ELOHI
Peuples indigènes et environnement

3 | 2013
La vie signifiante

“The Truth Hangs over Your Head”: Toward an Indigenous Land Ethic

Lee Schweninger

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/elohi/663
DOI: 10.4000/elohi.663
ISSN: 2268-5243

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Bordeaux

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 January 2013
Number of pages: 79-94
ISBN: 978-2-86781-899-8
ISSN: 2431-8175

Electronic reference
Lee Schweninger, « “The Truth Hangs over Your Head”: Toward an Indigenous Land Ethic », *ELOHI* [Online], 3 | 2013, Online since 01 January 2014, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/elohi/663 ; DOI : 10.4000/elohi.663

"The Truth Hangs over Your Head": Toward an Indigenous Land Ethic[1]

LEE SCHWENINGER
University of North Carolina Wilmington

In the spring of 1999, with the sanction of the International Whaling Commission, among other entities, the Makahs, an American Indian tribe whose reservation is on the Olympic Peninsula in extreme northwestern Washington state, reaffirmed an 1855 treaty right by successfully hunting and killing a grey whale and then bringing it back to the town of Neah Bay. Eight and a half years later, in the fall of 2007, a group of five Makah men (including two veterans of the first hunt) participated in an unsanctioned hunt that resulted in the death of another grey whale. Three of the hunters pled guilty and were put on probation for a misdemeanor violation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The two others, Wayne Johnson and Andy Noel, were given five- and three-month prison sentences respectively when a judge rejected their religious freedom defense.[2] From a strictly environmental rather than a legal perspective, one can logically and justifiably ask whether or not there is any difference at all between the two instances. In neither case was the hunt part of a necessary subsistence effort, and in both cases a member of a formerly listed species was hunted and somewhat brutally killed. The illegal hunt does differ, however, in that because of the hunters' poor preparation and lack of expertise, the whale suffered an especially brutal killing. Legally, of course, the differences between the two hunts are immense: one had the approval and sanction of appropriate

1. An earlier, much different and shorter version of the argument set forth here was originally presented as "'The Truth Hangs over Your Head': Sanctioned and Unsanctioned Crimes against the Environment". Indigenous Peoples and the Environment Symposium. Université Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux 3, Bordeaux, France. 8-10 December 2011.

2. "Three defendants —Parker, Gonzales, and Secor— ultimately accepted a plea deal in federal court. They pled guilty to the misdemeanor of violating the Marine Mammal Protection Act in return for the prosecutor recommending probation rather than jail and the tribe waiving the charges in tribal court. Johnson and Noel were convicted of the same misdemeanor after federal magistrate Kelley Arnold rejected their religious freedom defense. Arnold sentenced Johnson to five months in jail and Noel to three months." (Makah Whalers)

governing entities, the other did not. The questions I want to ask in this essay are not so much about the differences between legal and illegal whaling, but rather whether or not the two hunts differ in the context of an American Indian or Indigenous land ethic, and if so how.

In an effort to make an assessment of and a statement about the place of an American Indian environmental consciousness as reflected and represented in American Indian art and life, I compare these two related Makah whale hunts with a seemingly completely different text, the text of an American Indian film, *Powwow Highway* (1989). In the film the background motivation for the plot is the threat of a devastating mining operation on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Montana.[3] This essay thus argues that the film *Powwow Highway* (as well as the novel on which it is based) and the actual Makah whaling hunts offer very different but related "texts" through which one can theorize an American Indian environmental consciousness. Several different Native American writers come together speculatively to suggest an American Indian land ethic, an ethic that can be seen to operate in relation to many different forms of environmental exploitation, including whale hunting by tribal members themselves and mining on Indian land by non-Indians.

