



## **METAFOR**

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&  
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The Department of Western Languages and Literatures and the Department of Turkish Language and Literature at Boğaziçi University are pleased to announce the launching of a new journal: METAFOR: The Boğaziçi University Journal of Literary Studies.

Our mission is to issue an academic periodical of the highest standards, one that provides a forum for innovative discussions in the field of literary studies and literary criticism. The journal accepts submissions of original essays, book reviews, interviews and short commentaries.

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## Table of Contents

Nazmi Ağıl

**‘Or in the Incestuous Pleasure of His Bed’: An Eco-Feminist Approach to Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* / ‘Onun Günah Yatağında Hazlar İçinde’: Wordworth’ün Prelüd’üne Eko-Feminist Bir Yaklaşım -----1**

Didem Arvas

**Eleştirinin Büyübozumu: Aşk Romanına İlişkin Eleştirilerin Sorgulanması / The Disenchantment of the Criticism Questioning of the Critiques Regarding the Novel of *Love* ----- 13**

Coşkun Liktör

**In Search of the Ghosts of Postcolonial Gothic: Fred D’aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* / Fred D’aguiar’ın *Feeding the Ghosts* Romanında Postkolonyal Gotiğin Hayaletleri ----- 25**

Catherine MacMillan

**Turkish Passions: Gendered Stereotyping and Postcolonial Fetish in Pierre Loti’s *Aziyadé* and Antonio Gala’s *La Pasión Turca* / Türk Tutkuları: Pierre Loti’nin *Aziyadé*’sinde ve Antonio Gala’nın *La Pasión Turca*’sında Cinsiyete Dayalı Stereotip ve Sömürge Sonrası Fetiş ----- 39**

Ayşem Seval

**Hey-day in the Blood and Mutiny in the Bones: The Body Image in *Hamlet* / Kanda Taşkınlık, Kemikte İsyan: *Hamlet*’te Beden İmgesi -----57**

Ayşegül Turan

**Recovering (from) the Past in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* / V.S. Naipaul’un *Taklitçiler* Romanında Geçmiş Kurtarmak ve Geçmişten Kurtulmak -----70**

Defne Türker Demir

**Native American Autobiographical Practices: Louis Owens - A Temporally and Spatially Constructed Subjectivity / Amerikan Yerli Yazınında Benlik Temsili: Louis Owens’ın Özyaşam Öykülerinde Zaman ve Uzamlı Kurgulanan Kimlik ----- 87**

**Authors’ Biographies -----106**

## Native American Autobiographical Practices: Louis Owens - A Temporally and Spatially Constructed Subjectivity

Defne Türker Demir

*İstanbul Kültür University*

*d.demir@iku.edu.tr*

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### Abstract

In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence.<sup>i</sup>

As Adrienne Rich equates language and naming to power, and silence to oppression and violence, likewise Louis Owens in *Mixedblood Messages* remarks on the impossible odds against which the American Indian peoples struggled to have a voice in a world where they were denied not only a voice but also presence. In this ongoing struggle against oppression, the Native Americans have finally wrenched for themselves a niche from which to reclaim their visibility and existence. This site of liberation is the Native American literary canon, the creation of which Louis Owens rightfully acclaims a collective project. In the American Indians' fight against domination and obliteration, their strongest foe was the status of invisibility accorded them by the American meta narrative. Therefore, the American Indian Literature is an act of resistance against the mainstream which has deemed them non-existent and inarticulate.

In analysing the hegemonic relationship between the Native Americans and Anglo-Americans, Owens posits that the ultimate goal of the colonisers is not only to use the absent Other to promote their own ideology, but eventually and actually to replace the colonised, and in this way become entitled to his/her land, as well as his/her selfhood. According to Owens, the foremost objective of the Anglo-American is to take the place of the vanishing Indian since "the Euramerican [is] suffering from Heidegger's Unheimlichkeit, or not-at-

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<sup>i</sup> Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence – Selected Prose 1966-1978*. (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 204.

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homeness 'that torments the colonizer...'”<sup>ii</sup>. Then, Owens argues the deepest desire on the part of the coloniser is to be born afresh in this new landscape. The purity which was lost in conquering the coveted land can only be reclaimed and the Euramerican can only be redeemed in his own eyes through this act of rebirth. And when born again, the coloniser shall be reborn not only in the image, but in the person of the Other, who already has an innate relationship with the land.

In addition to its reclamatory essence, unison and inclusion that characterise Native American traditions have their reflection in the autobiographical practices by American Indian authors. Furthermore, Indian American autobiographical writing, through stylistic hybridisation and the inclusion of visual, textual and critical materials creates its own form alongside an inclusive and enriched content. One of the final works of Louis Owens, *I Hear the Train* provides us with a striking example of such a multifaceted autobiographical text. Uninhibited by Western constraints of linear temporality, the fragmental time provides the author with the freedom to construct the self as part of the larger whole that is the family, the community, and the land. In the process, what is created is a multi-textured text, which is all-inclusive, and one that resists separation, since in Native tradition separation amounts to the loss of selfhood.

*Keywords:* autobiography, self-writing, Native American, American Indian, space, land, earth, temporality, time, identity reclamation

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<sup>ii</sup> Louis Owens. *Mixedblood Messages – Literature, Film, Family, Place*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 123-124.

