy hat, and layers of clothes covering his skinny

body” (199, italics original). While Washburn provides *some* context, the cultural meaning of *wicasa wakan* is completely absent from the text; instead, Washburn describes the *wicasa wakan*, from the perspective of George Washington, serving as another layer of immersion. Much like the untranslated conversation that takes place around “you,” Washburn plunges the non-Native reader in the setting, without necessarily explaining it. For a Lakota reader, the “red wool scarf,” “battered cowboy hat, and layers of clothes” might signify meaning in terms of the ceremony; for “you” and George Washington, though, those details are left unexplained.

Furthermore, in considering the lack of linguistic translation in the ghost feast scene, the explication of the actual wiping of the tears ceremony is very sparse. In fact, it is basically absent from the text. The beginning of the ceremony is noted with the words, “It begins” (199). After that, though, “you” are taken out of the moment and put into George’s head as he thinks about his life as a janitor. George thinks about the amount of money he needs to exhume Elsie’s body, money that he doesn’t have. After a short description of George’s career, the text states, “The ceremony is ended” (200). As Brianna Burke notes, “silence is a political statement, a withholding of necessary information, and also replicates Indigenous beliefs about how to greet, or function with the presence of the sacred” (111). While it is unclear what exactly happens at the ceremony or whether or not “you,” or George Washington, actually experience the wiping of the tears ceremony, what Washburn does here serves multiple purposes. First, had “you,” the non-Native reader, or George Washington been privy to the entire ceremony, the cultural knowledge and understanding “you”/George possess of such an event is limited; therefore, the language with which “you”/George are equipped to describe the ceremony fails to encapsulate all that the tradition entails. In this

case, Washburn conveys that “the enemy’s language” falls short. In addition, a description about the event is not necessary for the non-Native reader to understand that the event is sacred. While Washburn’s refusal to include a clear explication of the wiping of the tears ceremony may appear as a refusal to accommodate the non-Native reader, including such information could also be considered exploitative or sacrilegious. Furthermore, for Native readers who are aware of what the wiping of the tears ceremony consists, explanations would be redundant and unnecessary. In this instance, yet again, Washburn finds the happy medium that accommodates both the Native and the non-Native reader.

Washburn even plays with the notion of Lakota language and non-Native people’s interaction with it. One morning, “you” wake up and step into the living room. Washburn writes, “‘*Hau, kola,*’ Oscar says. ‘Good morning,’ you answer. ‘I said, *hau, kola.*’ ‘How, cola,’ you repeat. Oscar chuckles at the stout, dark-haired woman on the sofa. ‘I’ll make an Indi’n of him, yet’” (103, italics original). Oscar’s response to “your” salutation of “Good morning,” illustrates that the sentiment or meaning behind *Hau, kola* cannot be wholly translated into English. While Washburn does not provide a translation of *Hau, kola*, she makes it clear that “the enemy’s language,” the language “you” speak, fails to encapsulate the purpose of this phrase. Washburn also makes “your” incapability of speaking Lakota visibly clear. When Oscar says the words, *Hau, kola*, they are italicized; however, when “you” attempt to say them, they are left unitalicized, like the rest of “the enemy’s language” and even spelled differently. Washburn indicates that “you” are an outsider in world dictated by Lakota language and a Lakota worldview.

The second way Washburn performs a transformative immersive process is through the inclusion of Lakota oral tradition. The first chapter is when “you” meet Oscar DuCharme

and “you start to explain who you are, but he stops you before you get more out than your name,” because Oscar tells “you” that he knows who “you” are and he offers “you” some coffee (2). Following this initial exchange, “You sense that it isn’t time yet for you to ask about Elsie’s story. Perhaps there are matters of politeness to attend first” (2). This impression is correct, because “you” chat with Oscar for a while, about some brief details concerning Elsie, but instead of immediately getting in depth about Elsie’s life, Oscar “folds his hands over his big belly and he starts a different story, a story that you think doesn’t have anything to do with Elsie,” the story of *Inktomi, the Spider* (5).^{xvi} To paraphrase and summarize Oscar’s story, *Inktomi* promises to make *Wazi* and *Wakanka* gods by making their daughter, *Ite*, a god. *Inktomi* whispers in *Ite*’s ear, as she sleeps, that she should set her sights on the very powerful *Anpetu Wi*, the sun, and if she does this, *Anpetu Wi* will be interested in her. She follows *Inktomi*’s advice and when *Anpetu Wi* sees *Ite* looking at him, *Anpetu Wi* points his finger “and half of *Ite*’s face turns ugly. / He points again and *Ite* is banished to the earth” (7, italics original). Forever after this, *Ite* is known as *Anukite: The Double Faced Woman*. In referencing not only the title of the first chapter, but also the first Indigenous term in the novel, this concludes Oscar’s story.

Despite the fact that the content of *Anukite* is pertinent to the novel as a whole, as a non-Native reader still expanding my knowledge about Indigenous cultures, I choose not to read the full cultural implications of the story. Rather, because I aim to examine the mediation of Lakota linguistic and storytelling aspects in *Elsie’s Business*, I want to look at *how* Washburn presents this story.^{xvii} While Washburn provides no initial context concerning the story of *Anukite*, she chooses to mediate this story through visual differentiation. After Washburn writes, “Oscar folds his hands over his big belly and he starts a different story,”

suddenly the text is italicized, centered on the page, and formatted like poetry—indicating the beginning of the story of *Anukite* (5). This visual change—similar to how Washburn italicizes the Lakota terms in the novel—alerts the reader, Native and non-Native alike, that this story exists apart from the rest of the text. Additionally, this visual differentiation also suggests that the story is being *performed*: “you” are not part of the italicized portion, “you” only listen. Performativity plays an important role in oral tradition; Washburn quotes Dennis Tedlock who states that, “Storytelling is a performance art [...] It is not only words that give shape and movement to a story’s characters, but also the ways in which those words are voices” (qtd. in “The Risk of Misunderstanding” 188). “[T]he ways in which those words are voices” is an inherently difficult idea to translate to a written text. Washburn acknowledges, “Readers of oral storytelling that has been converted to literary work do not have the same input as a live audience listening to a story” (“The Risk of Misunderstanding” 186). Washburn goes on to note that, “The reader cannot see the storyteller’s body language or facial expressions, hand movements, and body posture, nor can the reader hear nuances of voice such as pitch, volume, word emphasis, and silences within the speech act” (“The Risk of Misunderstanding” 186). Despite the difficulties of transferring the performative act of the oral tradition to the written word, Washburn states that “it is possible” and one way she accomplishes this feat is through textual visual differentiation (“The Risk of Misunderstanding” 186). Washburn conveys the performativity of *Anukite* by italicizing it, centering it on the page, and formatting it like poetry—simultaneously setting it apart as visibly different from the rest of the text and training the non-Native reader to recognize it as an instance of oral tradition.^{xviii}

In addition to considering the visual representation of oral tradition, the context that Washburn provides also plays an important role in examining *how* non-Native readers can understand these stories. Before Oscar launches into the story about *Anukite*, Washburn does not provide the reader with any context or information about the story; similarly, when Oscar ends the story, Washburn refuses to provide any type of explication. Instead of explaining the purpose or meaning of the story of *Anukite*, Washburn writes, “Oscar sits still for a minute. Then he heaves himself up out of the chair and he says, ‘Let me get you some more coffee’” and the chapter ends (7). Washburn declines to include an explanation of *Anukite* because she intends to immerse the reader, Native and non-Native alike, in a Lakota world. As Washburn writes, “Native American storytellers do not usually explain the meaning of the story, particularly when their audience members are also members of their own particular tribe or nation, because such an audience would understand the particular cultural information embedded within the story” (“The Risk of Misunderstanding” 193). Since the audience of *Elsie’s Business* could be either Native or non-Native, Washburn excludes the explanation of *Anukite*, not only because of its redundancy for readers familiar with the story, but also as a way to immerse the non-Native reader in an American Indian world. Even though “you,” the non-Native reader, and George Washington are not members of Oscar’s tribe and while “you,” the non-Native reader, have probably never heard of *Anukite*, Washburn refuses to explain this story because doing so would not be representative of an immersive and interactive experience in Lakota culture. *Anukite*, both the Lakota term and the story that follows, represents an “otherness” not generally seen in Western literary texts—alerting the reader that, ultimately, the world of *Elsie’s Business* is a Lakota world.

Washburn confronts the reader with Lakota storytelling again in chapter three, which is entitled *Sinte Sapela Win*. Washburn introduces *Sinte Sapela Win* similarly to how she introduces *Anukite*: Oscar provides “you” with little to no context. This chapter—*Sinte Sapela Win*—begins with Oscar handing “you” that second cup of coffee, which he references at the end of the first chapter. Washburn writes “You want to know the rest of Elsie’s story, but you wait for him to tell you in his own time. He tells you a different story,” the story of *Sinte Sapela Win* (16). The story of *Sinte Sapela Win* that Oscar shares, to paraphrase, follows a man hunting for food to feed his family. Suddenly, he sees a beautiful woman. While this man is already married to a good woman, this woman in the forest is particularly beautiful. He sits down beside her and “*he has her in that way, and he goes to sleep*” (17, italics original). He wakes up, the beautiful woman is gone, and, instead, there is a black-tailed deer in his presence. He returns home, thinking of the beautiful woman, and each following day, he leaves his home thinking of her, searching for her; in fact, he is so distracted by the thought of the beautiful woman that he forgets to hunt. As a result, his family begins to starve. One day he leaves home with the intent to hunt, but he never returns; “*Others go looking for him, and a long way from camp / They find him, dead. / He has been trampled to death by a deer*” (17, italics original). This line ends the story.

