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"We'll Always Survive!" The Challenges of Home in the Poetry of Adrian C. Louis

ROBIN RILEY FAST

Paiute writer Adrian C. Louis's poetry complicates Native meanings of home and community in painful and sometimes problematic ways, yet it participates in the project, widely shared by Native writers, of maintaining these very essentials of Indian continuance and survival. The importance of home for American Indian writers and their peoples is implicit in the centrality of land and community for both traditional oral and written literatures. Community ideally embraces human and nonhuman life, the physical world, and the world of spiritual reality, all of which are reciprocally related. It is thus supportive, empowering, and dynamic. Community includes land, understood as the grounds of tribal and sacred history, culture, and language. In the framework of such traditional knowledge, home is one's place within community and land; to some extent, these three terms—*home*, *community*, and *land*—can be used interchangeably, as I will often do here, using *home* to imply aspects of the other two. For Native peoples the web of home, land, and community has traditionally been the source of identity and of the sense of belonging, in and through family and culture; it is likewise often a source of knowledge and creativity.[1]

Native writers often confirm the significance of home to their visions and their work. Thus, for example, Luci Tapahonso writes: "The place of my birth is the source of [my] writing." And Joy Harjo states: "Oklahoma never leaves us. The spirit is alive in the landscape that arranges itself in . . . poems and stories."[2] Many critics have also contributed to the project of defining the importance of home, land, and community in Native literature. William Bevis observes that "[i]n Native American novels, coming home, staying put . . . is not only the primary story, it is a primary mode of knowledge and a primary good."[3] Robert Nelson, who notes that the landscape values he identifies in fiction are also evident in Native poetry, finds that in the Indian novels he

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discusses "the common referent that serves to define, evaluate, and confirm or validate identity is a physical landscape" and that land offers "the antidote to alienation."[4] Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver states that the "necessity of community pervades every aspect of Native life," since "Native peoples find their individual identities in the collectivity of community." Thus he argues that "[b]y writing out of and into Native community, for and to Native peoples, [Native] writers engage in a continuing search for community."[5] As these critics' observations suggest, and writers like Tapahonso and Harjo confirm, for Native peoples a grounding in home and community can be a powerful basis for survival.

Louis's poetry suggests a complex and sometimes contrary relationship to such conceptions. He repeatedly examines and exposes the difficult realities of his homes, the place where he lives and the place of origin, but it can hardly be said that "coming home," much less "staying put," is the "primary story" or "a primary good." Referring to his first poetry collection, *Fire Water World*, LaVonne Ruoff observed that Louis writes of his own and others' "inability to feel at home either on or off the reservation."[6] Even as we recognize (in later books and even in this first one) a recurrent impulse to move toward home, and occasionally to celebrate home's dreamed-of or real restorative potential, we must acknowledge Louis's persistent ambivalence. If the landscapes of home are sources of identity and of creativity in this work, as to some extent they may be, home (and land and community) hardly offers a reliable "antidote to alienation"—indeed, sometimes, quite the contrary. When a poem does locate him at home, the sense that the home feeling is provisional, and only tenuously sustainable, is often profound. Furthermore, in the view of home and community that predominates in Louis's work, survival is in question, if not already impossible, for many. It can even be said that what he knows of home *makes* survival, and hope, questionable for Louis. Yet Weaver's claims are not without echoes in this poetry. If Louis contests traditionally grounded conceptions of home and community, I would argue that he does so, often, within a dynamic not of rejection but of engagement and, as Weaver would say, of searching.[7]

The author of numerous collections of poetry, as well as short stories and a novel, Louis grew up in western Nevada, has worked as a journalist, and lived for many years on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, where he taught at Oglala Lakota College. He has persistently drawn attention to the harsh realities of reservation life, among them poverty, violence, and alcoholism, and the ongoing, devastating effects of racism and colonialism on Indian people. Louis writes "out of and into" communities, "for and to" peoples that frequently move him to anger and grief. Home, Indian Country, as Louis describes it, is characterized as often as not by conflict, hopelessness, violence, failure, fear, and by various forms of alienation, complicity, betrayal, and denial. It is a "suffocating" and dangerous place, a place to leave. It is also a "true . . . place" of "terrible beauty,"[8] where miracles might occur and recovery might be possible. But such possibilities, again, remain tenuous and provisional, demand constant struggle, and are always vulnerable to internal ills, as well as to the assaults of racism, colonialism, and exploitation.

Louis's poetry struggles with the implications of the home(s) he knows, and it occasionally glimpses the possibility that home could be different, more life-sustaining, more promising of survival. I use the single term *home* to refer to both the reality Louis describes and the possibility he sometimes envisions; I do so to acknowledge his insistence on facing the actualities he sees, which any vision of recovery must also confront. Home, for Louis, is often a site of conflict, of sorrow and anger, a place, he sometimes implies, where community has failed. But it is also a scene of ambivalence because of the poet's persistent refusal absolutely to give up on what it might be. In this refusal, the poetry resists not only racism and colonialist exploitation but also collective and individual self-betrayals. Because this complex resistance involves both personal witness and struggle, as well as exhortation and appeal to others (both aspects represented by Louis's ongoing account of his own alcoholism and hard-won sobriety), I argue that Louis's poetry engages not only with the pain and sorrow but also with the positive possibilities of home and community. In turn, this engagement confirms his commitment to the restorative potential of Native community. Furthermore, this resistant engagement itself constitutes an entering into the possibility of community-as-dynamic-process.

Commitment is implicit in what I would call Louis's position of critical solidarity: he questions and challenges his Indian people from a position of acknowledged and often pained, fallible commonality. In critical solidarity he searches for a sense of home, as he challenges his people to resist their circumstances and their own weaknesses, to recover community, and thus to survive. In critical solidarity he can be both angry and compassionate; he can offer his grief and anger to provoke others toward resistance. Critical solidarity recognizes painful commonality, often through the self-implicating pronoun *we*. (Although as an outsider I am moved by the integrity of such a complex position, it is important to recognize the risk Louis takes: anger may sometimes discourage others more than it moves them to change, especially if criticism seems to outweigh solidarity. Clearly, differently located readers might weigh any text's effects differently.)

