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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 20(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

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Publication Date

1996

DOI

10.17953

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Writing a Friendship Dance: Orality in Mourning Dove's *Cogewea*

MICHAEL WILSON

In the opening pages of Mourning Dove's 1927 novel, *Cogewea, the Half-Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range*, the narrator tells us, "Of mixed blood, was Cogewea; a 'breed'!—the socially ostracized of two races."¹ And yet what is striking about this work of contemporary American Indian literature is that it both asserts and, at the same time, subverts this essentialist vision of blood identity.

In certain circumstances (where there is a competition for money), *Cogewea* is indeed ostracized—denied an identity as either white or American Indian. Yet, at the same time, her Indian grandmother, the Stemteemä, and her white suitor, Alfred Densmore, far from ostracizing her, actively seek to claim her against the wishes of the other. The Stemteemä tells stories from the Okanogan oral tradition to the "mixed-bloods"² at the ranch—*Cogewea*, her sisters Mary and Julia, and Jim—to teach them that Indian women have been poorly treated by certain (not all) non-Indian men. Densmore, on the other hand, repeatedly urges *Cogewea* to forget the past, to deny the relevance of the Stemteemä's stories, and to affirm the "superiority" of her white lineage. After considerable deliberation, *Cogewea* chooses to ignore Okanogan oral tradition and to elope with Densmore, a choice that ends disastrously. Yet in denying the truth of the oral tradition, *Cogewea* in fact relives the old stories, adding her name to the list of

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wronged Indian women, affirming the truth and value of the stories. The novel, then, becomes an extension of the Okanogan oral tradition, creating a thematic bridge between the oral word and the written text.

These two different attitudes about the oral tradition embodied by Densmore and the Stemteemä are, in fact, discourses battling for a privileged position on the personal, communal, and aesthetic levels of the novel. Densmore's discourse embraces the ideology of science—in particular, the language of nineteenth-century anthropology, which posits that oral tradition and Indian life in general are essentially in the past, with any cultural mixing a sign of cultural debasement. The Stemteemä's discourse, on the contrary, emerges from the Okanogan tradition and, as she presents it in the novel, is already "mixed," since the stories she tells are about moments of cultural intersection between Indian and non-Indian peoples. By reaching out to Cogewea, the Stemteemä denies Densmore's discourse of purity and impurity, showing instead the importance of seeing the oral tradition as relevant and, indeed, necessary to understanding a changing world. This essay will explore the relationship of these two discourses to Cogewea, the community, and the novel. Although the languages of Densmore and the Stemteemä clash and sometimes blend, the oral tradition finally emerges as the discourse most valuable to the "mixed-blood" sites—individual, communal, and aesthetic—of meaning and value in the novel.

THE OFFICIAL "RACE" LANGUAGE/ THE LANGUAGE OF CHANGE

Unlike the other mixed-bloods in the novel, Cogewea contemplates and asserts the difficulties of her life as a mixed-blood. She says, "Yes, we are between two fires, the Red and the White. Our Caucasian brothers criticize us as a shiftless class, while the Indians disown us as abandoning our own race. We are maligned and traduced as no one but the despised breed can know" (p. 41). Yet what is interesting is that Cogewea makes the claim for a limited space "between two fires" in language that shows an ability to cross easily among different cultural boundaries, the result of growing up in two quite different cultural worlds. On the one hand, Cogewea experienced a traditional Okanogan upbringing under the tutelage of the Stemteemä; on the other hand, she underwent a formal education at the Carlisle Indian School in

Pennsylvania. Thus Cogewea is able to speak the language of the Okanogan (she sometimes serves as a translator for her grandmother); the language of her formal education; and a third language—that of the Horseshoe Bend Ranch, the area “between two fires,” where the novel takes place. Her multilingual abilities are not lost on other people at the ranch, nor is she unaware of her multiple voice. The mixed-blood foreman Jim LaGrinder tells her, “You’r bout the queerest I ever saw. Sometimes you talk nice and fine [the language of the ranch], then next time maybe yo go ramblin’ just like some preacher woman or schoolmarm [the language of her formal education]. Can’t always savey you.” Cogewea replies, “That’s what others tell me” (p. 33). Indeed, at certain moments in the book, Cogewea consciously shifts to different voices as the need arises. She speaks, for example, the language of her formal education to a bank clerk who considers her unable to handle her own financial affairs.

