

"LET US DIE TRYING":

A POST-COLONIAL READING OF VELMA WALLIS

By

Seth G. Myers

RECOMMENDED:

Richard L. Carr

Lillian Costa

James R. Brown
Advisory Committee Chair

Walter S. J. J. J.
Chair, Department of English

APPROVED:

D. W. W.
Dean, College of Liberal Arts

Susan M. J. J.
Dean of the Graduate School

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Date

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By

Seth G. Myers, B.A.

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Abstract

This essay explores the work of Velma Wallis from the perspective of post-colonial theory. Her works, Two Old Women and Bird Girl and the Man who Followed the Sun are read within this theoretical framework as volatile and resistant texts, in opposition to readings that might limit their meaning as ethnographic or otherwise. I outline the generalities of my theoretical framework with reference to Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, before I approach a discussion of Native American literature and Velma Wallis specifically. Within this theoretical framework, I find that Wallis resists, not only generic definition, but the larger structures of colonialism, through an exploration of resistance within so-called colonized groups. She performs this resistance by demonstrating the power of language, that survival is itself resistant, the resistance of feminism, and the importance of positive dialogue in a world of cultural contact.

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PART I—INTRODUCTION

Velma Wallis deserves to be read with the same vigor and attention as traditionally canonical texts. In order to make the literary canon richer, fuller and more complicated, the academy must include voices such as hers. Her works might be read in terms of an ethnographic study of her particular culture, distinct from and subjugated by the hegemony of Western colonialism. However, such readings do not achieve the richness of a reading within a post-colonial context that deconstructs the various structures that define “colonized” literature. Two Old Women and Bird Girl and the Man who Followed the Sun can certainly be read with an eye toward understanding Gwich’in culture and the oral tradition within that culture. Reading these texts as only ethnographic, however, does not achieve the fullness of meaning of my literary reading.

Wallis learned these stories from her mother and locates them as belonging to the Gwich’in oral tradition. Two Old Women is a fairly straightforward story whose simple plot arc belies a sophisticated theme. In it, two old women are abandoned by the Gwich’in band that has taken care of them throughout their old age. The band has fallen on hard times, starvation is rampant, and survival of the band is paramount. The band, as well as the two old women themselves, see these elders as helpless and useless and decide that their lives are not worth scarce and precious resources. After being abandoned, the seemingly helpless old women manage to survive using skills and determination they didn’t know they had. After two winters on their own, their band, again in the desperate straits of starvation, locates the women’s camp and takes advantage

of the women's foodstores. They are reincorporated, though not without some struggle, and all live happily ever after.

Bird Girl and the Man who Followed the Sun is Wallis' conflation of two stories her mother told her. This book follows Bird Girl as she leaves home to escape a forced marriage and is then kidnapped by the Gwich'in's traditional enemies, the Ch'eekwaii. Bird Girl undergoes torture, alienation, and impregnation by rape during her captivity and finally escapes after plugging the chimney holes of the Ch'eekwaii village, suffocating everyone, including her own son. In the complementary plot, Daagoo is an adventurous young man who prefers exploration to hunting, a preference that causes much ire in his band. After he witnesses a Ch'eekwaii raid, during which the Ch'eekwaii murder the men of his band, including his father and brother, he becomes a responsible and dedicated leader for the survivors. Eventually, he fulfills his lifelong dream of exploration and leaves to find the Land of the Sun. His journey takes him south through Tlingit land and then to California where he meets, falls in love with, and starts a family with a woman who, like Bird Girl, was captured and forcibly impregnated by her captors. They live an idyllic life on the California coast for many years until raiders murder this family, and Daagoo makes his way back to Gwich'in country. After another long journey, he is reunited with his band, who have incorporated the newly escaped Bird Girl. They begin a friendship that ends the book.

Even though these stories are, as Wallis points out, part of a rich and culturally specific oral tradition, my readings of these texts in terms of a post-colonial structure of theory, illuminates interesting and important themes relating to the power of narrative itself, the resistance inherent in survival, the importance of feminist resistance, and the

facts of post-modern cultural adjacence. Part of the fullness of a literary reading of these texts is their ability to subvert and resist the structures that define them. After Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, I read these works subjectively; the texts act on the modern world and contexts in a way that is meaningful for my own life, far removed from their cultural and physical setting. Works by the “colonized” are too often objectified, too often transformed within academic discourse that define the meaning of such texts as only tangentially relevant.

By including Wallis in the literary canon, we can expand and fulfill the ways in which we in the academy understand cultural production. Privileging her position as a contemporary writer and as the subject of arguably the most contemporary act of colonialism—that is, the unique “colonization” of Alaska Natives—objectifies her work. Her perspective is one of many, and that “many” includes writers like Shakespeare and Melville and Conrad. The difference is that the real, physical, historical and continuing “colonization” of the Gwich’in, is reflected in the hegemony of an academy that has not yet recognized the power imbalance inherent in its own activities.

I don’t know that I can even begin this work. Doing what I’m doing—seeking to de-objectify a colonized culture through their cultural productions—in many ways does not de-objectify but re-objectify the colonized other. Much of academic discourse is, in my experience, politically ineffectual at best, and a cruel hegemonic means to subsume and suppress discordant voices at worst. Even the most politically correct, socially aware academic work comes dangerously close to limiting and bounding culture, which allows for a stereotypical treatment of that culture, in another word, objectification. Even to define a culture as a discrete unit of meaning making, a geometrical boundary across

which translation is necessary, suggests some sort of platonic collection of ideas or symbols, an at least partially unified structure by which meaning is produced and reproduced. This is itself an objectification, a simplification, of the relationships between the symbols of the system and their meaning. This idea of culture limits and bounds the experience of a person in this real physical world.

I deny that what I will assert on the following pages has any sort of platonic truth. I believe, after Said, that Truth doesn't exist in some realm of clouds, but in the real physical realm that we inhabit in some relationship to our own experience and the symbols that others use to describe theirs (Humanism 60-61). Here the slippage is not just between the signifier and its signified, but between the ineffably different experiences of even identical words. Systems of meaning production are as individually meaningful as experience itself, in part because those systems in many ways determine that experience. Meaning is created in some space that is neither in the text nor in the individual. The space of meaning creation is defined and bounded by the systems of signification at play in any act of meaning creation. Such systems of signification—or interpretation or translation—both create and temper every attempt at meaning making. In other words, systems of signification create a real, historical, political experience of the world, including of those systems themselves.

Even within an academic discourse, there are multiple modes of meaning making. Comparative Literature is somehow different from Anthropology, Folklore Studies are somehow different from English, and so on. These systems cannot be given value on some scale of truth; they are simply different modes of interpretation whose enactment imbues a signifier with a different meaning or power. I believe that the academy ignores

Velma Wallis because of the powerful hegemonic forces of discourse that bind and objectify her.

In many ways any interpretation is real and valid. Much to the ire of formalists, such a vision of the way a text creates meaning has little to do with the text itself. I like to think of Marcel DuChamp's statue *La Fontaine*, a urinal placed on its back in a museum and signed. There is nothing in the production of this object that would give it more meaning than an actual, working urinal. However, by placing the urinal within the discourse of art, by making it interpretable, this urinal is suddenly and legitimately a complex and multi-valent sign. The same holds true for contemporary Cultural Anthropology and the ways in which such scholars "read" the "text" of a culture, essentially moving the discourse field of the humanities like a lens over other fields. My bachelor's degree in anthropology made me consistently uneasy; learning of the political power inherent in a discourse, I fear that the enactment of an academic (read Western, Northern, Developed, Colonial) discourse on cultures that are not included in such discourse is powered and directional. The act of academic interpretation across cultures is political and moral.

I agree with Said when he argues that the act of interpreting an "other" culture is the realization of a colonial trend toward objectifying a culture (Culture 36). That act of objectification is similar to the act of textual analysis—when culture becomes an object, a bounded and discrete entity. Thus, for me, the study of Anthropology is more valid when it is the study of the relationship between the infinity of cultural productions across discourse fields, history and whatever cultural boundaries that the powerful discourses of the Global North have defined. I turn to the study of literature because it creates meaning

within a web of discourse fields in which I have been trained since before I can remember. Literature is taken to say something true without necessarily saying anything true. It is conscious of its own relationship to the various interpretations it can incur. It is created to be interpreted. Literature is fundamentally a subjective enterprise—a study of signs and their relationships, more than an attempt to get at some platonic truth. Literature is also an hegemonic device that incorporates resistance to itself within itself. The history of literature, dominated as usual by Western universities (and this is not the geographical west, but the ideological) includes and is actually predicated upon works that are subversive and resistant to that kind of ideology.

We are at an interesting point in the history of literature now with scholars like Said and Bhabha whose elevated presence in our discourse suggests the possibility of some fundamental change in the balance of the humanities on a global scale. By arguing for the inclusion of previously excluded texts, we can reverse at least the hegemonic, discursive oppression of ideas, thoughts, and perspectives.

This is why we should read Wallis. Our experience in the modern world is one of continuing cultural adjacence, the boundaries of which can and should be transcended by a discourse with the power of the academy. The academy has the ability to include a multiplicity of global texts within a dominant, hegemonic discourse. There is nothing inherently wrong with the concept of hegemony, the diffusion of ideas and worldviews, except when its prescriptions are absolute and oppressive. Thus, inclusion of multiple voices, the subjectification of the object of the Western gaze as volatile actors will make the academy more truly democratic. Wallis' stories complicate and resist simplified notions of colonized cultures. When she subjectifies the "other," she resists uni-

directional and dominant modes of definition, and demonstrates the humanity not only of the colonized people of the United States, but across the world. But this subjectification can only be attained if her work is read as literature and not as the object of an ethnographic, anthropological inquiry.

Velma Wallis achieves an inter-structural mode of meaning creation. The characters in her stories bear complex human relationships to the structures that attempt to define them. The stories themselves bear the same humanistically complex relationship to the structures that attempt to define them. Just as the characters resist a culture that Western hegemony has dominated, the stories themselves resist their hegemonic definition as oral tradition or some kind of Native literature. Wallis layers the modes and acts of resistance through a discussion of the resistant power of language, the resistance that simple survival implies, feminist resistance, and the mutuality of meaning creation in a context of cultural adjacency. Reading Wallis in terms of the literary canon listens to her stories with their full weight and makes the enterprise of literary studies the more subtle, complex and rich.

