

## **THE HERO'S JOURNEY IN JAMES WELCH'S *FOOLS CROW* AND TRADITIONAL PIKUNI SACRED GEOGRAPHY**

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### **Abstract / Résumé**

Using an auto-criticism reflecting the author's experiences among the Pikuni, the essay explores the mythic significance of James Welch's *Fools Crow* as it reveals a traditional Pikuni sacred geography. The origins of the novel, as disclosed through experience and oral tradition, are, thereby, revealed through a mythic discourse analysis.

En ayant recours à une autocritique qui reflète les expériences de l'auteur chez les Pikuni, l'article explore la signification mythique du roman *Fools Crow* de James Welch qui révèle la géographie sacrée traditionnelle des Pikuni. Aussi, les origines du roman, divulguées en se fondant sur l'expérience et la tradition orale, sont révélées en utilisant une analyse du discours mythique.

A jet black night secured the evening. Icy fingers gripped the brick walls of my dwelling, each one feeling about the crevices and touching heavily upon the windows. It seemed a perfect night to settle in and begin writing the doleful academic treatise. Alone in the cocoon of surrounding books, I began to think through the prospects of a dissertation. When out of the darkness and cold, a crisp rap sounded upon the front door.

Arising from my thoughts, I made my way across the dimly lit room thinking who could possibly be out on a night like this. The air was thin and still; the temperature was ten or more below zero. Having made no preparations for Santa, I hadn't expected any visitors on this evening of world renewal.

With care, I opened the door doing my best to guard against the exchange of air. Standing on the porch were Keith and several shadowed figures. Quickly, I invited him in and the shadows made haste to join us. The cold figures stood about the living room while Keith took a seat. "What brings you here tonight Keith?" I asked. A raspy cough barked from a corner and Keith looked about before answering. "I've come to ask your help."

The air was chillingly still since opening the door. Keith began describing an appeal of the Lewis and Clark National Forest Plan, which proposed drilling oil and gas wells in a Pikuni sacred area known as the Badger-Two Medicine. He said that they had gone to Joseph Epes Brown but in failing health and declining memory, he had suggested that I might help them and passed his regrets. Keith had come to my door on behalf of the Pikuni Traditionalist Association and the shadows had danced along on Cold Maker's breath. Time was pressing hard, Keith explained, "Seven days is all we have to complete the appeal." Long interested in this matter, I looked past him to the waiting figures in a darkened corner of my study. "I'll do what I can. Let me review the literature tonight and come back tomorrow morning. We'll see what we have then," I replied. Keith agreed and leaving alone walked into the shadowy winter night.

Immediately I moved to the kitchen and began brewing a pot of coffee, even shadows expect hospitality and I had a long night ahead. Fortunately shelved about the walls of my study in brightly colored jackets were the primary works on the Blackfeet—Grinnell, McClintock, Schultz, Ewers, as well as, Wissler and Duvall.

There was no time for Nitsokan, Dream Bringer, the spirits were already there. Settling into an armchair, I began the soulful quest that had brought Feather Woman, Morning Star and Scarface into my home that night. Hidden in the black sky, Old Woman, refused to show her face and join us. Old Man, Napi, however, lingered briefly in the light of morn-

ing just before Keith returned. Hastily, I began to sketch out my findings and suggested the case for the Badger-Two Medicine sacred geography. Over the next six days and nights the spirits remained and I pulled their tales together into "Traditional Blackfeet Religion and the Sacred Badger-Two Medicine Wildlands." Although my committee sought a commitment to earlier ideas, little more mattered, a spiritual odyssey was riding at my door.

James Welch's *Fools Crow* has figured greatly in that odyssey and in this paper I shall attempt to articulate the hero's journey manifest in the novel's acknowledgment of *Pikuni* oral tradition and Badger-Two Medicine sacred geography. As suggested thus far, this paper is both an exploration of mythic personal experience that I have lived in the *Pikuni* world and an exercise in literary criticism. In part the approach is designed to facilitate an auto-criticism, intrinsically born from experience and the oral tradition characteristic of American Indian cultural traditions. When I was, for example, a child growing up in Virginia, my grandparents,<sup>2</sup> in day care, regaled me with traditional oral narratives that had been passed down throughout the generations.<sup>3</sup> As I entered the outside world through public school, I abruptly learned that their way of reasoning was very different from my elementary school teachers. During my early years as a student, I attended school one-half day and when I returned to my grandparents, they frequently inquired after my education. After I subsequently explained the school day events and teachings, Granddaddy and Grandma would invariably respond with a story. It was often one that I had heard many times before, nonetheless, I had learned to listen to these narratives and cherish them, as if anew in each telling. In the narration as a response to my school-day anecdotes, these traditional tales were often given a new emphasis suggesting a critical response to my accounts.