For Louis the meanings of home are further complicated by the fact that he writes of two homes, the place of his Northern Paiute origins, in western Nevada, and the Lakota people's Pine Ridge Reservation. I believe that Pine Ridge can be considered another home, in Louis's poems, for several reasons. It is part of Indian Country, as he acknowledges, for example, in "Thanksgiving at Pine Ridge": "back [on] Indian land . . . I'm me at last! . . . I'm thankful I'm on Indian land."[9] Scourges that grieve and anger him, including alcoholism, poverty, and racism, affect both his original and his adopted home place. There is, too, an important historical connection between the Paiutes and the Lakota, due to the latter's strong response to the Paiute prophet Wovoka and his Ghost Dance. And the poetry indicates that Louis involved himself fully in Pine Ridge and experienced feelings of leaving home when he moved away.[10]

Louis presents himself as distanced from both homes and yet drawn to both. Physically far from Nevada, he recounts periodic returns. Physically located at or near Pine Ridge, he is alienated from much of the life that

he knows there, yet he "returns" to witness, sometimes to exhort, and to stand in critical solidarity with his Lakota neighbors. Evoking the constant knowledge of loss and grief, in a world dominated by alcohol and poverty, Louis challenges his Indian people to break out of despair and self-destruction. He does so partly by confessing his own frailties, partly through humor, often through language that is blunt and angry. He warns against easy answers, as he struggles to find hope in a seemingly hopeless world. If hope is to be found, it may be in Indian land itself, in complicating (rather than simplifying) memory, and in willingness to fight back against both oppression and self-destruction. Yet home remains a place of pain. One strength of his poetry is that he leaves the hard questions open: how can one be part of, or create, a sense of home and community, in a place that moves one to grief and anger? Is there a way through the bleakness and disaster to something better? That he persists in confronting such questions signals his own commitment to land, people, and the possibilities of home, his engagement in Weaver's "continuing search for community."

Searching, Louis encounters Indian communities whose sources of potential strength are endangered and exposes the despair that can follow from loss of connectedness and hope. Doing so, he offers angry but compassionate witness. A relatively early poem and a more recent one testify to some of the conditions that Louis's poetry repeatedly faces. "Without Words," from his first book, begins:

> Farewell from this well is impossible.
> Man is composed mainly of water.
> I lower a frayed rope into the depths and hoist
> the same old Indian tears to my eyes.

By the poem's end, the tears have blended with alcohol:

> The parched and cracking mouths
> of our Nations do not demand
> a reason for drinking
> so across America
> we stagger and stumble with contempt for the future
> and with no words of pride for our past. (*FWW 2)*

These lines convey a sense of entrapment that pervades much of Louis's poetry—entrapment in the human condition, in what "America" has meant for Indians, in raw human need. But there is also a hint that Indian people share some responsibility for their condition, an idea that Louis makes more explicit elsewhere. Given the bleakness of this poem's vision, it is important to note that he acknowledges his own implication in the sad circumstances and behavior he depicts. Such acknowledgment, a form of critical solidarity, suggests here and elsewhere an affinity between Louis's witnessing and the commitment articulated by Mohawk writer Beth Brant: "as an Indigenous writer, I feel that the gift of writing . . . holds a responsibility to be a witness to my people. . . . [and] to the sometimes unbearable circumstances of our lives."[11]

"Valentine from Indian Country," from his most recent collection, also presents a bleak picture, this time with history as its explicit frame:

> On these plains the plows
> and drums wrestle for centuries
> and marry into resignation.
> The old songs scratch the earth
> attempting to release the ancestors.
> Digging deeper, John Deere tractors
> unleash the Ghost Dance
> but nobody remembers the steps. (*B&J* 3)

If colonialism is invoked as the source of this malaise, Indian people are nonetheless called to account for "resignation" and for forgetting the "Ghost Dance . . . steps," the impulse to resistance. Again, there is the sense of inevitability and loss, and life on the reservation, for the "scarred / husks of abandoned humans," is grim: "*Hope* is only a word used / in grant applications or in / the leering glare" of casinos. Facing this complex history and daunting present, and making no promises for the future, Louis concludes, "Yes, this is Indian Country," and "[i]n America there is no truer place / for us to worship our terrible beauty" (*B&J* 3–5). This is a difficult, and somewhat ambiguous, affirmation. If we hear an echo of Yeats, the "terrible beauty" evokes both the rebellion and the martyrdom of the oppressed. This is home, I think Louis is saying, but what follows from that, in the poem's final clause, is again ambiguous. One can read "to worship our terrible beauty" as a bitterly ironic indictment of solipsism. But reading with the emphasis on "no truer place," we might instead see that beauty as a still glimmering reason for hope that here, in Indian Country, is the place to confront, to understand, and perhaps to change Indian lives. ("Old Friend in the Dark," also from *Bone & Juice*, as well as "Black Crow Dreams" and "This Is the Rez," from an earlier collection, support this second reading. I discuss these poems below.)

Recovering and sharing the possibility of hope requires language, but in "Without Words" Louis alludes to the danger of wordlessness—not only in what he apparently sees, here and elsewhere, as some Native people's loss of a sustaining, storied knowledge of the past but also in the implicit suggestion that with the right words Indians might "demand" or create alternatives to the bleakness of "nothing to live for, nothing to die for." Finding and shaping the right words, the healing words, is difficult. Especially in *Fire Water World*, the book most painfully situated, as its name indicates, in the entanglements of alcohol, language is characterized as inadequate or as captive to drink: "we slur our song of self-pity" (*FWW* 3); "[t]hese gray words slog in spring snow / and lose themselves in our history's mud" (*FWW* 5). While other Native writers emphasize the creative power of language, Louis's references to words often reflect the seeming hopelessness of a damaged and damaging world. He prays to "*Numanah*, Grandfather," for "the grace / of a new song far from this lament / of lame words,"[12] suggesting as he does that his need for spiritual renewal is entwined with his conflicted relationship to home: "I only wanted

to run far, so far from Indian land . . . then when I was old enough / I ran back . . . / now I'm thinking of running from here" (*FWW* 21). The hope that language and spirit may be renewed is actually implied in this prayer (and in "A Prayer for the Lost," below); language's healing power will be more directly evident in "Old Friend in the Dark."