PART II—POST-COLONIAL THEORY

Texts do not control their meaning. Central to any reading or re-reading of any literature in terms of a post-colonial mode of interpretation, the meaning of a text fundamentally depends on the social structures surrounding a reading of the canon that must be recognized as diachronic. Homi K. Bhabha, in The Location of Culture, demonstrates that though an author of social action, which includes the production of a text, can set in motion the huge interactive relationships between systems of signification, it is finally the reader and the reader's context that determine the meaning, the experience of a text in the real world (18). Bhabha writes,

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. (53)

This third space is the location of culture, the location of the intersection of structures of meaning creation that define the meaning of any cultural production. This Third Space gives value to a reading, both in terms of superficial interpretation and the possibility to deconstruct the historical and social contexts which inform a reading as well as systems of meaning creation independent of text. When I say I believe this or that about the Middle East or Africa, I must be as aware as I can be that those beliefs move through the third space as much as my reading of Robert Browning. In both instances, I am

dependent on and contingent to the social and historical contexts I activate in understanding any moral value system.

One of the chief dominant historical and social contexts that influence and allow signification is the academy. This is certainly true of my experience of signification and the creation of the text you read now. The academy's power to create meaning, to locate discursive fields that value readings in certain idioms can and should itself be deconstructed so that the machinery of meaning making is more transparent. The academy is guilty of segregating cultural productions as much as any other colonial institution—because the academy is historically and socially White or Western or Northern, dominant certainly. The academy is a gatekeeper for the creation of meaning in that meaning without an academic sponsorship loses legitimacy and thus, power.

Bhabha asks, "Is the language of theory [another hegemonic means to] produce a discourse of the Other that reinforces its own power-knowledge equation?" (30). The answer is, predictably, both yes and no. Any discursive field in which meaning is interpreted is reinforced by the enactment of that system. However, there is a possibility within the discourse of theory to subvert the power inherent in the historical or political moment of that discourse. In other words, though theory informs and strengthens the legitimacy of a discourse that is so labeled or understood, the theory itself can in fact delegitimize a specific enactment of that theory. Theory defines itself more than it defines anything else, but in a super-rational understanding of a theory, we can see its emptiness as an absolute system of interpretation. By understanding theory as both socially and politically located, we can begin to expand a theory to incorporate the infinite readings potential in a text. Thus, even, and perhaps especially, meanings subversive to the

academic discourse of theory can be included in textual meaning. A theory of meaning production can resist itself as an institution that suppresses subversive voices.

Edward Said's focus is on the humanities generally, that group of academic disciplines that does not pretend to be objective in the interpretations of human cultural production. As he writes, "Humanities concern secular history, the products of human labor, the human capacity for articulate expression [...humanities are] neither system nor impersonal force like the market or the unconscious" (Humanism 15). Literature can be read as one of the most democratizing and resistant disciplines in the academy, as opposed to those theoretical frameworks (structures of meaning creation) that cement so-called exotic cultures in an objective position to some privileged perspective. Ethnography, for example, pretends to understand culture with a synchronic, scientific objectivity that is impossible when culture and language are understood to exist in the mutual creation of all of its subjective participants.

Another central tenet of post-colonial theory is the destruction of the falsely objective distinctions between cultures. Because culture is defined as groupings of human labor, and human labor takes its meaning from its relationship to other human labors, culture as a discrete unit must take its meaning from its relationships to other cultures. In other words, no culture can exist without other cultures. The boundaries between these cultures then become fuzzy, and the objectification of such boundaries inhibits a movement to global autonomy. We have an obligation, as Said argues, to understand, not the rhetorical, literary and objective separation of cultures, but their relationships (Culture 38). We must resist reading colonizers' literature as strictly making meaning out of their dominance, as well as reading colonized literature in terms

of their subjugation, but read both in terms of the dialectic and multi-logic relationships that a text bears to all others and to our experiences of the world. We must, in Bhabha's terminology, locate culture itself within that third space of meaning creation.

Bhabha writes of the modern reality of cultural adjacence, "In another's country that is also your own, your person divides, and in following the forked path you encounter yourself in a double movement...once as stranger and then as friend" (xxv). An individual exists in multiple structures that define her identity simultaneously. This is not a particularly new idea, but what is, I think, is the human value suggested by the metaphoric stranger-ness and friendship. We cannot help but apply an emotional resonance to the feeling that we are at once inside and outside, that we both belong and don't belong, that our identities, our locations of meaning, exist in a world that alienates us and gives us joy.

Systems of meaning creation do exist in a real world with real power. The power inherent in a given discourse is the power to influence my infinite agency of meaning creation. However, a world of cultural adjacence is also one of discursive adjacence. Within a cultural structure a huge number of discursive systems attempt to control the meaning of a text. Within a structure between cultures, the number of systems exponentially expands, as well as their differences in power and legitimacy. Within the academic discourse that creates the Western canon, a certain amount of play, of vacillation of meaning is possible. If we understand discourse as such, as a system without inherent, natural legitimacy, then the interaction between that mode of meaning creation and others allows a larger, more universal meaning. We in the academy must, and I cannot emphasize this enough, understand our power as power. Our readings of a

text are as subjective, as individually created, as readings from outside of that structure.

All readings are legitimate in terms of the systems that we enact to inform them. Thus, oral traditions resist the academy by creating meaning outside of that discourse. Thus, a student in a classroom disagrees with her instructor in order to subvert the authority of that relationship. Thus, a colonized writer resists her colonizer by ignoring the fact of colonization, by resisting the authority of the discourses within the system that is colonized.

PART III—A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKS OF VELMA WALLIS

Rachel Ramsey locates Velma Wallis somewhere within the dual role of author and ethnographer in Two Old Women. She writes,

Wallis [...] personifies the conflict inherent in the dual roles of author/ethnographer. Wallis comes to the publishing world not only as a first-time author, but because of the nature of her story, which is based on a Gwich'in oral story that deals, on the surface, with the issues of elderly abandonment and tribal survival, as an ethnographer as well. This distinction makes Wallis and her book particularly interesting and problematic because, together, they articulate an evolution taking place in the world of Native American writing, history, and authorship. (22-23)

Any definition of Wallis as an ethnographer must be qualified with the knowledge that she does not explicitly intend her work to be ethnographic. In fact, a reading of her work as ethnographic binds her text within dominant structures that define any text written about people who are other than white in places that are other than civilized as somehow non-literary. In other words, an audience who views the text as a fixed, specifically cultural document ignores the volition of the author of a fictional text. The danger, especially with taking this view of Two Old Women, is that an approach that assumes the synchronic, a-historical truth of a text subsumes the human meaning of the story.

Ramsey refers to the popularity of Wallis' work: "Wallis as a Native American author is producing documents about her people that speak for those people. Because of

the rapid consumption of her product by Western readers and the lack of other information about the Gwich'in people, her work becomes a defining document about them" (36). Wallis cannot, however, make distinct, platonic assertions about her people outside of a historical context. While Ramsey is correct in saying that Wallis is a speaker for a cultural group that doesn't have much textual exposure, a deconstruction of the relationship between a colonized culture and any text read as describing that culture is more apt to give a reader insight about the structures within which he (I) operates. Locating this work, as opposed to say, that of Dickens, Hardy or Shakespeare, outside of that sort of textuality approaches racism. We must understand all texts as equal, regardless of their position within or without dominant structures of literary interpretation. Two Old Women is as much ethnography as Hamlet, because any text reflects its context as much as anything else.

I agree with Ramsey when she argues that

Wallis's exploration of female power, then, appears to question concepts of authority based on gender, challenging the traditional male/female roles. The exploration of these themes, though, is undercut by the containment of the threat posed by the two old women, in a Greenblattian way, by the title of 'honorary position' rather than by the title they should rightly hold of 'chief.' (35)

Ramsey astutely observes the fact that the two old women resist the dominant hierarchy of the Gwich'in band in the story. These women exist in a way that is not dependent on the structures that determine that hierarchy in that they can exist and thrive outside of those structures. While there seems to be a biologically deterministic truth to the fact that

young, strong men will be the best hunters, Wallis' story exposes the emptiness and structurality of this long held tradition. However, the story does more than that. By exposing the social structures at work in the act of domination, she also exposes the structures inherent in understanding a "native" text differently from literature. Two old women survive, the children of alcoholics survive, the Gwich'in survive, the texts survive regardless of the structural systems that might and do suppress them.

Ramsey notes the lack of support given to Two Old Women within Fort Yukon. Arguing that while initially, the lack of support was hinged on the problem of exposing certain "taboo" subjects like elder abandonment, a new supportive reaction began with Gwich'in political opposition to the opening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil speculation. She argues that Gwich'in leadership now see the work as one that illustrates the ancient environmental respect of these people and their cultural dependence on the animals and land that oil exploration would interrupt: "Though one would not criticize the motives behind such an appropriation, it does signify that Wallis, as a possible subversive element, has been contained, and her work aligned with the goal of the Gwich'in people" (39). Ramsey simplifies Two Old Women in that she locates this story inside of a Gwich'in, "Indian" context. Ramsey and maybe Gwich'in leadership reduce the personal, complex meaning of a literary story to fit within a structural category. This story, because of its wide popularity, demonstrates its relevance to audiences who read it within many contexts quite distant from Fort Yukon and the political and cultural issues the Gwich'in face. This work is not about the Gwich'in any more than Hamlet is about the Danish. I ask, what do I, the reader, the sole arbiter of meaning in my experience of the world, gain from understanding Gwich'in culture as more objective than the fluidity

with which I experience my own culture? Doesn't my experience of this world expand as I understand the infinities of the human in this world?