Cogewea thus moves freely among these different types of discourse; indeed, she asserts her right to be part of them when she enters two different horse races—one exclusively for Indians and the other only for whites—at a Fourth of July celebration in a nearby town. But participants in both races lash out at her for entering an arena to which they feel she does not belong. Thus, rather than confirming her freedom to move among the different racial and linguistic groups, the races instead confirm her feelings that she is an ostracized mixed-blood. The participants in the “Ladies Race” demand, “Why is this *squaw* permitted to ride? This is a *ladies* race!” (p. 63) The riders in the “Squaw Race” echo this sentiment: “You have no right to be here! You are half-white! This race is for Indians and not for *breeds!*” (p. 66). Cogewea reflects, “For her class—the maligned outcast half-blood—there seemed no welcome on the face of all God’s creation. Denied social standing with either of the parent races, she felt that the world was crying out against her” (p. 66). The situation is further exacerbated when she tries to collect the prize money for winning both races. The race (“race”) officials deny her the money for the “ladies” race, citing the altercation she had with another rider and the fact that she is a “squaw.” The situation almost leads to Jim LaGrinder’s arrest and even to gunplay, but Cogewea defuses tempers by thrusting the prize money she won for the Indian race at the judge. She asserts that, if he is “disbursing *racial* prizes regardless of merit or justice,” then the second place riders deserved both. Furthermore, Cogewea eases Jim’s temper by speaking to him “in

their own tongue." In this moment of violent confrontation about her place (or lack of place) in these different groups, Cogewea uses the language of each of the groups to alleviate the violence; at the same time, she also uses her multilingual abilities to affirm the dominant political order of the separation of races ("races"), with the mixed-blood as an outcast.

This same official "race" language is evident not only with the judges at the Fourth of July celebration but with the narrator of *Cogewea* as well. Throughout the novel, but especially during the war dances at the celebration, the narrator often describes the mixing of Indian and non-Indian cultures as a form of debasement, thus emphasizing the official obligation to separate Indians and whites into spheres of racial purity, with mixed-bloodedness a sign of impoverishment. Yet after the narrator's description of the war dance, a much less divisive language emerges in the description of the friendship dance—a language that stresses dialogue between races, tribes, and genders. That is, unlike the language of purity and impurity, it embraces the mixed-bloods Jim and Cogewea into the sphere of the Okanogan dance circle, where relations between men and women are untangled and understood. Indeed, this language offers an alternative to what Cogewea feels is the inexorable plight of the mixed-blood.

The description of the war dance is remarkable for its enthusiasm for older Indian cultures and its abhorrence of the mixture of Indian and non-Indian culture. It is doubtless an instance of what Dexter Fisher regards as Lucullus V. McWhorter's insertion of "historical facts about other tribes that are hardly relevant to the story."³ McWhorter, who was Mourning Dove's friend and supporter, heavily edited Mourning Dove's initial draft of the book so that it would, in his mind, appeal more strongly to the general reading public and also arouse the sympathies of non-Indian readers to change the conditions of Indian life under the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Fisher, p. xii). As a consequence, the novel contains scathing indictments of the Indian bureau in language that is quite different in tone and diction from much of the rest of the book. For example, Cogewea describes the Bureau of Indian Affairs as follows: "A nasty smear of Government escutcheon. . . . A stagnant cesspool swarming with political hatched vermin! Stenchful with the fumes of avarice and greed; selfishly indifferent to the Macedonian cry of its victims writhing under the lash wielded by the hand of Mammon!" (p. 145). Louis Owens points out that such language contends with the language of Mourning