## Amerikan Yerli Yazınında Benlik Temsili: Louis Owens'ın Özyaşam Öykülerinde Zaman ve Uzamla Kurgulanan Kimlik

Defne Türker Demir

*İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi*

*d.demir@iku.edu.tr*

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### Özet

Dilin ve isim vermenin güce denk olduğu bir dünyada, sessizlik şiddetle, baskıyla eşdeğerdir<sup>i</sup>” diyen Adrienne Rich’in kurduğu sessizlik ve şiddet arasındaki denklem gibi, Louis Owens da kuramsal metinlerinde Amerikan Yerli halklarının ne seslerinin ne de varlıklarının kabul gördüğü bir dünyada kendilerini temsil için verdikleri zorlu çabadan söz eder. Bu baskıya başkaldırının odağı da, yöntemi de, Amerikan Yerli yazınıdır ve Louis Owens söz konusu direnç ve özgürleşme eyleminin kolektif bir proje olduğunun altını çizer. Amerikan Yerlilerinin hegemoniye karşı duruşlarında, Amerikan meta-anlatısının onlara biçtiği görünmezlik belki de en büyük engeldir. Bu nedenle Owens’ın da altını çizdiği gibi Yerli Yazını, Yerli Amerikalıları sessiz kılan ve yok sayan bir kültüre karşı en etkili başkaldırıdır.

Beyaz Amerikalılar ve Amerikan Yerlileri arasındaki dialektik ilişkiyi analizinde Owens, sömürgecinin asıl amacının yokluğuyla belirgin Ötekiyi kendi ideolojik amaçları için kullanmanın ötesinde, sömürülenin yerini alarak onun hem toprağına sahip çıkmak hem de kimliğine bürünmek olduğunu belirtir. Beyaz Amerikalı “kaybolmakta” diye nitelediği Yerlinin yerine geçmek ister, çünkü “sömürgeciye işkence eden” Heidegger’in tanımı ile Unheimlichkeit, veya yabancılaşma duygusu Beyaz Amerikalı’nın bir türlü

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i. Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence Selected Prose 1966-1978*. (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 204.

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yakasını bırakmaz”<sup>ii</sup>. Owens’a göre sömürgecinin en derinlerde yatan arzusu, bu yeni topraklarda yeniden doğmaktır, çünkü sömürgeci saflığını toprağın kazanımı sürecinde kaybetmiştir. Beyaz Amerikalı ancak yeniden doğarak kaybettiği masumiyete ulaşabilir. Sömürgeci bu yeniden doğuşu, toprakla koparılamaz bağları bulunan Amerikan Yerlisi’nin yalnız imgesinde değil, kimliğinde beden bularak, Ötekinin fiilen yerine geçerek gerçekleştirmek ister.

Sözcüklerle kimliğin kurgulanması Amerikan Yerli Edebiyatının temel amaçlarından biriyken, bir diğer amaç da Yerli geleneğinin özünde yatan uyum ve dengenin sağlanmasıdır. Yerli Amerikalıların özyaşam öykülerinde biçimsel çokluluk, görsel, yazınsal ve hatta kuramsal yapıtların tek metinde birleşimi şeklinde kendini gösterir. Louis Owens’ın son kaleme aldığı yapıtlarından olan *I Hear the Train* böyle prizmatik bir otobiyografi örneğidir. Yazar, Batı Edebiyatının temelinde yer alan lineer zaman yerine kullandığı döngüsel zaman sayesinde benliğini aile, toplum ve toprak üçgeninde yeriden üretme özgürlüğüne kavuşur. Üretilen çok-dokulu metin ise bütüncü ve sağaltıcıdır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** otobiyografi, özyaşam öyküsü, benlik temsili, Amerikan Yerlisi, Yerli Amerikalı, toprak, döngüsel zaman, kimlik kurgusu, kimlik örüntüsü

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<sup>ii</sup> Louis Owens. *Mixedblood Messages – Literature, Film, Family, Place*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 123-124.



‘[T]he *quotidian* as series and structure ... time as measured but blank ... a field open for self-creation by self-inscription.’<sup>1</sup> Stuart Sherman summarises the characteristics of secular diaries in the Western tradition. Whereas the mundane and the commonplace constitute the core of the diaries in the West; autobiographical writing, which does not constitute a popular genre in contemporary Native American writing, is imbued with the creative importance of the word. Yet, the blankness of time we see in diaries, has an affinity with fragmental time used by Native American authors in terms of its function, since both employments of temporality resist the restrictions of emplotment, that is progressive time, common to linear temporality. The phrase “open for self-creation by self-inscription”, on the other hand, invites a more favourable comparison, since Native American autobiographies are texts through which subjectivities are created by way of textuality. Then, the aim in Native American autobiographical writing becomes not self-exposure or self-narration or even self-fashioning in the Western sense, but the true creation of a subjectivity enabled by the power of the word. This subjectivity created anew by means of the text is one that resists separation and is construed by connectedness of the person and the community that sustains the wellbeing of the person in question.