Let me start not with the hunt or with the film, however, but with a few references to how Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday articulates his understanding of the obvious need for humans to maintain a moral and spiritual relationship with non-human nature. In an early essay, "An American Land Ethic" (1970), Momaday writes that "We have become disoriented, I believe; we have suffered a kind of psychic dislocation of ourselves in time and space. We may be perfectly sure where we are in relation to the supermarket and the next coffee break, but I doubt that any of us knows where he is in relation to the stars and to the solstices. Our sense of the natural order has become dull and unreliable." (*Man* 47-48). In another essay, "A First American Views His Land" (1976), Momaday insists further that "there are ethical imperatives" in one's relationship with the

3. The settler culture's tendency to exploit Indian lands is as old as contact, and as early as 1833, Pequot writer William Apess in "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man" maintains that white tree cutters "would think it no crime to go upon Indian lands and cut and carry off their most valuable timber, or any thing else they chose; and I doubt not but they think it clear gain" (Apess 156). In Seals's novel Buddy challenges Philbert by recounting some such exploitations: "Navaho [sic] uranium miners are getting cancer, Indians are getting fifteen cents' royalty on a ton of coal while white landowners get a dollar and a half. The per capita income on reservations is a thousand dollars per year—one seventh of the national average, and you gotta tell fairy stories?" (Seals 203).

land: "Inasmuch as I am in the land, it is appropriate that I should affirm myself in the spirit of the land." (*Man* 39). And in a 2008 interview Momaday summarizes an aspect of what he thinks of as an American Indian land ethic: "I believe that we must have a moral understanding of, and regard for, the earth. We must realize that the earth is a vital and spiritual entity. Moreover, it is indivisible with Mankind. We are the land. We cannot do harm to it without doing harm to ourselves" (Walker). For Momaday it comes down to a simple necessity: we must "formulate an ethical idea of the land—a notion of what it is and must be in our daily lives—and I believe moreover that it is absolutely necessary to do so" (*Man* 48). In yet another essay, "Navajo Place-Names," Momaday contends that story itself has the power to imbue place with sacredness. Humans must recognize and take advantage of this capability of language. (*Man* 124).

As appealing as these directives might appear as articulations of a land ethic, however, nowhere in his writing and theorizing does Momaday seem to offer anything more specific or concrete concerning a person's necessary relationship with and attitude toward nature and the environment. His attitudes do nonetheless offer one some means of grappling with questions of an American Indian land ethic in other contexts. Specifically important in the contexts of the Makah whale hunts and a specific moment in the film *Powwow Highway* are his insistences on the power of story and his sense of the interconnectedness of man and non-human nature.

In the film—adapted from the 1979 novel *The Powwow Highway* by Huron writer David Seals who also wrote the screenplay—two Cheyenne men leave Lame Deer on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in southeastern Montana and, via Pine Ridge, South Dakota, drive to Santa Fe, New Mexico. In this somewhat generic road movie, Philbert Bono (played by Cayuga actor Gary Farmer; *Dead Man* 1995; *Smoke Signals* 1998) and his friend Buddy Red Bow (played by A Martinez, Blackfoot)[4] drive a beat-up wreck of a car, a 1964 Buick LeSabre—which Philbert names Protector the War Pony—on their mission to rescue Buddy's sister Bonnie (played by Mescalero Apache actor Joanelle Nadine Romero). Corrupt, non-Native mining entrepreneurs, along with the help of the equally corrupt Santa Fe police and even the FBI, conspire to wrongfully incarcerate Bonnie in order to lure the politically active and tribally influential Buddy away from his center of power immediately prior to an important

4. It is not clear that A Martinez, the actor who plays Buddy Red Bow (Red Bird in the novel) has Native American ancestry. On at least one web-site Martinez does self-identify as tribal, however: "My mother was part Blackfoot Indian and they were from the Dakotas" (Martinez). Interestingly in the context of tribal affiliation, it is Martinez's character who is quite ambivalent about his tribal past and heritage. See also "Mainstream."