Joy Harjo has said that "the act of writing, of witnessing means taking part in the healing of the people."[13] Similarly, Weaver maintains that "to promote communitist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them."[14] Louis takes part in the healing of his Indian people as he recognizes their grief and challenges them to struggle, to "fight back," in Simon Ortiz's words, "for the sake of the people, for the sake of the land"—for the sake of community and home.[15]

He directly addresses his desire to contribute to the healing of home and people in "A Prayer for the Lost," the first poem in *Blood Thirsty Savages,* which locates him in a multifaceted world of family and Indian nation. At the close of a vignette that mingles humor and elegy, beauty and danger, he prays: "In the purity of starlight, I ask Grandfather / to salvage this battered Indian nation / because my words may be no help."[16] Again, his prayer implies at least the possibility of hope, acknowledging as it does a power both beyond and *related,* as "Grandfather," to the speaker and the "battered Indian nation." In another poem he again suggests what is needed if words are to heal, when he voices the fear that someone else may write his people's story "without searching / for a space to inject / the slightest hint of grace"—of beauty, promise, the fact that humankind is the "artwork" of the "Great spirit."[17] His own poetry indicates that grace might be found in love ("This Is the Rez"), in recognizing connection with Indian land ("A Visit to My Mother's Grave"), and in the desire for health and for continuance ("Old Friend in the Dark," "Some of What We Have Forgotten").[18] As in Harjo's prose poem "Grace," Louis suggests that it is "the promise of balance," the knowledge that "there is something larger than the memory of a dispossessed people."[19] Such knowledge offers the possibility of healing. Louis (like Harjo) doesn't promise that there will be more than "hints" of grace, or that the search for healing will always be successful, but the search itself, I believe he implies, is valuable evidence of life and of the persistent will to survive. This is certainly so in "Old Friend in the Dark," one of his most hopeful poems.

In this poem, from his most recent collection, Louis offers grace and confident healing words. He may be speaking to another Indian or even to himself; either way, what is important is the invitation to life and vitality, grounded in Indian Country. Against the "pale heart of fear," he urges,

> Let's sing of hot Dakota summer nights.
> Let's sing of frybread smell and ice-cold
> beer, the sexy eyes of sweet, dark women,
> and the dust of cars and kids and ghosts.
> Let's sing of everyone, young and strong.
> Let's dance backward

to the strength of summer.
Wake up now, friend,
and come back home. (*B&J* 87)

The poem is, in essence, a promise: its last line confirms that home exists and can be life-affirming, for home can embrace all that the previous lines evoke—life-giving, sensuous pleasure, familial and communal wholeness (kids, women, ghosts, "everyone"), restorative language and ritual, and the balance created by the lines' initial repetitions. At the same time, the health of home depends on human energy and response—the friend must awaken, whether from sleep, illness, alienation, or ignorance. Thus Louis isn't simply singing *to* or *for* his "friend"; he is inviting participation, cajoling the other to join the song, the dance, and life itself, to "come back home" to health and land and community.

As the body of Louis's work shows, coming back home can be hard work, and so can the work of healing, for neither follows, necessarily or smoothly, from being on Indian land. Yet when we recognize his voice as repeatedly challenging, imploring, and, in critical solidarity, confessing, we can recognize too that this poetry is moved by the need to "help . . . keep the people, the communities . . . together and going," and that in this way Louis is engaged in "the continuing *search* for community" and for home.[20]

I want to suggest that what Louis offers to his people is, on the one hand, his own story, a representative one, despite his education, job as a teacher, and publications. On the other hand, he gives his grief and his anger, as a provocation to others, challenging Indian people to resist and thus to move toward the healing and empowering possibilities of home and community. The two are closely related as acts of healing and because Louis is challenging himself as well as others: he acknowledges that he is a part of the world that he criticizes and resists. The story, the provocation, and the healing intent follow from Louis's commitment "to bring things to the surface regardless of how ugly they are," hoping "that in that way a little bit of it will be confronted and dealt with."[21] He insists on acknowledging and dealing with the "ugliness," both condemning the legacy of conquest and calling himself and other Indian people to account.

Thus in poems that begin by calling attention to the injury done by white institutions and assumptions, he nonetheless does not desist from challenging his Indian relatives and neighbors. In "Farewell to Synthesis" (*FWW* 6) he exhorts them to break free from romanticized appeals to the past and the dulling trap of addiction, to face the disasters of the present. The challenge is direct and personal: "Sandy, you remember her? . . . she went to school at Pine Ridge High? / Well, on coke she choked her baby good-bye / yes, she was a daughter of Crazy Horse." This poem grieves not only for Sandy and her baby but for an Indian community lost in addiction and white religion, "needing drink . . . wasted to the point we cannot think of / Crazy Horse, or who he was." Here Louis intimates the need to recover a meaningful relationship to history and culture—to communal knowledge that might instill sustaining pride and guide recuperative action. As he often does, he includes himself in

the plural *we*, implicitly acknowledging his own complicity and speaking from within the world he would change. "Sunset at Pine Ridge Agency" also begins by inviting reflection on Indian-white history as it draws attention to the role of the U.S. government in Native lives, but the failure of Indian community is even clearer: "drunks stab and rape . . . other drunkards and nobody / gives a good God damn." The poem ends bluntly:

> This Indian nation is in anarchy
> dancing awkwardly toward the day
> when it will fall off the edge
> of the bed of the world
> and awake to its own suicide. (*ADE* 24)[22]

The ambiguity of the final line—will the people wake up dead or awaken to turn away from death?—doubles the challenge Louis offers by heightening the sense of urgency, of the need for an awakening before it is too late. This is the same challenge we heard him voice more gently in "Old Friend in the Dark": "Wake up now" (*B&J* 87).

