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James Welch's winter in the blood as contemporary literary pragmatism

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Abstract
James Welch's work functions simultaneously as self-exploration, contemporary literary pragmatism, and as a form of anthropology and archeology used to identify and interrogate historic, social, cultural, and political realities. In addition, it contains a fundamental binary composed of a pragmatic, grounded gaze at certain realities of living experience nevertheless often expressed in abstractions that invite theoretical association. In this sense the frontier still exists, a place wherein there is not only the scarcity of buildings, railroads, and other infrastructures by which we deem places civilized, but where there is a kind of scarcity of language and understanding as well. High theory, like a Manhattan skyscraper, is of limited value in this land and mindscape, where utility within a local context is valued above all else. At the same time, there is a need to understand and articulate lived experience that quickly achieves higher levels of abstraction.

Keywords: self-exploration, contemporary literary pragmatism, and as a form of anthropology and archeology used to identify and interrogate historic, social, cultural, and political realities

Introduction

Welch's *winter in the Blood* has been said to exhibit elements, including social isolation, an Oedipus complex, censorship, authority, and the failure of written discourse to provide resolution of these aspects of the plot. The failure of written discourse also reflects the limitations of language in general, which, although enormously useful to human beings, is at best a rudimentary tool for accessing the wilderness of reality. There is a tendency to be judgmental about hinterlands, to assume places like New York City are superior to an "Indian reservation," and that, by association, so are their residents. It is likely, however, that were New Yorkers forced to function on their own in the milieu of the average American Indian living in an existing tribal community like those reflected in much of Welch's work, they would soon realize the complexity of doing so. In fact, visiting medical doctors, capitalists, and academics of all kinds baffled at the ways money, education, or connections failed to facilitate their individual agendas at Fort Belknap.

To begin, in a situation where the language that evolved over millennia to fit a certain place has been destroyed, simple acts of naming become near impossible, to say nothing of achieving understanding. Add to such destruction the enforced substitution of a foreign language used primarily for deception, and it begins to become understandable why history, reality, and language seem to stand so far apart from one another in the tribal community perceived by the narrator of *winter in the Blood*.

The assertion that the book "laments the inevitable slippage of signifier from signified" is supported by the fact that neither insiders nor outsiders have the advantage in understanding what is going on. The infrastructure of stories recounting and explaining what happened in the past has been destroyed; much of what has replaced the past is in total conflict with the warp of colonial distortion; and, as a result of the corruption of the past and present, the means by which tribal people believe it's possible to influence the future has been significantly hindered.

Naming and language, the dialectic of presence and absence, and the recurring theme of "distance" have all worked to create what has been described as a contrary doubleness in *Winter in the Blood*: "the narrator's identification of and desire to abolish 'distance' in order to fuse self and other coexists with the idea that the 'distance' resulting from spatial and temporal separation becomes necessary to cure his winter in the blood." Although usually incompletely developed, this concept of spatial and temporal, or, place versus time separation, is helpful in establishing both the theoretical as well as the pragmatic ground for not only *winter in the Blood*, but also for the larger body of Welch's work.

Textual dissonances related to distance and the paradox of desire, desire and its relationship to larger textual disorder, and disorder and its relationship to the productive matrix of Welch's fiction are ways to begin discussion of spatial and temporal separation. First, it is in the "recognition scenes," including the attempted rescue of the stranded spinster cow, and the narrator's visit to Yellow Calf, wherein the old man tells him of the Blackfeet's effort to stay alive during a particularly hard winter, we see what has been described as the double movement of the novel. On the one hand, trying to achieve intimacy with the desired object(s); on the other hand, trying to maintain an objective distance, the narrator attempts to deal with his situation: "By noting the novel's investment in defining distance as something that needs both to be overcome and yet remains a condition to strive for, we confront what Belsey calls the very paradox of desire."

Textual dissonance also works within the critical consensus of opinion that the narrator can not only overcome a host of disadvantages, through forging a meaningful relationship with a female, he can also find a workable identity. Fiction usually strives to achieve its own consensus by explaining, ordering, and providing clues to a central theme. As silence determines

sound, however, and emptiness shapes form, literatures of resistance often conceal a sort of backboard of conflicting subtext, against which the surface story can propel itself forward.