Susan B. Brill de Ramirez takes a somewhat different approach to Wallis' works, but one that should be expanded: "American Indian writers and other writers whose work straddles both oral and written traditions produce literatures that intertwine both orally conversive and textually discursive literary traditions. Conversively informed work is essentially relational with the meaningfulness of its words co-created through the interactive relationship between the teller and listeners" (59). She continues, "In contrast, textually discursive writing is self-contained with the points of focus being on the writer, the text, and/or the reader/audience (but not specifically on the relationships between those points). Here, semiotic signification is found in the texts and their signifying elements" (61). I would argue that, regardless of the form in which Velma Wallis claims to have heard this story, it comes to me in the form of a text whose plot and characterization, in fact, all literary forms, are quite familiar. Two Old Women could not possibly come to me in any form other than the textually discursive. Further, reading this story can still bring the "interactive relationship" between teller and listener to the forefront. Central to any discursive view of literature is that author and reader co-create meaning. This "co-" suggests not only two living breathing human beings, but the interaction between discursive fields and structures. Brill de Ramirez' approach to the orality of Native American literatures is more apt for those authors who are continually conscious of their relationship to orality. This is not to say that Wallis is not conscious of her stories' beginnings in an oral tradition, but they read like books, not transcriptions of oral performances.

Further, I reject the notion that “conversive” and “discursive” exist separately from each other. The spoken word, even in an oral tradition, allows only the response that the discourse in which it is spoken allows. There is a difference between listening to your drunken friend tell a story at a bar and listening to a paper given at an academic conference. In both instances, the act of speaking is conversive, but the political, economic and historical powers of the discourses the participants activate determine the responses that would immediately inform the speaker, laughing obscenities on the one hand; polite, appropriate questions on the other. When the power is totally imbalanced, in the case of a legal defense, the words of one party are effectively silenced in favor of the words of the other. Such imbalance occurs in the discourse field of English Departments. Because the discourse of the academy carries with it real power—institutional, political, economic—that discourse conversively informs texts that it describes or understands. Thus, English Departments are predicated upon British Literature, an echo of the power of the old world over the new. The fact of the power inherent to discourse is not itself inherently evil. However, because our discourse gives us the freedom to deconstruct the power inherent in that discourse and the opportunity to cultivate a truly democratic mode of generating knowledge and meaning, we have an obligation to understand the discursive power we produce and reproduce. And by understanding what it is that the academy does silence, we can seek out those silenced voices.

Again, Wallis’ work exists in between literature—by which I mean an a-cultural, a-historical, unnamed reading—and ethnography, which assumes that a reading of her work depends upon her representation of cultural difference. Brill de Ramirez is correct

when she argues that the two old women in the story assert their existence outside of the dominant social structures that make them so other that they are assumed to be dead, in a way that, apparently, other American Indian writers do as well (66-70). This story is *at least* superficially concerned with resistance to dominant paradigms, to destructive customs, to the ability of the seemingly strong to exploit or abandon the seemingly weak. I read these stories as subverting not only what it means to be a Gwich'in, in history or contemporaneously, but also acquiescence to any structure that can abandon or betray us.

Reading a given text in terms of the structures that dominate the text always does to that text what the band does to the two old women. In fact, reading Wallis' work as some sort of ethnography, some cultural production divorced from the mode of traditional English Department explication, as if Wallis herself is some sort of naïve talent or a quaint chronicler of a dying breed, objectifies her and her human experience of the world. Velma Wallis is as much of an American as I am, or you are, or George W. Bush is. By objectifying these texts as "colonized" or "native," with however much politically correct cultural sensitivity, we still limit the huge and human variety of meaning that her text creates.

Gerald Vizenor writes of the containing and silencing voice of the academy in its treatment of the objectified other.

I have not been fierce enough about anthropology [...] it's only in the interests of profits and power that these studies and simulations of culture are given institutional authority. Cultural anthropologists pose with their booty, and universities honor these academic predators with advanced degrees, and then they go out to create even more anthropologists to study

natives and others around the world [...] Consider the arrogance of a culture that believes in outside experts, the experts who create simulations, and consider a culture that believes in such experts over natives, over the wit and wisdom of native stories, and the cultural predators who reduce the original, mythic, and ironic perceptions of natives to mere material evidence. (90)

While Vizenor viciously attacks, with reason, anthropology, any system of interpretation that depends on simulations and models needs to be reconsidered. Literature is just such a system. Regardless of the ethnicity of the author, every text, as Said and Bhabha suggest, exists in a fluid and changing historical context that works within the reader's mind to interpret a text in a given mode. That context includes, but is not limited to, the idea of "otherness." After Vizenor I would claim that a discipline like English needs to understand those structures as creating the "other" in a way that it does not create the "self." It is important, for example, that Queequeg is a Pacific Islander, but not as important as that the other men on the ship share more in common than not. Queequeg has symbolic power in the novel, not merely because he is a strong man. Melville reproduced a process of meaning creation that ends with my reproduction here, reading and interpreting the novel in multiple ways. There are infinite structures that inform my reading, but few of them consider Queequeg as a human being who defines himself as much as the crew, Melville and I, here in Fairbanks in the twenty first century, define him.

Vizenor emphatically describes a similar problem. "The *Indian* is the invention, and *Indian* cultures are simulations, that is, the ethnographic construction of a model that

replaces the real in most academic references” (85). He nicely and effectively argues for the placement, by the various structures at play on a hierarchy of political power, of the “other” as the “object.” For him, being a native becomes an objective mask that can be described but cannot describe. He cites numerous examples from the popular imagination of this object to demonstrate the variety and range of this objectification. Vizenor writes of films like *Little Big Man*, *Dances with Wolves*, and *Last of the Mohicans*: “The postindian simulations in these movies are radical turns of savagism, a romantic resistance at best, and seem to serve terminal creeds. I wonder if these scenes of simulated traditions are not, once again, the mythic adventures of a nation worried about violence and the corruption of the environment [...]” (86).

This voice, this placement as subject, is precisely what Wallis accomplishes in her work. There are no Western colonizers in the worlds of Two Old Women or Bird Girl and the Man Who Followed the Sun. If they’re there, they live inside the reader’s mind, placed there in reference to this literary “once upon a” time. Outsiders are not necessary for any understanding of these texts; however, they are welcome to interpret as they please. Such stories rectify the damage that objectification of the other inflicts at least within the field of literature, and potentially in the larger political world. Wallis demonstrates, I think, precisely what Vizenor argues for:

Listen: survivance, the idea of survival and resistance, is more obvious in my stories. So maybe upsetting binaries and resistance is more than a structural reversion [...] Clearly, the seams that need to be loosened were sewn too tightly. The irony here, the cultural irony, is that the seams are simulations of dominance. The seams are sewn over and over by social

scientists and other inventors of the American Indian. And the invention is a conservative, national allegory of cultural difference and distinction. The seams get even tighter as more studies are conducted to eliminate all of the loose ends and ambiguities, and to explain every doubt and nuance. The seams are measured right down to the actual words and names in stories about natives. These are the anthroseams, the ironic cultural representations of the other. The great spirit told me to loosen the seams and tease survivance in my name. (79)

Vizenor's idea of the seams that bind and thus objectify the other is closely related to Brill de Ramirez' idea of containment. Both of these ideas serve to illustrate further the dangers of trying to describe the other with a pretense to holism. In describing that "other" in a way that somehow makes sense, we privilege the sense-maker, the persons to whom we address the reports of our investigations. This is how, I think, Vizenor comes to understand the act of dominance itself as a simulation and an objectification. That "self" to which we address our thoughts and writing is no more real, no more culturally homogenous or definable than the "other." Grammatically even, the "self" in this sense becomes the object of our discourse even while she portends to control and give power to that discourse. Thus I can write this essay without fear of reprisal from what would be a paranoid fantasy of some fascist cabal that runs the economic and political direction of the world. The truth is that both the other and the self are creations of the self, of multiple selves that sing almost in unison in a melody that begins to sound like the whole human tragedy.

We are subject to a world of political and economic realities. We cannot act with freedom without fear of reprisal, and the powerful discourses that pervade our most personal thoughts truly bound our minds. I do not suggest some dissolution of cultural groups, some mass post-modern cultural plurality in the name of an empty, liberal view of cultural diversity. Rather I suggest that a study of literature can do precisely what I've done so far, destroy any one sided attempt to define anything. I think Vizenor's concept of survivance is perhaps just as apt for my work here as it is for his own work. Only by resisting what we see as dominant modes of meaning making, only by playing with structures, by deconstructing them and the politics behind them, as the characters in Wallis' stories do, can we hope to make any meaning out of anything.

PART IV—THE TEXTS

The resistance of works like Two Old Women and Bird Girl and the Man who Followed the Sun occurs on a human scale. That humanity rejects conformity and coercion not only to the colonizing, dominant, Western culture, but to every power that an individual as a member of a cultural, social or political group abuts. We struggle for the right to define our identity. I resist the domination of the television in my house by attempting not to conform to the vapid and superficial images I see on the screen. I resist all sorts of influences, both direct and indirect in the course of a single day, and I might argue that we all do.

A Gwich'in woman born in Fort Yukon, Alaska in 1960 to an alcoholic family faces a much more dire and difficult task in terms of defining her own identity. Investigating her works with an eye to this multi-valent, multi-directional, seemingly self-contradictory resistance in terms of the post-colonial frameworks I've already laid out, illuminates the meaning of her texts as well as the struggle of colonized peoples the world over.

The foreword to Bird Girl demonstrates an interesting layer in the struggle to define identity outside of traditional precepts. Written by Iggiagruk (William L. Hensley), this foreword serves as a kind of apology for Wallis' vilification of the Inupiaq Eskimos in the story itself. Hensley is a "prominent Inupiaq leader, [who] co-founded the Alaska Federation of Natives, helping to unify Alaska's Native peoples" (10). This man creates a contemporary political identity that seeks to unify the cultures that have been politically defined as Alaska Native. This political grouping is not a cultural one,

and, as evidenced by Bird Girl, Wallis has a strong awareness of cultural identity in opposition to other cultural identities. I do not accuse Wallis of any anti-Eskimo sentiments. However, it is relevant that she chooses to re-tell a story that includes violence and outright warfare across cultures in the contemporary post-colonial context. That she is never one to back down from a fight seems clear in her treatment of her characters and in her memoir, and she is certainly not afraid to write and describe whatever she wants in order to convey her points.