Louis sometimes uses confession and self-directed humor as he urges his people toward the possibility of continuance and survival. Confession establishes commonality with those he depicts as weak or destructive; he doesn't speak from above or apart, but from experience shared—that is, from a position of solidarity. And humor, as many have noted, is a strategy for survival and a teaching tool; it seems especially important in the context of the deadly world Louis's people inhabit. "Sometimes," he says, "life gets so grim that there's nothing to resort to but humor. And in a way it becomes a kind of salvation at times, a redemption."[23] "Friday Night at White Clay" (*ADE* 48) evokes the world whose inhabitants focus all their energy on getting to the border-town liquor stores to stock up for the weekend. Despite their delusions of toughness, "the truth is, only a few / are strong enough to be human here." As for the rest, they fail to struggle against oppression, preferring their "world of denial." The poem ends with a twist of sardonic, self-mocking confession that, by locating the speaker among those he criticizes, renders the criticism more poignant, the challenge more pointed:

> Our race is puffy, uneducated
> and waiting to die,
> I tell my old lady
> as we drive the three miles
> to White Clay, Nebraska
> to buy the medicine
> of tolerance and bravery.

The first two lines preach from a self-righteous distance, but the remaining lines expose the speaker as one of those on the same errand, and the final line reminds us—and the speaker, Louis himself—of the errand's futility, for alcohol will neither remedy intolerance nor substitute for lasting bravery.

Louis uses similarly self-implicating and self-deflating humor to criticize and challenge, in poems like "Coyote Song (*FWW* 28), "Messiah" (*FWW* 26), and "I Flew into Denver April" (*FWW* 43). Humor's importance as a tool for emotional survival is poignantly evident in "Raiding Party" (*ADE* 12), where it temporarily fends off the sadness of a friend's coming death from cirrhosis, and in "Coyote's Circle" (*CD* 45–56), where Coyote's tricky responses to a highway patrolman, and his exaggerated, almost goofy heroics, facing some superheated cans of beer, serve to counterpoint the mix of loss and longing evoked as he "head[s] . . . for home."[24]

But humor doesn't always have a place in these poems. Thus, in "In the Land of the No Hearts" (*B&J* 12–15) Louis imagines "*a novel of / autonomous, anonymous / Indian Territory in 1856*," where an old woman who "once held the weight / of the world upon her shoulders" pleads with her people not to abandon her: "*Where are your hearts, / my People? / Please answer me!*" She speaks for Louis, and her people's silence, like their breasts, which "would never pulse / with love again," seems emblematic of the fear underlying many of his angry, challenging poems. The people of the "novel" will neither answer nor look at the old woman, and at the poem's end Louis implies a parallel as he struggles in the present to understand

> *why some of us cannot*
> *explain our inability*
> *to love except to mumble*
> *those clichés about the boarding*
> *schools and how they changed*
> *most Skins from men to rocks* . . . (ellipsis in original)[25]

Anguish, anger, and the temptation to despair are all encapsulated in this poem.

In such painful poems Louis mourns the absence of solidarity and simultaneously challenges his people to turn toward love, change, and the possibility of community. The appeal is especially powerful when it is made on behalf of Indian children, who are endangered not only by racism and poverty but also by the failures of their broken communities. The brief story of Sandy and her dead baby, in "Farewell to Synthesis," in which both infant and mother can be seen as child victims, is but one example. Louis refers frequently to children's vulnerability to drugs and alcohol. The road to the liquor-store town of White Clay "is where our children die / on their way to getting born" (*FWW* 5); those who survive are prey to "coke dealers . . . hustling and ushering / our youth steps closer / to death's dribbling knell" (*FWW* 28). Perhaps his most moving poem on this theme is "Muted War Drums" (*FWW* 9), in which the speaker looks back to the time when he was just ten years old. The tone is quiet, befitting the title, and the poem's first words describe the speaker's mother in gentle terms: she has "strong black hair," and her "warm breath" plays "sobbing yet silly" notes on a comb. But the ten-year-old boy was "like a baby at a dry breast," hungry and unfed, and the plea that ends each of the two stanzas voices sorrow, need, and the stirrings of anger:

> "Mom," I pleaded,
> "Please don't drink no more now."
> . . . .
> "Please, Mom," I sang weary from memory,
> "Don't drink no more here now tonight."

The repetition, the "weary . . . memory," and the fact that his mother does not respond, tell us sadly that the scene and the plea will be repeated. The poem conveys both love and anger, testifying to the complexity of Louis's response to the situations and people he criticizes and challenges. The boy's love for his mother is evident in his initial description and his plea. But he also says, "I tapped my fingers . . . masking the thumps of my empty heart / muted war drums / for Mom that night." In "masking" the "drums" he might indicate the desire to protect her, to shield her, but they are "*war* drums," suggesting that his anger is growing and that not only the "masking" but also the angry drums are "for Mom."

In "Petroglyphs of Serena" Louis calls attention to adults' responsibility for the children:

> We are all hiding from the truth.
> Our children have no respect
> because their parents cannot connect
> the values of the ancient chiefs
> to the deadly grief that welfare brings. (*CD* 9)

As elsewhere, Louis implicates himself, with the first-person pronoun. He also implicates government, with the word *welfare*, but most important is the accusation of communal avoidance—"we are *all hiding*"—and the laying of responsibility on adults' inability to link traditional values to the present. This, again, recalls "Farewell to Synthesis," with its repeated references to Crazy Horse, suggesting the loss of historical knowledge of resistance and of cultural continuity. But Louis doesn't stop with accusation:

> The question is, can the children be saved?
> And if so, then why? Will they ever be whole
> or do we just add them to the dark days
> of casualties from Sand Creek
> to Ira Hayes?
> I mean, do we catalogue them
> in the first grade and then sit back
> and wait, afraid . . . . ?