Dove for a position of authority, "with Mourning Dove's easily winning out" (p. 44). Thus, even on a stylistic level, the two spheres of language collide and struggle to become, in Owens's words, the "internally persuasive discourse" for *Cogewea*.⁴

McWhorter, in addition to conceiving of the novel as a form of social protest, was also interested in using it as a means of teaching about Indian life. As Alanna Kathleen Brown points out, McWhorter was an "amateur ethnographer,"⁵ and many of his intrusive comments about aspects of Indian culture stem from his desire to explain or elaborate on the Okanogan cultural elements in the book, such as the smoking of the pipe or the use of the sweat lodge. Brown writes, "It must be remembered that so little was known about Indians in McWhorter's time that McWhorter felt compelled to explain and reinforce Mourning Dove's representation of Indian life."⁶ But along with ethnological information, McWhorter also includes the ethnological *philosophy* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which sees Indian cultures as either pure or impure, with change as a debasement. For example, McWhorter (who was well-versed in the traditions of the Nez Perce) focuses not on the local Pend d'Oreille dancers but on a "visiting, stately Nez Perce" (p. 74), whose presence provides McWhorter with an opportunity to expound on his knowledge of Nez Perce culture and whose countenance presents a sharp contrast to younger, "mixed" dancers.⁷ McWhorter writes, "See those young men! Their slouchy '*traipsing*' tells of contact with the meaningless 'waltz' and suggestive 'hugs' and 'trots' of higher civilization—a vulgarity—a sacrilegious burlesque on the ancient and religiously instituted ceremony. Like other of his tribal cultures, the Indian's dance is suffering in modifications not always to be desired as morally beneficial" (p. 75). The language of pure and impure cultures, with its idea of mixedness as sign of debasement, cannot accommodate the possibility that Indian cultures, like any other culture, change over time in ways suited to their own needs. Thus, throughout the chapters devoted to the Fourth of July celebration, the narrator describes clothing, housing, dancing, storytelling—all as diminished by contact with non-Indian peoples.

Very different in both style and substance is the description of the friendship dance. Here, the narrator makes no mention of diminishment of Indian life but instead focuses on the purpose of the dance, which is to bring men and women together in a way that clarifies their relationship to one another, whether friendship or love—the precise issue that the men and women in the novel

must address. La-siah, a Pend d'Oreille elder, says through an interpreter, "As you circle in this dance, the position of the hand and arm of the man will make known how his heart and mind runs out to the woman" (p. 76). The friendship dance, then, emphasizes the importance of understanding the "language" (the hand positions) of a specific group to determine the nature of one's relationship to others—yet another crucial theme of the novel. Furthermore, La-siah says, "This is a ceremony of friendly good will; where all distant tribes may meet in harmony; a peace to be regarded well. All may dance, but it must not be in mockery. It must be from the heart which should always be true" (p. 76). Thus the dance brings people from many different backgrounds—including mixed-bloods—inward toward a moment of group understanding.

Significantly, the chief of the Pend d'Oreille chooses to dance with Cogewea, indicating a desire to include rather than to exclude the mixed-bloods. After the dance, the Pend d'Oreille chief presents her with a gift of "one of [his] best horses," which Cogewea accepts according to tradition: "Cogewea's heart bounded with gladness but Indian etiquette forbade any outward demonstration of gratitude. It was for her to reciprocate in a subsequent friendship dance" (p. 77). Likewise, Jim LaGrinder, the mixed-blood foreman of the Horseshoe Bend Ranch, also participates in the dance, giving the Stemteemä a blanket of "rare design" as a gift. The narrator tells us, "At that moment he ingratiated himself in the old heart, far more than he ever realized. That gift, received in stoic silence, was bread cast in the van of a fast gathering flood destined to break, dark and turbulent on the border shores of both their lives" (p. 78). Both the Stemteemä and the chief of the Pend d'Oreille ceremoniously create a bridge between the older tradition and the younger mixed-blood Indians, drawing no hard distinctions between themselves and their changing relations—in contradistinction to the attitude of the narrator in the description of the war dance.