vote concerning the proposed license renewal of the mining operation on the reservation. Buddy opposes the mine, and the film suggests he has the political power to get the proposal defeated. Philbert has a two-fold purpose in taking the trip to Santa Fe. As does Buddy, he wants to rescue Bonnie, but he also wants to continue a quest he has just begun to gather medicine and become what he understands to be a Cheyenne warrior. When the two men finally get to Santa Fe, they do rescue Bonnie and her children and successfully elude police pursuit. Ultimately they ride off en masse, evidently back to the reservation in Montana. Although the episodes depicting the long drive and literal rescue mission might seem to dominate the film's plot, the threats of political chicanery and serious environmental exploitation do underlie and motivate the film's entire action.

Despite the underlying motivation, however, scholars have tended to denigrate the film in the context of its actually making any sort of helpful political or environmental statement. In "Culture Isn't Buckskin Shoes: A Conversation around *Powwow Highway*," for example, Toby Langen and Kathryn Shanley lament that even though the end of the film offers some catharsis, politically, "you're no better off for having seen that film" (Langen 26). Corinn Columpar argues similarly that "the only point of reference that the film has for its vision of the ideal home is the hypothetical past . . . a time when the reservation was not in the clutches of corporations and people had access to the 'good old Indian wisdom'" (125). Ellen Arnold makes a similar point, even more emphatically, when she argues that after the chase-scene finale, "all the real issues the film raises have been dropped": the violent regime at Pine Ridge, the concerns with capitalism, exploitation, and racism, for example, and especially in my context here, the mining deal and its threat to the environment and the physical well-being of the residents of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. All these issues seem simply to have disappeared without resolution as the credits roll. Furthermore, according to Arnold, for "Native American audiences, the film carries the disturbing message that political activism and resistance are less effective . . . than lawless revenge." The ending of the film is especially disturbing in Arnold's view in that the heroes "must now 'vanish' back to the reservation, never to leave again on pain of arrest" (353).

These readings of the film, which could apply equally well to David Seals's novel, focus almost exclusively on Buddy and his political role in the film. If one focuses instead on the other protagonist, Philbert, I believe that one can much more readily find an affirmative message about political activism and resistance and about environmental awareness and environmental ethics. That is, the film depicts Buddy's lawless revenge and brute force as completely ineffectual. Indeed, the film presents Buddy's actions as laughable. He bullies shopkeepers

and throws temper tantrums, but he accomplishes little. He and his ineffectiveness stand in sharp contrast to Philbert and his successes. Philbert is guided by reflective, considered, and inventive approaches not only to rescuing Bonnie, but also to teaching her children about their Cheyenne heritage. Ultimately Philbert can also be seen to offer instruction concerning attitudes toward the natural environment. And here, as I hope to demonstrate, is where the film intersects with the attitudes toward sanctioned and unsanctioned whale hunts in the context of an environmental ethics.

A crucial moment in Philbert's intellectual and moral journey (as well as the literal journey to Santa Fe) is evident in a scene at a roadside stop somewhere just north of Denver, Colorado. The travelers pull off the interstate for fuel and food, and in this scene Philbert tells a story through which he idealistically insists that Wihio, a trickster figure, will somehow protect the Cheyennes specifically and Indigenous people generally from the rapaciousness of "white America." Wihio the trickster will, in fact, protect the environment itself (the lands, the waters, the animals, and the people) from exploitation and environmental degradation. The film takes care at this moment to intricately contextualize Philbert's storytelling within an environmentally compromised setting. That is, the mise-en-scène includes the towering smokestacks and the utility poles of a coal-fired power plant which loom in the background as Philbert stands at a petrol station alongside an interstate highway where he has temporarily parked his gas-guzzling 1966 Buick LeSabre. In other words, the setting would seem to belie any environmentally sound message Philbert's tale might otherwise contain.

Powwow Highway. 1989. Handmade Films. Dir. Jonathan Wacks.