In *Winter in the Blood*, this subtext consists of the historical fact of the American holocaust perpetrated against American Indians, the narrator's projection of elements of the holocaust he has internalized onto the women in his life, and the use of humor to emphasize the absurdity of negative and self-feeding cycles such as colonization. Juxtaposing the text of redemption through romantic love, and the subtext of violence and destruction, can be read as a prefiguring of classical realism to address social, cultural, and political realities. In so doing, it can be fairly said that Welch also elevates his art beyond a commodity for easy consumption, a medium for entertainment, or as a text echoing triumphalism expressed by the dominant culture.

Romantic love in *Winter in the Blood* is represented by the narrator's relationship with a Cree girl he has brought home, and who, however, has subsequently left again, taking with her his gun and electric razor. Alienated Indian men and their estranged relationships with both white and Indian women reflect the colonial assault on the identities of Indian people by a hegemonic culture, and, as a result, they are the central characters of contemporary American Indian novels. The reasons for using such characters include the fact that Indian men are easily viewed by the primarily non-Indian readership of such books as tragic figures who have suffered the most from the onslaught of Western Europeans against Indigenous peoples of North America. It is also true, however, that Indian men fit the "vanishing savage" stereotype, which is enormously appealing to the dominant culture because it represents an elimination of a threat to the colonial scenario.

The subtext of violence and destruction is reflected most strongly in David E. Stannard's book, American Holocaust: *The Conquest of the New World*. In a thoroughly documented expose of the grisly details, Stannard draws such conclusions as, "The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world." Interspersed are descriptions of "dogging," or throwing human beings to vicious dogs, where they were torn to pieces, the rape and torture of countless women, and the brutal murders of babies and small children. Based on scientific data, such as agricultural anthropology, Stannard estimates the Native population of the Americas was reduced from some 76,000,000 to 2,50,000 by 1900, in "The worst human holocaust the world had ever witnessed, roaring across two continents non-stop for four centuries and consuming the lives of countless tens of millions of people.... There was, at last, almost no one left to kill."

And this frankly situation into which the narrator of *winter in the Blood* is born. No wonder his life is so elemental, so tentative, and so susceptible to almost anyone or anything that comes along. And no wonder that such a life invites theoretical associations; it takes everything the mind can muster, concrete and abstract, to find traction of any kind in the horror of postcontact with Western Europeans throughout the Americas. The analysis of parallels between the rhetoric of the text and deconstructive, psychoanalytic, and Marxist critical theories is incomplete, however, whenever they attempt to remove from local histories of violence, "only to insert him into the mythologies of European academic literary criticism [and] to reinscribe the colonial violence that No-Name tries to exorcise from his body by rejecting the subjectivity provided for him by the government and the media."

The term "Opacity" has also been used to contrast *winter in the Blood* with more discernable texts, such as Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony. The observation that there seem to be no recognizable "Indian" things in the novel, which might help shape the central character, does indeed provide a beginning point for distinguishing not only Welch's book from those emanating from the southwest, but pointing out differences between southwestern and high plains cultures as well. In fact, American Indian texts based on southwestern cultures reflect more traditional tribal elements because those cultures were located in what was perceived as deserts of little value during the brunt of colonial dispossession, and, as a result, were left comparatively intact. The high plains, however, were obviously rich in mineral, environmental, and other resources; as a result, the Native inhabitants there were dispossessed of those lands, and of their cultures, with extreme prejudice.

Winter in the Blood takes place at a point in time when colonial dispossession is nearly complete, and, as a result, the narrator is faced with the aftermath rather than the actual process. The aftermath is signified primarily by absence, although there are a few subordinate signifiers, such as Yellow Calf, who have managed to survive and who bother the margins of the new imposed order. The narrator, as children will, takes his early life more or less as he finds it. As part of the process of colonization, however, the colonizer has filled the void it has created, and, coincidentally, the narrator's life, with its own signifiers, including "various media of the dominant white culture: Randolph Scott movies, bars, and booze." Eventually, as intended, these artificial signifiers, which should be secondary in the narrator's consciousness, overwhelm the primary signifiers of his life to the point that he is largely disassociated from not only the place in which he lives, but from his family of origin, both living and dead.