In this case, the antagonism between Gwich'in and Inupiaq peoples in the distant past can serve as a metaphor for any moment of cross-cultural contact or co-existence. Hensley writes, "Among my earliest memories of growing up along Alaska's Arctic Coast were stories of warfare between the Inupiat and the Athabaskans of the Interior. The two peoples shared a common border for millennia, and it was understandable that clashes occurred over hunting territory" (9). Within the context of hunting territory, Hensley apologizes for Wallis' harsh treatment of his people, but does so in terms of a competitive territoriality that the dominant culture can understand. It is certainly credible to believe that two Native groups would compete for control of hunting land. Keeping in mind that language and cultural production continually define and re-define a culture—including notions of territory and enmity—the stories that Hensley and Wallis heard as children must be seen in light of this process of re-interpretation. I cannot say what these people's experiences of these stories might be, other than to say that although the struggle for land may have happened over thousands of years, the struggle today is not *only* about land.

Wallis here becomes especially brilliant. She rejects the uniform for the multiple; she rejects all simple questions and simple answers. She refuses to be an ethnographer, limiting the meaning of cultural production or taking that meaning from history or politics. Bird Girl describes a cultural conflict that does not uniformly resist the dominant West, other than to re-humanize her own cultural background by reference to its flaws as well as its strengths. She denies dominant culture on many levels. In terms of the colonial moment, she subjectifies the characters in her stories instead of making them cigar store Indians. She demonstrates the strength of her culture's insistence on survival, a survival that itself occurs on many levels and includes important aspects of that culture. Wallis resists Western domination by criticizing the oppressive traditions of her culture. Both of her stories exhibit striking and independent characters who resist definition by pre-contact cultures. Finally, Wallis' stories exist in this world of complicated and gray morality and describe events of a terrible immoral nature that become survived or survivable, understood or understandable.

In the introduction to Two Old Women, Wallis writes,

Sometimes, too, stories told about one culture by someone from another way of life are misinterpreted. This is tragic. Once set down on paper, some stories are readily accepted as history, yet they may not be truthful.

This story of the two old women is from a time long before the arrival of the Western culture, and has been handed down from generation to generation, from person to person, to my mother, and then to me.

Although I am writing it, using a little of my own creative imagination,

this is, in fact, the story I was told and the point of the story remains the way Mom meant for me to hear it.

This story told me that there is no limit to one's ability—certainly not age—to accomplish in life what one must. Within each individual on this large and complicated world there lives an astounding potential of greatness. Yet it is rare that these hidden gifts are brought to life unless by the chance of fate. (xiii)

Wallis further complicates the resistance to dominant cultures by rejecting any notion of the truth of Western texts. She talks about the power of the written word in terms of the discourse of history, or any academically validated text that is given the status of objective truth. This story is as true as any other, especially now that it is written down and has been “approved” by publication. However, this story especially resists the notion that it is somehow pure history. Like Herodotus, Wallis writes this history not in order to describe what happened in the past, but to demonstrate what is happening in the present. Even her mother intended the story to have a specific meaning for Wallis herself at the moment of its telling. This is one of the advantages of an oral story. The teller and the listener by their physical proximity have many clues with which to create the meaning of the story mutually and manipulate that meaning through continual cues. Thus, a roll of the eyes and Wallis' mother may change tack, however subtly.

These texts, in keeping with my structural and linguistic arguments, could be manipulated by any reader to give any reading. I cannot refute their argument except to assert that the following is my reading, however contextually located, and I do not claim

to write Truth. However, by looking closely at the texts themselves, I have discerned what I see as patterned themes that evolve as the plots move forward.

These stories are aware of themselves as stories, from Wallis' own description of their origins in the forewords and afterwords, to the stories told by characters within the diegesis of the main plot. These stories are real and have real power for real individuals. However, that these works cannot be relegated to the genre of fables or prescriptive morality plays along with other so-called folklore. Aspects of the stories are morally prescriptive and do offer such pragmatic information as how to make snowshoes, snares, muskrat traps, and how to skin a moose, as well as suggesting the importance of a strong group dynamic in dire conditions. The morals of these stories, however, are continually tested, refined, and redirected in ways that make the themes of these stories multivalent.

Wallis' texts further describe survival itself as an act of resistance. Well beyond what I imagine to be the boundaries of physical and emotional endurance, the characters in these stories persevere. Survival is the central concern in the unspeakably harsh arctic conditions for bands of subsistence nomads and is often difficult if not impossible. Wallis describes survival in this context requiring privation on a group scale, each member of the band giving her all and receiving her share. However central, survival is not the only aspect of a human life, even a human life in the straits of surviving an Interior winter. For these texts, survival itself takes on multiple dimensions as it is explored, and existence becomes an act of resistance towards those who would have you cease to exist. The survival of the stories themselves through generations of hardship and domination evokes a powerful and beautiful resistance that Ghandi himself might have admired.

The resistance of these stories is perhaps most obviously noticed in the feminist themes of the works. The two old women in their story defy all sexist expectations and norms, resisting the dominant structures that might have defined their fates. *Bird Girl* gets herself into quite a bit of trouble when she rejects her band's gender role norms, but does so anyway, always asserting her right and obligation to live her life how she will. Again, though, the feminist resistance in these texts is multi-valent and subtle. Gender roles are not villainized, but explained, and it is not only women who test and resist the boundaries of these gender roles.

Finally, the relationship between cultural and political groups plays a large role in the thematic arcs of both stories. The more obvious example of what I have been referring to as cultural adjacence occurs in *Bird Girl*, as both central characters move between various cultural groups. Again, though, Wallis does not present such movement in a reductive or simplistic way. These people transcend cultural borders with fear and joy, love and hate. She does not make the mistake, a distressing pattern in the English canon, of turning her cultural and political others into races of Calibans, brutes who are misunderstood because they are silent.

PART V—THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

The fact of metaphoric and symbolic representation is central to our human mediation and understanding of our existence in the world. Language is the glue that maintains social groupings, that creates individual experiences of the world and prefigures, then describes any thing, idea or action that we can live. Wallis' stories demonstrate what could be called a post-colonial awareness of the power of language to affect social and political life. Because language is the instrument of social and political grouping, it also provides the ability to undermine those aspects of such groupings that are oppressive or suppressive. Language, as the glue between individuals and groups, can also expose the seams of those joinings and in so doing allow for their deconstruction.

Just after Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak are abandoned to their own devices, after the band they are with has lost the will to support a seventy five and an eighty year old woman, Sa', the more determined of the two, demonstrates the power of language to set into motion a story of survival. Though individually these women may not have the will power to accomplish their survival, this drive has to be initiated and realized through language. Thus, Sa' convinces her friend and herself to get up, move around, and start the arduous work of survival. This convincing necessarily happens in terms of language. The most interesting parts of this rousing speech occur at the end. Sa' says, "But we will die if we just sit here and wait. This would prove them right about our helplessness" (15). Sa' asserts that they should survive in order to affect the minds and morality of the band that abandoned them, to revise their given identity as helpless. The word "right"

sets off a slough of potential antecedents for the pronouns in those sentences. Taken out of context, the sentences provide a structure that defines resistance in terms of survival. The first person plural could represent, obviously, the two women, but also their band, Gwich'in generally, all Native Americans, oppressed peoples, or children of alcoholics. The meaning of the sentences applies to almost any context of oppression or trial. Movement and activity are necessary to begin the work of revitalization. The women know that they may not have contact with the band again; they are not grandstanding, politically resisting a morality that oppresses and nearly kills them. Instead, the act of survival itself will prove their moral justification, even if it does so only in their own minds. This structure of resistance holds true in my experience of any unpopular moral cause, especially those causes where the “victims”—and I do not use that word lightly—have been ostracized or silenced.

The speech ends: “Yes, in their own way they have condemned us to die! They think we are too old and useless. They forget that we, too, have earned the right to live! So I say if we are going to die, my friend, let us die trying, not sitting” (16). Again, language serves as a multivalent metaphor. On one level, Sa' the character speaks to Ch'idzigyaak the character in attempt to save their lives in the world of the story. On another, Sa' becomes a metaphorical vehicle for all the dispossessed and silenced the world over; I don't think her sentiment would need too much change to express the woes of people who feel rolled over by the machinery of oppression. Sa' becomes a vehicle for anyone who feels abandoned or misunderstood.

Ch'idzigyaak speaks after a long moment of silence at the end of a long and difficult journey. Wallis writes, “So it was that night, at the end of their painful journey

together, they did not know how to converse in companionship, and instead, each woman dwelled on her own thoughts” (56). Both women at this moment are seemingly unsure of their survival, and the tension of the scene lies in the fact that each almost seems prepared to succumb to her own pessimism and lonely feelings of abandonment. At this moment Ch’idzigyaak begins the story of her own grandmother’s abandonment when Ch’idzigyaak was a little girl. The abandoned woman in the story within the story was blind and deaf and didn’t seem to understand what was happening to her. Ch’idzigyaak’s father and brother, she later learns, went back to end the old woman’s suffering and to burn her body so she would not be cannibalized (57-59). Such a horrific story ironically serves to lift the two old women’s spirits, at least to strengthen their resolve to survive, because, on one level, they are still capable of language. The presence of another individual to communicate with is essential to survival and often the most difficult to realize. Thus, Ch’idzigyaak’s story and the larger oral tradition link individuals and their potential to survive. Such stories create communities, and communities increase the likelihood of survival. The irony is that communities have the ability to oppress as well as to liberate. Wallis’ relationship to the oral tradition—one of respect and revision—is parallel to the two old women’s relationship to their community.