The unison and inclusion that characterise Native American traditions have their reflection in the autobiographical practices by Native American authors. Hence, Native American autobiographical writing, through stylistic hybridisation and the inclusion of visual, textual and critical materials, creates its own form alongside an inclusive and enriched content. One of the very final works of Louis Owens, *I Hear the Train* provides us with a striking example of such a multifaceted autobiographical text. Uninhibited by Western constraints of linear temporality, the fragmental time provides the author with the freedom to construct the self as part of the larger whole that is the family, the community, and the land. In the process, what is created is a multi-textured text, which is all-inclusive, and one that resists separation, since to quote Allen, “... separation of parts into this or that category is not agreeable to American Indians, and the attempt to separate essentially unified phenomena results in distortion.”<sup>2</sup>

Louis Owens’ *I Hear the Train* comprises of three sections and is further enriched by photographs, which according to Suzanne Lundquist are “... images of absence rather than presence.”<sup>3</sup> The three sections of the work are named “Reflections”, “Inventions”, and “Refractions” respectively. The first section, “Reflections” is made up of autobiographical musings, whereas the second section, “Inventions” covers Owens’ fictional texts. The final section,

<sup>1</sup>Stuart Sherman quoted in Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Privacy Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 176.

<sup>2</sup>Paula Gunn Allen. *The Sacred Hoop*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, 1992), 62.

<sup>3</sup>Suzanne Evertsen Lundquist. *Native American Literatures An Introduction*. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 136.

“Refractions” constitutes critical works by Owens. Thus, in this autobiographical work, Owens’ self-writing, fiction and critical writing, with the additional component of his and his family’s photographs; “...[of] Native ancestors whose stories are primarily like negatives...”<sup>4</sup> form parts of the subjectivity that constitutes Owens. Consequently, we have a merging of genres, textuality and images. The three partite structure then, with this triple focus adds up to form the multifaceted self, and ties together diverse parts of the fabric that constitute Owens the person, Owens the author and Owens the literary critic. With the addition of the photographs included in the text, these four parts create the selfhood of the writing subject. Hence, Owens starts the preface to *I Hear the Train* with the following words:

This is a collection of stories, mostly true. Some are stories that arise from memory.... of things that simply happened. Some are stories I’ve told myself in an attempt to fill in the empty places in memory and received history. Some are just stories, inventions, the kinds of fictions we create to make sense of the otherwise uninhabitable world we must, of necessity, inhabit... Some are stories about others’ stories, the sort of speculations we like to call criticism...<sup>5</sup>

In this merging of the autobiographical with the fictional and the critical in textuality, which is further enriched by the visual data, is a subjectivity altered by syncretism, being expressed in a hybrid genre. Furthermore, since Native American stories attain formative qualities, the stories are always active in shaping the reality the subject lives in. Therefore, whether autobiographical or fictional, or as in Owens’ case, critical, the formative element employed in any act of narrativity is the key in creating the ontological domain of the subjectivity in question.

The resultant blurring of the epistemological distinctions and boundaries between the factual and fictive are imminent to Indian American writing. Consequently, the fluidity as exemplified by the merging of the autobiographical and fictional and even critical becomes an imperative in Native American autobiographical practices, since although these texts belong to different epistemological domains; they comprise only the separate parts of the subjectivity being forged. These separate parts should then necessarily be merged to create anew the composite/ syncretic selfhood in the act of re-inscribing the self into the text. Thus the reader is taken along Owens’ path of meticulous search

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<sup>4</sup>Louis Owens. *I Hear the Train Reflections, Inventions, Refractions*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 136.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, xi.

for selfhood and witnesses the weaving of his subjectivity from threads of memory, fiction, family ties, and the land itself.

Owens' quest for wholeness is informed by his sense of urgency to connect the past with the present and the future, thus the past has to be dealt with. The necessity to come to terms with the past stems from the importance accorded by the Native American tribes to the cyclical understanding of time. As a case in point, Christina Hebebrand argues that one repercussion of the cyclical nature of time is that "... historical events not only provide valuable lessons for the present and future, but may also be expected to repeat themselves."<sup>6</sup> Hence, the epistemic/ informative nature of the past experience, the real necessity to forge connections between the past, present and the future is a direct result of the cyclical understanding of time, in which the past, present and the future are imminently connected in that they are not only co-existent, but co-creative/ co-constructive entities. Consequently, in *Mixedblood Messages* Owens argues that the interconnectedness of the past, present and the future is a key aspect of Native American literary traditions. Owens writes: "What sets Native American fiction apart, however, is among other qualities, an insistence upon the informing role of the past within the present, a role signified by the presence of Native American myth and history reflected in both form and content."<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, Paula Gunn Allen in elaborating on the vital importance of myth to the tribal existence posits that mythopoeic vision teaches us that "...past, present, and future are one, and the human counterparts of these – ancestors, contemporaries, and descendants – are also one."<sup>8</sup> Since the past, the present and the future are inseparable, so are the ancestors, contemporaries and descendants, and experiences of one generation are critical to the subsequent generations that follow. The resultant is the necessity of carrying forward the experiences and stories of the past generations to the future, in order to reach an understanding of not only the self, but also the world at large. Therefore, as a result of the connectedness of time, stories become imminent to identity reclamation, not only as parts of the collective history of the people, but also as crucial components in self-formation. Hebebrand further posits: "Retell[ing] the stories ... will help the people to recreate their own history and thus envision ways to create a future for themselves..."<sup>9</sup> Hence, without stories of the past and the ancestors, there would be no identity, and the telling of stories is crucial in the formation of consistent

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<sup>6</sup> Christina M. Hebebrand. *Native American and Chicano/a Literature of the American Southwest*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Louis Owens. *Mixedblood Messages Literature, Film, Family, Place*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Paula Gunn Allen. *The Sacred Hoop*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, 1992), 117.

<sup>9</sup> Christina M. Hebebrand. *Native American and Chicano/a Literature of the American Southwest*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 25.

and coherent subjectivities that would muster the strength to project a future for themselves.