After all these intervening years, it has occurred to me that my grandparents were utilizing an intrinsic oral criticism and applying it to my school day anecdotes. The result it seems is an acknowledgment of an auto-criticism that I believe is characteristic to traditional Native American intellectualism. Minding this insight, I am in this essay attempting to adapt this auto-criticism and apply it to a contemporary American Indian literary text. In doing so, it is my perception that the Native ethos is grounded in the experiential and the organic dimension of reality. It is from this perspective that I have inserted my experiential reflections when living among the *Pikuni* and experiencing their sacred geography. The intent is an effort to create sectional similes that convey meaning in a manner reminiscent of that which my grandparents taught me as a child. The effect is, I hope, of intrinsic American Indian literary criticism

grounded in experience and organic reality.

While *Fools Crow*<sup>4</sup> is nominally an historical novel conveying a *Pikuni* perspective upon the Baker Massacre,<sup>5</sup> it is, really, much more in its attention to the *Pikuni* worldview and oral tradition. Opening with two young men excited at the prospects of joining their first war party and gaining tribal social honors, *Fools Crow* is at once an adventure story in an ethnohistorical context and a traditional narrative born of *Pikuni* experience. The textual practices of storytelling and mythic engagement are, however, very distinct from both modern fiction and ethnohistory. *Fools Crow* is effectively a mythograph telling in mythic allegory both the account of a young man and his triumphant heroic adventure, as well as affirming timeless traditional *Pikuni* wisdom in the contemporary world. Utilizing *Pikuni* traditions and narratives, Welch presents an allegorical story of the Scarface myth through the imaginary figure White Man's Dog.

Allégorizing the traditional *Pikuni* story of Scarface,<sup>6</sup> the protagonist, White Man's Dog is a nothing person among his people. Unattractive, he has no wealth and even lacks a spirit helper. Evidence of his status may be derived from the figurative and polysynthetic qualities of the name. *Imitaisiski* "dog-face" or "dog-lover" are the worst possible insults in the *Pikuni* language. As metaphorical derivations, these epithets imply that one has the face of the rear-end of a dog or that one loathsomely mates with dogs. When combined with "White Man," a term applied to the Euro-Americans who it is said will come to rub the *Pikuni* out, Welch creates a figurative expression of the vanquished or conquered. We are told that the name "White Man's Dog" was given the youth because as a child he followed an old storyteller, Victory Robe White Man, around (218). Consequently, in *White Man's Dog*, Welch metaphorically implicates the reader who has heretofore foolishly followed or accepted the White Man's account of *Pikuni* conquest during his or her youth.

Further engaging a figurative trope, Welch has given us a protagonist equal to Scarface in his traditional poverty. Recounting an orphaned, impoverished youth with a hideous deforming scar on his face, the story of Scarface includes his quest to have the scar removed by Sun and to marry the most beautiful maiden in the village. Through his respect and earnest behavior, *Poia*, Scarface, realizes his quest and returns with the ritual knowledge necessary to honor Sun, giver of life. In *Fools Crow's* transformation, marriage to the beautiful Red Paint, and subsequent quest meeting with the goddess, Feather Woman, we observe a close allegory with the traditional mythic narrative.

Tall, handsome and cock-sure, Fast Horse boasts that he will join

Yellow Kidney in a raid upon the traditional *Pikuni* foes, the Crows. Almost as an after thought, he has suggested that his poor relative, White Man's Dog, is good for holding horses. The son of a "Beaver Man," Fast Horse enjoys extremely high social status. In all of Native America, the Beaver Medicine Bundle is the most significant totem of its kind. Including objects associated with over six hundred revivification songs, the Beaver Bundle is a complex symbol and manifestation of *Pikuni* religion and ecology of place.<sup>7</sup> At the time of the novel's origin, there remained only one man who knew all the songs and rites associated with this bundle and concomitant ceremony, yet, the taboo or moral restriction that one must never burn a piece of wood gnawed upon by a beaver remained firmly in place among the contemporary traditional *Pikuni*.<sup>8</sup> In the zeitgeist of the novel, a "Beaver Man" would hold a position of highest religious and social status; in effect, Fast Horse was born into a family of the social elite.

In Welch's mythic allegory, the failure of Fast Horse parallels the decline of *Pikuni* civilization that occurred with the historic Baker Massacre. Indeed, Fast Horse's actions in joining the outlaw gang of Owl Child and in killing Malcolm Clarke establishes a foundation for White reprisal and concomitant *Pikuni* decline.<sup>9</sup> While White Man's Dog's fooling of the Crow Chief, is simply a matter of dumb luck, it manifests transformation at the hands of fate. Mirroring the story of the beaver medicine (195-198) where *Akaiyan* (Old Robe) is betrayed by his jealous elder brother *Nopatsis*, Fast Horse betrays his comrades in the mists of the Crow village and becomes an outlaw. Like *Akaiyan* who was left to die by his brother but befriended and saved by a small beaver, White Man's Dog luckily "fools" and kills the Crow Chief to experience transformation from "nothing-person" into warrior-hero—Fools Crow. Consequently, just as *Nopatsis* met his death for betrayal and *Akaiyan* achieved empowerment from the Beaver people, Fast Horse becomes an outlaw and White Man's Dog a hero.