Sa’ replies with a story of her experience of abandoning an old woman (59-66). Sa’ says she stood up to the chief of the band who suggested and enforced the abandonment with such vigor and determination that the chief’s solution was to abandon Sa’ with the unnamed old woman. After the old woman died, unable to survive on the diet of mice and owls that Sa’ provided for her, Sa’ was left alone. “‘I talked to myself all the time. Who else was there? They would think I was crazy if The People returned

to find me talking to the air. At least you and I have each other,' Sa' told her friend, who nodded in wholehearted agreement" (64). Survival is not enough; community and meaning are fundamental necessities for human existence. And community and meaning are tightly related. Much of this meaning, too, at least for Sa's story, comes from her self-definition in opposition to tradition and community. It is not beyond the bounds of imagination to think that she could have swallowed her pride and rejoined her band, since she was a better hunter than many of the men. However, such a rejection of her personal integrity and identity would have left her just as empty as if she had no one to talk to. At the same time, such pride cannot exist outside of the structures which it opposes. Sa' must on some level belong to the group which, in many ways, she herself rejects and abandons.

After the two old women survive one winter and virtually thrive during the next, they are found by the band that abandoned them, which again faces the starvation and privation of winter, while the old women have cached more food for the winter than they need. The old women are afraid that the band still does not value their lives and this time will kill them outright for the precious food they have stockpiled. At this moment in the plot, Sa' discusses with Ch'idzigyaak the motivations of the hunters who have found them and the oaths these hunters have taken in protecting them and asking forgiveness for abandoning them.

Sa' was not through talking, for she knew that Ch'idzigyaak still harbored fear about what was happening and needed confidence to face the future. 'They do not know we have done well for ourselves,' she said. 'But tomorrow in the daylight they will see, and then we will know if what

they say is true. But remember this, my friend. If they do the same to us again, we will survive. And if they truly mean what they say, then maybe we will always be a reminder to them in harder times ahead.’ (118)

This short speech demonstrates again the power of language to assuage mental and emotional anxiety, anxiety that can be detrimental to survival. Sa’ once again comforts her friend with language, language that comforts even as it describes terrible and difficult things. The speech also reinforces the stubborn resistance of survival. The two old women got it together to survive after one abandonment; they can surely do it again. Finally, and most interestingly, I think, Sa’s speech is aware of itself as a story that has *always* been a reminder. She realizes that her story of survival is one that will echo across generations, genders, political and cultural gaps. Thus, Sa’ teaches us through the language used to describe her story within the text and the language she herself uses to interpret that story, that survival means more than just eating and that anyone can surmount situations that seem to be insurmountable. Moreover, overcoming such obstacles placed in our paths by political or economic or social or familial power is a means to resist and potentially change that power so as to allow for a further degree of justice in the future.

Bird Girl and the Man who Followed the Sun is the conflation of two narratives Wallis heard from her mother (Bird Girl 215). Again, the language used by the narrator and by the characters within the story exists in a parallel relationship to each other. The ways in which language functions within the story itself mirrors the way that the text functions in the world familiar to you and me and Wallis herself. Language has real power to aid in survival, to determine identity and meaning, to affect the political and

social groups in which one finds oneself. Language is the vehicle for the attainment and exercise of power, and is always the vehicle for true moral justice, and valid or invalid justification for action.

The plot arc of Daagoo, the man who followed the sun and whose name means ptarmigan, is initiated by a story:

To satisfy the child [Daagoo], the elders told him about the Land of the Sun, a warm country to the south where the sun shone all year long. It was said that a group of Gwich'in people had journeyed there many years ago. Some of them reached the Land of the Sun, while others turned back, afraid of entering unknown territory.

One elderly man said that his great-grandfather had been one of those who returned to the north. The elder described the ancient route to the Land of the Sun, passed on to him by his great-grandfather, and drew a map for little Ptarmigan in the dirt. Delighted, Daagoo copied the map onto a piece of tanned moose skin that his mother had given to him.

When Daagoo questioned other adults about this fabled land, or showed them his map, often they only frowned at him, for most people did not take such legends seriously. But Daagoo had complete faith in the legend. One day, the small boy vowed to himself, he would find the Land of the Sun (15-16).

It is the story of the strange land that piques the child's interest and determines the course of his future life and any happiness or satisfaction that he finds. The first paragraph above outlines the short legend in simple language that belies the terrible draw it has for

young Daagoo. Only a few words pique his interest, but these few words drive Daagoo over thousands of miles of “unknown territory.” Daagoo has faith in the story, in its historical accuracy partly because he wants to believe, but then also because one old man insists that a relative was with the group. However, the veracity of this story is fairly obvious knowing that California and points south do, in fact, exist, as well as in the apparent truth of a band of nomads’ having little knowledge of those places.

Daagoo has faith in the stories of the old times that we should share when we read his story. The stories told to him and about him both take place at a narrative remove from the contemporary world. A further doubling of these stories occurs textually. The physical existence of the map is a trope of the text that recurs throughout the plot, even when Daagoo is “stuck” as the leader of his band. The map, here, is a form of text, of written symbols as metaphors for physical locations. As Daagoo’s journey unfolds the map continues to hold true to the world around him. The dramatic irony in such a sequence of events—we, the audience, know full well that the “Land of the Sun” exists—suggests the historical veracity of the oral tradition. Compounding the power of language to describe the complexities of the human condition, language also has the pragmatic function of describing both place and time.

Such a map mirrors the sort of moral, thematic map that the collection of symbols and metaphors named in Bird Girl represents. Just as Daagoo has faith in a legend, doubled by a text, that cannot be realized without a frightening journey into the unknown, we must *believe* the legend of Daagoo, itself doubled by a text, whose realization cannot be undertaken without the frightening prospect of leaving the familiar behind. This short passage is emblematic of a post-colonial approach to textual extrapolation. The map

means different things to different people. For some it is the object of fancy, a digression at best and a distraction at worst. For others it represents a linguistic utterance with the potential for action, for practice. I think many texts previously catalogued as “other” or legend or myth might be re-viewed in light of their potential to activate political and social change. When Daagoo encounters the Tlingit, for example, it is the *story* of his adventure that saves his life from “one of the most powerful and warlike clans in the whole land” (152). In addition to the map, it is the narration of his quest that overturns the overwhelming power of the many Tlingit over the one Ptarmigan. A story that cannot be translated and a text (map) can interrupt and overturn an imbalance of physical power. In this way, the text itself is more powerful than the spoken language which is opaque between the speakers of different languages. The Tlingit's attempt to understand is not only what saves Daagoo's life, but also the source of a narrative that expands their experience of the world. Though not necessarily allegorical, this story privileges an attitude of openness and attempts at understanding over rote performances of tradition.

In his imagination he [Daagoo] saw a country that stood green and lush, where night never turned cold, dark, and empty. The happy people of this land never hear the lonely sound of the hungry wolf crying in the night. Life was easier there, and men did not need to trudge through deep snow in search of moose that could not be found. Such a place had to exist, because the elders told such vivid stories about it. Daagoo resolved once more to find that place, and then he closed his eyes to sleep. (46)

This paragraph demonstrates the creation of another place through language and imagination, in opposition but parallel to the stories of the Ch'eekwaii, the Gwich'in

children are told. And again, California is exoticized with use of dramatic irony. This irony suggests that the hidden and perhaps obscure truths of an oral tradition might be quite literally true. Not all stories have this power, however:

From their earliest years, Gwich'in children were taught to fear strangers. Their parents frightened them by telling them that, if they made too much noise, the Ch'eekwaii would come from the north and steal them. Although this was intended only to keep the children quiet in case an animal was nearby, the stories filled the children's imaginations with terrifying images of the enemies they had never seen. (25)

Both versions of the unknown are transmitted through language, and both physically affect the worlds in which listeners to the stories operate. Wallis herself, in the introduction to Bird Girl, refers to that legend's being told in a context antagonistic to the Inupiat, and as I argued in Part IV, William Hensley, apologizes for and understands that antagonism. In these two paragraphs, the unknown, that which is unfamiliar and "other," is understood in much the same ways that the contemporary colonial powers understand similar unknown locations. Daagoo imagines an Edenic paradise free from pain and eventually finds a place that is, in many ways more paradisiacal than Interior Alaska, but also full of human tragedy. The narrative construction of the Ch'eekwaii does not get totally flipped in the interaction that Bird Girl has with them, but she does find some kindness from the old woman, Ukpik, and the son she has with her Eskimo captor, Turak. She also takes joy in the cultural activities of her cultural enemies. For me, the relationship between the legends and this book destroy and unpack certain half-conceived notions of the other, buttressing their human complexity. The existence of such "colonial"—and I use that term to evoke the objectification of the mysterious—

attitudes within a framework that is colonized itself re-humanizes the other in his own world. Just as Wallis herself asserts in the afterword, Daagoo is a kind of Robinson Crusoe (217), but a Robinson Crusoe who comes to realize the full and complex humanity of his Friday. Just as the stories within the story bear a certain relationship to the larger story, so does the larger story bear a relationship to this narrated text that we call individual experience. As Daagoo comes to realize, “The wind, the sun and the stars existed as far away as the mind could wander” (206).

Language is a means of transcending cultural borders in favor of a more expansive humanity. In his interaction with the Tlingit, Daagoo trades them a song, one which they do not perfectly or readily translate (154). Daagoo sings the song, one about longing, with a passion and emotion that transcend linguistic barriers. This episode is especially relevant to a discussion of any oral tradition within the context of Western literary criticism. Even though these stories have been written and translated, that translation, both to text and English, is fundamentally imperfect. In fact any utterance is fundamentally incapable of perfect transmission; there is always some disconnect between the word, spoken or written or mimed, and the meanings of that word for speaker and listener. We should, however, after the Tlingit in Bird Girl, attempt to understand and appreciate whatever meaning we take from a given utterance. The example of the Tlingit is one in which the meaning is almost completely opaque given the difference in linguistic systems, and illustrates nicely the distance not only between linguistic systems, but larger systems of meaning creation. While I can understand Bird Girl’s murders in terms of Western justice as immoral, I can also judge them as a justified response to the cruelty she withstood or as an untranslatable cultural or political

transaction which I will never understand. All of these (mis)understandings happen simultaneously, though, or variously in the course of my re-reading the book. My partial understanding does not, however, detract from the humanity of Bird Girl's revenge or the value of transgressing cultural barriers the text enacts. I do understand the story perfectly, even in a context different from the one in which it occurred, and I believe that, like the Tlingit, my experience, bounded as it is, expands the range of human action and emotion. I should embrace my admittedly partial understanding, especially of a culture with which I have contact, as the beginning of a process making meaning through dialogue. I do not want to be Turak, endlessly repeating a cycle of violence and revenge. Nor do I want to be the naïve Daagoo, who believes in a paradise on earth that he will never reach.