Again, as a non-Native reader, while I will not culturally read the content of *Sinte Sapela Win*, the way Washburn chooses to present it to the reader illuminates *how* she immerses the reader in a Lakota worldview. When Oscar begins the story of *Sinte Sapela Win*, he references *Anukite*; however, this time Washburn chooses not to italicize *Anukite*.^{xix} Washburn writes,

Oscar talking now, he says, “Remember Anukite, the Double-Face woman, who tried to steal Hanhepi Wi’s husband? Well, the Deer Woman is kind of like Anukite. See there’s two kind of deer. Black-tailed deer and white-tailed deer. It’s Sinte Sapela Win, the black-tailed deer, that men got to watch out for.” (16)

While Washburn’s decision to leave *Anukite* and *Sinte Sapela Win* unitalicized here may seem strange, or may even appear to be typographical errors, this is the first instance where Washburn blends Lakota terms and ideas into the text, “normalizing” them. This is the first example of how Washburn makes the presentation of oral tradition increasingly more complex as the novel progresses. After initially visually separating these terms in the first chapter, Washburn then includes them as part of the larger narrative, training the reader in thinking that these terms are *normal*, no longer *other* or “*foreign*.” While these specific terms have become visually integrated into the novel, when Oscar launches into the oral storytelling of *Sinte Sapela Win*, the formatting of the text mimics the telling of *Anukite*. Again, the text is entirely italicized, center aligned and formatted like poetry. Washburn does not yet integrate the oral tradition into the narrative; she wants to provide the non-Native reader with another example of the inherently performative aspect of Native storytelling, making it easy for the non-Native reader to recognize oral tradition.

As with *Anukite*, Washburn couples the visual distinction of *Sinte Sapela Win* with no context. Even though Oscar prefaces the story of *Sinte Sapela Win* by saying, “Well, the Deer Woman is kind of like Anukite,” the connection is not overt and Washburn chooses to provide no clarification (16). When the text shifts back to non-italicized, non-center aligned, and not formatted like poetry, Oscar says, “There’s lots of those old deer woman stories,’ [. .

.] ‘Well, it’s just about supper time, and there’s plenty. Why don’t you eat with me?’” (17). Similar to the presentation of *Anukite*, Washburn, once again, refuses to provide an explanation of the story, but “you” don’t ask any questions. Instead, “You follow him to the kitchen” (17). “You” are forced to make any sort of connection on “your” own. In addition to avoiding redundancy for readers already familiar with these stories, Washburn’s refusal to explain *Sinte Sapela Win* privileges the reader familiar with Lakota culture. These decisions inform the non-Native reader that the world of *Elsie’s Business* is not only an American Indian world, but specifically a Lakota world.

As the novel continues, Washburn increases the complexity of integrating Indigenous storytelling, reminding “you” of “your” place as an outsider in an Indigenous world and forcing “you” to not only navigate that world, but to question the “mainstream” world with which you are familiar. In the eleventh chapter, which is entitled “How the Crow Got to Be Black,” Oscar launches into another story. To paraphrase Oscar’s story about how crows became black, he explains that crows were originally white and that they were friends with the buffalo. At the time of Oscar’s story, buffalo were the major source of needed entities such as food, clothing, house materials, etc. Evidently, the buffalo were very difficult to catch because when the crows saw the hunters coming, they would warn the buffalo. One day, the hunters decide to have someone dress up as a buffalo—as a way to circumvent the crows’ warnings. As usual, the crows warn the buffalo, but one particular buffalo does not move. A crow comes closer to warn this particular buffalo and when the crow comes close enough, the hunter—who is disguised as a buffalo—grabs the crow and ties its legs together. The hunters have a difficult time deciding what to do with the crow, and “one of the young warriors, angry about the waiting, he grabbed that big white crow and flung him into the fire.

And pretty quick the fire burned through the sinew and set the crow free. But his feathers were singed and all covered with soot, and ever since crows have all been black” (94). This completes Oscar’s story about crows becoming black.

In including Oscar’s story about how the crows became black, Washburn complicates *how* she incorporates Lakota oral tradition in multiple ways. To start, this story is not formatted in the way that *Anukite* and *Sinte Sapela Win* are; the story of the crows becoming black is not italicized, not center-aligned, and not formatted like poetry. Instead, Washburn integrates the story into the text. Similar to the way she chooses to leave *Anukite* and *Sinte Sapela Win* unitalicized at the beginning of chapter three, Washburn’s decision to *assimilate* the crow story trains the reader to not only recognize Lakota storytelling characteristics, but to perceive them as *normal*, as part of the Lakota world. At the same time, Washburn’s integration does not detract from the performative aspect of Oscar’s narrative. Even though the text remains unitalicized, Oscar remains the only one talking throughout the entirety of the crow narrative—reminding the reader that this is a story that “you” are not a part of, “you” are an outsider, and “you” just need to listen to it. After including two instances of the Native oral tradition, Washburn forces the reader to recognize the performative aspect on his/her own.

In addition to visually *normalizing* the story about the crows, the way Washburn introduces the narrative also implies that the story possesses a moral, which serves as another difference from how Washburn presents *Anukite* and *Sinte Sapela Win*. Washburn writes, “‘Long time ago,’ Oscar begins, and you know you’re going to get a story whether you want one or not. You just hope that it isn’t one about patience because yours is about to run out, and you don’t want to hear about your own faults” (93). “Your”/George’s thoughts imply

that the forthcoming story possesses a moral, since “you don’t want to hear about your own faults” (93). The fact that “you” think this suggests that Oscar’s previous stories possessed morals—despite the fact that these morals were never explained in the text. As Stratton and Washburn analyze the role of oral tradition in Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*, they label one particular story as “an example of a type of sacred oral history that is meant to teach proper ways of behavior” (63). Oscar’s stories not only work to acclimate “you” to the Lakota world, but to also teach “you” lessons. Washburn purposefully avoids making the morals of these stories blatantly clear, and like her, I will leave their lessons to the reader to figure out. Washburn writes, “Because oral tradition, story, is the basic means of communicating information in traditional societies, it is important that stories be recorded, transmitted, and explained as accurately as possible” (“The Risk of Misunderstanding” 185). Washburn’s goal of being as accurate as possible is evidenced in her portrayal of the oral tradition. If Washburn characterized Oscar as explaining the purpose behind his stories, it would be inaccurate to the performance and characteristics of Indigenous oral tradition. Whether or not the lessons behind Oscar’s stories are comprehensible to the non-Native reader is not the point; Washburn integrates these details to present the reader with an accurate and interactive representation of an Indigenous oral storytelling experience. The reader must discern the morals of these stories on his/her own. Again, Washburn creates the world of *Elsie’s Business* so that it feels like the reader is *experiencing* the Lakota world from George’s perspective, not just *reading about* a Lakota world.

Washburn’s change in visual mediation with the crow story also brings forth a change in response from “you.” In the previous two stories, *Anukite* and *Sinte Sapela Win*, “you” listen to the stories and absorb them as best as “you” can, but the story about the crows

causes “you” to ask Oscar to clarify the purpose. The “you” who is a non-Native reader expects a clear explanation, indicating the need for standard Western literary conventions. “You” ask, ““did the crows still warn the buffalo? How did the people keep from starving?” (94). In response, “Oscar looks disgusted. ‘It isn’t about *that*,’ he says. ‘It’s a story about how the crow became black’” (94, italics original). “You” are still concerned with the people starving, and Oscar commands, “Feel. Go on, touch me.” (94). But “you” don’t understand; “you” touch Oscar’s arm and Oscar asks if “you” see what he’s talking about. However, “you” still cannot comprehend Oscar’s point. Oscar “rolls his eyes. ‘The people didn’t starve! I’m here, we’re here, that’s proof we didn’t starve [...] Some people can’t figure out their own answers,’ he complains. ‘Gotta have it all explained for you’” (95). “You” *still* express incomprehensibility and Oscar finally explodes: “Horses [. . .] We got horses, and then it didn’t matter if the crows warned the buffalo, we could ride our horses fast enough to catch the buffalo when they ran’” (95). Because asking for clarification falls outside of Indigenous oral tradition techniques, and because it is a component of EuroAmerican storytelling, “your” need for Oscar’s explication of the “obvious” part of the story detracts from Oscar’s stated purpose in sharing the narrative—which is, as Oscar explicitly said at the outset of the story, as well as in the title of the chapter, to explain how crows came to be black.