Indeed, the different descriptions of the two dances present a microcosm of the central issues of the novel: The characters need to work out a relationship to Indian tradition, specifically the oral tradition, with the alternatives embodied by the two voices of the narrator. On the one hand, Densmore, Julia, and Cogewea (at least initially) see the oral tradition as fixed in the past, a view that reflects the attitude of the narrator of the war dance regarding the opposites of pure and impure tradition. On the other hand, the

Stemteemä and Mary (and later Jim) understand that a way of life is forever changing, and the oral tradition, like the dance, remains useful, even necessary, in pulling inward those who embody the changing conditions of life—namely, the mixed-bloods who live on the ranch. Indeed, in the same way that the two voices of the narrator in “The Indian Dancers” mirror the tension between the voices of Densmore and the Stemteemä, these voices, in turn, mirror the tensions between McWhorter and Mourning Dove.

CLAIMING COGEWEA

The novel sets up a balanced tension between the Stemteemä and Densmore, creating another kind of race where the victor claims Cogewea as a prize of the area “between two fires.” The Stemteemä and Densmore arrive precisely at the same time, off the same train, on the same wagon, and at the bidding of Cogewea. Furthermore, both are outsiders to the ranch: Densmore does not take part, even nominally, in activities integral to the ranch; the Stemteemä, too, stands apart from the ranch, choosing to stay in her tipi rather than in the house with Mary and Julia. Most important, both are particularly adept at one sphere of discourse: in Densmore’s case, the official “race” language of the judges and, in the Stemteemä’s case, the language of the Okanogan culture. Although Cogewea, too, understands and uses both these spheres of discourse, Densmore and the Stemteemä know them much more intimately and attempt to make theirs the “internally persuasive discourse” (in Owens’s terms) for Cogewea.

When Densmore steps off the train at Polson, he (unlike the others at the station) notices Cogewea, Mary, and the Stemteemä standing together and feels disappointment that they are not “the painted and blanketed aborigine of history and romance.” Seeing Silent Bob, who works at the Horseshoe Bend Ranch and who appears to agree more with his sense of what a Westerner looks like, Densmore expresses to him “his vexation and disgust for the writers who had beguiled him to the ‘wild and woolly’” (p. 44). Later, at the ranch, he reflects, “Where were those picturesque Indians that he was promised to meet? Instead, he had been lured into a nest of half bloods, whom he had always understood to be the inferior degenerate of two races” (p. 48). Indeed, like the race officials, Densmore regards blood, purity, and money as central to his conception of himself and his relationship to Cogewea. When he discovers that he is “half in love” with Cogewea, he is momen-

tarily torn between his feelings for her and his desire not to lose his inheritance and social standing back east (p. 81). He resolves to remember that he is a "scion of the ancient house of Densmore" (p. 87) and that "such women" as Cogewea are "alright as objects of amusement and pleasure, but there it must halt" (p. 81). Later, he even admits to Cogewea that he believes the white race to be superior (p. 135), but this statement and other clues about the true nature of his character are lost on Cogewea, for she is unable to read his character with the insight of the Stemteemä.⁸