*Addressing the question of an Algonquian Great Mysterious in lieu of a Supreme Deity in Western theology, I had explored Brown's conceptual description of a Native metaphysic of nature with a Midwestern Napikwan audience.<sup>10</sup> With a small pinch of tobacco, I left the pipestem quarry and doggedly drove across the Dakotas and eastern Montana. It was long into the night before I reached Browning, so I decided to drive into the mountains and sleep there. Near Glacier Park and with bedding in the back, it was only necessary to find a pullout for my truck. It was a place I'd never been before. Fluttering about the canopy that night, Nitsokan found a crack in the door and soon translucent images filled my otherworldly vision. Walking along a small rivulet, I came to a tiny but*

sunshine sparkling falls flanked by a glacial boulder and a church spire-like fir. A mere fifty feet distant, the natural grandeur was eminent when a grizzly bear and two cubs walked into the foreground of the striking fir tree. Speaking as she and the cubs stood up while I got down on all fours, she declared: "How are you?"

Natos, Sun, had grown strong upon the canopy of my truck until the heat and my visitor's words drove me from the bed. As I followed a tiny stream I hadn't noticed in the night, I was stunned beholding Nitsokan's cascade flanked by fir and rock. Was it really a dream? Judging by Sun overhead, it must be getting near time for the pipe ceremony. Although, I had heard of Fort Kick, home of the old people who kept the Sacred Thunder Pipe, I had never met nor visited them. Noticing the fence about the house and the many cars and pickups parked nearby, I knew it was probably the ceremonial grounds. Singing and prayers emanated from the cabin so I feared to enter lest I disturb the holy proceedings. As I stood respectfully outside, the old man brought the pipestem out to greet Sun, Thunder and the pervasive spirits of place.

Following these prayers, a feast ensued and I joined Bob, Keith, Steve and the Pikuni faithful in the little cabin. Approaching one hundred degrees, it was incredibly hot for Mother's Day on the northern plains, yet no one complained. Appropriately, on this day, we honored the mothering influences of the Earth and amid the afternoon ceremony, we were honored with red ochre face paint protection. Together with the mother grizzly's greeting, I felt confident facing my thesis defense and the trials ahead.

Welch's preparation of White Man's Dog engages the Thunder Pipe tradition (238-40), which suggests an affirmation of *Pikuni* life force. Without a helping spirit, White Man's Dog fears to go to war against the Crows lest they send him to the Sand Hills—death. Fearing White Man's Dog's lack of courage, Fast Horse has made arrangements for a purifying sweat lodge with *Mik-api* (Red Old Man) who is a powerful many-faces man. The keeper of the sacred Thunder Pipe bundle of the many faces of nature, *Mik-api* affirms the power manifest in life. Apparently an individual pipe carrier, Yellow Kidney uses the sacred pipe medicine throughout the journey. Including the story of *Seco-mo-muckon*, Welch recounts the power of the Sacred Pipe to aid in good weather and give protection; also evident is a normative warning against treachery. With each grain of tobacco representing the respective beings of nature, the pipe is lit by the sacred element—fire—and drawn with one's life breath fusing all life forces into one where the totality of being is acknowledged in the tension of the many faces of nature. Smoking the sacred pipe is a celebration of life concomitant with the Native metaphysic of nature

wherein an all-inclusive Great Mysterious concept manifests both a Supreme Being and fount of power and the totality of all "spirits" or "powers of creation."

Opened each spring following the first clap of thunder, the Sacred Pipe affirms the life force of all things. Long ago the *Pikuni* were given the sacred pipe by Thunder who told them that if they honored it he would restore their sick to health and protect them through the coming year. As a child of the bundle, a pipe carrier, is a person who would typically be given the instructions that "the pipe is your life" and "that you must carry it with respect." Accordingly, Welch's Yellow Kidney survives his captivity in spite of himself but his lack of respect for the Crow girl's life no doubt contributed to his mutilation.

Following and incumbent upon this mythical account of transformation, *Fools Crow* is allegorically the story of Scarface manifesting the classical account of the hero's journey. As Joseph Campbell explained: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from their mysterious adventure with the power to bestow on his fellow man."<sup>11</sup> Campbell designates the first stage of the hero's mythological journey as "the call to adventure" and as a rite of spiritual passage, it marks the illumination of mystery<sup>12</sup> that is life's initiation. Awakening his wife, Fools Crow informs her of his call to adventure. "I had a dream," he said. "Nitsokan instructs me to make a journey" (315). Intent upon answering the call, he assures his wife and asks her for helpful prayers (316).