Washburn’s inclusion and visual integration of the story “How the Crow Got to be Black” also encapsulates multiple facets of minimalization, which Sidner Larson defines as “a technique of oral tradition wherein the supreme skill of a storyteller, oftentimes, is knowing what to leave out” (515). Despite the fact that “you,” or George Washington, have heard two previous Native narratives before hearing the crow story, and “you” are becoming

used to hearing them, “you” still don’t quite understand them. As Washburn writes, non-Native readers “expect texts to provide at least a modicum of explanation” (“The Risk of Misunderstanding” 191). While Oscar employs minimalization in *Anukite* and *Sinte Sapela Win*, Washburn mediates those stories, through visual distinction, alerting the reader to recognize those stories as *other*. The first two instances of oral tradition educate the reader in “otherness,” while the story about the crow moves beyond the purpose of illustrating *foreign* ways of thinking—hence the *assimilation*—and moves to the more complex idea that not everything in a story is easily interpreted. “You” must figure it out on your own. The fact that Oscar leaves out the obvious part of the story—how the people survived—is because this fact is axiomatic; the people did not starve because, clearly, Oscar’s ability to share the story conveys the fact that the people still exist. However, Oscar’s decision to leave out this particular piece of information eludes “you.” In so doing, while Oscar assumes “you” know how to synthesize the oral tradition, Washburn’s method *forces* “you” to think for yourself and make sense of these stories. In addition, this particular story undermines the vanishing Indian stereotype.

In the final instance of oral tradition, which occurs in chapter twenty-six, Washburn further complicates the immersive power of Oscar’s stories by not only visually integrating the story into the text, but also by incorporating a significant amount of Lakota language—more than in Oscar’s previous three stories. Before Oscar shares this story, “you” have just come back from speaking with the town’s coroner and discovered the absurd expenses needed to exhume Elsie’s body. Oscar senses George’s frustration and says, “*Ho eyes,*” although this term is not clearly defined. Oscar then starts the story about Two Boys: “Long time ago, the government divided up our land and gave pieces of it out to the people, because

there were few of us. The *wasicu* knew if they made the pieces they gave out to us small enough, there would be lots of big pieces left over for them” (193). “Your” reaction to this story is anything but excited: Washburn writes, “You’re not in any mood for another one of Oscar’s stories, especially not one that starts out with what sounds like it’s going to be a boring history” (193). This reaction mimics the reaction “you” have to Oscar’s story about the crows—“you” have become accustomed to Oscar’s storytelling, so much that it annoys “you” now. “You” understand that when Oscar tells a story, it usually does not overtly or obviously relate to the current situation and that the stories do not always directly pertain to solving Elsie’s murder. They are performative acts that “you” listen to and “you” must figure out *how* they relate to the larger story at hand.

In this last instance of oral narrative, Oscar tells the story of Two Boys; to summarize, Two Boys receives a good piece of land that the *wasicun* have overlooked. The white people attempt to get Two Boys drunk in order to trick him into selling this piece of land, but he doesn’t drink. Instead, Two Boys leases his land to a *wasicu* farmer and once a year the two meet to renew the lease. The *wasicu* farmer always tries to lower the amount of the lease, but Two Boys never lets that happen. One year, Two Boys goes to town to re-sign the lease, and the *wasicu* again tries to be clever; he greets Two Boys with, “*Hau, kola*” and he proceeds to drink his entire glass of water. The *wasicu* asks Two Boys to refill the glass of water. Two Boys obliges and brings the glass, full of water, back; the *wasicu* drinks it all again and asks Two Boys to refill it once more. Again, Two Boys complies. This happens a third time, but when Two Boys returns, it is with an empty glass. The *wasicu* demands to know why the glass is empty. Two Boys responds, ““Can’t get you more water. There’s

another *wasicu* on the well” (195, italics original). From this event, Two Boys earns the name Makes Water and the change in Two Boys’s name indicates the end of Oscar’s story.

At the end of the story, “you” ask, “Well, did he get more money on his lease?” (195). Again, “your” experience with Western literary techniques yields such a question. To this, Oscar responds, “If I couldn’t tell better by looking at you, I’d say you’re part *wasicu* yourself” (195, italics original). Irene, Oscar’s daughter, joins in with “You got to *listen* to the stories [. . .] They’ll give you the answers” (195, italics original). Both Irene’s and Oscar’s responses communicate that comprehension of these stories might not happen immediately; it takes time and “you” need to think about the story. Even though “you” remain confused about *how* all of Oscar’s stories—*Anukite*, *Sinte Sapela Win*, “How the Crow Got to be Black,” and Two Boys—relate to Elsie, Washburn makes it clear that the answer might not come immediately, but that the stories *do* pertain. “You” need to figure it out for “yourself.” What happened to Elsie is not something that will be solved in thirty minutes and the same goes for storytelling—it might take some time to figure it out. Unlike “your” reaction to the crow story, “you” do not push the issue of not understanding the story of Two Boys and instead “you” let it go.

Between *Anukite*, *Sinte Sapela Win*, “How the Crow Got to be Black,” and the story of Two Boys, “you” have experienced multiple stories throughout *Elsie’s Business*—stories that are purposely mediated and accessible to all readers, including those who have been trained in EuroAmerican literary traditions. Washburn herself states, “While it is difficult to translate the spoken story in the written text and to explain material so that is understandable by a general audience, it is possible” (186). In *Elsie’s Business*, Washburn succeeds in translating the spoken word to the written text. While “you”—and George—have

experienced moments of confusion, by the end of novel, “you” finally find “your” place within this *foreign* language and *other* style of storytelling. After Elsie’s body is exhumed, “you” have plans to head back to Mississippi to figure everything out: “You turn around and glance back at Elsie’s coffin in the back, remembering that word that Oscar said to Irene. *Cunski. Cunski*. We’re going home daughter. *He ha’yela owi’hake*” (212, italics original). Through context, “you” learn the translation of *cunski* earlier in the novel, but “you” show that “you” have found “your” place in the story by using that word “yourself,” by referring to Elsie as “*Cunski*.” While “your” Indigenous education is not comprehensive of every aspect of Lakota life, “you” have come to learn a few things about the Lakota perspective.

In *Elsie’s Business*, through transformed treatment of Lakota language and Lakota oral tradition, Frances Washburn subversively uses “the enemy’s language” to immerse the non-Native reader in an interactive Lakota world. In using English, all implied readers, Native and non-Native alike, can enter the text, but only readers with a previous knowledge of Lakota culture can understand the complexities associated with Lakota language and oral tradition. As a result, Washburn makes the non-Native reader actively aware of his/her status as an outsider by not straightforwardly defining all Lakota aspects and by treating the reader as if he/she were a character *in* the novel. This immersive process provides an *invisible* and interactive education, ultimately challenging the non-Native reader to rethink “mainstream” culture, even if the non-Native reader does not fully understand a Lakota worldview. Similar to how Washburn leaves it unclear who killed Elsie, she illuminates for a non-Native reader, like myself, that not only am I not supposed to know who killed Elsie, but that I am also not supposed to understand *all* Lakota aspects of the text. While I have learned that *cunski*, on one level, means “daughter,” I also know it means a lot more. Ultimately, in the world of

Elsie's Business, I remain an outsider.

CHAPTER 4

THE GRADATIONS OF SUBVERSIVE LANGUAGE: THE REFUSAL TO MEDIATE IN
THE SHARPEST SIGHT

In Louis Owens's novel *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), the reader is immediately thrust into a syncretic text, and while all American Indian novels can be labeled syncretic, not only does Owens populate his English narrative with a significant amount of Choctaw words, he also refuses to fully translate these terms. Owens's refusal to explain Indigenous language affects the comprehensibility of multiple aspects of the novel—and, more specifically, creates two different narratives—but the current scholarship surrounding *The Sharpest Sight* ignores the notion of Choctaw language and instead falls into one of two camps. On one side, the novel has garnered an abundant amount of analysis about Owens's use of Western literary techniques. By focusing on Owens's allusions to Greek mythology and references to Western literary authors such as Herman Melville, William Shakespeare, and Robert Frost, among others, scholars have analyzed not only how these details allow *The Sharpest Sight* to inhabit a Western space, but also how these details mediate the text for the non-Native reader.^{xx} On the other side, while scholarship also exists about Owens's inclusion of Choctaw and Chumash cultural references, little analysis exists as to how Owens includes Indigenous language and how his linguistic choices affect the readability of *The Sharpest Sight*.^{xxi}

While Owens incorporates a significant amount of Choctaw terms in *The Sharpest Sight*, he refuses to *fully* define any of these Indigenous words. Instead of providing the reader with straightforward explanations, Owens circumvents translation on three different levels. In this chapter, I will examine *how* Owens both weaves Choctaw terms into *The Sharpest Sight* and *how* Owens withholds explanations of these Choctaw terms; I will do this

through analyzing Owens's three gradations of refused mediation—starting with words that appear to have simple definitions, moving to terms that are only somewhat explained, and finally looking at words that are left completely untranslated. In examining how Owens achieves these three types of linguistic mediation, I will also take into account Owens's use of English, his inclusion of Spanish words, and his decision to italicize Indigenous terms—ultimately illuminating the political purposes behind Owens's linguistic choices.