Initially, Densmore courts Cogewea as an "object of amusement," asking her to marry him in an Indian ceremony, which he knows is binding within Indian culture but has no purchase in American courts. Densmore is anxious that this particular tradition be relevant for the present; he even goes so far as to attempt to please the Stemteemä by hunting and fishing for her to win her favor. But with all other traditions, especially the oral tradition, Densmore is adamant that they be relegated to the mythical past. His attitude is partly motivated by the official "race" language, which makes a hard distinction between pure and impure cultures, and partly motivated by the desire that Cogewea deny her Indian half so that she will marry him. Densmore's desire to relegate Indian culture to the past is evident when he expresses disbelief in the Stemteemä's story "The Dead Man's Vision," which describes the prophecy and the coming of Jesuit missionaries, who work for the good of the Okanogans, and the later arrival of other white men, who rapidly shrink the tribal land base. Densmore is incredulous, first because the story does not coincide with written history, which says that the Lewis and Clark expedition was the first into that area, and second because he cannot fathom that any missionary would undertake such a voyage without proper compensation (pp. 129–30). Densmore's attitude toward the oral tradition is especially evident when Cogewea confronts him with the stories she has heard from the Stemteemä that chronicle a history of deceit on the part of white men toward Indian women. Densmore asks, "Cogewea, why do you so seriously and constantly remind me of a possible few questionable deals suffered by your people at the hands of the white man? There are bad individuals among all races, but the things of the past should be forgotten. People change and advance" (p. 231).

While Densmore uses the language of division between past and present Indian culture, the Stemteemä argues instead for the importance and, indeed, the necessity of using the past as a means

to understand the present. In this regard, the languages of Densmore and the Stemteemä are analogous to those of the narrator in the descriptions of the two dances, one advocating a language of purity and impurity and the other embracing the language of cultural exchange. Furthermore, although Densmore's forays into Indian culture are a means to acquire wealth, the Stemteemä uses her knowledge of non-Indian cultures for the benefit of others. For example, when Cogewea and her sisters were young girls living with the Stemteemä on the Columbia River, two men from town asked them if the ice was safe for them to fish. The girls, pretending not to speak English, failed to warn them that the ice was dangerously thin. The Stemteemä scolded them for endangering the men, and the young girls responded by asking why did she not tell them herself. The Stemteemä said, "I can speak when I have to do so. But what did you learn the language and books of the pale face for? They do no good unless you make use of them when needed." In broken English, the Stemteemä warned the young men, who "often visited her lodge after that" (p. 119).

Although the grim history of Indian and white relations, especially as it appears in the oral tradition, causes the Stemteemä to distrust white people as a general rule, she does not close herself off to the possibility that there are important exceptions, such as the Jesuits from the "Dead Man's Tale." She also says that John Carter, her granddaughter Julia's husband and owner of the Horseshoe Bend Ranch, is "true and good" (p. 217), and one assumes that she gives her blessing to the marriage between Mary and Frenchy, the wealthy, aristocratic Parisian who takes great pains to become part of the culture of the ranch, even learning the "language" of the ranch well enough to play an elaborate trick on his tormentor, Celluloid Bill. The Stemteemä therefore is opposed to Densmore not because of race prejudice but because she reads his intentions when she meets him and places him in the oral tradition as another in a line of white men who treat Indian women badly. The first time Densmore goes with Cogewea to speak directly with the Stemteemä, Cogewea brings up the Indian marriage ceremony, which fascinates Densmore and which becomes the seed of his plan to take Cogewea by deceit. The narrator tells us,

A covetous light had come into Densmore's eyes, which escaped the notice of Cogewea. But not so with Stemteemä, who sat opposite him. A close reader of character, it was not

necessary that she comprehend any part of the conversation in determining the motives of her pale faced visitor. (pp. 101–102)

Later, when Cogewea and Densmore ask the Stemteemä to approve their marriage, the narrator says, “Covertly, she re-read the sordid character which others seemed not to understand” (p. 247). Although her worldview comes from the oral tradition, the Stemteemä in fact “reads” character much more accurately than others. She sees that, unlike Frenchy and John Carter, Densmore has become involved with Cogewea, Indian culture, and the ranch not because he places value on them but because he wishes to use them for personal gain.