Before turning to the trickster story itself, therefore, one might do well to take a closer look at that automobile, Philbert's war pony. There is the unspoken but unavoidable fact that on their trip of about 1,900 kilometers (almost 1,200 miles) Philbert and Buddy will consume about 227 liters (approximately 60 gallons) of gasoline, and thus, in their rescue of Bonnie, they will be directly responsible for putting approximately 528 kilos (well over 1000 lbs) of CO_2 into the atmosphere as part of their carbon footprint—although that language as such would not have been available to them in the 1980s.[5] And of course they would add another 528 kilos were they to drive that vehicle back to Lame Deer, Montana. Within the fiction of the film, furthermore, they make this trip at a time when the city of Denver along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado has some of the worst air quality in the entire United States. In 1987, for example, the *New York Times* reported that

> *in Denver last Thursday and Friday… an ugly, foul-smelling cloud of carbon monoxide and particulate pollution hovered over the city, producing the two worst days of air pollution this fall. It was so bad that motorists were asked not to drive to work Friday… To many people, the dirty skies were a reminder of recent winters, when Denver consistently had some of the highest carbon monoxide levels in the nation… On one smog-choked day in 1986, carbon monoxide levels here reached… almost three times the Federal standard… and the worst anywhere in the country that year… In the winter of 1985-86, Denver exceeded Federal standards for carbon monoxide on 36 days, which was an improvement over the 45 days the previous winter. ("Western Cities")*

So, where does this leave the viewer of the film? In a context in which the Native characters themselves are heavily implicated in the environmental degradation, what can Philbert's trickster story possibly have to say in light of the storyteller's complicity in environmental degradation?

In this layered context, then, beside the dilapidated old Buick, along an interstate highway, and perched precariously in front of the fossil-fuel powered electricity-generating power plant, Philbert shares his account of the trickster Wihio and the plums. Here's the story as Philbert tells it:

> *One day he saw some plums floating on the creek. Now, Wihio loves to eat. So, he reached for those plums, but they disappeared, and he fell into the creek. He*

5. The Environmental Protection Agency publishes a formula for computing CO_2 produced per gallon of gasoline. (See "Greenhouse Gas.") *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists 1999 as its first recorded instance of the expression "carbon footprint." Although I find no mention before 1990, one finds a plethora of occurrences beginning in the early- to mid-nineties ("Carbon Footprint").

crawled out, all soaking wet. Saw them plums again, shimmering in the water. He kept diving, and they kept disappearing. Three days later his wife found him still splashing around. "Woman," cried Wihio, "during the day juicy plums float in this magical spot, but at night they go away." His wife screamed at him: "Stupid dog of a dog. Those plums are still on the tree. You worthless fool of a husband, chasing shadows when the truth hangs over your head." (Powwow; see also Seals 201-02)

Even though the contextual elements of the storytelling sequence might suggest an environmental context, the story itself, verbally at least, does not seem to be about the environment or about environmental degradation. Nevertheless, the character Buddy immediately makes an environmental connection when he challenges what he calls Philbert's naïve point of view. Buddy insists that miners and/or developers will not stop simply because of such old-time stories, such fairytales. Philbert maintains that his friend is wrong. They won't do the mining, he counters, because "Trickster won't let them."

BUDDY: It's just too bad those stories don't tell us how to keep our reservations from turning into sewers.

PHILBERT: But they do.

BUDDY: . . . white America ain't gonna hold off much longer, man. They're hungry. They want our coal, and our oil, and our uranium, and they're gonna take it, wherever it is.

PHILBERT: No they won't. Wihio the Trickster won't let them. For Wihio is also the creator of the universe. (Powwow)

Philbert reminds Buddy that he narrates "the stories of our ancestors." These stories describe "how the old ones dealt with problems," and they are especially relevant, Philbert contends, because "often the problems never change; nor the people." The stories, implies Philbert, have an unrelenting, palpable power. They embody and make manifest the trickster, and the trickster simply will not allow that "white America" destroy the environment in taking the coal and oil and uranium from Indian land.