Through the combination of the English narration and the inclusion of unexplained Choctaw words, Owens both reclaims and “reinvents the enemy's language.” English allows Owens, first, to reach a wide audience with the “simple plot”—the plot that all readers, Native and non-Native alike, can glean (Burke 121).^{xxii} The “simple plot” also allows Owens to introduce—but not translate—Choctaw terms. Because the “simple plot” leads many non-Native readers to consider *The Sharpest Sight* a murder-mystery story, it requires no comprehension of Choctaw language, and, as a result, the presence of Indigenous terms creates an additional and more complicated story—the “complex plot,” the plot that privileges the Native reader.^{xxiii} How Owens's uses both English *and* Choctaw languages works in the way David Murray describes: “The fact of having to use English does not entail a passive adoption of white values,” rather, “it is an act of cultural and political assertion” (77). The specific linguistic choices that Owens makes in *The Sharpest Sight* work as acts of “cultural and political assertions”; through the use of English, Owens reclaims and reinvents “the enemy's language” to not only privilege the Native reader, but also to confront the non-Native reader with Choctaw terms that Owens refuses to translate.

A brief synopsis of the “simple plot” within *The Sharpest Sight* supports the often-made claim that the novel is a murder-mystery story. Set in both Amarga, California and the

swamps of Mississippi, the book starts with the disappearance of Attis McCurtain. Attis, who served in Vietnam, returns to California suffering from PTSD, and in the middle of a nightmare, he kills his girlfriend; Attis is subsequently placed in the veteran's hospital, the same hospital from which he mysteriously disappears at the beginning of the novel. Attis's disappearance propels the plot of *The Sharpest Sight* as the book specifically follows three characters' attempts to uncover the circumstances surrounding Attis's disappearance and presumed death. One of the characters, Mundo Morales, who is Attis's best friend as well as Amarga's sheriff, possesses personal and professional investment in this mystery, and investigates potential perpetrators of this crime. Simultaneously, Attis's father and brother, Hoey and Cole, respectively, conduct their own investigations. Cole's journey, in particular, leads him to think about his own identity as a mixedblood, and this self-analysis takes him to the swamps of Mississippi. The parts of the book that take place in Mississippi are the parts of the text that imply the second plot of the novel, the "complex plot." Mississippi is the home of Luther Cole, Hoey's uncle, a Choctaw medicine person, who exists within unexplained and oblique religious practices—references a non-Native reader will not understand, except in some kind of "mystical" sense. While any reader can comprehend the main themes and ideas of the "simple plot" of *The Sharpest Sight*—Mundo, Hoey, and Cole are trying to solve Attis's disappearance—not all readers will understand the Indigenous cultural references and Choctaw terms. By including details that not all readers will comprehend, Owens privileges Native readers through the creation of two distinct plots and works to reclaim "the enemy's language."

Before analyzing the three specific ways Owens refuses to mediate Choctaw language, thinking about Owens's linguistic choices in *The Sharpest Sight* requires

cognizance of the foremost mediation in the text. Like Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer* and Frances Washburn's *Elsie's Business*, the narrative of *The Sharpest Sight* is in English. I would like to acknowledge, once again, that for the American Indian writer, in the words of Owens himself, English is "an essentially appropriated language" that references not only centuries of forced assimilation, "but also the assimilation of 'alien' discourse by an oppressed people" (*Other Destinies* 12). Owens's awareness of the oppressive and historically complex power of English provides him the ability to use English as a subversive tool. Owens performs what Gloria Bird discusses in the introduction of *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*: "there is hope that in 'reinventing' the English language we will turn the process of colonization around, and that our literature will be viewed and read as a process of decolonization" (25, italics original). The way Owens uses English in *The Sharpest Sight* functions in the exact way Bird discusses; the English narrative not only allows Owens to tell a story to a large audience, but Owens's choice to use English also permits him to insert multiple untranslated Choctaw terms—creating an additional and different story for an Indigenous or culturally-knowledgeable audience. Ultimately, through the ability to create two separate plots, Owens's decision to use the "enemy's language" allows him to undermine the very framework within which colonization has forced him to work.

In addition to Owens's purposeful use of English in *The Sharpest Sight*, Owens also includes Spanish as another way to "reinvent the enemy's language." In fact, interestingly, Owens includes a Spanish term in the first chapter, whereas the first Choctaw words occur in the second chapter. In the first chapter, Owens introduces the reader to the character Mundo Morales, who, unbeknownst to him until later in the novel, is a mestizo—a mix of American Indian and Spanish peoples. The language that Owens uses to denote the presence of Mundo

is generally bestrewed with Spanish words, usually one at a time, at most two together, and only occasionally as part of a phrase; terms like “hermano” (32), “gringos” (43), “policia” (49), “chiquita” (99), “bruja” (136), and “huevos” (155), among others, frequently occur throughout the parts of the novel where Mundo is present.^{xxiv} These terms, while they technically belong to a language separate from English, are presented in specific ways that allow them to be comprehensible to readers with no knowledge of Spanish. First, Owens generally inserts these terms one at a time, allowing context and repetition to help the reader discern meaning. For example, at one point Mundo is talking to himself and Owens writes, “‘Pendejo,’ he said under his breath. ‘Fool’” (155). This is not the first time that Owens uses the term “pendejo,” and through repetition and a straightforward translation, all readers can comprehend that the basic meaning of “pendejo” is “fool.” The second way that Owens makes Spanish terms comprehensible is through visually integrating them into the text. This visual normalization—which works in direct opposition to how Owens italicizes Indigenous words—folds Spanish terms into the greater English narrative, ultimately making Spanish visibly equivalent to English, “the enemy’s language.” Owens’s decision to integrate Spanish terms into the text works simultaneously with his choice to italicize the Choctaw terms; these decisions work together to project the Indigenous terms as *other*. In the world of *The Sharpest Sight*, Spanish terms function as part of dominant society, oppressing Indigenous language; even though Spanish is a separate language from English, the way Owens uses Spanish in the novel allows it to work as part of “the enemy’s language.”

The two ways that Owens mediates Spanish for readers—clear explanations and visual integration—juxtapose with how Owens includes Choctaw terms. First, like Susan Power does in *The Grass Dancer* and like Frances Washburn does in *Elsie’s Business*,

Owens italicizes the Indigenous terms in *The Sharpest Sight*, visually distinguishing them as *different*. The first Indigenous term that Owens introduces to the reader occurs in the second chapter and this term, *koi*, is closely followed by other “foreign” words; on that same page, Owens uses *ishkitini*, *nalusachito*, and *shilombish* (7, italics original). However, Owens does not stop there; he also uses the term “soul-eater,” and while this term is in English, it remains an alien concept for the non-Native reader. This rush of Choctaw terminology is a stark contrast to the single Spanish term, “viejo,” that Owens uses in the first chapter. The term “viejo” appears repeatedly throughout the text, and by the end of the novel, the reader knows that “viejo” means “old” and that it is also used to refer to Mundo’s dead grandfather. The Choctaw terms presented in the second chapter —*koi*, *ishkitini*, *nalusachito*, *shilombish*, and soul-eater—are not mediated the way “viejo” is. In her dissertation, *On Sacred Ground: Medicine People in Native American Fiction*, in reference to this early onslaught of Choctaw terms, Brianna Burke asks, “how are readers to make sense of the concepts used in this passage?” (126). The simple answer to this question is that Non-native readers are unable to make sense of this passage; they *cannot*. Furthermore, non-Native readers *are not supposed* to make sense of this passage. This confrontation with Indigenous terms is how Owens privileges a Native reader. Burke continues: “Owens’s use of untranslated terms, in addition to ‘soul-eater,’ confront the reader with the unintelligible. If Owens were to explain, this is where he would need to do it, a mere seven pages into the narrative” (126). Because Owens refuses to explain these “unintelligible” terms at this point in the novel, it is clear that the purpose of including them is not to help establish a transparent story, not part of building the “simple plot.” Rather, the purpose of including these “foreign” terms sets the tone of the novel: similar to the way Washburn frames *Elsie’s Business* with Lakota language, the reader

of *The Sharpest Sight* becomes aware that s/he “is entering another world, an American Indian world” upon encountering this early collection of Choctaw terms (Stratton & Washburn 60).