I do want to achieve the love that Daagoo and Sunshine find on the border of cultures, each free to create meaning outside of a coercive system that ignores love and mandates adherence to tradition. Daagoo and Sunshine exist in a relationship whose structure parallels that of Daagoo and the Tlingit:

Still looking him in the eye, she questioned him in her language. He had left the map back at his camp, so he drew a map in the sand, gesturing and speaking in his Gwich'in tongue to describe his far-away homeland. He talked about how long the journey had taken, drawing a moon and pointing to the sky, then to places on the map, then to himself, then to the place where he sat.

The woman listened carefully, her eyes opening wide. She wanted to ask more questions but knew that he would not understand her. Weary

from having given birth, she motioned for Daagoo to come closer, then handed him the infant and lay down on the ground to sleep. (161)

This passage describes with great skill and tenderness a beautiful moment of pure, domestic humanity, and the ability of love to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers. It is apparent from these paragraphs that there is some degree of transparency between the two individuals' languages, but mostly as the result of the kindness and openness with which they treat each other from the start. This encounter suggests that there is a positive and a negative way to approach cultural difference. Neither approach requires language, but each become a mutually intelligible structure by which two groups can co-create meaning. Just like the song Daagoo trades to the Tlingit, the simple domestic gestures that he and Sunshine share become understandable utterances in a way that is very similar to language. This universal language of kindness, love and acceptance opposes the other universal language of coercion. However, coercion does not share the same communicative features that love does. We are given to understand that Bird Girl's incarceration is Turak's revenge for the loss of his family at Athabaskan hands, but the characters involved in these scenes understand no more than the ancient tribal hatred with which they began. Love is truly communicative in that it creates new meaning, meaning which is variously understood but which somehow changes tradition and the status quo.

This communication of acceptance constitutes a language of resistance to the fixity and legitimacy of traditional identity. Through language, we, here in the real world, understand the characters' actions and motivations in the stories, and apply those metaphorically, both forward and backward, between the story and the world of our experience. If we approach a story in a certain traditional mode, we are guilty of limiting

that story in any number of ways. Language itself binds the fluid and infinite experience of a given moment. However, these texts provide, in their characters' opposition to traditional definition, a template by which the texts themselves can be understood to oppose a limiting definition. We can work at expanding those boundaries or at least understanding them, regardless of how impossible it may seem to overcome them. As Sa' says, "Let us die trying."

PART VI-- SURVIVAL IS RESISTANCE

The idea that presence and survival are themselves resistant acts runs throughout both of these works. Obviously, in the meteorological reality of Interior winters, the survival of a group depends very much on unthinking, unquestioning cooperation within a group dynamic. The division of labor in such bands as Wallis describes is essential to the continuation of such groups, even at the risk of losing individuals to starvation or exposure. On a group scale, survival can be seen as resistant to the dominating environment in which these people live and travel. Individually, however, such strict group dynamics suppress those who desire to go beyond what the group determines to be that person's share of the work or food. It is these moments that interest me, although they occur only at a single remove from the presence of Gwich'in culture in continuing opposition to the rapid changes of the last century.

When the two old women are first abandoned, it is Sa' who convinces Ch'idzigyaak, and possibly herself, that they can survive. "'We are going to prove them wrong!' she says, 'The People. And death!'" (28). A resistance to death, survival, in another word, is conflated with the resistance to The People's edict of abandonment. The idea that these two old women are helpless and perhaps more importantly useless is one that even Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak have internalized, even cultivated. Just before her determination to survive, Sa' sums up their position in the band. "Two old women. They complain, never satisfied. We talk of no food, and how good it was in our days when it really was no better. We think that we are so old. Now, because we have spent so many years convincing the younger people that we are helpless, they believe that we are no

longer of use in this world” (27-28). Sa’ realizes and asserts that it is simply the structural location of old age that has influenced The People’s decision, as well as the two old women’s lifestyles in the recent past. She argues, in essence, that regardless of their thoughts or language or their own attitudes, the reality of their situation may in fact be much different. This obfuscation of a potential reality by language and thought on a group level appears to be a kind of cultural hegemony. The idea of uselessness, however internalized, is still the encoding of the cultural and ideological power of the dominating, defining structures. Language defines uselessness; therefore, language can deconstruct the apparent truth of such a repressive definition. The greatest task these women face, and where Sa’ really demonstrates her strength, is in her ability to engage her will power to re-define both of their structural locations, not as helpless, but as capable of survival.

As the women move camp, they face a shortage of food and the physical limitations of their bodies:

Sa’ was thinking of the day ahead. ‘After we have eaten, we should try to move on, even if we go only a little way today,’ she said. ‘Each step brings us closer to where we are going. Although I do not feel good today, my mind has power over my body, and it wants us to move on instead of staying here to rest—which is what I want to do.’ (49)

Sa’s determination to march on into the unknown is a decision to make a small step forward, not to finish a long journey. Their decision to survive, to resist the weakness of their bodies and their self-identification, will not succeed if they continually dwell on the hugeness of their journey. Much like the cultural group’s value of continual existence despite momentary privation that will allow for long term, macro survival, the women

realize that it is the small steps that will allow them their destination. The other key to their continuing survival is Sa's assertion that her mind has power over her body. I see a parallel here to the alcoholism that has so plagued the Gwich'in as described in Wallis' memoir, Raising Ourselves. Survival, like recovery from alcoholism, must conflate the idea of small steps and the will of mind over body. This process does not hold true only for Alaska Native groups. This theme is one of the more relevant to my own cultural experience.

The two old women's survival actually allows for the survival of the larger group that eventually finds the women's camp. The women's survival, in defiance of the political power of the group, allows for the survival of that group in resistance to the dominating forces of the environment. This doubling of the themes of resistance and survival suggests the possibility for resistance to affect and change the political structures against which it acts.

Daagoo—an elderly guide in this book—is sent to look for the old women after the band returns to the place where they were abandoned. The band is again facing death by starvation, and the chief has brought them to this place for reasons that few members understand: “Daagoo respected the chief and realized that he suffered from self-loathing because of the part he had played in abandoning the old women. The guide knew the chief despised his own weakness, for it showed in the hard lines of bitterness etched on his face” (97). The major weakness of imposed definition is the realization of moral wrongness of such domination. This weakness allows the old women to return to the band that abandoned them, changing, however subtly, the political structures of definition of that band. Inherent in dominant structures of definition is their necessary structural-

ness. The two old women reveal the limits of the structures that abandoned them and defined them as useless to be habits of thought, traditions without positive substance. The women's survival demonstrates the weakness of such dominating, repressive structures, a weakness predicated upon the very nature of many culturally definitive modes. Continuing colonial domination is just such a weak structure. The revelations of structural weakness that the women's survival suggests can be extrapolated onto continuing colonial domination. The contemporary structures that limit and prescribe definitions are just as empty and weak, just as potentially resistible as those structures that named the women useless.

I see the same themes of survival as resistance in Bird Girl. After Bird Girl flees her band because she will not acquiesce to an arranged marriage and its strictly, traditionally gendered division of labor, Wallis describes her internal conflict:

Part of Bird Girl knew this was not a realistic plan, for the minds of the Gwich'in, especially the men, would never be changed. Once they decided how something should be, then that was the way it would be. Even when they allowed her to hunt, her parents had insisted that she not hunt during her menses, for fear it would bring bad times to all of their people. The relationship between animals and the spirit world was a complicated one, they had explained. Many times, Bird Girl had secretly thought of such rules as a great nuisance. Now, again, tradition was interfering with her life. For such traditions Bird Girl felt only contempt.

She would prove to her people that she could survive on her own. She would go up to those mountains and make a winter camp. There she

would hunt, dry meat, and gather edible plants and berries. As she walked alongside a small river, Bird Girl's footsteps grew bold with resolve. She would show them what she could achieve without rules or traditions. (63-64)

Bird Girl's survival, in this case, would demonstrate the same, unnecessary emptiness in the traditional order that the two old women faced. Her survival would demonstrate a woman's ability to hunt. The relationship between the spiritual aspects of reproductive power and survival is, as she and her parents realize, also complicated—in some ways fundamentally ineffable. This ineffability might be an admission of the validity of the political paradigm of the spiritual realm. Bird Girl intuitively feels that regardless of her people's spoken spiritual strictures, she can resist and possibly change such limiting strictures as are based on the empty, traditional prescriptions for gender.

Bird Girl's naïveté is exposed when Turak and the other Eskimo hunters capture her alone. On some level, these men are able to capture her because she is isolated from her social, political group. Regardless of the emptiness of structure, that structure has real power inasmuch as it provides a literally protective social dynamic. The real power in this case may have provided Bird Girl with protection from her captors. To complicate such a claim, another group of Eskimos massacre Daagoo's hunting party even though they adhere to the traditional structures. In fact, Daagoo joins the hunting party as an attempt to assuage the ire of his bandmates because his predilections do not conform to the stated group ethic. These traditions do not save Daagoo's party, and I might assume that they may not have saved Bird Girl either. Traditional social roles, in either case, would not, by themselves, protect these people from their enemies. Thus, Bird Girl,

regardless of her naïveté is validated in her thinking that her survival would challenge the traditions of her group.

Further twisting the conflation of survival and resistance is Bird Girl's long enslavement by the Ch'eekwaii. In opposition to the constant physical and emotional domination of her captors, Bird Girl remains alive and defiant. "The more Turak and his people tried to break her spirit, the stronger and more stubborn Bird Girl became. She believed that if she broke down and begged for mercy, they would be satisfied, having had their revenge, and they would kill her. Pride kept her alive" (122). In this case, resistance insures her survival. Ironically, her individual definition of her identity as culturally distinct from the Ch'eekwaii and resistant to them allows her to survive when her identity as distinct from her own cultural group had put her in the situation wherein survival was questionable.