The thematic suggestion here is that, ironically, it is the pragmatist Buddy, not the storyteller Philbert, who is looking at a reflection rather than at reality. In this sense Buddy, not Philbert, is the one chasing mirages. Rather than the root causes of the problems, Buddy hacks at some of the more obvious manifestations. In Momaday's terms, he can be said to know where he is in relation to a coffee break, perhaps, but not in relation to the stars or the solstices. Buddy goes berserk smashing merchandise and breaking windows in an electronics shop, for example, because he erroneously thinks he has been chea-

ted. Meanwhile, Philbert reads the instruction booklet and solves the problem. Buddy risks the entire rescue enterprise when he gets into a pointless fistfight in a Santa Fe bar, and at one point he even carries a pistol he would be a fool to ever use. Even his macho bravado in the Santa Fe jailhouse is ineffectual. Despite all his sound and fury, that is, he accomplishes nothing. In his attitude and approach, as the film demonstrates, he is, figuratively, as stupid as Wihio, deceived by appearances. Philbert, in stark contrast, understands that the real plums are hanging heavy on branches just overhead, and all one needs to do is look up. Buddy is unable to see that reality because he refuses to hear his friend. Philbert's tale informs the viewers, if not Buddy, however, that one must learn to appreciate the stories, to recognize where one is in relation to the real plums, the stars, the solstices.

That appreciation is precisely what Philbert is learning through his quest to become a late twentieth-century Cheyenne warrior. The film emphatically insists that Philbert's approach, not Buddy's, is the effective one. Philbert rids Buddy of his pistol, albeit inadvertently. Philbert is finally the one who rescues Bonnie from her jail cell. It is Philbert who recoups the money that Buddy has misappropriated and that Bonnie's friend Rabbit (Amanda Wyss) has put up as bail and lost. Philbert is the one who retrieves the children and begins to instruct them about their Cheyenne heritage. And it is Philbert (with a little help from friends) who effects everyone's escape from the Santa Fe police pursuit in the film's denouement. The film thus cues the viewer to recognize that Philbert's quest to understand his own heritage and his own place in the cosmos results in effective action every time and everywhere it is needed. The film thus insists that it is Philbert, not Buddy, who does the work of the contemporary Cheyenne warrior, and his methods do not include lawless revenge.

Philbert's successes are so thorough, in fact, that he is even able to rid himself of his automobile, even if his doing so is not completely his own choice: that is, failing brakes make the choice for him. Having used the automobile to rescue Bonnie and evade pursuit, he can legitimately abandon this gas-guzzling "war pony," and so he leaps from the plummeting LeSabre just before it flies off a cliff and explodes in the ravine. Philbert, with the other fugitives, walks away from the crashed and burning automobile. In the novel, he turns "without remorse to the smoking ruin below, the dead American thing his people no longer wanted" (Seals 293). Literally the car burns, but figuratively, in a sense, the automobile that so heavily contributes to the degradation of the environment, takes its place as a sort of synecdoche representing the polluting disease of American settler culture. In this figurative sense, the automobile signifies an oil-based, highly polluting, rapacious, capitalistic economy, and therefore should, must in fact, be abandoned. And Philbert does indeed abandon it.

Despite the film's insistence on Philbert's many successes, however, Buddy's skepticism concerning the power of the story to solve any real problems remains perhaps understandable. How does learning or knowing the stories of the ancestors translate into an American Indian environmental ethic? one might fairly ask. And how might that ethic translate into action against mining or timbering or toxic waste disposal enterprises on Indian land? How might stories protect the oceans from the unsanctioned slaughter of whales? Can a trickster story actually translate into deflecting further "real world" environmental exploitation and degradation?

According to the character Philbert Bono, the writer N. Scott Momaday, and others, the answer is yes. Yes it can.