In addition to Owens’s use of italics and unclear explanations, Owens employs three different strategies when it comes to translating (or refusing to translate) Choctaw words. Unlike Owens’s treatment of Spanish terms—meaning discerned through repetition and contextual clues—Owens’s inclusions of Choctaw words are not accompanied by full explanations. While Owens’s presentations of Choctaw ultimately refuse direct translation, Owens creates three levels of refused mediation: words that appear to have simple definitions, terms that are only somewhat explained, and words that are left completely untranslated. As with *The Grass Dancer* and *Elsie’s Business*, it is important to again consider whether complete and extensive translations of Indigenous terms and Indigenous ideology are even possible. In his article “Uncomprehended Mysteries: Language and Legend in the Writing of Zitkala-Ša and Mourning Dove,” Harry Brown plainly states that “authentic intercultural understanding is impossible” (68). As evidenced in Power’s seemingly simple translations, and Washburn’s definitions of Lakota terms like *Ina*, the non-Native reader, will never be able to *completely* understand all of the cultural implications inherent to particular Indigenous terms. However, with that in mind, thinking about *how* Owens chooses to present Choctaw terminology illustrates what the non-Native reader can and cannot take away from the text, or, essentially, what Owens *allows* the non-Native reader to take away from the text. For example, Brown compares the different ways Mourning Dove and Zitkala-Ša integrate Indigenous language into their texts and how both writers make different choices to accommodate the non-Native reader. Brown states, in reference to

Indigenous language, “Mourning Dove includes such terms throughout her narratives, along with explanatory footnotes and parenthetical pronunciation guides. She not only wants to convey an understanding of Okanogan stories but also a rudimentary lesson in the Okanogan tongue” (78). While Owens includes Choctaw terms in *The Sharpest Sight*, there are no pronunciation guides and there are certainly no footnotes explaining the terms. Zitkala-Ša, on the other hand, “divides legend from language using Sioux terms or Sioux names merely to provide descriptive texture, never serving as a means of linguistic instruction or cultural communication” (78). Owens’s choices in *The Sharpest Sight* are different from Zitkala-Ša’s as well; Owens does not just use Indigenous names, he uses specific language that provides specific “cultural communication” (78). Because Zitkala-Ša and Mourning Dove were writing in the early twentieth century, and because Owens wrote toward the end of the twentieth century, the changes in mediation illustrate Owens’s rejection of both forms of accommodations that were previously made to non-Native readers. Instead, Owens actively reclaims the “enemy’s language.”

In his first gradation of mediation, Owens provides seemingly simple definitions—definitions that a non-Native reader will understand on the most basic level, but definitions that fail to explain the Choctaw cultural significances that rest behind the terms. In this way, like Power and Washburn and their seemingly simple explanations, Owens works under the guise of mediation, but, in truth, this guise is a subversion, because he refuses to provide a comprehensive translation. This first level of mediation—providing seemingly simple definitions—occurs with the first Choctaw term that Owens employs: “he heard the low, muted cry of the *koi* outside the cabin, and he knew the story was forming to the pattern he had dreamed. After a few minutes the panther cried again” (7, italics original). The way

Owens appears to interchangeably use *koi* and panther suggests that the terms are synonymous. In addition to shifting from *koi* to panther, Owens also uses the verb “cry” each time: the “cry of the *koi*” and “the panther cried again.” The way “cry” moves from passive to active also adds to the evidence that *koi* means panther. At the same time, though, this shift in the action of crying also suggests that there are differences between *koi* and panther.

Owens has provided a seemingly simple definition—a *koi* is a panther—and because most readers will know what a panther is, the definition seems complete. In this translation, however, Owens refuses to explain the Choctaw cultural significance of *koi*. After providing a seemingly simple definition for *koi*, Owens continues the inclusion of animal terms, because the Choctaw term that follows *koi* is *ishkitini*. Again, Owens provides a seemingly simple translation: “he heard the horned owl—*ishkitini*—and he nodded his head” (7, italics original). Owens’s use of dashes in defining *ishkitini* creates a more direct translation than the explanation of *koi*. Interestingly, though, Owens never uses *ishkitini* in the text after this instance; instead, Owens uses “owl” for the rest of the novel—continuing to communicate to the non-Native reader that *ishkitini* is directly synonymous with the term owl. Owens’s refusal to use *ishkitini* again makes it seem that *ishkitini* is irrelevant and that the English term works better. While it initially appears that Owens has translated *koi* to mean panther, and *ishkitini* to mean owl, the way Owens continuously weaves not only the term *koi*, but also panther and owl imagery throughout the text, suggests that the definitions are more complex than what Owens originally implies.

While Owens uses panther and owl imagery consistently throughout the novel, consider, for example, what Owens does in chapter forty, a chapter that is less than a page long. Owens writes “Owls flew up,” “the great cat sprang in immense, sinewy strides behind

the vehicle, stretching low and bunching to hurl itself after him,” and “An owl flared in the headlights, rising from the road with spreading wings that blotted out everything” (217). To reiterate Burke’s words: how are readers to make sense of this? Chapter forty, which is a short, but culturally rich chapter, specifically illuminates *how* Owens manipulates English to subvert itself. This brief chapter contains no Indigenous terms, and yet, the ideas are wholly Indigenous. While all readers possess basic knowledge about animals like panthers and owls, and while the actions of the animals in this chapter are not unimaginable or out of the realm of “mainstream” reality, the Choctaw cultural meanings of such animals are absent not only from mainstream knowledge, but also from the text itself.^{xxv} Therefore, although Owens provides seemingly simple English definitions of *koi* and *ishkitini*, the translations are inadequate; in providing incomplete explanations, Owens works within the construct of mainstream literary standards as a way to undermine and subvert those very standards. In other words, Owens uses English to not only introduce Native ideas, but also as a way to refuse to explain Native ideas. Owens’s purpose in doing so, once again, works to “reclaim the enemy’s language” as well as to remind the non-Native reader that in entering the world of *The Sharpest Sight* s/he “is entering another world, an American Indian world” (Stratton and Washburn 60).

While the continued repetition and inclusion of *koi* throughout the novel suggests that the term is more complex than it initially appears, Owens continues to provide seemingly simple translations for *koi*. The character Cole McCurtain, who is not only Attis’s younger brother, but also one of the main characters of the novel, struggles with his identity as a mixedblood and, like the non-Native reader, is experiencing some of these Choctaw terms for the first time. For example, in regard to his uncertainty about his identity, Cole says to Hoey,

his father, ““you’ve always been telling us how Choctaws do things. But you just told me it says white on your birth certificate. Why do you have to be just one thing or the other?””

(59). Hoey admits that his own knowledge about being Choctaw is incomplete, but Hoey reminds Cole about Uncle Luther, a Choctaw medicine person. Hoey tells Cole: ““You got a chance to listen to him now. Maybe you can learn some of the things I never learned. You’re smarter than me, and you’re smarter than your brother, so maybe you can learn something””

(59). Cole goes to Mississippi to stay with Luther, not only as a way to gain a better understanding of his heritage, but also as a way to escape conscription. Because he has been drafted, in order to avoid the war that caused Attis’s PTSD, Cole goes to Mississippi to stay with his great uncle, Luther.

Upon Cole’s arrival in Mississippi, Luther tells Cole that ““We got another visitor out there”” (65). Luther’s oblique comment eludes Cole because Cole inquires about the identity of this extra guest. To Cole’s question, Owens writes, ““*Koi,*’ the old man said. ‘Painter”” (65).^{xxvi} But Luther, similar to the way Oscar acts after telling “you” a story in *Elsie’s Business*, does not explain what he means. Instead, Owens writes, “He stood up while Cole watched him and went to a wooden trunk at the foot of the other bed, opening the trunk and pulling out a couple of brown wool blankets,” and the two get ready for bed (66). As Cole attempts to fall asleep, “the sound that had been deep in the trees moved closer, and he heard the cry of a man in pain, the sound muted and liquid” (67). Owens continues to associate the verb “cry” with *koi* and when Cole hears this cry, he thinks, ““*Koi,*’ the old man had said. A panther” (67). While this is the third time Owens has directly defined *koi* as a panther, and another instance of linking “cry” to *koi*, the cultural translation of *koi* seems simple, but less than explicit. With the term *koi*, all readers are aware of the fact that, at the most basic level,

it is a panther, but for the privileged Native reader with a knowledge of Choctaw culture, the idea contains more, and ultimately adds to the “complex plot” of the novel. Even though Owens continues to weave *koi* throughout the text, the “simple plot” does not become inaccessible to the non-Native reader; for the non-Native reader, *koi* is a lurking panther that potentially represents something more, but lacking the deeper meaning of *koi* does not contribute or detract from the “simple plot” of the book.

While the way Owens provides ostensibly simple explanations for terms like *koi* and *ishkitini* mimics the seemingly straightforward definitions that Power and Washburn also provide, it is Owens’s two other levels of refused linguistic translations that separate *The Sharpest Sight* from *The Grass Dancer* and *Elsie’s Business*. In the second level of translation, Owens provides partial explanations, or what I will call “middle ground” definitions. The “middle ground” terms are more complex than the seemingly simple definitions of terms like *koi* and *ishkitini*. At the same time, however, Owens provides more information about these “middle ground” terms than the information he provides in the third kind of mediation—words that are left *completely* unexplained. For example, one “middle ground” term that Owens uses is *kashehotapalo*. Initially Owens provides an elusive explanation of this word: Luther states to Onatima, “I don’t know what you mean. Invading a man’s home and talking like a crazy woman. One would think *kashehotapalo* had had his way with you in the forest” (25-26, italics original). To which Onatima replies, “Some old men have their way with no one, but can only make hog talk” (26). From the context, a reader unfamiliar with the term *kashehotapalo* walks away from this section without a good understanding of what the word means. While implied meanings exist—perhaps *kashehotapalo* is some kind of monster or evil being that commits violence against women—

these potential meanings are left unexplained. It initially appears that Owens refuses to provide *any* context for *kashehotapalo*, but fifty pages later, when Luther talks to Cole, he provides another oblique explanation of *kashehotapalo*. Luther says, “he’s a man and a deer and he likes to scare folks when they’re out at night” (77). A non-Native reader might interpret *kashehotapalo* as an instance of what some critics call “magical realism”; however, as discussed in my first chapter in regard to *The Grass Dancer*, labeling cultural beliefs as “unreal” is culturally imperialistic, and, classifying *kashehotapalo*, which is part of Choctaw ideology, as “unreal” is essentially racist. Burke states that Owens “comes dangerously close to allowing his narrative to be viewed as ‘fantastical’ by readers who don’t understand this material. For some, his story might seem to stray into the realm of Magical Realism [...] however, Owens is not writing to mediate this text for readers who may misread” (Burke 127). Similar to how Luther does not explain *koi* to Cole, Luther’s explanation of *kashehotapalo* is followed up by a comment that does not clarify the definition: “Even that one wouldn’t scare the meanest fucker of mothers in the valley” (77). And, again, to restate Burke’s concern: how are readers to interpret this explanation? The answer remains the same: non-Native readers *are not supposed* to make sense of this. Owens works to privilege the Native reader, to let the non-Native reader know that the world of *The Sharpest Sight* is embedded in Choctaw ways of knowing and understanding.