Fools Crow must now cross the first threshold and enter the zone of magnified power. As Fools Crow seeks his adventure, he unexpectedly encounters the entrance to the place of power or world navel.

The snow was a pale blue in the dusk-light by the time they reached the mouth of the canyon. Although Fools Crow had been in this country twice before, he had not noticed the canyon. The wall on the south side was made of granite with several horizontal striations too small to be called ledges. Each striation held a narrow line of snow that seemed to point Fools Crow's eyes up the canyon. The other side of the canyon was a more gradual slope covered with short gnarled pines and gray grasses. Between this slope and the small ice-blue stream that emptied out onto the flat where the black horse stood, there was a thick patch of red willows that blocked the entrance to the canyon. (319-20)

Fools Crow visions a strange female guardian and her lodge while doubting himself at the threshold of the canyon. Images of a nether world

assail Fools Crow while he rests upon a sleeping platform and he is confronted with an impenetrable entrance. Yet as he looks about the canyon, he recognizes the spirit images of *Sa-sak-si*, the freckled faced dog, and Skunk Bear, his spirit helper, who disappear into the mysterious portal. Panicked, Fools Crow calls for supernatural aid: "Skunk Bear!" shouted Fools Crow. "It is me, your brother!" (325). Chanting his power song:

*Wolverine is my brother,  
From Wolverine I take my courage,  
Wolverine is my brother,  
From Wolverine I take my strength.* (326)

Fools Crow gives himself over to the spirit<sup>13</sup> and transits "the Belly of the Whale"<sup>14</sup> entering the sacred world navel from which life emanates.

After his swim, Fools Crow lay down on the warm sand of the beach. The beads of water glistened on his body, and as he slung his forearm over his eyes, he wondered that Sun Chief never seemed to move from his position directly overhead. And he wondered at the silence, the stillness of the air. He breathed a long sigh and then slept. (327)

Clearly in a timeless, transcendent mythic zone, Fools Crow encounters the goddess.<sup>15</sup>

The woman wore a white doeskin dress, which reached, almost to the tops of her moccasins. A black leather belt, studded with brass tacks, encircled her waist, the two ends hanging down in front. There were no elk teeth, no shells, and no fringes on the dress. Her moccasins were plain and she wore no necklace, no earrings, no feather or beaded medallions in her hair. Her graying hair was cut short and close to her head. She stroked it absently as she watched the sleeping man. (327)

Knelling with purifying bough of juniper and the spider web of life, Feather Woman beseeches Morning Star with her sacred chant while the watching Fools Crow is filled with awe and wonder (336-37).

Following the story of *So-at-sa-ki's* life (349-351) Fools Crow is prepared for the real purpose of his adventure. The "ultimate boon"<sup>16</sup> is bestowed upon him when he observes the mythic images of a cinematic winter count of the future. The Baker massacre, death of the blackhorns, starvation and boarding school terrors appear as the scene unfolds. But Fools Crow has seen beyond and knows that he "can prepare [the people] for the time to come" and is comforted that "the stories will be handed down" (359). Returning to his people with the knowledge of survival, the clap of thunder resounds and *Mik-api* prepares the Thunder Pipe bundle

affirming life's renewal and respecting its eternal continuation (388).

When assessing the mythic dimension of the narrative, I suspect that a multiplicity of meaning is present. Indeed, I believe that mythic narratives share polysemous and polysynthetic qualities with traditional Native American languages. Consequently, there is no single approach worthy of their interpretation. We must, instead, consider the narratives from multiple perspectives.

Derived from dream and vision, myth in its origin is itself wild, void of social and rational intentionalities that predicate normative values. Nevertheless, these norms are encoded in the myths when dream mythologems are composed amid selected folk motifs in traditional narratives. Consequently, there are two components of mythic narratives, which require analysis: the wild mythologems and the social folk motifs. These must be identified and read in contrasting metaphorical analysis. In comprehending mythologems, attention must be directed to the connotative as opposed to denotative reading. These insights are derived through the body and its energies of place. They affirm our spiritually grounded condition in the Nature about us. In this context, universal principles consistent with the Native metaphysic of nature manifest themselves in ecological referents. Conversely, the folk motifs bespeak the social and local knowledge of cultures as they convey traditional norms and values. These are distinctly different concepts that are, nevertheless, both conveyed in traditional mythic narratives.