According to Chickasaw poet, novelist, and environmental activist Linda Hogan, the unsanctioned Makah hunt, resulted in disaster. In an interview with Summer Harrison, Hogan describes her antipathy toward the hunt and the men who undertook it. Her frustration and disappointment are evident in her responses to Harrison, and especially indicative of her emotional involvement is that she tends to fuse the two different hunts, hunts separated by over eight years. In describing the unsanctioned hunt of 2007, she relates that

> *the same guys that killed the whale before—which was televised in the northwest—killed another whale and it just sank to the bottom of the ocean. They just did it because they could, and they didn't even ask the tribal council or the elders or anything, they just went out and killed a whale. And you have to really work hard to kill a whale, submachine guns and automatic missiles and all that stuff. So this was a major event when they did it because even the Coast Guard was on their side . . . And then the guys didn't know how to whale and it sunk to the bottom and the Coast Guard pulled it up for them, pulled it up on the land. . . . So it was a disaster, and it was all on television. Everybody on the northwest coast saw it, and they saw the blood and the gore and the suffering of the whale (Harrison 167).*

A major aspect of Hogan's concern and disappointment here is the ill-preparedness of the hunters, their lack of spiritual readiness, and their complete and utter disregard for the sentience of the whale itself. The subtext, if you will, is that on some level there could be a better way to put into practice the 1855 Makah treaty right to fish and hunt whales. In another place, Hogan argues that the Makahs could actually retain their tribal identity and at the same time decide not to hunt whales. They could make the fact of their not hunting a living part of their culture. Such a decision, contends Hogan, "*might very well restore tradition until the whale and the people reestablish a relationship of offering and receiving from one another. The way it used to be. The heart of the hunter has*

to care" (Peterson 154, emphasis in original). If there is that better way, it would certainly include that the whalers be capable hunters, that they have a clear sense of the spiritual aspects of their undertaking, and that they care that the hunted animal is a being deserving of consideration, respect, and prayer.

Analogously, just such attitudes toward tradition and recognition of sanctity as a necessary component of any kind of hunting are evident in some of N. Scott Momaday's descriptions of bear hunts. In a book called *In the Bear's House* (1999), Momaday writes that part of the difficulty inherent in telling a story is that to be any good it must include, or must encapsulate the spiritual: "Grace is the soul of story. . . . It is a presence without a mask. . . . Or perhaps a mask behind which there is no presence" (25). Similarly, one could argue, much of what Momaday has to say about Bear is similarly elusive: "A mask of words behind which there is nothing, only a silence, a perfect stillness. . . . Grace" (25).

In turning from the example of the bear in Momaday's context to the whale in the context of the Makah hunts, one can find ample ground for comparison. Although Hogan might disagree, one can argue that in 1999 the Makahs organized a whale hunt that included spiritual preparation and acknowledgement of the whale as worthy of respect. They modeled their canoe on the traditional Makah whaling canoe and called it *Hummingbird*. They took similar care with the design and making of the oars and the harpoons. Before the hunt, in addition to physical training, they performed preparatory ceremonial rituals, namely strengthening, cleansing, and purifying rituals. Throughout, they paid careful attention to the sacred aspects of the hunt and acknowledged the spiritual importance of the whale itself. Let's call that *Grace*! Many people, including some Makahs on the reservation, opposed the hunt on environmental, ethical, moral, and even legal grounds, especially members of such organizations as Earth First and Greenpeace, but nevertheless in addition to federal and state sanction, the hunters had tribal approval for their hunt. The verb *to sanction* has significance in this context; it is from the Latin *sanctio*, meaning *to make holy*. The very fact of the hunt's legal sanction thus etymologically and implicitly acknowledges the hunt's inherent spiritual element. The hunters took great care to establish themselves in relation to their culture, their traditions, their history, and perhaps most importantly, in relation to the whale itself. Although the actual killing of the whale was without a doubt unfortunately inept and clumsy and although many people took and continue to take issue with the hunt and its aftermath, in the realms of the ritual or spiritual or ideal it can be regarded, in Momaday's sense, as imbued with and aspect at least of grace.