Yet, this imminence of the connectedness of the past, present and future in identity formation and reclamation attains a personal urgency when we take into consideration Owens' own personal history, since instead of experiences, Owens has holes and gaps in his ancestral past. His memories appertaining to that yet unknown/ unformed past are fragmental at best. However, these lacks and breaches need to be gapped, bridged, and if not, then created anew retrospectively. Thus Owens in his self-writing takes on the difficult but crucial task of creating his own stories/ histories in an act of self-inscription in textuality. "I go backward, look forward," a Swampy Cree storyteller says, "as the porcupine does."<sup>10</sup> In a way, this is what Owens does with historical time, going back in order to be able to look forward. Owens did not inherit stories of his ancestors to help formulate his own subjectivity, and in this respect was denied the opportunity for fashioning a self based on connectedness. Thus, personal lacks in terms of ancestral stories/ memories/ histories are accounted for through the creative power of words, and Owens creates the stories that would help comprise his selfhood.

On the cover of the volume of *I Hear the Train* is an image of Owens' great-great uncle. In Owens' words, this "photo-turned-postcard" is one he had inherited from his elder sister, who had in-turn inherited them from their mother. We read:

I know next to nothing about Uncle August Edward Bailey, my mother's grandfather's brother.... My grandmother, orphaned at age six through means neither she nor we ever understood, could not tell us about this uncle. My mother, product of the worst margins of Uncle August's world and tumbled into a motherless world herself as a child, *imbibed* no stories that would answer such questions. Irish-American with Cherokee blood, American Indian with Irish blood, transient, infinitely motion-bent, poised within the tracks on an America determined to hurl all lies and stories toward a receding horizon, Uncle August and all the rest are particles scattered, the chaos of invasion, coloniality, deracination, and removal embedded in their blood and photographs.<sup>11</sup>

The solitary man in the photograph is an illustration of absence, a testimony to the filial bonds broken. Owens has no stories passed on about the uncle or his

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<sup>10</sup>Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance*. (California: University of California Press, 1983), Lincoln 13.

<sup>11</sup>Louis Owens. *I Hear the Train Reflections, Inventions, Refractions*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), xii-xiii.

other predecessors, since both his mother and grandmother had been orphaned. Paula Gunn Allen, on the other hand, in elaborating on the importance placed on family in matriarchal Native American tribes give the Keres as a case in point. Allen writes: "Failure to know your mother, that is, your position and its attendant traditions, history, and place in the scheme of things, is failure to remember your significance, your reality, your right relationship to earth and society. It is the same as being lost – isolated, abandoned, self-estranged, and alienated from your own life."<sup>12</sup> The family bonds are as sustaining and life giving as the umbilical cord. However in Owens' family the umbilical cords had been severed too soon and this lack had informed generation upon generation in Owens' family. With no mothers, there had been no stories, and no connections with the ancestors or the past. Thus, Owens compares his ancestors to scattered particles, unable to form a whole and stand against the outward forces of invasion, coloniality, and removal that had become the constant in their lives.

Consequently, from mere traces Owens needs to construct his past, out of which will arise his present and future. He writes of his uncle's photograph: "My inheritance, it leaves in the air a trace out of which I will construct history, mirroring consciousness... Like that dollop of sourdough left behind in the bowl to double infinitely into another loaf, it becomes stories that birth others."<sup>13</sup> For Owens the photograph will become the metaphoric piece of sourdough, the creative principle that will initiate stories ad infinitum, and forge the non-existent connections with the past. Accordingly, Owens resumes:

... [We] make stories in order to find ourselves at home in a chaos made familiar and comforting through the stories we make, searching frantically for patterns in the flux of randomly recorded events, a world in which endings stalk us and we can only keep inventing ways to both explain and forestall closure. Language must be the surest way, as we remain here telling ourselves stories in the dark, spinning webs of language...<sup>14</sup>

Owens will create coherence by way of stories in the face of the chaos that life is, and in that he needs the power of the words. This retrospectively constructive act then becomes an act of survival, and in his endeavours to fight against segmentation, Owens harnesses the creative force of language.

In the preface to *I Hear the Train*, Owens elaborates on another family photograph found in the same box he had inherited from his sister. It shows "a

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<sup>12</sup>Paula Gunn Allen. *The Sacred Hoop*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, 1992), 209-210.

<sup>13</sup>Louis Owens. *I Hear the Train Reflections, Inventions, Refractions*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), xiii.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, xiii.

strange, shanty-like ‘houseboat’”<sup>15</sup> his maternal grandmother had lived in when she was between six and eight years old. Owens asks: “What story can that picture tell me and my eight brothers and sisters about the labyrinth of memory that should and must be our own. How may we... fill in the empty pages of oral tradition that is all we have from our mother’s world?”<sup>16</sup> Owens’ way of engagement with the void where there ought to have been stories, is the sheer act of writing. The bonds have been long broken between the self and the world of the ancestors, and as such, memory proves to be not illusive but redundant at best. However, Owens is writing to reach back and claim the lost world of his ancestors, while supplementing fiction and fabrication to fill in the void that has been his lot, his inheritance. Owens continues: “Conscious of my own temerity in such an endeavor, I wrote that story and include it here: ‘Blessed Sunshine’, the name of the shanty-boat. Similarly, I have gone back in fiction to the story I call ‘Yazoo Dusk’, to reconstruct, or construct for the first time, a story of the Mississippi my father’s Choctaw-Irish-French family knew.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Owens is supplementing fact with fiction, or rather the absence of the factual with the fictive, and thus locating himself into a matrix of stories and reminiscences, where there used to be nothing but the void of memory. Owens’ efforts to fictionalise the past, and construct (auto)biography out of fiction is informed by the desire of a reunion with his family and ancestry, that would result in enhancing or rather creating a patchwork of ties in place of the gaps that constitute memory and concomitantly add up to form a sense of community and continuity.