Myth qua myth is wild and consequently its purpose is too put us in accord with Nature. This approach to visions, dreams and traditional myths is an a priori acknowledgment among Native American traditions. While I fully concur with Nora Berry's explication of the normative values attributable to *Fools Crow* as a mythic saga,<sup>17</sup> I strongly suspect that there is also a deeply wild ecological referent manifest in the narrative and subject to interpretation. Joseph Campbell was fond of declaring that a mythic metaphor or mythologem must be rendered transparent to transcendence. With this approach, I strongly concur and I base my conclusions upon a lifetime of experiential Native traditional practice.

*Catching the plane to Wichita, I reflected on the lack of excitement, which a conference<sup>18</sup> in Kansas would hold. There would be no breath taking vistas like those of Eugene, Coeur d'Alene, Estes Park and later Salt Lake City or Vancouver; at best there was Dorothy in the Land of Oz, I thought. At the conference banquet, however, we were treated to an exhibit of traditional Plains Indian dancing while we ate Indian Tacos at the Mid-continental Indian Center. While I enjoyed the graceful grass dance, admired the slow, ponderous buffalo dance, and thrilled to the darting, fluttering dancing of a young woman, all of these dances were*

typical of the Pow Wow circuit and nothing new to me. Nevertheless, I took notice of the fine performances and enjoyed the Native heritage.

Next day on the bus to Bethel College, I thought: just another museum with typical frontier exhibits lay in store. When, however, a prominent botanist promised a tour of a restored one-acre plot of the original Kansas tall grass prairie, I became mildly excited. She began explaining how careful she had been in selecting the appropriate plants from highway right-of-ways and described her vigorous battle with weeds and other invaders when restoring her beloved grasses. As we listened intently to this devoted ecologist, I began reflecting upon the Plains Indian dances of the night before. As the majestic grass stood a foot or more above my head and waved in the Kansas breeze, I recalled the graceful and lithe grass dance. Musing upon this sense of ecological referent, the slow, ponderous movements of a buffalo trekking about on trails, which countless animals had made in ancient prairies, came to mind referencing the Buffalo dance of the previous night. Noticing the little, darting, twirling, fluttering birds about the tops of the grasses, a remembrance of the thrilling young woman's dance returned. Clearly, we were this day amid the ecological referent of the previous day's culturally manifest traditional Plains Indian dances. The principles of respectful empathy and mythical accord with Nature that characterize Native American Traditions were potently evident as I pondered upon the time immemorial inhabitants of the Plains and their ecological ethos; on my flight home, I cherished this mythical insight derived from the land of the Wichita, Kansa and Osage, among others.

Turning to an interpretation of Fools Crow's heroic adventure, one must note his success and Fast Horse's failure. In his quest, Fools Crow, successfully gives himself over to the spirit—Skunk Bear—at the critical moment and thereby succeeds in transcending the threshold of time and space that is simple location. Conversely, Fast Horse's dream of Cold Maker's sacred spring (13-14) is never realized precisely because he cannot give himself over to the spirit manifest in the Nature. He reads the dream literally thereby objectifying the earth about him and reducing his experience to the rationalization of time and space.

Despairing at the canyon entrance, Fools Crow observes a Freckled Faced Dog, *Sa-sak-si*, who is Feather Woman's companion. In his freckled condition, the dog has a fickle appearance that connotes Fate or Fortune. Accepting one's fate or fortune in the world is at once suffering and gratifying; the ambiguity of life is thus exposed and healing ensues. You can quit and grow bitter as did Fast Horse or you can seek to embrace life honoring and respecting the fate or fortune that is played out upon us. In chanting his power song, Fools Crow embraces life and puts

himself in accord with the powers of the world given him; with this spiritual aid, he is led to the insight of the goddess. Through this quest, Welch absolves the Baker Massacre and transcends the *Napikwan* conquest; in effect, he returns tradition and respect to the *Pikuni* world.

*Soatsaki*, Feather Woman, translates as woman with plumes on her head and metaphorically bespeaks the Earth. The imagery of plumes about the head invokes prairie grasses waving in ground-swelling breezes characteristic to the *Pikuni* homeland. Grass woman or ground is the literal translation, which was historically manifest in a long-lived centurion who passed away shortly before this text was written. The goddess, *Soatsaki*, is the Earth itself and Fools Crow's insight parallels the *Pikuni* Thunder Pipe and Sun Dance traditions of life's renewal and its ritual respect. During his visit, Fools Crow notes Feather Woman's "watery flat eyes" realizing her aged condition (319). And although, she is renewed when splashing water upon her breasts and belly, she proceeds to show him the horrors of the *Pikuni* future. Transiting time, Welch metaphorically conveys the modern *Pikuni* plight and a long neglected and abused Earth. An Earth that suffered without her people's care in ritualistic revivification, Feather Woman is aged and infirmed. These insights act then as the boon or wisdom, which the hero imparts upon his, return.

The *Pikuni* people take their name from a figurative expression of the bison – round scabby robe. At the conclusion of the novel, Welch writes of the bison return.