Jump ahead to 2007 and the unsanctioned hunt mentioned in the opening paragraph above: Without the sanction of any tribal group or permission from any United States governmental agency, without the approval of the Makah

Tibal Council itself, the group of five Makahs used a pretense to borrow the boat, rifles, and harpoons, before going on their botched clandestine hunt. According to a *Seattle Times* report, "the fatally injured whale swam nine miles. About 12 hours after it was struck, it died and sank in about 700 feet of water" (Mapes). Between the time the gray whale had been shot—"at least sixteen times" and after having been harpooned with at least four harpoons—and the time it died twelve hours later, the hunters themselves were arrested and taken from the scene. (See Gottlieb.) Willingly or not, these hunters abandoned the harpooned whale, left it to flounder, to suffer, to die, and eventually to sink to the bottom of the Strait. According to reporter Paul Shukovsky, Joe McGimpsey, a Makah elder, took a boat into the Strait Juan de Fuca off of Neah Bay to offer sacred chants to the dying whale. "It would not have been right to let the whale die alone," McGimpsey is reputed to have said. He was also "troubled because the surprise hunt lacked the intense discipline and spiritual preparation that mark tribally sanctioned whaling" (Shukovsky). What McGimpsey's decision and compulsion to offer a prayer suggest is that he recognizes a spiritual and ethical relationship with the whale; he understands that humans have a responsibility toward non-human nature. In Momaday's terms he is upholding a "moral understanding of, and regard for, the earth," and for the non-human life upon that earth.

In contrast to McGimpsey and his sense of what is right and what one's responsibility toward the natural world is, one can argue, the five men who hunted the whale disregarded their moral obligation to the natural world in pursuit of other senses of duty: what they felt to be their legal right and their political responsibility. As Wayne Johnson, one of the hunters, insisted: "The five of us did this to protect the kids. . . . If nobody exercises their treaty right, we don't have one." ("Treaty Warriors"). The hunters maintained this attitude and repeatedly insisted that they undertook the hunt because it was their treaty right to do so and because they were tired of wading through all the red tape of dealing with the International Whaling Commission and the National Fisheries for permissions. They were simply tired of waiting. In this context, their actions can appropriately be considered a form of civil disobedience, but hardly a religious or spiritual act—in so far as one can separate the two in such a context. That was the determination of the judge at any rate, and perhaps that judicial separation is precisely the point.

That separation is perhaps analogous to the differences between Buddy's and Philbert's approaches to rescuing Bonnie and coming to terms with their Cheyenne heritage. Vengeful and hot-headed, Buddy practices a lawless revenge, and in this he is a filmic counterpart to the rogue hunters, whereas Philbert puts into play a multitude of considered inspirations. He combines spiri-

tual preparation (gathering medicine and praying as he stands in a cold creek, for example), knowledge of and respect for the ancestors (which he gains, in part, through conversations and visions), and opportunism (noticing on a television screen how one acquires a war pony and how one makes a jailbreak, for example). This combination allows him to look back, look forward, and to borrow where necessary from settler culture. His commitment coupled with versatility enable his successes.

In the courtroom the lawyer for Wayne Johnson and Andy Noel argued that the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 should protect the defendants from prosecution; not being able to hunt the whale, he argued, was analogous to not being allowed to attend church. The Religious Freedom Act stipulates that in addition to free access to sacred sites and sacred objects, Indigenous Americans have the right to their sacred ceremonial practices. Such a defense maintains that in addition to the 1855 treaty right to fish and to hunt marine mammals, the Makahs have the right to practice their religion and that whaling is a part of that religion. They have the right to hunt grey whales, the lawyer asserted, because the hunt is part of their tribal sacred history and that the hunt itself constitutes a religious ceremony. Recognizing that the spiritual element was precisely what was missing from the rouge hunt, the federal judge rejected this argument, and sentenced each of the two men to several months in jail.