In the section from *I Hear the Train* entitled “The Syllogistic Mixedblood” Owens writes, “I lay the photograph before me and search for absent origins,”<sup>18</sup> since “[t]he[y] are fibers out of which a tread might be woven, bits of family story, old photographs with scribbling on the backs, but no coherent narrative.”<sup>19</sup> Owens’ creative endeavours do stem from an inner necessity, since the sum total of his writing is constitutive of the self, and to reach the self that is not hidden but in flux and thus in need of constant recreation. He has to forge bonds and bridge the gaps with the past without which there can be no present or future. Owens continues: “Because I cannot do less, I have made these various stories, call them essay, fiction, or criticism. Together, I believe they form a pattern, one turn and twist of the labyrinth leading to another. At the center, of course, is the hybrid monster of self, the ultimate cannibal to which all stories lead.”<sup>20</sup> In this act of self-creation in textuality, Owens is reaching out not only to the self now

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., xiv.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., xiv.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., xiv.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 91.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., xiv.

constructed through the stories but is also enabled to reach back and start to hear the voices of his ancestors. Or as the title of his autobiography clearly indicates, he now hears the train, just as his uncle had heard it. That title echoes the very words of his Uncle August when he in 1913 wrote to his own mother on the back of another photograph “I her (sic) the train so Bee (sic) good tell (sic) I see you.”<sup>21</sup>

Not surprisingly, the first episode in Owens' search for wholeness and self is entitled “Finding Gene,” which is the account of his search for his lost brother. Owens starts his mixed genre autobiographical work with the narration of a loss recovered, that is, his brother Gene, whom he hadn't seen for twenty-nine years. We learn that Gene, a Vietnam veteran “had come back only to vanish,” after “he'd discarded the medals”. Then the medals had become “tangled in the tin trunk with the residue of [their] mother's short life.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore Gene's medals had become visual reminders of his absence, taking their place amongst the photographs of ancestors, other mementos of loss Owens had inherited.

Contemplating on their shared past with Gene, Owens writes that since deer hunting was an activity they cherished, pistols and guns “had become... the *petites madeleines* of [their] own remembrance of things past.”<sup>23</sup> However, Owens also muses on the fine line between fact and fiction and the need for the corrective of memory: “... I'd begun to wonder what had actually happened and what my imagination had simply formed into history and truth. Without Gene I had no touchstone to truth, no way of verifying memories. I know that we invent what we need to be true, imagining and rewriting until there is some kind of text that gives us back a self.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the fallible nature of memory needs to be implemented with the memories of others, and the touchstone is his brother Gene. Although invention and creation are the tools by which he would ultimately attain his own selfhood, in his endeavours Owens feels the necessity to reestablish his connection with Gene, a lost and important piece of the puzzle.

Ironically, Owens' reunion with his brother is brought about by another act of textuality. Or in this case - the power of words become explicit and concrete - confirming the Native American faith in the import of words. Owens' fiction changes the course of his life, and his fiction brings about his union with Gene in the real world. We read:

I'd written a novel about my brother. My second novel, *The Sharpest Sight*, was born out of Gene's disappearance, out of the paradox of his nonreturn from that war.... It was a book about Mississippi, about my father's Choctaw ancestors, about the mysteries of identity and story, but

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., xiii.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 4.

most of all it was a book about a lost brother and a long pattern of loss into which that one seemed to fit....

And then one day, after a quarter of a century of silence, my brother called. He had found a copy of *The Sharpest Sight*, had seen my name and read the book. This was extraordinary, because Gene does not go into bookstores and does not usually read books. But he had read it and had known at once that it was about him, had read past layers of metaphor and myth, through a complex “mystery” plot, to see that I’d written a novel about the loss of my own brother.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the gaping hole left empty by lack and loss had been supplemented and filled in by fiction, and the fabricated story had actually created history. Rewriting of a story -that of Gene in the *The Sharpest Sight*- had resulted in Owens and his brother Gene’s history being rewritten and recreated. Consequently, the act of re-imagining a past had literally and physically created a present for Owens and his brother Gene.

Yet, the reunion between the brothers is not only a static event that has repercussions for a short duration, but will prove to be a life-changing event, with clear implications for the future. Through his get-together with Gene, Owens starts re-remembering the past and the changes to memory will actually contribute to a future that will be re-shaped. Owens writes; “old memories had become both more real and changed in the same moment.”<sup>26</sup> Through memory jolted by the recovery of Gene, Owens reaches a better understanding of both himself and his past, and he muses on his chances of actualising a similarly enhanced understanding when he says “...I’d like my daughters to meet their uncle. Maybe then they’d know their father better. Perhaps their memories would become more real.”<sup>27</sup> Hence, re-forging of connections and learning from the family members and ancestors brings about a better understanding, while shared experience adds to memory, making it prolific.