He continues by cataloguing, in the form of unanswered questions, some of the grim possible outcomes of the children's lives. The further question Louis implies is whether he and his people will break free of paralyzed fear to rebuild community and save their children.

This poem suggests as well another, perhaps more troubling (because even wider in its implications), question: is it possible at all to "connect" the old values to the grief of dependency, to deal with and surmount contemporary suffering by means of traditional wisdom grounded in a radically different world? Or are the old ways and the new conditions utterly irreconcilable? Either way, adults must be responsible—whether by discovering how to make connections or by finding some other basis for saving the children. But at the same time that Louis asks and implies such questions, he seems, within the poem, to evade responsibility. None of the directly voiced questions is answered, nor does he seem to offer suggestions about how answers might be sought. Instead this long poem, in part an elegy for a student who "drunk-rolled / a car," ends in "the snug, smug darkness / of lust" (*CD* 11), in explicit disregard of old ways of mourning, with the sister of the dead girl. If the poem's voiced concern for Indian children represents an appeal for resistance, through change, to save the children, its conclusion seems, if not to undermine the appeal, at least to expose again the difficulty of change and the speaker's complicity in "our Indian dance / of self-destruction" (*CD* 4). Grief hasn't, apparently, led yet to change on the speaker's part.

Such a conclusion threatens despair, and it may be necessary to Louis's sometimes grimly determined truth-telling that he *not* allow the poem to end otherwise, with any hint of redemptive or restorative change that might soften his vision of self-destruction. But in another poem, "Some of What We Have Forgotten" (*VIF* 39–42), Louis suggests that the old values may indeed offer hope of healing. This poem insistently, conscientiously, remembers cures for a variety of physical ills, along with wisdom for restoring communal health: thus, for example, it urges, "Listen, you can only pray for yourself / by praying for others. / This is important above all else"; and "Always share your food with others. / Never refuse when food is offered." This is wisdom that can help bind people back into community, and Louis speaks for such healing when he ends this poem with "[t]he cawing of crows / . . . the first sign of spring."

The importance and the difficulty of maintaining communal connectedness are evident as well in poems that return to the Nevada home of Louis's Paiute people. Going home is hard work, according to these poems, the subject of painfully mixed feelings. Thus "The Walker River Night" (*FWW* 10–11) announces, "It's hell to be home," then exults, "but kin of my skin, my Indians!" Absence and education ("In the Holy Order of Objective Correlative") have made his relationship to people, culture, and history tenuous; he both wishes to communicate and dreads the message: "How can I tell my own people / that we exist before the artist's stroke / and that after the portrait we die?" Without an answer for himself, he turns away (as we have seen him do in "Petroglyphs of Serena"): "I toot my tune in the fire water horn / and blank my mind to the warrior's song / and wonder where the Great Spirit has gone." Another poem recounts his return, "after twenty years of baiting the trap of the past," to "the house of ghosts," and "the airless past that suffocated my youth" (*ADE* 34), where he finds the detritus of vandalism. Yet notwithstanding the difficulty of return, Louis announces in the later "Valentine from Indian Country," "*my soul is the Black Rock Desert*" (*B&J* 4).

And in "Coyote's Circle," in which Coyote travels Louis's route home from South Dakota to northern Nevada, his anticipation is clear: "Nothing matters, he's headed for home. / Home, where his ancestors lie buried" (*CD* 46). As these poems suggest, Louis repeatedly turns toward home, which is repeatedly associated with desire, uneasiness, and disappointment. Yet for all the tension it evokes, he evidently hasn't given up on the possibility of connecting with the restorative possibilities of home.

He locates several poems "where his ancestors lie buried" in Lovelock, Nevada; these poems show him doing the maintenance work of home, tending not only the graves but memory, community, and his own spirit. Such work, some of these poems suggest, can be hopeful and healing. In "Indian Cemetery: Lovelock, Nevada" (*FWW* 41) he's both at home and something of a stranger, "at that place I grew up to leave." Above all, though, he is momentarily at peace:

> Strange unknown Indians with my mother's eyes
> stare at me and whisper behind my back.
> Their words unheard feel good and in my tribe's
> burial ground I have no fear of death
> and I have no fear of life.

"A Visit to My Mother's Grave" (*ADE* 10) is one of Louis's most peaceful and celebratory poems. Its use of repetition and its encompassing scope seem to anticipate the later "Old Friend in the Dark," discussed above. Here he leaves the cemetery and takes a walk to visit with some Paiute boys. In a kind of visionary moment a flash of "God-glint" light "reflected and refracted on the brown boys' sweat," an image of spirit alive in the human, material world, moves him "to sing"

> this mirage of rainbows
> this mingled prayer
> this visit to my mother's grave
> this soil of Nevada
> this soil of Wovoka
> this song of love
> for my people.[26]

These words embrace the whole world in a vision of a sustaining, relational home and community—nature, family, spirit, land, history—and in this moment, because of the commitment represented by the visit to the mother's grave, all are in balance.

But such balance is fragile, given the white world's encroachments. "Medicine Song" (*CD* 49–50), which again brings Louis home to the Indian cemetery, reminds us of the ongoing history of Native losses and the vulnerability of Native life and land, hence of Native community. He is "talking, / crying, pulling old sticks and weeds / off [his] sleeping relations, sleepy [him]self," when "some white dudes / with stereo blasting," go "four-wheeling over the sage"; as their dust disappears, he knows "that their genes will always

whisper: / 'Take, take, take.'" This noisy intrusion can only remind us of the historical and contemporary contexts in which Indian people must struggle to sustain supporting connections to home and community, and survive.

While maintaining ties to home and community is essential to survival, departure can become equally necessary; and, as Louis demonstrates, leaving home can be as difficult as returning. Three poems at the end of *Among the Dog Eaters* recount his move from the Pine Ridge Reservation to live in a nearby town. Emotionally, each is very complex, suggesting both the necessity and the difficulty of the move. He explains the move succinctly: "I no longer drink. I no longer can / and will not live in a nation of drunks" (*ADE* 78). The reasoning—his need to distance himself from people who still drink—may be clear and simple, but the experience recounted is not.