Although the concept as well as the practices of colonization is much more available for interrogation now than in the past, they are still not well understood. Vine Deloria Jr., however, suggests ways by which we can understand what it is we talk about when we talk about colonization, in a discussion he has termed "Thinking in Time and Space." For example, while it seems clear that liberals are more humanitarian, and that conservatives are more disciplinary, the truth of the matter is that both are expressions of Western European political philosophy. As a result, although the distinctions are meaningful within that cultural group, they are often lost on others, such as American Indians.

What is more meaningful to American Indians is the fact that Western Europeans are philosophically oriented toward time while Indians are more concerned with space, to the point that "American Indians hold their lands--places--as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind." In contrast, mainstream America perceives time as a linear progression that has proven their superiority; that they have "withstood the test of time" over and above others. Within this triumphalism attitude there is no room for either the possibility that the mainstream is simply the beneficiary of unexpected circumstance or that there is every likelihood they will take their turn at passing out of raw. The privileging of time or history over the place is

remarkable, especially given the failures of colonial powers since recorded history. In the case of the United States, the Vietnam War serves as an example of how, "in most military coalitions, history is clearly negated by geography. We have seen this phenomenon before in the two classic, unsuccessful attempts by Napoleon and Hitler to conquer Russia, in which that country's vast, interior subdued military forces.... We may now be facing that phenomenon again in the Middle East."

As colonialism exhausts environmental sources of wealth, it is forced to seek new sources. New technology represents such a source, but so does the cannibalization and reorganization of established social and economic systems. Not even American public education is safe from this process, and the movement toward globalization is probably less concerned with efficiency than with creating continuing opportunities for exploitation. Although disrupting the status quo does create opportunities for profit, there are unanticipated consequences as well. For example, technology has created instantaneous communication that has significantly altered notions of time. Similarly, globalization has revealed how diverse the world really is, and the many ways difference can result in conflict if not properly managed. An example of how this works is the United States' post-realization that there are certain cultural groups so "fundamental" in their beliefs that they seem "out of time," and thus undeserving of respect or consideration. The fundamentalist groups, however, do not share the belief that they are out of step and reject the United States' notion of time as a limiting factor.

Fundamentalist groups are often strongly associated with religion, and religion is often thought to be a highly evolved expression of universal concepts of "good." The problem with this, however, is "whether or not religious experience can be distilled from its original cultural context and become an abstract principle that is applicable to all peoples in different places and at different times." The process of abstraction, furthermore, is often one of disconnecting from reality and "making up" things to suit particular purposes.

American Indians are less inclined to depart from lived experience, deriving their religious traditions from the world around them, and keeping those traditions closely tied to specific places where they have had religious experiences. As a result, "The vast majority of Indian tribal religions.., have a sacred center at a particular place." In addition, the concept of sacred places also carries with it a highly personal, confidential aspect; Indians, therefore, are less invested in preaching about the details of their spirituality in public forums, or in any related tendency to incorporate ever-widening abstractions as a means of making the story convincing.

Giving up abstractions such as heaven and the conversion of others in favor of actual places and events connected to, rather than dominating, living communities; while, at the same time, continuing the interpretation of history over a long period of time is extremely difficult. In response, Western religion has chosen the less complex path of inventing chosen people participating in a divine plan, which in reality, seems more tragic flawed than guided by a higher power. Allowing abstractions, or ideas, and the consequences of ideas, such as war, to overwhelm the more concrete forms of existence is a form of allowing time to consume space. There are those, however, who are trying to recapture a sense of place and, at the same time, to interrogate mainstream dependence on time figured as progress, or Manifest Destiny, as the primary measure of identity.

Conclusion

James Welch's effort to come to grips with a place that has produced a particular tribal culture is an example, as well as being a rejection of the colonialism that seeks to define those people and that place, doing so in large part by making up its own rationalizations as it goes. Much has been said and written about James Welch's *winter in the Blood* since its publication in 1974, including discussions of distance, humor, gender, race, and class. While certainly ripe for discussion, these issues are but the tip of the iceberg compared to the dynamics of colonization that not only decimated Indian people, but that are part of an ongoing process practiced against American Indians as well as others and tolerated by the American people to this day.

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