In addition to the survival of the individual and the group within the texts, the texts themselves survive and resist the larger, colonial world context in which they exist. Like Bird Girl and others, stories that may be suppressed survive and thus resist the structures political, economic authorities impose on them. These stories resist the colonialism that, for example, informed the attempted murder of Alaskan Native languages. The existence of these books has allowed for my specific reading of them and therefore resist and expand dominating modes of definition. Colonized stories, culture and language will not give up without a fight, in terms of this post-colonial world in which Western hegemony seems as daunting as a winter in the Interior.

PART VII-- FEMINIST RESISTANCE

Perhaps the most obvious mode of resistance in these works is that presented by the strong women who refuse to be relegated into the oppressive gender roles their societies enforce. The two old women and Bird Girl and Ukpik and Sunshine and even Wallis herself, in her memoir, are women of strength and resolve who resist coercive domination. These women achieve self-determination at any cost, though that cost is often dear. The survival and resistance they do achieve is limited, at best, but in their act of resistance, the groups and ideas that they resist change and expand. In addition to the more literal feminism of the female characters, some male characters, parallel to their female counterparts, resist gendered identity definition. This conflation of feminism with resistance to any limiting definition of gender corresponds to the larger themes of resistance at work in these texts.

The most obvious example of feminist resistance relies on the plot of Two Old Women. These women are abandoned because they are nominally useless, but part of that seeming uselessness is their gender. At a time when obtaining meat is the essential quest of the band, their groupmates see them as incapable of being anything other than consumers of meat. However, as the plot develops, it becomes clear that these women are quite capable of subsisting in a harsh environment, subsisting to the same degree that young men can. Their success demonstrates the falsity of gendered assumptions about who can hunt and who cannot.

A resistance to enforced and arranged marriage is another feminist concern of these texts. Both Ch'idzigyaak and Bird Girl are forced to marry against their wishes,

though Ch'idzigyaak mentions this only in passing (66). Her complicity in this marriage, or her unwillingness to face the ostracization that Bird Girl must endure, typifies her generally weak character in the face of dominant forces. Sa' must continually encourage and support her friend in the face of daunting obstacles as well as provide a template for a more successful resistance—Sa' marries during her banishment for helping another abandoned elder a man who is himself banished (65-66). I imagine with Sa's presence, Ch'idzigyaak would have struggled more against her marriage. Luckily, Sa' is around for us and for the entire audience of her story. Her example of successful resistance to enforced marriage as well as to expectations of gender provides us with an example of effective resistance.

This resistance to central mores of the cultural groups in which they are members complicates any Western attempt to objectify this culture or this story. By allowing subjugated members of a group to resist the internal hierarchies of that group, Wallis imbues those characters with subjective agency; in other words, she allows them thoughtful, complicated volition in a world often antagonistic to such volition. One of the major sources of resistance in these works is precisely that re-humanization of the colonized and objectified cultures. The resistance of these old women, and of the other feminist characters, does not happen in opposition to any monolithic system. They are able to enact change in a context that is resistant to change; they do not face a savage and unflinching tradition, nor a noble round table whose authority comes from consensus. The intricacies of gender further support the gender difficulties of the male characters. All assumptions about the natural predilections of gendered humans are called into question in the same way that we ourselves, out here in the real world, question such

structures. Wallis makes no distinction between resistance to gendered strictures within a colonized culture and such resistance within the dominance of Western culture.

Bird Girl's resistance to marriage, unfortunately, becomes the catalyst for her "marriage" to Turak, which provides a picture of an almost perfect oppression:

Zhoh remained silent. He suspected that the men had resented his daughter [Bird Girl] for a long time. She was aggressive, always asking questions and looking directly at the men—unlike the other women, who listened quietly and obeyed the men without challenging their authority.

Zhoh wanted to defend his daughter and tell them she needed more time to accept the idea of marriage, but he could not argue with his fellow hunters. He knew that he was the one to blame. He had known the strict rules that his people had followed for generations, the traditions that kept everything in balance. Yet he had willfully indulged his daughter, breaking one rule that was never to be broken. He had taken over his wife's responsibility and trained his daughter himself. Now Bird Girl would pay the price for his mistake. (34-35)

In this passage, the double humanization of gendered resistance comes to the forefront. Not only does Bird Girl reject the forms which her womanhood is expected and prescribed to take, but her doing so is a result of the way she has been raised. Bird Girl's father Zhoh is blamed, by himself and his fellow hunters, for allowing his daughter to take part in male activities. Zhoh, in this way, resisted the forms and structures of a gendered division of labor. Such a cultural transgression is interesting in this case, because as the final sentence suggests, Bird Girl is the one who will suffer. This transfer

of suffering informs the themes of revenge and cycles of destructive behaviors. Yet however painful and torturous Bird Girl's situation becomes, she understands that situation in her own terms. Her pride and insistent, resistant self-definition, allow her survival in the Eskimo camp, just as it alienates her from her own people.

Again, within the fairly obvious themes of feminist resistance, Wallis complicates and humanizes the difficulties of strict and unflinching gender definition. Men, like Zhoh, also consistently resist and subvert the dominant modes of definition in terms of gender. Just as Zhoh contradicts cultural edicts when he teaches his daughter to hunt, the young Daagoo also resists domination by his cultural group. "I could be a piece of wood for all they care," he thought angrily. "When I do what my heart desires, they reject me and threaten me. They only accept me when I do what they want" (42). Though not necessarily expressed in terms of gender, I think the young Daagoo's understanding of the group dynamic parallels feminist resistance. His band wants him to hunt and take a wife and live like the rest of the people in the band. But Daagoo wants to explore, wants to push the boundaries of even the geographical realities of his world. He constantly asks "troublesome questions" (15) the subjects of which, besides the land of the sun, are never revealed by the text. I locate this questioning of his prescribed role with a feminist resistance because it parallels the struggle of the women to transcend their prescriptive roles. Just as the survival of Bird Girl and the two old women exposes the weakness of traditional modes of defining structures, Daagoo's questions are troublesome because they investigate the source and nature of the power at play in his life.

Ch'idzigyaak's grandson, Shruh Zhuu, in Two Old Women, is another male character who displays resistance to prescriptive modes of behavior. Just before his grandmother and her friend are abandoned, Shruh Zhuu appears:

He was an unusual boy. While the other boys competed for their manhood by hunting and wrestling, this one was content to help provide for his mother and the two old women. His behavior seemed to be outside of the structure of the band's organization handed down from generation to generation. In this case, the women did most of the burdensome tasks such as pulling the well-packed toboggans. In addition, much other time-consuming work was expected to be done by the women while the men concentrated on hunting so that the band could survive. No one complained, for that was the way things were and always had been. (9)

This description of Shruh Zhuu's character in its proximity to a description of the gendered division of labor speaks to the themes of the work that can be described with feminist critical theory. The conscious elicitation of structure in terms of the social, political and economic organization of this cultural group, suggests that such structure has no reality outside of human performance.

These stories and characters demonstrate a critical, complex, and fundamentally human reaction to any dominating means of control in a time well before Western contact. The theme of feminist resistance, my reading suggests, is one that is neither new nor Western, but a function of sensitive and intelligent people everywhere. That these themes occur within the texts parallels their effect between the texts and their audiences. By identifying with the political resistance of a culture removed in its traditions, time and

geographical location, Wallis' audience provides her access not only to an example of positive and successful resistance within the text, but a justification of such resistance across cultural, temporal and spatial boundaries.

I want to be careful when I describe the results of such resistance. When I say positive and successful, I'm afraid I'm in danger of objectifying the text and the resistance itself. Wallis is constantly aware of the subtleties and subjective (human, I mean, fallible in another word) nature of such resistance and the victories they accomplish. Questioning the cultural structures that inform the lives of these characters, and by extension of my life and yours, doesn't end with egalitarian utopia. The changes that do occur happen in small steps, often at the cost of group membership for those who initiate the changes. While Daagoo the explorer is welcomed back a hero, Bird Girl and the two old women are necessarily alienated, even after their reincorporation with their bands. In humanizing this "other," Wallis rejects any notion of platonic cultural definition, including some sort of concrete and lasting change affected by an individual. Cultural structures and the behaviors they mandate are, like language, fundamentally and constantly produced and re-produced by their actors and audiences. The Gwich'in culture, if it can even be described with such an implication of discreteness, did not change because of the actions described in these texts. This culture is realized over and over by individuals in the variously changing contexts in which they find themselves. The characters who transcend cultural boundaries do so because they experience those boundaries differently, dependent on the individual experience of contact. Few of the conformers to the stated cultural rules are displayed as having a less moral location, simply a different one. The end of this discussion is the discussion itself. Resistance will

not necessarily result in utopia, but in the beginning of a multi-logue which informs the search for equality and justice.

PART VIII-- CULTURAL ADJACENCE

The final end of my investigation into the various modes of resistance at work in Wallis' stories, is the permeability of inter-cultural boundaries. Just as the meaning of language itself is in constant flux, the meaning of the structures that language describes is also fluid and slippery and muddy to a degree which makes it difficult to express. Cultural boundaries are fictions of structures produced by a dominant Western ideology. Dominating cultures define dominated cultures, regardless of their physical proximity. Thus, women are women because their definition prescribes a certain set of behaviors, attitudes, and creations of identity. Students are students for the same reason. Colonized cultures face the same structurally limiting definitions, especially within the literature of the dominant discourse. Within this hegemonic mode of interpretation, the other is most often engaged as an other, not a human being who informs the fluid processes of cultural production and meaning making. Wallis reminds us that others have others, too.

Colonized cultures face coercive physical oppression as well. Even a cursory knowledge of history reveals the atrocities of cultural contact between a dominant, aggressive force seeking to impose "order" and those who become oppressed by such force. My goal with this essay is to describe the ways in which a dominant force variously oppresses its objects on a spectrum ranging from ideological hegemony to physical violence. We live in a world of cultural adjacence, of simultaneous and sometimes contradictory modes of identity creation and meaning making. The violence in the world speaks to the potential destructiveness of the interaction of cultures.

I suggest that Wallis' stories seek to locate her colonized culture within the fluidity of the human condition. She consciously presents an other within a context of others, a cultural group that approaches its own problems with the subtlety and complexity that every group does. Her characters resist oppressive structural and cultural systems and become human through a parallel, simultaneous, and multilayered resistance to their own cultures, and by extension to the cultures that seek to hegemonically dominate the colonized of the world.