In this middle level of mediation, like the example of *kashehotapalo*, Owens does exactly what James Ruppert proclaims that Leslie Marmon Silko does in her writing: “She does not want to lose an outsider by including too much Laguna detail nor a Native American reader by over emphasizing goals and methods too Western. She consciously analyzes which cultural codes to use and to whom she is speaking at any one point in the text” (20). In

choosing to give an explanation of *kashehotapalo*, albeit an evasive one, Owens provides some context for the non-Native reader, but Owens also avoids redundancy for the Native reader who is already familiar with this term. With “middle ground” terms, the information provided is less straightforward than the definitions given for the first type of mediation; seemingly simple explanations, like the definition of *koi*, while incomplete, are more comprehensible than the definition of *kashehotapalo*. However, at the same time, the elusive explanation of *kashehotapalo* that Owens provides is more information than what he includes for the terms that are left completely unexplained. The way Owens chooses to walk the line between the Native reader and the non-Native reader is how *The Sharpest Sight* is able to contain two stories. While all readers can comprehend the “simple plot,” the reader who is familiar with Choctaw cultural references and Choctaw language gleans an additional and different plot, the “complex plot.” This reader, who understands the complex definitions of *koi*, *ishkitini*, and *kashehotapalo*, gains a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying occurrences in the novel as well as a deeper comprehension of characters like Luther. The readers who enter *The Sharpest Sight* with a knowledge of Choctaw cultural references also possess privilege when it comes to terms that Owens refuses to define at all.

While Owens does not *completely* define any of the Choctaw terms in the novel, there are some terms within the text that just seem to sit there, without any conceivable context—for the non-Native reader, at least. In *The Sharpest Sight*, the Native terms that exist in this third level of mediation—completely undefined and completely untranslated—are actually few. These undefined words operate in the same way that Oscar’s storytelling works in *Elsie’s Business*; Washburn chooses to leave Oscar’s stories unexplained and Owens chooses not to explicate some Indigenous words, confronting the non-Native reader with this *other*

language. While Owens does not initially provide definitions for some of the early Choctaw terms previously mentioned—which were *nalusachito*, *shilombish*, as well as the idea of the “soul-eater”—he continues to include these words in the novel and through repetition, the non-Native reader gleans a “middle ground” understanding. While Power and Washburn sometimes also include concepts that possess more complexity than terms that can be seemingly easily defined, the way Power and Washburn define such terms force them to remain in that seemingly straightforward level of mediation. In *The Sharpest Sight*, there are Choctaw terms that Owens only uses once, sometimes twice, that do not get any sort of explanation. For example, at the end of chapter three, as Attis’s body is floating down the river, Owens writes, “he began to turn, slowly, swinging in a wide circle, around and around in a great whirlpool, the dead trees etched now against a black vault of sky. ‘*Chahta yakni.*’ The words echoed as if he had spoken them. ‘*Chahta isht ia,*’ a voice answered back” (8-9). The chapter then ends, providing no context for the non-Native reader. What do these words mean? Who answers back? The next chapter begins without any explanation of what happened at the end of the third chapter and Owens refuses to provide any explanation of this scene in the remainder of the book. Another instance of zero translation occurs when Luther says to Onatima, ““Yes. It’s happening the way it’s supposed to. There is a tree, and the *sheki* has come. The cleansing begins. It’s not quite time for the younger nephew to find what he searches for”” (163). As with all of the Choctaw terms in the novel, this term is italicized, visually setting it apart; but Owens provides no clear explanation—neither from content nor from context. Again, this is where Owens specifically makes use of English as a construct for communicating the “simple plot” to the non-Native reader, while also privileging the Native reader by purposefully refusing to define Choctaw phrases.

Owens also uses this third level of mediation—completely untranslated Choctaw words—to point to the damaging affects colonization has had on Indigenous languages. In the same chapter that *sheki* appears, Luther approaches Onatima and “Softly he kissed her neck. ‘*Anushkunna*. You know that word, old lady?’” (165, italics original). To this, Onatima replies, ““You butcher the tongue, old man. You don’t speak the language”” (165). This notion of speaking the language incorrectly illuminates another layer of untranslatability in regard to Choctaw terms in *The Sharpest Sight*. On top of refusing to provide a definition of *Anushkunna*, Owens leaves it unclear whether Onatima is teasing Luther or being truthful. Nevertheless, her proclamation about Luther’s inability to speak Choctaw implies his slippery relationship with it. In this way, Onatima’s comment also implies reference to the fact that “Native Americans have had several centuries of experience with authoritative discourse, having had their native languages ruthlessly suppressed” (*OD* 12). In other words, American Indians have been forced to speak the “enemy’s language” for a long time. Even though Owens makes no direct references to events such as forced assimilation through boarding schools, the implication of Luther’s tenuous knowledge of Choctaw language refers to “the devastating affects of the forced adoption of English” (Stratton 68). While Owens’s references to linguistic oppression are oblique, the fact that Onatima insinuates Luther’s inability to effectively speak Choctaw implies the lasting effects colonization has had on Indigenous peoples and on Indigenous languages.

In addition to Onatima proclaiming that Luther does not correctly speak the Choctaw language, Luther himself recognizes his weak grasp of Indigenous language. Luther recalls the time he gave Cole a Choctaw name. Owens writes, “‘*Taska mikushi humma*,’ he said, pausing for a moment and then adding, ‘I think that’s right, but I ain’t positive, it’s been so

long and I don't hardly talk Indian no more. Means something like Little-chief-warrior Red” (75). Luther's acknowledgement of his incompetence in terms of Choctaw language supports Onatima's claims that Luther does not speak the language correctly. Again, as with *Anushkunna*, the translation of *Taska mikushi humma* is only acknowledged as uncertain, and Owens refuses to provide a comprehensive or *correct* translation. Luther's apprehensive translation of his Choctaw name for Cole reinforces what dominant society has done to Native language and culture, and the fact that Luther admits the way he gave Cole a nickname was “Not the regular way” alludes to the damaging affects that have been waged upon Indigenous people for hundreds of years. At the same time, Luther's decision to give Cole a nickname that was “Not the regular way” also attests to survival. Like the way Owens uses English in *The Sharpest Sight* to “reinvent the enemy's language,” Luther uses English to perpetuate the little Choctaw language he knows. Even though Luther alters the circumstances of a Choctaw ceremony—giving Cole a nickname—he still performs the act, making a statement of survival and perhaps even cultural revitalization, despite his uncertain grasp of Choctaw language.

Both Luther and Hoey feel uncomfortable with Choctaw language, and inevitably, so does Cole. Because Cole spends the novel grappling with his identity as a mixedblood, he also spends time grappling with his lack of understanding of Indigenous language. Gloria Bird states, “Often our ancestors were successfully conditioned to perceive native language as inferior or defective in comparison to the English. A direct response, as it often happened, was that the previous generation did not teach tribal languages to our generation” (24). Speaking to Cole, Hoey admits his lack of knowledge when it comes to “being Indian”: ““The damned trouble is I don't know very much. I didn't listen well enough back then””

(59). Even though Hoey fails to be a linguistic resource for Cole, Hoey later says, ““But you still got Uncle Luther. You got a world in that old man”” (60). While Luther certainly continues to use Choctaw medicine, his use of Choctaw language, as evidenced above, is less than comprehensive. Stratton and Washburn write, “If language is the carrier of culture, then it follows that the loss of language would also mean the loss of culture, or parts of culture for the speakers of that lost language, and future generations who have not learned the language might very well have absences in the understanding of their own culture” (60). The fact that Luther, a medicine person, is implied to have a nebulous grasp on language, represents the magnitude that colonization has had upon Indigenous people; the fact that Cole also feels uncomfortable with Choctaw language represents the “absence in understanding his own culture.” At the same time, though, because Luther continues to practice Choctaw medicine and Choctaw ceremonies, he—like Owens does in writing *The Sharpest Sight*—reinvents and reclaims the enemy’s language in order to survive. Through the use of English, Luther is able to pass aspects of Choctaw culture on to Cole, just like Owens is able to pass on aspects of Choctaw culture to those who know how to see them.