Thus the Stemteemä conceives her relationship with Cogewea as an overlapping of cultural spheres: Although she understands that she and Cogewea are different in many ways, she attempts to find ways to bring what is useful and relevant from her past to the present—that is, from the Okanogan culture to her mixed-blood granddaughter. Densmore, on the other hand, sees his relationship to Cogewea, Okanogan culture, and the ranch as spheres that are fundamentally separate, even oppositional, certainly hierarchical, where his engagement is only a foray into the wild unknown for riches—an unknown he hopes eventually to leave.

The Stemteemä attempts to create an overlap between the sphere of the Okanogan traditions and that of her granddaughters, yet it is important to note that she leaves the sphere of Okanogan discourse with misgivings (unlike Cogewea), especially when telling her stories to a nontraditional audience. For example, before relating the story of the “Dead Man’s Vision” to Cogewea and Densmore, she says, “I know that they would want [the stories] kept only to their own people if they were here” (p. 122). Later, when she tells Jim the story of the “Second Coming of the Shoyapee” (white men), she says,

“If you were not of my own kind, I would not talk. Although the white blood has made fairer your skin, I like and I trust you. I will tell you this story of other snows. Troubles of long past should be buried, but I will speak.” (p. 219)

The Stemteemä feels that the sphere of the Okanogan past is fast closing and perhaps should be left alone, yet she also knows that it must be enlarged if she is to keep her granddaughter from serious harm. For this reason, before she begins the story of Green Blanket Feet, she tells Mary, Julia, and Cogewea, “My grandchil-

dren! I am now old and cannot stay with you many more snows. The story I am telling is true and I want you to keep it after I am gone" (p. 165). Analogous to her reluctance to use English to speak, doing so only when she must—as when in English she tells the young men to avoid the ice or Densmore to leave (p. 249)—the Stemteemä tells stories to a nontraditional audience only from necessity, here precipitated by her love for Cogewea.

Yet, for all her efforts, she ultimately fails to convince Cogewea of the value of the oral tradition, for Cogewea chooses to marry Densmore. After hearing the story of Green Blanket Feet, Cogewea responds, "The wisdom of the Stemteemä is of the past. She does not understand the waning of ancient ideas" (p. 176). The narrator expresses very similar sentiments and undoubtedly overstates the case in denying the ability of the "modern" to comprehend the Stemteemä. The narrator declares,

Thus the primitive and the modern are ever at variance; neither comprehending nor understanding the other. The Stemteemä knew many interesting tales of the past; legends finer than the myths of the Old World; but few of them known to the reading public and none of them understood. Whether portraying the simple deductive ideals of a primitive mind delving into the shadowy past, or constructive of the hopes of a future yet unborn, the philosophy is a sacred one. Ever suspicious of the whites and guardedly zealous in the secrecy of their ancient lore, seldom do the older tribesmen disclose ancient erudition, and when they do, their mysteries are not comprehended. (p. 40)

But the difficulty in communicating the stories (even the translated story to Densmore) is not that they are incomprehensible, nor is the problem that they are false (the perspective of Densmore). The problem is that they do not become the "internally persuasive discourse" through which Cogewea understands the world. Instead, Cogewea accepts the language that separates the past from the present—that is, the language of the narrator in the above passage and in the description of the war dance, and the language of Alfred Densmore.

A TEXT IS ALWAYS A TEXT

Although the Stemteemä's stories fail to convince Cogewea of Densmore's corrupt nature, in a general (and ironic) way the oral

tradition nonetheless emerges as the dominant discourse of the novel, for the Stemteemä's stories provide a metanarrative of which the novel itself is a part. *Cogewea* repeats the basic plot of the story of Green Blanket Feet and the Second Coming of the Shoyapee, not *in spite* of Cogewea's decision to marry Densmore but *because* she chooses to follow him. In this regard, *Cogewea* is, in one sense, a novel much like Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, which also uses a metanarrative from the oral tradition (drought, ceremony, and harmony) to define the parameters of the present-day story of Tayo, the returning war veteran. In *Cogewea*, the metanarrative consists of non-Indian men taking Indian women for wives, only to abandon them for wives they have elsewhere.