Far from the fires of the camps, out on the rain-dark prairies, in the swales and washes, on the rolling hills, the rivers of great animals moved. Their backs were dark with rain and the rain gathered and trickled down their shaggy heads. Some grazed, some slept. Some had begun to molt. Their dark horns glistened in the rain as they stood guard over the sleeping calves. The blackhorns had returned and, all around, it was as it should be. (390-91)

In metaphorical eloquence, the Goddess is renewed with life giving rains just as the mythic Feather Woman splashed water on her breasts and belly in Fools Crow's vision. The invocation of the bison molt and return, reflects the seasonal cycle, which the people live by surviving winter and affirming spring. Known then as round scabby robe, the *Pikuni* are metaphorically people of the bison. And in respect for the gifts of this animal, which sustain their every need, they honor and ritually renew its life force annually. Likewise as Thunder speaks during this annual cycle, life emerges from long dormancy and the goddess—Earth—must be renewed in the annual Sun Dance. Welch's narrative serves to renew

this traditional worldview and affirm its place in our contemporary world. His narrative is the language of respect passed from time immemorial through the author's bloodlines to we fortunate readers.

In concluding this critique, permit me to draw upon the mythographical concept of *Das begründen* derived from the Germanic Romantics. According to this thematical principle, a mythic *begründen* is affirmed when thought and place are inseparably manifest. Welch's narrative surviving time thusly has referent in the natural world about us, just as the conceptual Native American metaphysic of nature would demand. Once at a Thunder Pipe Opening, my *Pikuni* godfather instructed me saying: "This bundle contains the Nature, we are here to honor the Nature."<sup>19</sup> These are profound words, in my way of thinking, affirming the notion of a mythological *begründen* where metaphorically the ecology of place—"the Nature"—is given ritual reference and spiritual revivification in ceremony. Accordingly, as Welch derived the narrative from his grandmother and the time immemorial *Pikuni* traditions of an ecology of place, we must suspect an ecological referent expressed in metaphorical mythological narrative in the manner of the *Das Begründen* concept.

*It was late June, after graduation, before I could prepare for my journey into the sacred Pikuni wildlands.<sup>20</sup> In consultation with Bob and others, I had decided to begin my visit through Badger Canyon. As I approached the canyon, the mud and mire stalled my truck, "Old Yellow Horse," forcing me to leave her before the trails end. Inspiring vistas of the mountains drew me ahead through the broken terrain above Badger Creek. Following the jeep trail to its end I approached the thundering sounds of Badger Canyon. Deep pools of glacial green appeared placid below the great cataract that filled the canyon mouth. Approaching a large boulder, I pressed forward to the entrance; there was no path, no way beyond. Looking up at sheer granite walls towering hundreds of feet above, I thought how can I climb these walls with a ninety-pound Kelty backpack. Panic was near as I thought my adventure doomed. After struggling with the adjacent slope, my defeat was inevitable, so I resigned to retrace my steps up the jeep trail and try another path into the mountains. The near panic and climb out of the river bottom had severely drained my energy when I decided to stop, refuel and collect my wits in a small meadow west of the trail. As I struggled out of the pack, I glanced toward the mountain above the canyon and high in the rocks I noticed a strange design painted onto the granite face. Shaped like a diamond, it held four interconnected rings resembling a modern Olympiad symbol. Leaving my pack, I began walking across the meadow trying to get a better look. Near the west end of the glade, a foot trail*

approached distinct in its ascent across the mountain.

The pictograph was fairly recent and made with white house paint. Reflecting upon the decaying Sun Lodge, which I had noticed downstream at the road crossing, I began to wonder if the two were connected. Clearly the graph faced east toward the rising sun and it seemed luminous in morning light when I first noticed it. Taking it as my guide, I began climbing the foot trail over the mountain high above Badger Canyon. Loaded with a two-week supply, the pack was digging into my shoulders and my lungs seared for air as I reached the summit. Ahead lay a treacherous bit of trail where I later learned a Pikuni Elder had lost a packhorse to the gorge below. The rock formation shifted and pitched better than a thousand feet deep. Given one miss-step and I would surely join the horse and its load in the distant nadir. I struggled to keep my balance and plant my feet firmly but the Kelty harness and lap belt prevented me from moving freely. Unbuckling the lap belt, I could move easily but I feared the pack would shift and plunge me into the abyss below. My legs quivered as I crossed the perilous pitch. Safely across, respite came to me and I began to notice the incredible valley ahead. Badger Valley shaped by a hanging glacier no doubt lay below like a mythical Shangri-La. Miles ahead loomed Goat Mountain below which the Badger forked; and to the south beautiful Morning Star Mountain stood grandly in snow and cloud. Framed nearby were Mt. Poia and Scarface Mountain while Half Dome held the north horizon in splendor. No thought was necessary to know that surely this was a special place. Climbing down to the vale, I faced the first of eight bone chilling crossings of the glacier melt river. Midway up the valley, I came upon a sand bar and decided that this would be a fine place for lunch. Here I could rest on the firm but gentle sand and the cold water rushing by would keep me cool even in the sun. As I finished my lunch, lying back, I fell into a comfortable sleep before Sun again called me awake. As I roused in the now warm sunshine, I beheld an impressive mountain shaped like an eagle wing fan lying on the ground. She could only be Feather Woman now greeting me. Gathering my things I proceeded to the forks of the Badger, a place of mystical dimension at the base of perpetually snow clad Goat Mountain where Cold Maker's sacred animals dwell. A land of spirits, a land of solitude steeped in mystery and wildness, indeed a place to dream dreams and learn the words transcendent of time and fresh with ever-present creation.