The first stanza of "Owl Dream Song: The Eve of Departure" (*ADE* 76) states the situation provocatively: "tomorrow we move to a white town." As he falls asleep, exhausted from packing, an owl flies over the reservation and "enters [his] calm mind where / there is no agitated exhortation," only the damning "whisper that as Indians / we have failed ourselves." This is a charge that elsewhere Louis might level at others, but here it is the personal voice of all the grief, guilt, and fear associated with such a move. Immediately, "[t]hat old time religion, / that urge to drink / begins to rise," and he is in a car, "hurtling / down the highway" with "dead-drunk / and soon dying warriors." Only the next and last sentence reassures us, as it were, that this is not a relapse, but the reassurance is also painful: "I feel good and fear the dream's end."

"Breakfast at Big Bat's Conoco Convenience Store in Pine Ridge" (*ADE* 77–81) bears the dedication "*E numu du wi*, for all my relations." The dedication is particularly moving here, for with it he embraces those whom he is leaving behind and signals the desire to maintain solidarity with them. The poem opens by focusing on the town of Pine Ridge, with a statement that suggests resolve and perhaps an effort at self-persuasion: "This town . . . is no longer a source of pain to me." Acknowledging it as "the same world I grew up in / and left only to return, forever tethered," he promises not to scorn this place, which has been both "sanctuary" and "home," or to deride its people, whose weaknesses he admits he has shared. Thus in a sense he reaches out to Pine Ridge even as he concludes, "For now, I will withdraw . . . eighteen miles from Pine Ridge / as the buzzard flies." "For now" offers the possibility of future reconsideration: his move is definite but perhaps not absolute.

Nonetheless he promptly asserts a conclusive break: "I'm gone. I'm history. / Never mind that I'll drive / back each day to teach." As the poem continues, it reflects all of the agony of mixed feelings, moving from resolve, self-persuasion, and explanation, through admission of pain, self-deprecating humor, defiance, and more self-persuasion.

The poem's final section raises a plethora of questions that may prompt speculation and interpretation but that Louis does not answer. This final "postscript" begins with words from Sitting Bull: "*My friends and relatives. Let us stand / as one family as we did before the white / people led us astray.*" Then we find Louis in his "little white house / with a white picket fence." As he contrasts Sitting Bull's ideal of unity to his own conflicted need for physical distance, we

understand that he has not stood as one family. But is he being too hard on himself? In what ways, to what extent, is it still possible to "stand as one family" in the face of all the disasters brought by the whites? What steps must an individual take, given the world that Louis evokes, before he can move toward communal unity? Can we readers (and non-Natives especially) condemn his act of separation as he himself, in this poem's ending, seems to do? I think not. Yet we must acknowledge the ramifications of such questions. As the poem moves toward its close, Louis next thinks of the troops arriving in "this town / by train in December of 1890 / to march those few miles to Wounded Knee." These lines remind us that the move has not taken him far from the reservation or from the scene of genocidal massacre. But instead of further or directly referring to that terrible history, he turns inward, inviting us to think of betrayal and defeat as he continues, in the poem's conclusion,

> I have murdered all inner conflict.
> I have no anger, no remorse,
> and the white world
> can just sit on my face
> if it wants to.

The difference in scale—from Wounded Knee to the anguished individual in his little white house—is startling, and, again, the poem forces us to question: is the juxtaposition of communal trauma and self-reference appropriate? What might such seeming incommensurability, and the exaggerated sense of self-blame it creates, signify? How does such a national (Lakota) and communal (Indian) history create the kind of self-lacerating "inner conflict" that this poem presents? At the very (and very superficial) least we might recognize, in the disproportion, evidence of how distressing this move, with all of its implications, is. Such invited but unanswered questions work against the apparent certainty of the poem's final, flat statements and carry the sense of distress and unresolved conflict into the poem that concludes this cluster.

Before turning to the cluster's final poem, we should briefly examine "Red Blues in a White Town the Day We Bomb Iraqi Women and Children" (*ADE* 82–83), which comes between the second and final poems of the "moving" cluster. In this context the importance of "Red Blues" is that, taking us to some unspecified time after the experience of the move, which it doesn't mention, it modifies the effect of the passage quoted above: as Louis observes and comments on a Sioux boy's successful "counterattack" against a gang of "three little bright white / *wasicu* boys," we see that in fact he has *not* "murdered" his anger at white aggression and racism, and that his solidarity with his fellow Indians remains strong. In turn, this evidence of continued resistance (his own and the Indian boy's) may become a retrospectively recognized promise of possibility beyond the anxieties of the "moving" cluster's final poem.

The cluster ends with "Small Town Noise" (*ADE* 84), which begins, "It's so peaceful here." But after three weeks in Rushville Louis wants to return to Pine Ridge:

> Verdell once said:
> *If an Indian does not live on Indian land*
> *then he is not an Indian.*
> And I shit you not, the boy is right.
> We're moving back to the reservation
> soon when we grow weary of sanity.

Though Louis elsewhere implicitly distances himself from Verdell's claim, here the possibility that identity may be vulnerable away from the land, reinforces the fear of having betrayed both self and others. Yet the announcement that "we're moving back" is immediately qualified, as Louis opts for "sanity" away from the reservation. This leaves unanswered the painful implied question: is insanity the cost of being Indian? Earlier in the poem Louis has characterized peace as the absence of the desire "to burn my neighbor's house / and shoot her family" and as the quiet of "this medicated night," free of traffic noise and sirens. Now, between the insanity of violence and the sanity of "medicated" peace, the poem seems paralyzed, unable to arrive at a satisfactory resolution to the question of where identity can be located, in the struggle between the hard work of staying at home and the difficulty, even the necessity, of leaving. By the time he writes the poems of *Ceremonies of the Damned*, he has evidently reached a resolution that allows him to live away without self-lacerating doubts, while (as already forecast by "Red Blues in a White Town") maintaining solidarity with Indian land and people.