The oral tradition in *Cogewea* is similar to that of *Ceremony* in another important respect. In both, an effective oral tradition understands and comes to terms with elements from outside the culture. In *Ceremony*, the traditions known to Ku-oosh are insufficient to cure Tayo, because the sources of Tayo's sickness range far outside Ku-oosh's knowledge of the non-Pueblo world. (Ku-oosh cannot, for example, imagine that one can kill an enemy without seeing him.) For this reason, Tayo turns to Betonie, a mixed-blood medicine man who understands the way witchery ranges throughout the world. In *Cogewea*, the oral tradition is also "mixed-blood," for each of the Stemteemä's stories is a meeting, an intersection between two spheres of people, the Indian and the white. Contrary to the narrator's description of the oral tradition, then, which portrays it as pure and inaccessible, the Stemteemä's stories are themselves evidence of the value of enlarging the sphere of the oral tradition beyond a particular race or ethnicity to incorporate and to make sense of non-Indian elements and thus to remain relevant to changing social conditions.

Because the novel mirrors the plot of the stories from the oral tradition, the oral and the written overlap in a significant way. This is not to say that there are no important and fundamental differences between the two modes of discourse, just as there are important differences between the Stemteemä and *Cogewea*. But the novel shows that different traditions can "speak" to each other: that is, the oral tradition pulls the mixed-blood novel *Cogewea* inward toward an American Indian tradition of literature, similar to the way the Stemteemä embraces *Cogewea* and affirms her Indianness.

This relationship between the oral and the written discourse is played out not only with the stories within the novel but also with stories and written texts outside the novel. As Dexter Fisher tells

us, Mourning Dove initially conceived *Cogewea* as based on the Okanogan Owl and Chipmunk story (pp. xi–xii), a story that is never mentioned in the novel but that is included in Mourning Dove's *Coyote Stories*. In this Okanogan narrative, Chipmunk, or Kots-se-we-ah (Cogewea), is a carefree young girl trying to elude Owl-woman, who devours children's hearts. Upon first seeing Chipmunk, Owl-woman tries to get her out of the berry bush by telling her a number of lies. Chipmunk momentarily escapes with the help of her grandmother, but Meadowlark tells Owl-woman where Chipmunk is hiding, and Owl-woman eats her heart. Fortunately, Meadowlark tells Chipmunk's grandmother how to restore Chipmunk to life, and the story ends happily. The parallels to the novel are evident. Through deception, Densmore wins Cogewea's heart, only to toss her aside later. Afterward, Cogewea returns to her former self with the help of the Stemteemä and, especially, Jim LaGrinder. It is perhaps because the novel is based on the Owl and Chipmunk story that Mourning Dove ends the novel happily, against McWhorter's vigorous arguments⁹ and contrary to the Stemteemä's stories, all of which end unhappily. Furthermore, Mourning Dove's use of the oral tradition in this direct way indicates her belief in the value and power of the oral tradition in her efforts as a writer.

While the novel is pulled toward the sphere of the oral tradition, it also is pulled toward the traditions of non-Indian written discourse by both McWhorter and Mourning Dove herself. In his editing of the book, McWhorter not only included ethnographic information (and philosophy); he also added epitaphs from writers such as Lord Byron, Badger Clarke, and especially Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. By using these intertextual references, McWhorter places the novel within the tradition of British and American letters rather than the Okanogan oral tradition. Mourning Dove, however, displays considerably more ambivalence toward the written tradition—in particular, the written work she refers to in *Cogewea*, Therese Broderick's 1909 novel *The Brand, a Tale of the Flathead Reservation*.¹⁰ In chapter 10 of *Cogewea*, "Lo! The Poor 'Breed'" Cogewea reads Broderick's novel and castigates it for its misrepresentation of Indian people, eventually throwing it into the stove. She argues that *The Brand*, "stigma of the blood," is false, because it depicts a wealthy, educated, mixed-blood Henry West as one who denies his Indian parentage because he is in love with a white easterner, Bess Fletcher. Cogewea says, "Show me the Red 'buck' who would slave for the most exclusive white 'princess'

that lives. Such hash may go with the whites, but the Indian, both full bloods and the despised *breeds* know differently” (p. 91).