Owens dwells on Gene’s comment that at Vietnam, troops referred to enemy territory as “Indian Country,” a clear reminder of the Native American’s static image as the ultimate trope, the epitome, the embodiment of *the* enemy in Anglo-American consciousness. Owens’ final words read: “Out there, in Indian country, anything could happen. A person might never get home.”<sup>28</sup> Owens’ comment illustrates that in the real Indian country, the enemy cannot be clearly defined, and getting home is not an act of spatial movement but is the recovery of wholeness, and at that not everyone is able to attain this healing balance. Owens

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 15.



knows that not only the past/ memories/ ancestors/ family might be lost, but through their loss, selfhood might also get dissolved. As a case in point Gene had lost his selfhood, and although he had come back from the war alive, he had not been able to go back home. Gene had failed in forging connections with his family and the community, and the resultant was utter isolation, alienation and fragmentation. Owens, on the other hand, had not inherited a past of stories or histories but implements his own recovery through textuality, through the creative power of words, supplementing the losses with fiction and thus reaching coherence and cohesion.

Whereas one obstacle in Owens' search for wholeness was the lost stories, histories, memories and family members, another but related difficulty was frequent displacement, and the imminent disconnection with the land of his ancestors. The loss of connectedness with the land is caused by the family's perpetual moving from one location to another, so much so that moving becomes the sole constant in life. Being uprooted time and again, Owens needs to contest the possibility of a dissolution of selfhood, since the repeated pattern of dislocation induces liminality. Owens' state is further complicated by his experience of interstitiality, a result of his mixed blood heritage. However, through forest ranging and fighting forest fires, Owens is able to forge a bond with the land, on an even greater scale than he would have through bonding with one locality only. As a ranger and forest fire fighter, Owens spans the whole continent, from Tucson, to the Glacier Peak Wilderness just south of the Canadian border, and to Arizona. These very physical acts of living and working with the land locate Owens firmly within the natural world. Then, through this constant interaction with the land and nature through farming and hunting, Owens bonds with the earth and the whole continent. Consequently, the earth becomes an anchor of his subjectivity in his refusal to surrender to liminality.

Thus for Owens, interacting with the land and the nature is the panacea for a life of dispossession. Faced with the risk of isolation and interstitiality, the healing powers of the land and the nature provide Owens with a safe haven. In relating his youthful indiscretions, Owens remarks on how he had envied a settled and peaceful life. We read:

...through the window, I saw Mom and dad and Sis sitting on a light-colored couch and a boy about my brother's age in a comfortable-looking chair. They were laughing together at something on the big television. I remember standing on the porch, plainly illuminated by the porch light, watching the family watch television. We did not yet have a TV in our house, and the eight of us could never have watched at the same time if we had owned one. There was a wholeness about the scene, a kind of completeness that I had never imagined in a family before. In my experience families were in constant flux, coming and going, messy and

uncontained. Strange cousins could appear one day and stay for several years with no evident disruption even as additional cousins showed up and vanished. Never had I imagined a family holding a single image in mind or sight even for a moment. The scene inside the picture window opened onto a world I had never considered, one I knew instinctively did not desire my company.<sup>29</sup>

Owens is confronted with the image of a nuclear family watching television. They are not only surrounded by material comforts but seem very cozy. However, most important of all, the family seems to be enjoying the company of each other. For Owens, the scene exhumes a wholeness and completeness he never knew existed. For him family life is marked by instability and change. Then, it is the togetherness and cohesion of the family that is most striking and desirable for Owens. Feeling himself a stranger to a world perfect in its unity, he leaves unwillingly:

I tore myself away with great difficulty... In the driveway I paused and looked back, and no one had moved. To this very day that family lives in perfect time, balanced in the flickering gray light of a black-and-white television set, forever, as I steal their bicycle. And I still feel the awfulness of the moment in which I broke into that perfect order, violated whatever it was inside the house that I could not understand, and bore an objective portion away into the night.<sup>30</sup>

Owens feels a keen sense of alienation while watching the perfect family, yet is drawn to it. He knows he has intruded upon the unity of the family, and thinks he has violated and even stolen the precious communality shared by the family members. For that very reason, while his conscience is perfectly at ease with stealing the bike, a mere material possession, he thinks he has harmed the wholeness of the family, and disturbed their peace by his brief presence.

Further on Owens explains that interaction with nature replaces the thrill he used to get from stealing. Nature is the panacea for the fragmentation of the family which had driven him into recklessness. We read: "From that time onward, sometimes with Gene but more often alone, I broke and entered upon nature herself, burgled her hills and oaks, ransacked her solitude for days and weeks and months and years on end, feeling my way toward a door that must exist somewhere."<sup>31</sup> Thus the people in Owens' life and the landscape that surrounds him would keep changing. Yet, nature not only remains Owens' safe

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 89.

haven, but also provides him with an endless source of adventure and experience. The sense of wholeness and communality he lacks will be supplemented by his escapades in the nature. Nature will provide him with hope and comfort, in the constant flux of his life.