Ceremonies of the Damned focuses on terrible personal loss and grief, as Louis recounts his struggles to deal with his wife's Alzheimer's' disease. Yet part of the struggle of this book, too, is his continuing engagement with questions of home and community and the challenge to survive, to continue; the personal trials take place in the same world that he has detailed in earlier books. As for the problem of *Among the Dog Eaters*—the anguish of moving off the reservation—Louis simply states that he's living eighteen miles away (15), but this now seems a nonissue, which has no evident effect on his ongoing engagement with Indian land and people. And he is no less Indian or Paiute for not living on Indian land. Cherokee-Greek-German writer Thomas King has stated, "In reality there are a lot of Indians who go off the reserve, who come back to the reserve, who work, who go off the reserve again, who keep going back and forth, and they manage. Unfortunately, there are a lot of Indian people who buy into that concept that if they leave the reserve they'll never get back, and that just isn't true."[27] Louis seems tacitly to have arrived at the same conviction.

Unchanged in *Ceremonies of the Damned* is the tension between his vision of "how hopeless things really are" in Indian Country (*CD* 39) and the appeal of home: "O Reservation. Home, home, hell" (*CD* 16). As in earlier poems (for example, "The Walker River Night"), his pain is partly due to the influence of white-dominated education: "home has been educated out of us," one poem asserts, as it was taken from the boarding school generations: "the map to home was lost" (*CD* 39).[28] The tensions are reflected in his response to his

Nevada home, too. In "Coyote's Circle," the bravado of "Nothing matters, he's headed for home" is followed by a tempering recognition:

> Beer, blood, soil, home.
>
> So many lost years connecting crazy.
> So many lost years connecting crazy
> and love and memories
> and love and forgotten memories. (*CD* 46)

These lines vibrate with tension: between "connecting," with its suggestion of wholeness and relationality, on the one hand, and "crazy," on the other; between, as well, "love and memories" and "lost . . . forgotten memories." No sure resolution is offered. Yet, just so, the lines can also be read as a response to the "educated" conviction of alienation, implying that one does return, recognizing the realities of home, and knowing that one must deal with the loss, the craziness, and the love.

Such recognition doesn't preclude a kind of affirmation. In "Black Crow Dreams" (*CD* 55–57) Louis states,

> I don't know much, except
> this is the Rez and ninety-nine percent
> of the people in America
> could never fathom how life is here.

A place apart, it is also, in this poem, a place of miracles: "a flock of crows . . . carried me" to the bedroom of "the kindest girl in the world"; years later "I awoke" to "black feathers, / eternal fear, / forlorn hope, and restless love." The poem ends with questions that, although personal, might also apply, in critical solidarity, to Indian people more generally: "Are our wings broken, darling? / Or have we simply forgotten / how-the-Christ to fly?" Crows, in this poem, represent death, vision, and love. Simultaneously, as these final lines suggest, they embody vitality, signify movement, and hence offer the possibility of change. By leaving the questions unanswered, as the poem ends, Louis leaves them open to multiple answers and to the hope that some of those answers might enable life-sustaining recovery—that broken wings might mend and forgotten powers be relearned.

The final poem of *Ceremonies of the Damned*, "This Is the Rez" (70), is similarly constructed of straightforward statement, suggestions of the supernatural, and a question. "This is the Rez," he begins. Here one might see, "in the black crow night, a black car / with no headlights at all . . . roar[ing] / past . . . at a hundred miles an hour."

> Then you know that this is the Rez.
> Wild Indian ghost cars and more.
> Wild Indian ghost cars and less.

> Skin memories fading.
> Skin memories being created.
> Love impossible. Love still possible?

The repetition and variation in these lines create a balance reminiscent of Harjo's "Grace." Here the Rez is all of life, encompassing change, death, spirit, and the possibility of love. The question here, like those in "Black Crow Dreams," is implicitly, if tenuously, hopeful, refusing, as it does, the flat finality of "Love impossible." And it is clearly an embracing question, about the land and people, the life, the possibility of community, at home, on the rez. With its statements and its question the poem accepts the realities and the uncertainties of the reservation, home as it is, and opens itself to the possibilities that might yet be.

One might like to be able to trace a kind of linear progress through Louis's poetry, to find that his vision grows steadily less bleak and that his poems more readily affirm the creative and resistant power made possible by belonging to a community grounded in knowledge of wholeness and all-embracing relationship. I have occasionally pointed, in this essay, to possible glimmers of such a shift in perception. But the conditions faced by Louis and the people of whom he writes are ongoing and must be dealt with continually. Thus the recurrence of the whole range of responses to these conditions should not surprise us and may indeed more accurately testify to the truths Louis knows.

Louis writes of a world in which sources of sustenance—land, community, spirit, culture—are often endangered and contingent. He draws attention to the grief often associated with Indian home places and the difficult struggle to maintain and reclaim life and community, as he recalls "the airless past that suffocated my youth" (*ADE* 34), and exposes the pain, and often the self-destructiveness, of many Indian lives. But the energy and persistence of his own voice confirm that he has not given up either critical solidarity or hope. He speaks with the powwow drum as it

> . . . pounds and pulses these words through
> the blood of our Indian Nations:
> "We have survived. Yes, we have survived.
> Look at us dancing. Look at us laughing.
> God damn you *wasicus*, we'll always survive!" (*CD* 8)

Witness to grief but also to the possibility of wholeness and health, he challenges himself and his people to resist. As in *Ceremonies of the Damned*, in *Bone & Juice*, his most recent collection of poems, the struggle to survive loneliness, grief, and indignation with love intact is solidly grounded in Indian Country, the "true[st] place / for us to worship our terrible beauty" (*B&J* 5). The struggle is ongoing, the questions and the pain recurrent, but so is the determination to survive. While Louis will not promise that hope is easy or certain, he acts for hope and for healing when he invites the "Old Friend in the Dark" to "wake up now, . . . and come back home" (*B&J* 87).