In spite of the problem of untranslatability that all American Indian writers face, Louis Owens approaches mediation from a different angle than Susan Power and Frances Washburn do. While Power works hard to mediate *The Grass Dancer* and while Washburn chooses to mediate some aspects of *Elsie’s Business*—but not all—Louis Owens refuses to accommodate the non-Native reader in *The Sharpest Sight*. Owens’s purposeful choice to narrate the novel in English combined with his decision to leave Choctaw words untranslated make a powerful political statement: Owens actively reclaims and “reinvents the enemy’s language.” Instead of using English to cater to the non-Native reader, Owens uses English to

privilege the Native reader. In using English to communicate the “simple plot” to all readers, Owens inserts Choctaw religious, cultural, and linguistic references that comprise the “complex plot.” While these components work to privilege the Native reader—because a reader with prior Indigenous cultural knowledge will pick up on these references—the “otherness” of these details also work to confront the non-Native reader with an Indigenous worldview. In refusing to translate Choctaw language, Owens performs “an act of political assertion”; through the use of English language, Owens makes it clear that English does not singly represent oppression (Murray 77). While Owens’s novel, at first glance, possesses a simple story—much like the terms *koi* and *ishkitini* possess seemingly simple definitions—upon closer examination, that simple story fails to encapsulate all that the novel implies. As a non-Native reader, I am unable to decode the “complex plot” of Owens’s novel, but I do know that *koi* does not just mean panther and I also know that *The Sharpest Sight* is not just another murder-mystery novel.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

In this thesis, my initial question regarding the absence of American Indian literature from my personal education remains a broad query without a simple answer. Instead, the research performed here examines one particular angle of Native-authored texts: *how* American Indian writers choose (or refuse) to linguistically accommodate the three implied audiences of American Indian literature. In pursuing an investigation of mediation—specifically the relationship between English and Indigenous languages and *how* authors utilize both—I have attempted to not only show the immensely difficult feat American Indian authors are required to perform, but to also explain a potential reason behind the absence of American Indian literature from classrooms across the country.

In examining three novels, Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*, Frances Washburn's *Elsie's Business*, and Louis Owens's *The Sharpest Sight*, I know my project fails to be exhaustive of all the potential linguistic methods American Indian writers might employ while writing for three distinct audiences: "a local one, a pan-tribal one, and a non-Native contemporary American one" (Ruppert 15). Despite the fact that my thesis is incapable of looking at *all* possible linguistic choices, the novels I analyze represent a spectrum of mediations: from consistent and seemingly straightforwardly translated Dakota language in *The Grass Dancer*, to a middle-ground mediation in *Elsie's Business*, and finally to the refusal to accommodate the non-Native reader in *The Sharpest Sight*. While these novels represent a range of mediation, all three texts illuminate political significances of weaving Indigenous languages with "the enemy's language," English. After centuries of oppression and suppression, Power, Washburn, and Owens, among all American Indian writers, assert

that “the enemy’s language” alone will not do these stories justice; even though English constitutes the majority of the language in all three novels, *The Grass Dancer*, *Elsie’s Business*, and *The Sharpest Sight* would be incomplete without the presence of Dakota, Lakota, and Choctaw languages, respectively. In inserting Indigenous languages, all three writers make the overarching political statement that EuroAmericans and colonizers have not “succeeded” in eliminating American Indian peoples. Together, along with all American Indian writers, Power, Washburn, and Owens declare, “We remain.” But the political statements of these texts extend beyond assertion of continued existence; Power, Washburn, and Owens also announce, through these texts, that the multiple Indigenous ways of knowing, seeing, and perceiving the world also persist. American Indian peoples do not only continue to exist, but American Indian peoples continue to see and discuss the world through the lens of Indigenous languages.

However, the writers’ statements regarding continued existence and maintained modes of perception only constitute one part of the political statement conveyed in these novels. Beyond serving as an assertion of survival, the fact that Power, Washburn, and Owens all make their texts readable to non-Native readers, through the use of English, constitutes the other part of the political implications inherent in *The Grass Dancer*, *Elsie’s Business*, and *The Sharpest Sight*. Power, Washburn, and Owens *choose* to send these stories *outside* of their respective Indigenous communities, not only allowing the stories to be read and comprehended pan-tribally, but also by readers who are EuroAmerican, non-Native. In allowing outsiders—readers who potentially possess no cultural knowledge regarding American Indian peoples—into the worlds of these texts is a powerful choice. Non-Native readers, through these texts’ accommodations, are given glimpses into Indigenous

communities, Indigenous modes of thinking, and Indigenous ways of seeing the world. While these texts neither attempt nor allow non-Native readers to deceive themselves into thinking they understand what it means to be American Indian, these texts work as forms of radical enculturation, by allowing non-Native readers to experience Indigenous worldviews. Because Power, Washburn, and Owens on some level let outsiders into their cultures—cultures that have always been seen as “less than” by “mainstream” culture—these writers “restructure” EuroAmerican modes of thinking. Furthermore, the fact that American Indian writers continue to write illustrates that they have something important to say. In short, Power, Washburn, and Owens, along with all American Indian writers, convey that EuroAmerican stories are not the only ones that constitute *American* stories.

Looking at a range of ways Native authors choose to present Indigenous language illuminates potential reasons behind *why* non-Native instructors may feel uncomfortable teaching American Indian texts. Despite the fact that all three writers have produced comprehensible novels for non-Native readers, on at least some level, all three novels also possess material that rests outside the realm of “mainstream” culture and outside of “mainstream” literary techniques—Indigenous modes of perception that challenge non-Native readers with the *unknown*. While the inclusion of Indigenous modes of perception does not morally justify excluding American Indian novels from classroom syllabi, American Indian novels certainly invite the reader “toward a restructuring of [...] preconceptions and expectations” (Ruppert ix). For many non-Native instructors and readers, this “restructuring” can be more than challenging—at times incomprehensible—and such *radical* ideas can scare non-Native readers away. This incomprehensibility *somewhat* justifies the absence of Native-authored texts from classrooms with non-Native instructors; because non-Native instructors

do not wish to teach these texts irresponsibly, the absence of American Indian literature is for a legitimate reason. At the same time, many other complex reasons exist as to why American Indian texts are often ignored in classrooms and excluded from syllabi.

The other potential reasons that could explain the absence of Native-authored literature from commercial and academic contexts brought up a whole slew of questions I would like to eventually explore. For example, in thinking about linguistic accommodations, neither the role of publishing houses nor the role of the literary canon can be ignored; both have a significant, if difficult to pin down, impact on the presence of texts in both commercial and academic contexts. What kind of demands do publishing houses make? In what ways are independent and university publishing houses different from mainstream publishing houses? Obviously larger publishing houses possess more funds for promoting, marketing, etc., but how are the messages pushed forward by mainstream publishing houses different than the messages pushed forward by smaller presses? Furthermore, the role of the publishing industry also ties in to the placement (or displacement) of American Indian literature within the literary canon. The issues surrounding the literary canon and the American Indian novel prove complicated and manifold, and needless to say, the relationship between these two entities is equally complex—far more complicated than my thesis can currently explore.

In addition to thinking about the role of publishing houses and the elusive and intricate literary canon, I am also interested in further exploring *what* texts are taught in classrooms across the country. While I don't think my experience as a non-Native student is an anomaly—in the sense that I never read a Native-authored text before coming to graduate school—I have to wonder about the experiences of others. From looking at high schools and

colleges across the country, between private, public, and reservation schools, I am interested to see how reading lists vary. Does regionalism play a role in the presence of American Indian literature in schools? Additionally, examining available university course selections and the prevalence of American Indian Studies courses and majors also plays a significant impact on my question about the presence of Native-authored literature in classrooms across the country. It would also prove interesting to think about the presence of Indigenous writers in all of North America; do Mexico and Canada include more or less Indigenous-authored texts in their classrooms? How are the politics different in those countries? As is evidenced by my multitude of questions, the issues surrounding the presence (or absence) of Native-authored texts in classrooms proves to be quite a large and complex topic.

While my questions for further research about this topic are both multiple and complex, I must also acknowledge that my thesis is not without gaps. As mentioned in my introduction, one of the issues I faced while working on this project was the lack of current sources—not only regarding these specific books, but also in reference to the way in which I approached these texts. Because the conversation about these texts and the method of analysis I am pursuing is small, I know there is certainly room for improvement in the work I have done. For example, in all three novels, I do not attempt to look at every single instance of Indigenous language; while doing so might be beneficial for the project at large, it seemed redundant for the purposes of this thesis. Additionally, while I maintain a focus on linguistic mediations in these novels, I must acknowledge that all three authors make other mediated choices in their texts as well. To completely examine all the ways in which these novels are mediated, I would need to look at not only language, but also content, the publication details,

how the book was disseminated, the plot, etc. In other words, mediation through linguistic choices is not the only way American Indian writers reach all three implied audiences.