“We know at some profound level that we inhabit the future while piecing together the past”<sup>32</sup> writes Owens in *Mixedblood Messages*. Approached from this perspective, nature and land acquire sacredness and importance the same way the ancestors do, since by holding the memories of past, the land has an informing role on the present and the future. In a similar vein, Marcia Pablo (Flathead) in her essay “Preservation as Perpetuation” writes: “First Nations of this continent did not have a written history in book form as did the non-Indian peoples who came here. Our history is written in our unique and specific cultural landscapes. These places hold the memories of our ancestors, speak to us in the present, and are crucial to our survival, as Indian people into the future.”<sup>33</sup>

Paula Gunn Allen, on the other hand, posits: “We are the land, and the land is mother to us all,”<sup>34</sup> a statement which attests to the function of land as the primal life-giving source. Allen resumes: “We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea that permeates American Indian life; the land (Mother) and the people (mothers) are the same. As Luther Standing Bear has said of his Lakota people, ‘We are of the soil and the soil is of us.’ The earth is the source and the being of the people, and we are equally the being of the earth. The land is not really a place, separate from ourselves, where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies...”<sup>35</sup> Then, according to Allen the main tenet of Native American existence is oneness with earth, since as Luther Standing Bear has also suggested humanity is the offspring of the earth and the earth is where she/he returns. Thus equating the land and the people, Allen further argues:

The earth is not a mere source of survival, distant from the creatures it nurtures and from the spirit that breathes in us, nor is it to be considered an inert resource on which we draw in order to keep our ideological self functioning, whether we perceive that self in sociological or personal terms. We must not conceive of earth as an ever-dead other that supplies us with a sense of ego identity by virtue of our contrast to its perceived

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<sup>32</sup>Louis Owens. *Mixedblood Messages Literature, Film, Family, Place*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 201.

<sup>33</sup>Marcia Pablo quoted in Christina M. Hebebrand. *Native American and Chicano/a Literature of the American Southwest*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29.

<sup>34</sup>Paula Gunn Allen. *The Sacred Hoop*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, 1992), 119.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

nonbeing. Rather, for American Indians... the earth *is* being, as all creatures are also being: aware, palpable, intelligent, alive.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, no separation is possible between the Native American and the land, since the land is not a source of life that lies inanimate at the disposal of humanity, but on the contrary, land is as alive as any other being, and in the great scheme of things, the destinies of the land and the people cannot be separated either.

In *Mixedblood Messages* Owens asks, remarking on the ultimate importance of earth to self-definition and identity construction; "...how do we preserve the earth that is so integral to self-definition?"<sup>37</sup> Owens' question is another reminder of the all-permeating importance of land in self-formation. Similarly, in "Yazoo Dusk" in *I Hear the Train*, Owens re-creates the story/ history of his father's mixed blood Choctaw family, and equates identity to land, writing: "If they were Choctaw, as if white men from somewhere north could just come and tell people who they were.... Those other Choctaws had been taken away seventy and eighty years before by the government, leaving a handful who wouldn't or couldn't. Torn away, like a piece of flesh caught on a briar and just ripped from the body, except this time it was the body itself ripped away, leaving that bloody piece behind."<sup>38</sup> Thus, even after the Removal Act, the American Indians are conned into losing their communal land, in return for individual allotments, putting communal identity at stake. Furthermore, Choctaw identity cannot be determined by the whites, nor replaced by a constructed "Indianness," which infantilises the Native Americans. Owens uses the metaphor of torn flesh in telling us what happens when the bond between the people and the land is severed. People torn from land is like "flesh caught on a briar and just ripped from the body" and land separated in allotments is "the body itself ripped away, leaving that bloody piece behind".<sup>39</sup> The imagery herewith employed is a striking testimony to the power of alienation that results from the fissure between the Native American and the land.

Accordingly, land and connections with the earth become prime sites in the creation of Owens' locus of selfhood, as he relates his memories of working in a summer camp, and a mushroom farm, and later as a forest ranger and forest fire fighter, which he dubs "the best time of [his] life."<sup>40</sup> On one occasion Owens

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>37</sup>Louis Owens. *Mixedblood Messages Literature, Film, Family, Place*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>38</sup>Louis Owens. *I Hear the Train Reflections, Inventions, Refractions*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 174.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 174

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 57.

travels to the Grand Canyon, and relates its spiritual dimension that makes it incomprehensible to all except to the American Indian. Although the Anglo-Americans had tried to represent the Grand Canyon in words time and again they failed, since inside the Canyon “[s]ignification fails; language did not come into being in the presence of such phenomena and remains utterly insufficient before it.”<sup>41</sup> Owens himself, on the other hand, describes the experience of the Grand Canyon in the following manner: “To enter the air of the Grand Canyon is to breathe differently, measure one's world by new degrees, see past the earth's skin to neither flesh nor bone but something other, an inner form or spirit that requires radical adjustments. To describe the canyon requires the impossible...”<sup>42</sup> The Canyon is where the earth's spirit lies bare for those who can perceive it. Owens continues:

The center does not hold, the blood-dimmed tide floods at sunset, and all ceremonies of innocence are reimagined and revived. Any falcon swooping those endless and endlessly changing shadows could not possibly hear a falconer. An anarchy of impressions is loosed upon every perception. Only the Native holds the measure of the place, because the Native, the Indian, has had many, many generations in which to learn resistance to the jealousy of measure and voice, the futile desire for words to reach up and over.<sup>43</sup>

Rephrasing W.B. Yeats' *The Second Coming*, Owens draws our attention to the way Enlightenment concepts of causality and the Western ideas of order are upset in the face of the Grand Canyon. For the intruder, chaos and confusion reign supreme in this particular landscape, whereas the innate connection between the land and humanity is felt by the adept more clearly here than in any other geographical location. Consequently, it is only the Native American who can understand this landscape, since they have had millennia to come to terms with the land and its significance. The Grand Canyon is imbued with much spirituality, and it is the American Indian who through her/his connections to the land can apprise the primal qualities of this amazing landscape, and touch upon its bared soul.