In conveying these personal experiences, let me assure the reader that there is no intent to appear presumptions or arrogant on my part. Moreover, in formulating this genre of literary criticism, I am attempting to attend the traditional Native metaphysic of nature and the conceptual

*Das begründen* theme. Indeed, in a worldview where abstraction has little hold, experience is the arbitrator of reality. Consequently, one cannot presume to address that which one does not know from first hand knowledge. James Welch has admittedly included traditional oral narratives passed to him from this grandmother. These narratives have referent in the natural world. Accordingly, literary criticism of such traditional American Indian mythology and religion must ground itself in the experiential. It was simply my good fortune to have these experiences coalesce in timely fashion while I attended the controversy involving the Badger-Two Medicine wildlands.<sup>21</sup>

Provided that my assertions are correct that a traditional Native American world view rests upon assumptions and principles distinct and unique from both Eastern and Western thought, and that it is surely experiential in character, then we must re-think our approach to American Indian literary criticism and learn to respect the inherent integrity and ecological *begründen* conveyed in these traditional narratives.

When considering these ideas, particularly that of a spiritual and ecological *begründen*, we would wisely heed Plato's suggestion that particular locations possess ecological and spiritual qualities, which markedly affect human character.<sup>22</sup> Surely, this wisdom is manifest and affirmed in the traditions and philosophies of Native America, long may it be so.

### Notes

1. An original version of this paper was presented to 31st Annual Meeting of the Western Literature Association in Vancouver, British Columbia, October 1996.
2. Charlie I. Vest and Little A. Hamilton Vest who were descended from the Fort Christanna Indian Tribes including the *Saponi-Monacan-Yesang/Pochick-Nansemond/Pamunkey-Powhatan* and surviving as a tribal community atop the Blue Ridge Mountains in Rockbridge and Amherst Counties, Virginia. They had retained a significant body of oral tradition that they shared with me as a child in their day care. Incidentally, they read at a third grade level and were largely dependent upon the oral tradition in their affairs. A literary account of these stories is forthcoming, see *The Bobtail Stories: Saponi-Monacan-Tutelo Narratives from the Buzzard Rock – Hico, Virginia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).
3. Affirming and elaborating upon this Native tradition, I have published a series of articles including: Jay Hansford C. Vest, "The Buzzard

Rock: *Saponi-Monacan Traditions from Hico, Virginia*," *Lynch's Ferry: A Journal of Local History*, 5:1 (Spring/Summer 1992), 26-31; Vest, "My Mother's Brother': *Monacan Narratives of the Wolf from the Virginia Blue Ridge*," *Weber Studies*, 12:3 (Fall 1995), 117-122; Vest, "From Bobtail to Brer Rabbit: Native American Influences upon Uncle Remus," *American Indian Quarterly*, 24:1 (Winter 2000), 19-43; Vest, "From Nansemond to Monacan: The Legacy of the Pochick-Nansemond Among the Bear Mountain Monacan," *American Indian Quarterly* 27:3 (Fall 2003), 781-806; Vest, "Native, Aboriginal, Indigenous: Who Counts as Indian in Virginia?" in *Mid-Atlantic Conference on the Scholarship of Diversity, Conference Proceedings*, Janet Sawyer, editor (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech University, April 2004) <<http://www.multicultural.vt.edu/conference>>, 21pp.; Vest, "The Origins of the Johns Surname: A Monacan Ethnogenesis," *Quarterly Bulletin*, Archeological Society of Virginia, 60:1 (March 2005), 1-14; Vest, "An Odyssey among the Iroquois: A History of Tutelo Relations in New York," *American Indian Quarterly*, 29: 1&2 (April 2005), 124-155; Vest, "The Lynchburg Tobacco Trade and the 19th Century Monacan Economy: Oral Traditions from the Blue Ridge at Hico—the Buzzard Rock," *Lynch's Ferry: A Local History Journal*, (Spring 2005), 34-39; Vest, "Further Considerations in the Ethnogenesis of the Monacan Indian Nation: The Saponi Origins of Selected Families," *Quarterly Bulletin*, Archeological Society of Virginia, 60:3 (September 2005), 133-149; Vest, "Opechcancanough and the Monacans: The Legend of Trader Hughes and Princess Nicketti Reconsidered," *Quarterly Bulletin*, Archeological Society of Virginia, 60:4 (December 2005); Vest, "The Monacan Nation as Lost Tribes: The Origins of the Indians of the Central Blue Ridge Virginia and the Lynchburg Tobacco Trade," *Crossroads: A Southern Culture Annual*, forthcoming (December 2005), 39pp.; Vest, "Monacans and Huguenots: Manakin Town and the Ethnogenesis of the Monacan Nation," *Quarterly Bulletin*, Archeological Society of Virginia 61:1 (March 2006), 27pp.; Vest, "A Tutelo Inquiry: The Ethnohistory of Chief Samuel Johns's Correspondence with Dr. Frank G. Speck," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, forthcoming 2006; Vest, "Travels of Francis Louis Michel and the Ethnohistory of the Monacan Nation," *Crossroads: A Southern Culture Annual*, in publication review (Winter 2005), 32pp.; and Vest, "The Fabulous Adventures of John Lederer: Explorations and Oral Traditions in Monacannah," presentation to the 1st Annual Southeast Indian Studies Conference, UNCP and in preparation for publication review (Spring 2005).