And, finally, the last gap I must acknowledge is my role as a non-Native reader. Because I am a non-Native reader myself—and even though I know that was the angle from which I approached this subject—I know that my knowledge is limited when it comes to Indigenous history. While I aimed to respectfully approach all of the texts, I know that, as a non-Native reader, I most likely bring some unintended biases to my analysis. As I continue my studies, I anticipate my knowledge and understanding will broaden and I also intend to maintain a culturally respectful approach to American Indian literature. Because, in order for American Indian literature to have a more prominent place within the literary scene, not only do Indigenous scholars need to study Native-authored texts, but non-Native scholars need to put forth a respectful effort as well. I hope that I have done so here.

NOTES

ⁱ The fact that scholarship about these three novels remains scarce is reason enough to expand the current dialogue or to start a new conversation.

ⁱⁱ For discussions about the role of magical realism (or lack thereof) in *The Grass Dancer*, please consult: Neil H. Wright's "Visitors from the Spirit Path: Tribal Magic in Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*"; Lee Schweninger's "Myth Launchings and Moon Landings: Parallel Realities in Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*"; Vanessa Holford Diana's "'I am not a fairy tale': Contextualizing Sioux Spirituality and Story Traditions in Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*"; Roland Walter's "Pan-American (Re)Visions: Magical Realism and Amerindian Cultures in Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*, Gioconda Belli's *La Mujer Habitada*, Linda Hogan's *Power*, and Mario Vargas Llosa's *El Hablador*."

ⁱⁱⁱ The term "magical realism" is highly contested—on both sides of the issue. I refrain from using it because I do not think that Power's novel implies anything "magical" or "unreal." She writes about the experience she knows. Additionally, in an interview with Shari Oslos, Power states, "I actually do disagree with this, is they talk about how my work is an example of magical realism and making references to writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I really feel that given the culture I was raised in, this is not magical realism, this is actual reality to me" (Interview with Shari Oslos).

^{iv} While the Dakota perspective plays a large role in *The Grass Dancer*, as a non-Native reader myself, I do not want to attempt to read the *cultural* implications of these details; rather, I am interested in thinking about the accessibility of the linguistic choices that Power makes.

^v Throughout my thesis, I adopt and reword the title of a book edited by Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird: *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*. What Power, Washburn, Owens do with English encapsulates many of the goals articulated by Harjo and Bird in the introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*.

^{vi} For a fairly succinct summary of the plot of *The Grass Dancer*, consult Jacqueline Brogan's article "'Two Distinct Voices': The Revolutionary Call of Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*."

^{vii} Each time I reference an Indigenous word used in these novels, I am using the same orthography used by the individual author. Unless otherwise noted, I always italicize when the author does.

^{viii} The other words that Power includes are: *Takoja* which is translated as "grandson" (121, 328, 330); *Ina* which means "mother" (155, 277); *Atewaye* which means "father" (230); *Tanke* which is translated as "older sister" (247, 249, 274); *koda* which is translated to mean "friend" (260, 318); *tatanka* which means "buffalo" (275); *mato* which means "bear" (275); and *mičhepi* which means "my flesh" (276).

^{ix} In making this assertion, I do not intend to imply that Wakan Tanka is a simple concept that can be easily reduced to the definition of “the Great Spirit.” I recognize that the term possesses complex cultural meaning, but in thinking about linguistic accessibility, Power provides a simple definition that allows the non-Native reader to access, on a surface level, a *sense* of the meaning of Wakan Tanka.

^x The other unitalicized yet contextually defined proper nouns are: Iktomi, “the tricky spider who was both clever and imprudent and whose misadventures served to instruct” (61); Wanaği Tačanku, translated as the Spirit Road, which means something similar to the notion of heaven or afterlife (104, 118, 122); Tate Akičita, the Dakota name for Calvin (170); Ini Naon Win, the name Lydia calls herself because it means Silent Woman (216); Čuwignaka Duta, Dakota name for Red Dress (222, 229, 234, 239); Šunka Gleška, name of dog, means Spotted Dog (240); Šunka Wakan Wanaği, Dakota name for Ghost Horse (243); Čanwapekasna Wi, early October/autumn moon (259); and Waniyetu Wi, November/Winter moon (260). (Admittedly, this list might be missing a few terms, due to human error.)

^{xi} In no way am I attempting to argue that Power’s choices make her book more or less worthy of study than Washburn’s or Owens’s novels.

^{xii} Even Diana’s decision to call Power’s Dakota realisms “supernatural elements” is problematic. Despite the fact that Diana is teaching this text to her students, her own perception of Power’s tactics fail to understand the inherent Dakota worldview in *The Grass Dancer*.

^{xiii} By “invisible,” I mean that Washburn provides Indigenous details in a way that makes the reader feel as if s/he is a character in the novel. Because of this immersion, Washburn provides an invisible education, rather than a “forced” education. As Washburn states, “Indigenous peoples cannot force dominant cultures into understanding, but writers, both indigenous and nonindigenous, must make every effort to foster cultural understanding in order for indigenous groups not only to survive in the world but also to prosper” (“The Risk of Misunderstanding” 185).

^{xiv} For reviews of *Elsie’s Business*, please consult: Jeff Berglund’s “Native Storiers: Five Selections (review)”; Peter Grandbois’s “*Elsie’s Business*, by Frances Washburn”; and Louise Cummings Maynor’s “*Elsie’s Business*.”

^{xv} Washburn’s decision to use second person narration has not been received positively. In fact, in the same e-mail correspondence, Washburn states, I have been asked often since the publication of the book, how I ‘got away with’ using second person. It seems that editors and publishers are vehemently opposed to that technique; I don’t know why.”

^{xvi} Interestingly enough, this story is also alluded to in Susan Power’s *The Grass Dancer* (61). In *The Grass Dancer* though, Power does not share the narrative.

^{xvii} Additionally, because I am a non-Native reader, I am not at liberty to culturally read the Indigenous stories that Washburn includes in the novel.

^{xviii} Another aspect to consider when examining *how* Washburn presents the written version of oral tradition in *Elsie's Business* is the history of how oral tradition has been recorded. While I will not go into the history at length here, it is interesting to keep in mind the work of Dell Hymes and Dennis Tedlock—both of whom worked with the transcriptions of Native oral tradition. Washburn discusses how Hymes and Tedlock developed a system that reflected the various aspects of oral tradition; Washburn writes, “For example, different-sized type fonts indicate volume of speech with (logically) smaller type indicating a softer, lower volume than normal voice, and capital letters in larger type indicate a louder than normal voice” (“The Risk of Misunderstanding” 188). She continues with the details regarding their system of visual representation, and while Washburn does not adhere to this particular system in *Elsie's Business*, Washburn’s decision to italicize and center align Oscar’s stories mimic the deliberate choices of visual representation that Tedlock and Hymes developed. Because Washburn chooses to set the stories of *Anukite* and *Sinte Sapela Win* a part from the rest of the text, she communicates the performative aspect of the oral tradition. For Washburn’s full discussion of the work of Tedlock and Hymes, see her essay, “The Risk of Misunderstanding in Greg Sarris’s *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*.”

^{xix} Even though Washburn stops italicizing these terms, I will continue to italicize them in this chapter for the sake of continuity.

^{xx} For discussions of Owens’s use of Western literary techniques, see: Carolyn Holbert’s “‘Stranded in the Wasteland’: Literary Allusion in *The Sharpest Sight*”; Bernadette Rigal-Cellard’s “Western Literary Models and Their Native American Revisiting: The Hybrid of Aesthetics of Owens’s *The Sharpest Sight*”; Chris LaLonde’s “Discerning Connections, Revising the Master Narrative, and Interrogating Identity in Louis Owens’s *The Sharpest Sight*”; Margaret Dwyer’s “The Syncretic Impulse: Louis Owens’ Use of Autobiography, Ethnology, and Blended Mythologies in *The Sharpest Sight*”; and Melody Graulich’s “The Salinas Valley: Autobiographical, Critical, and Environmental Musings on John Steinbeck and Louis Owens.”

^{xxi} For a discussion of Owens’s inclusion of Chumash and Choctaw cultural references, see: Melody Graulich’s “Unearthing the Chumash Presence in *The Sharpest Sight*.”

^{xxii} In her dissertation, *On Sacred Ground: Medicine People in Native American Fiction*, Brianna Burke labels the plot of the novel that all readers can understand the “simple plot” (121). I use this term throughout this chapter, but, because I use it so often, I will not parenthetically cite it each time.

^{xxiii} As a non-Native reader, I am not at liberty to culturally read the presence of Indigenous terms included in the text; rather, I am interested in thinking about what Owens presents to the reader—Native and non-Native alike—and, as a result, what is left out of *sight*.

^{xxiv}The terms I have listed here are not exhaustive of every Spanish term Owens uses in the novel. Additionally, the pages I have paired with each term are single instances; many of the words in this catalogue occur multiple times in the novel.

^{xxv}Here, “mainstream” refers to what non-Native readers generally associate with “reality.” However, as in the novels of Power and Washburn, the notion of “mainstream reality” implies that the Indigenous realities occurring in books like *The Grass Dancer*, *Elsie’s Business*, and *The Sharpest Sight* are unreal. In this specific instance, though, what Owens writes about in chapter forty is *not* outside of “mainstream” reality—meaning non-Native readers *should* be able to accept what is happening.

^{xxvi}Owens uses “Painter” instead of “Panther” to communicate *how* Luther says the word.

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