Thus, the Grand Canyon reverses the epistemically violating relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, described by Edward Said and later Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Inside the Grand Canyon the coloniser loses his hold on the land, since he does not have the adequate tools to understand, describe, verbalise, and thus possess the land. Then the Grand Canyon, in Owens'

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 68.

words “where the world speaks to us in its real from, undisguised, sincere, forever”<sup>44</sup> resists the colonialist in its sheer majesty and grandeur.

Aside from Owens’ own particular uprooting caused by his family’s economic and social circumstances and his complex mixed blood heritage that induces liminality, the failure in truly connecting with the land is the fate of all colonised peoples, since the loss of land endangers the colonised people’s sense of identity. Hence Owens quotes Frantz Fanon on the all-permeating relationship between land and identity: “Fanon writes ‘[f]or a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity’. Above all, Native Americans have been deprived of land, and of the dignity that derives from the profound and enduring relationship with homeland.”<sup>45</sup> Like Allen, Fanon emphasises the importance of land, which imbues the people with a sense of identity and well being, which is lost when the land is lost. In that sense, Owens connects his own plight with that of all colonised peoples, and in the process bonds with the survivors of colonialism on the nexus of the earth, lost and regained.

Consequently, *I Hear the Train* can be read as a testimony to subjectivity formation through textuality. A mixed genre autobiographical piece, which at first glance appears to be the non-sequential experiences of the single individual, it becomes the tool through which Owens constructs not only his own selfhood, but also a communal selfhood through relationality with his ancestors, and finally the land itself enabled by the cyclical nature of Native American temporality. The text, structurally and temporally fragmented, enables Owens to retrieve/recreate/ fictionalise and narrate the family ties and the past, and forge connections with the land/ landscape, in an effort to reach wholeness and communality. As the title of this autobiographical work suggests, through the creation of this text, Owens comes to hear the voices of his ancestors, and the voice of the train, just as his great-great granduncle had as he posed for a photo on the railroad tracks in the year 1911.

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 76.

<sup>45</sup>Frantz Fanon quoted in Louis Owens. *I Hear the Train Reflections, Inventions, Refractions*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 219.

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### Authors' Biographies

**Nazmi Ağıl** graduated from the English Language and Literature Department, Bosphorus University, Istanbul where he also received his PhD. Currently, he is working at the Department of English Language and Comparative Literature, Koç University as an Associate Professor. He has published several volumes of poetry, and translated some canonical works from English literature including *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Prelude*, and wrote an academic book titled *Ekphrasis: Turkey and the West*.

**Didem Arvas Balta** 2012 senesinde İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Karşılaştırmalı Edebiyat Bölümü'nden mezun oldu. Daha sonra aynı üniversitenin Kültürel İncelemeler Yüksek Lisans Programı'na burslu olarak girmeye hak kazandı. Yüksek lisans tezi "Modernite içinde Yaşantılanan Bir Deneyim Olarak Örtünme" basılmaya layık görüldü. KONDA araştırma şirketiyle birlikte kimlik üzerine odaklanan birden fazla araştırma projesi yürüttü. 2013 senesinde Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı doktora programına başladı ve halen doktora tezi çalışmasına devam etmektedir.

**Coşkun Liktör** is a film critic and an Assistant Professor in the Department of American Culture and Literature at Haliç University, where he teaches courses on film studies, popular culture, American novel, American poetry and English literature. After studying philosophy at Boğaziçi University for several years, he received his BA degree in American Culture and Literature from Haliç University. Having received his MA degree in American Culture and Literature from İstanbul University, he completed his PhD in Cinema and Media Research at Bahçeşehir University. He has published articles on cinema and literature in such academic journals as *Sinecine Journal of Film Studies* and *Moment Journal of Cultural Studies*. He regularly writes film reviews for *Altyazı Monthly Cinema Journal*, published by Boğaziçi University Mithat Alam Film Center, as well as for *Yeni Film Journal*.

**Catherine MacMillan** Catherine MacMillan is an Associate Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature in Yeditepe University (Istanbul). She obtained her PhD (in European Studies) from Marmara University in 2008. In addition to literature, her research interests include Turkey/EU relations and populism in the EU, particularly from a discourse perspective.



**Ayşem Seval** is an Assistant Professor of English at İstanbul Kültür University, Turkey. She teaches courses on Renaissance literature, classical and contemporary drama and literary theory. Her current research concentrates on the ethics and aesthetics of the idea of tragic in literature and philosophy. Her secondary interests include contemporary British drama, Renaissance studies and gender studies.

**Ayşegül Turan** is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at İstanbul Kültür University. She received her B.A. and M.A. from Boğaziçi University, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, and her PhD from Washington University in St. Louis, Comparative Literature. Her research interests include Anglophone postcolonial literatures, Middle Eastern literatures, narrative theory and film studies.

**Defne Türker Demir** received her BA in Western Languages and Literatures from Boğaziçi University, her MA in English Language and Literature from Doğuş University, and her PhD in American Culture and Literature from İstanbul University, Turkey. At present she is an Assistant Professor at Kültür University, teaching at the Department English Language and Literature, with a focus on Post-Colonial and Post-Modern Literatures. She has presented at conferences, and visited universities and institutes as an invited speaker in the US and Europe, giving talks mainly on Cultural History. Her research and publications focus on self-writing and ethnicity. She has published book chapters in the US, in France, and in Turkey.