4. All references are to James Welch, *Fools Crow*. New York: Viking

- Penguin, 1986 and will subsequently be cited by page number in the text.
5. Under the command of Col. E. M. Baker nearly two hundred *Pikuni*, almost an entire band, were massacred on the Marias River in January 1870. See John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders of the Northwestern Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 236-256; and James Willard Schultz [Apikuni], *Blackfeet and Buffalo: Memories of Life Among the Indians*, edited by Keith Steele (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 282-305.
  6. See Walter McClintock, *The Old North Trail: Life, Legends and Religion of the Blackfeet Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 491-505; and Schultz, *Blackfeet and Buffalo*, 347-368.
  7. As for the notion of a Medicine Bundle reflecting the ecology of place, see Jay Hansford C. Vest, "Feather Boy's Promise: Sacred Geography and Environmental Ethics in D'Arcy McNickle's *Wind From an Enemy Sky*," *American Indian Quarterly*, 17:1 (Winter 1993), 45-67; on the Beaver Bundle tradition, see McClintock, *Old North Trail*, 76-112.
  8. Although this esteemed Elder, Mike Swims Under, has passed on into the Sand Hills, his traditional knowledge of the ritual, songs and spirit power, remain with several Beaver Medicine bundles that are active today among the *Pikuni*.
  9. See Ewers, *The Blackfeet*, 236-256; and Schultz [Apikuni], *Blackfeet and Buffalo*, 282-305.
  10. See Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1982) 60-70; and for the presentation, see Jay Hansford C. Vest, "Kitchi Manitou and Western Theistic Assumptions: An Arbitration of Algonquian Metaphysics," *Utah Foreign Language Review*, 12 (June 2003): 20-32.
  11. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949, 1973), 30.
  12. Campbell, *The Hero*, 49-58.
  13. Campbell, *The Hero*, 69-77.
  14. Campbell, *The Hero*, 90-94.
  15. Campbell, *The Hero*, 109-120.
  16. Campbell, *The Hero*, 172-192.
  17. Nora Berry, "'A Myth to be Alive': James Welch's *Fools Crow*," *MELUS*, 17:1 (Spring 1991-92), 3-20.
  18. Reference is made here to the 28th Annual Meeting of the Western Literature Association in Wichita, Kansas October 1993.
  19. Instructions given by Elder Joe Crowshoe at Brocket, Alberta, June 1988.

20. See Jay Hansford C. Vest, "Traditional Blackfeet Religion and the Sacred Badger-Two Medicine Wildlands," *Journal of Law and Religion* 6:2 (1988), 455-489; Vest, "The Badger-Two Medicine Wildlands: Sacred Geography of the Blackfeet," *Western Wildlands*, 15:3 (Fall 1989), 20-24; also Vest, "Organicism and Pikuni-Blackfeet Mythology: Paradigms of Mythographical Discourse Analysis," *International Journal of the Humanities*, forthcoming (2005), 40pp.; and Vest, "The Medicine Wolf Returns: Traditional Blackfeet Concepts of *Canis, Lupis*," *Western Wildlands*, 14:2 (Summer 1988), 28-33.
21. See Vest, "Traditional Blackfeet Religion," 455-489; and Vest, "Badger-Two Medicine," 20-24; Vest, "Organicism and Pikuni Blackfeet Mythology, 40pp.; and Vest, "Medicine Wolf Returns," 28-33.
22. Plato, *Laws*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 747 d-e.