Yet what is striking is the degree to which *The Brand* parallels the plot of *Cogewea*. In *The Brand*, Bess Fletcher moves to the Flathead Reservation with her brother. Instantly, Henry West falls in love with her but says nothing, because he feels beneath her, a situation not entirely different from that of Jim LaGrinder, who has similar feelings for Cogewea. In Broderick’s novel, the villainous Indian agent Dave Davis pursues Bess Fletcher and persuades her to marry him, even though he, somewhat similarly to Alfred Densmore, has fatally wronged another woman in the East. In the end, Dave Davis is found out, and we are left with Henry West and Bess Fletcher together in love. In her reading of *The Brand*, Cogewea denies the relationship between “real” Indian life and Broderick’s novel, yet her own life mirrors key moments in that novel. Furthermore, although Cogewea rails against Broderick for suggesting that Indians would deny their parentage, Cogewea herself denies the relevance of the Stemteemä’s stories and, in effect, reproduces the story she so despises.

Thus the novel itself, like Cogewea, “speaks” the language of different spheres of discourse—the written tradition and the oral tradition—but feels pressure to choose its dominant mode. The choice for the novel is an affirmation of the oral tradition, for it repeats the metanarrative from the oral tradition in a written form. At the same time, however, the novel has a curious, ambivalent relationship to established literary traditions—both denying and embracing the forms of written discourse from which it cannot escape. Indeed, in this precise way, Cogewea is representative of the theoretical issues most pressing to many American Indian authors to this day, who find themselves between these different spheres of discourse while addressing questions of identity, community, continuity, and change. Mourning Dove’s novel responds to these issues by showing that the oral tradition provides a theoretical and practical wellspring of language and philosophy, creating a written literature that has a character—an ethos—that is profoundly Indian.

NOTES

1. Mourning Dove, *Cogewea, The Half Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 15.

2. The quotation marks indicate an awareness of the theoretical issues in questions of "race"—issues that, in some ways *Cogewea* addresses. Further references to "race" and "mixed-bloods" are not in quotes but are understood to be sites of theoretical contention.

3. Dexter Fisher, introduction to *Cogewea, the Half-Blood*, xiv.

4. Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 44.

5. Alanna Kathleen Brown, "Mourning Dove's Voice in *Cogewea*," *Wicazo Sa Review* 4.2 (Fall 1988): 2–15.

6. Idem, "Through the Glass Darkly: The Editorialized Mourning Dove," in *New Voices in Native American Criticism*, ed. Arnold Krupat (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1993), 280.

7. It is a safe assumption that McWhorter is responsible for this section. The visiting Nez Perce carries during the dances a club, which, McWhorter says in his notes to the book, "is now in my possession, a present from the Nez Perce warrior of the dance. A thrilling personal narrative, dictated by its owner, is still in manuscript form" (p. 289).

8. For example, when *Cogewea* asks about his religious faith, Densmore names several positions in various denominations, and concludes, "A sort of free prospector, I have panned wherever the colors showed most promising." His statement reveals his mercenary character, as well as a connection to *Cogewea*'s father, who abandoned her for the Alaska gold fields.

9. Brown, "Mourning Dove's Voice in *Cogewea*," 12–13.

10. Therese Broderick, *The Brand, a Tale of the Flathead Reservation* (Seattle: Alice Harriman Co., 1909).