Acknowledgment

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NOTES

1. For examples of such conceptions of the relation between an individual and the web of home, land, and community see Carter Revard, "History, Myth, and Identity among Osages and Other Peoples," in his *Family Matters, Tribal Affairs* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 126–41; Leslie Marmon Silko, "Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories," in her *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 25–48; and Nora Marks Dauenhauer, "Some Slices of Salmon," in her *Life Woven with Song* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 3–16.

2. Luci Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataał: The Women Are Singing* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993), x; Joy Harjo, "Oklahoma: The Prairie of Words," in *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, ed. Geary Hobson (Albuquerque: Red Earth Press, 1979; repr., Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 43.

3. William Bevis, "Native American Novels: Homing In," in *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 582.

4. Robert Nelson, *Place and Vision: The Function of Landscape in Native American Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 1, 6.

5. Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 40, 161, 164.

6. LaVonne Ruoff, *American Indian Literatures* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1990), 112.

7. There may be a hint of the complexity of Louis's response in his identification of Luci Tapahonso as one of his favorite poets, in a context that implies he sees her as a poet who, like him, is "reality based . . . interested in things that derive from Indian communities." Among contemporary Native poets there could hardly be two whose works seem more different that Tapahonso and Louis. See Louis, "Speaking the Unspoken: An Interview with Adrian C. Louis," interview by Michael Wilson, *Native Americas: Akwe:kon's Journal of Indigenous Issues* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 63.

8. Adrian C. Louis, *Among the Dog Eaters* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1992), 34; and Adrian C. Louis, *Bone & Juice* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 5. Future citations will appear in the text as *ADE* and *B&J*, respectively.

9. Adrian C. Louis, *Fire Water World* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1989), 2. Future citations will appear in the text as *FWW*.

10. Louis has acknowledged some ambivalence about writing of Pine Ridge as a Paiute; clearly he wouldn't presume to write from a Lakota perspective. But he also maintains that problems on reservations "pretty much are all the same," and he says later, "I don't find any Sioux writers writing about their people in a real way. I'm here, I live here, so I do it" ("Speaking the Unspoken," 61, 62).

11. Beth Brant, "Writing as Witness," in *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1994), 70.

12. "In the Paiute creation story, *Numanah* . . . [is] the 'Father of all People,' or 'Creator of all Things'" (*Among the Dog Eaters* 86).

13. Joy Harjo, *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 108.

14. Weaver, *That the People Might Live*, xiii. Weaver defines *communitism* as "a proactive commitment to native community, including . . . the 'wider community' of Creation itself" (xiii).

15. Simon Ortiz, "Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, for the Sake of the Land," in Ortiz, *Woven Stone* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992).

16. Adrian C. Louis, *Blood Thirsty Savages* (St. Louis: Time Being Books, 1994), 17.

17. Adrian C. Louis, "Petroglyphs of Serena," in his *Ceremonies of the Damned* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1994), 9. Future citations will appear in the text as *CD*.

18. *Ceremonies of the Damned*, 70; *Among the Dog Eaters*, 10; *Bone & Juice*, 87; *Vortex of Indian Fevers* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 39. (Future citations from the last-named book will appear in the text as *VIF*.) These are representative poems; others also suggest possibilities of grace. I discuss these later in this essay.

19. Joy Harjo, *In Mad Love and War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 1.

20. Eric Gary Anderson, "Situating American Indian Poetry: Place, Community, and the Question of Genre," in *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*, ed. Dean Rader and Janice Gould (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 42; Weaver, *That the People Might Live*, 164 (emphasis added).

21. Louis, "Speaking the Unspoken," 61.

22. It might be asked whether, by criticizing Indian people so sharply, Louis in effect "blames the victims." I think not. He unambiguously condemns racism and colonialism, but he also rejects victimhood, insisting repeatedly on his own and others' agency.

23. Louis, "Speaking the Unspoken," 62.

24. In a number of poems from *Bone & Juice*—for example, "Indian Sign Language" (54–55)—Louis shows us how humor can be in a sense redemptive, enabling communication and confirming love in the face of the ruin created by his wife's disease. Louis's poems in response to this illness deserve a fuller, separate study.

25. One of the things this poem seems to imply is that Indians were capable of cruelty (like all people, I assume Louis would say) before the whites' arrival and that current problems shouldn't be explained entirely by reference to colonialism. In this sense the poem rejects idealized stories of the pre-Conquest world. As a white critic and beneficiary of colonialism I'm highly aware that such an implication could seem to relieve whites of responsibility for colonialism's ravages. In fact, however, Louis's poems repeatedly deny any such relief. This is perhaps only most obvious in the persistent presence of alcohol and alcoholism, which are simply inextricable from colonialism. An interesting partial parallel to "In the Land of the No Hearts" is Athabascan writer Velma Wallis's book *Two Old Women* (Fairbanks: Epicenter Press, 1993), which retells a similar story of abandonment but with a strikingly different

outcome. This book has caused controversy among some Athabascan readers. (See Rachel Ramsey, "Salvage Ethnography and Gender Politics in *Two Old Women*: Velma Wallis's Retelling of a Gwich'in Oral Story," *SAIL: Studies in American Indian Literatures* 11, no. 3 [1999]: 22–41.)

26. An aspect of Louis's relationship to his Nevada home that I have not addressed in this essay is his response to the Paiute prophet Wovoka, to whom he alludes in many poems. Because Wovoka's Ghost Dance became so important to the Sioux, I think that he functions not only to help define Louis's Paiute identity but also as a link between Louis and his Pine Ridge neighbors.

27. Quoted in Weaver, *That the People Might Live*, 150. I read King's reference to "going back" as including the idea of maintaining Native affiliation and identity.

28. The tension is compounded in view of Louis's stated belief that the answer to the problems of Indian Country "lies in education" ("Speaking the Unspoken," 63).