Two Old Women accomplishes this complex resistance through the old women's resistance to what amounts to attempted murder. Not only do they resist the harsh environment in which they find themselves, but they challenge definition as weak and useless. Because this work does not deal directly with cultural contact in the way that Bird Girl does, the other is created in this book by the distance between the "cultural" group that the women form and those who left them for dead. By rejecting the structures that define them as useless, in effect proving their meaninglessness, the old women come to understand themselves with their own, volatile definitions. The women create their own cultural group when they negotiate their individual structures of definition.

These women are never fully re-incorporated into the band that abandoned them because of the rift their new definitions create. However, they continue to live in contact and negotiation with the structures that betrayed them and that they rejected.

Relations became better between The People and the two women. Both learned that from hardship, a side of people emerged that they had not known. The People had thought themselves to be strong, yet they had been weak. And the two old ones whom they thought to be the most

helpless and useless had proven themselves to be strong. Now, an unspoken understanding existed between them, and The People found themselves seeking out the company of the two women for advice and to learn new things. Now they realized that because the two women had lived so long, surely they knew a lot more than The People had believed. (127-128)

These two groups exist peacefully and to their mutual benefit. Granted, the grouping here is a somewhat convenient one, given that most structures of identity remain, I imagine, mutually comprehensible. However, this co-existence with an emphasis on openness and a mutual transfer of knowledge and experience provides a positive example for the people of the world. Often generational boundaries are the most difficult to transcend. Wallis writes often in Raising Ourselves of the cultural disconnect between the people of earlier generations and the current ones who have access to Western culture. She does not do so in terms of a nostalgia that romanticizes the past by objectifying a noble savage, nor does she extol the virtues of Western modernity. Wallis asks for a relationship between cultures that is mutually beneficial and exists in dialogue. It is for the individual to interpret and create her own cultural responses and prescriptions, especially in a world where technology allows access to cultures across the globe.

Bird Girl and the Man who Followed the Sun presents a less optimistic, but perhaps more historically realistic, vision of cultural adjacence. The cultural other for the Gwich'in bands in this story is the Ch'eekwaii who, though they live on the North Slope, overlap in some hunting grounds with the Gwich'in. These two cultural groups share a

historical and traditional animosity which has obviously affected relations between them.

It is understandable, then, that a traditional Gwich'in story has for its antagonist the Ch'eekwaii, though that relationship, as demonstrated by Hensley's foreword, no longer fully exists. It is still consistent with the task of re-humanizing the colonized other to demonstrate that this other, too, has its other.

The Eskimo massacre of Daagoo's hunting party introduces the interaction between these groups (58-59). Wallis describes this violence in terms of political and economic struggle, a question of access to hunting lands. It is by chance that Daagoo survives, while all the men of his band are murdered in their sleep.

Daagoo tried to comprehend why this had happened. Why had the Ch'eekwaii killed his father and the other men? What did they want? He knew that the two peoples had come to hate each other, but he had not understood the destructive power of such hatred. Whatever the reason for the raid, Daagoo knew that he would never again take his people's safety for granted. (93)

Daagoo is a boy who constantly questions the boundaries of his reality. He does not understand why he must behave in a certain way, nor does he understand the tradition of hatred between these groups. What he doesn't understand is the relationship between tradition, cultural structures of understanding, and the negative consequences of those structures. Daagoo literally moves beyond the geographical boundaries of his tradition in a way parallel to his resistance to the fixity of deleterious cultural precepts. The above passage appears at the moment of cultural contact, at the moment of realization of other

cultural groups that ends in bloodshed. One does not have to think hard to find a further parallel within historical cultural contact.

The second interaction between the Ch'eekwaii and the Gwich'in occurs when Bird Girl is kidnapped and enslaved. This interaction, predicated by Bird Girl's flight from oppression within her cultural group, is described with reference to a cycle of violence and revenge. Turak, her captor, watched his father clubbed to death by Gwich'in. "Never would he forget that day. As a child he had been taught to hate his tribal enemies through the many stories he had heard about their cruelty. The murder of his father made that hatred real" (78). Thus begins a cycle of revenge killings and hostile captures that culminates in Bird Girl's killing of the entire Ch'eekwaii camp. It is human to react with rage and violence to unspeakable torture, and thus Bird Girl's reaction demonstrates a volatile, yet grim, vision of human potential.

The most interesting aspect of Bird Girl's captivity is her pregnancy. Fathered by Turak as he continually rapes Bird Girl, the child that grows inside her becomes a symbol of cultural adjacence. She attempts escape but is recaptured:

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She thought about the life within her and wondered what would become of her and her child. She glanced back at Turak, who stood behind her on the sled. This child inside her would be part of her and part of him, two long-time enemies joined together in her womb.

Yet whenever a life is conceived, there is a sense of hope, of beginning. Bird Girl was not immune to this ageless magic as she lay on the sled, hoping for the best for the life inside her, and for herself. (130)

The union of self and other, of two enemies, in the form of an innocent and unwitting child demonstrates the fundamental vacuity of enmity. The life growing inside her could be a symbol of her continual captivity and subsequent rape. However, this human being who exists directly at the intersection of these two warring cultures is, for the narrator, a symbol of hope. Children and pregnancy are positive moments in this cycle of violence just as much as they are the vehicles for the continuation of this cycle. The implication here is that each child born represents a chance to escape destructive cycles of distancing and separating definitions of cultural groups that inform the cycles of violence. But this child is taken from Bird Girl and raised to hate her as his peers do and suffers the same fate as his peers at the hands of the mother he never knew.

More positive examples of cultural adjacence and the contact it suggests occur in the story of Daagoo. The first occurs when he encounters a Tlingit village after traveling for many months. He is initially awed by the difference and beauty of the physical village and adornments of these people. The Tlingit, defined in the text as “powerful and warlike” (152), are also awed by the presence of this culturally different man. The moment of contact, in the absence of structural hatred, becomes one of mutual curiosity:

The men stared at their visitor in disbelief, straining to understand. Why would a man endanger his life to explore an unknown place? Like the Gwich'in, The People, the Tlingit, led lives tightly interwoven with deeply held traditions. Any Tlingit man who strayed outside tradition would bring upon himself anger and contempt. But Daagoo was not a Tlingit, so his strangeness was no threat to them. Although they could not

understand him, they decided to respect his dream of finding the Land of the Sun. (152-153)

This wonder compounds the complexity of cultural contact within a text. An encounter with the other ultimately provides more insight into the structures that define the other than they do into the other himself. For the Tlingit, Daagoo is such an other, but instead of making an attempt to relegate him to some suppressed position—of a slave, for example, like Bird Girl—they allow him to be un-understood, to remain outside their culturally specific structures of definition. For Daagoo, their inability to understand his quest is precisely the sort of unknown territory he seeks to discover.

Parallel to the child born of Bird Girl's violation, Daagoo's adopted and culturally mixed children offer an opportunity for positive and beautiful cultural contact. Daagoo's journey of discovery and his ambition to understand the reaches of his own culture place the unknown in a position of wonder and beauty, not one of fear and hatred. Daagoo, in his embrace with the strange and unfamiliar, resists the limiting definitions of the unfamiliar that allow it to be addressed with aggression and violence. By approaching the unknown with open minded curiosity, Daagoo subverts traditional modes that might define the unknown as dangerous or as an enemy. In much the same way that the cycle of definition and the violence those definitions justify, Daagoo's cycle of openness and exploration without conquest, of not limiting with traditional definition, allows him the wonderful years he spends with Sunshine.

PART IX-- CONCLUSION

Initially, I set out to describe and interpret Velma Wallis' work in terms of Bhabha's, Said's, and Vizenor's post-colonial perspectives. I was drawn to this endeavor out of my feeling that literature as human production, can and does affect the physical world, and should do so in positive ways that allow all people to express their various experiences of this world. I am constantly surprised, every time I pick up a book by an author who is labeled "other" or from a historical period with which I cannot have any contact outside of "text," at just how human this language is. By human, I mean that I myself have a gut reaction to a text, have an emotional connection, a kind of universal empathy for the difficulties and joys of a human life. Of course, I am not suggesting that I possess some sensitivity or insight that allows me a privileged reading of any text. I only mean that the human drive for narrative, the universal human propensity for telling and listening, reflects the humanity of all those who talk and write.

I was privileged to spend a weekend in Fort Yukon in September of 2005. I was received with kindness, hospitality, and humor and thoroughly enjoyed my time there. I visited as a result of my summer construction job and spent most of my time working outside in a mild arctic rain, listening to a wind-up radio playing one of two stations in town. This trip was just after the hurricanes and flooding that devastated the Gulf of Mexico's coast, far away from little Ft. Yukon. However, I was struck and continue to be, by the generosity, both economic and cultural, that the people of Ft. Yukon showed to the victims of that distant catastrophe. All day, the radio station sponsored an auction of whatever goods anyone was willing to donate, with the proceeds going to help those

people so literally unknown and far away, yet nevertheless culturally adjacent. I love to think that money raised by selling dried salmon caught in fish wheels and traditional Gwich'in beadwork went to feed and clothe and house anyone from interstate support personnel to generations-old Creole families. This is positive cultural adjacence.

Humanity isn't perfect. Thus, often the disturbing imperfections of a text make it human. Difficulty, indecision, bad decisions, and on, *ad infinitum*, are the locations of the human condition and all text, because the nature of language, fundamentally records these problems. We become human in the act of narration. However, as the theorists I refer to point out, the facts of political and economic reality strip away much of the humanity in the act of narration, and, in essence, create the other. This other is understandable in a way that the self is not understandable. When we ask of the meaning of life, we cannot help but ask of the meaning of our lives, the only lives that we live. The answers, though, are bound by sometimes oppressive and sometimes liberating cultures and traditions. Resistance to oppressive cultures begins with a critical investigation into the structures of meaning that inform and justify oppression. Velma Wallis' genius is placing such investigation right under the noses of her audience, making her point inclusively, neither forgiving nor alienating anyone.

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