When Momaday writes about hunting a bear, he emphasizes the spiritual connection between human and non-human. He describes a bear hunt, for example, in which he devotes several pages to a description of the chase, the kill, and the hunter's ritual return to the village. Momaday cloaks the fact of killing the bear in ritual, almost as if to ease the pain and associated sadness, commenting on "the hunter's offering of death and the sad watch of the hunted, waiting somewhere away in the cold darkness and breathing easily of its life, brooding around at last to forgiveness and consent" (87). The acknowledgement of death underlies many of Momaday's other celebrations of Bear. In the poem "Scaffold Bear," for example, he writes that

… a bear, stripped of its hide,
Lay on a scaffold in a range of trees,
Bleeding, breathing faintly.
Its great paws had been removed. (56)

In another instance, "To an Aged Bear", Momaday reminds the reader that "Mortality / Is your shadow and your shade" (67).

One of Momaday's recurrent unspoken questions or issues is whether or not

the ritual and the hope of regeneration or reincarnation can indeed suffice to maintain the spirit of Bear. He describes a Siberian bear hunt, for example, placing the entire hunt within the parameters of ritual: "everything would have its place in the relief of ritual" (73). He writes that "Bear dances on the edge of life and death, crossing over and back again" (xiii). When Momaday himself was in Siberia, he informs the reader, he experienced several elements of the Khanty bear feast, and his familiarity with the ritual surrounding a bear hunt finds voice in another poem, through which the spirit of Bear is preserved and shared:

Let me hear the singer say,
"Whose house is this?" And reply
"Behold, this is the bear's house." ("The Khanty Bear Feast" 75)
Where does this leave us?

Respecting the hunted bear. Practicing appropriate rituals and ceremonies. Rediscovering where one is in relation to the stars and to the solstices. Telling and appreciating stories. Acknowledging the trickster. Finding grace through story telling. Offering prayers to and for the harpooned and dying whale. Such actions have to be the first steps in (re)establishing a land ethic. To what extent such prayers and realizations will alleviate or reverse the environmental degradation so prevalent on Indian land or anywhere else is perhaps impossible to say. As Linda Hogan argues, however, "You can really change the world with a good story" (Harrison 171). Without such realizations of the capacity of story to recognize and value the standing of non-human life and the land, one could argue, there is no hope at all. Non-human life deserves legal, moral, and spiritual standing. A version of that ethic, as made manifest in the film *Powwow Highway*, is Philbert's respectful turn toward tradition in his quest to understand his Cheyenne heritage. One of his realizations is that the truth hangs over our heads. We need simply to look in the right direction and to understand how to respond to that truth. Linda Hogan argues that "tradition is about how you think about the world and how you behave within the world. . . . You have to decolonize your own mind and heart and soul, and then reeducate yourself into understanding what tradition is. Understanding and loving the earth, this land we come from. . . . It has to do with respect for the world, and giving back, and loving in a certain way where you do the least damage" (Harrison 168). Momaday's imperative is that we realize we are one with the natural world. This realization is fundamental to a respectable relationship with the earth. When in the Strait of Juan de Fuca off the coast of the Olympic Peninsula and the Makah reservation in northwestern Washington, one must realize, as did tribal elder

Joe McGimpsey, that "This is the Whale's House." Such a recognition marks at least the beginning of an ethical relationship with the natural world. These Native American writers and activists contend that humans must realize that they are guests in another's home, and they must behave accordingly.

Let me hear the singer say,
"Whose house is this?" And reply
"Behold, this is the bear's house."

Sources Cited

Apess, William. "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man." 1833. *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess*. Ed. Barry O'Connell. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992. 155-61.

Arnold, Ellen L. "Reframing the Hollywood Indian: A Feminist Re-reading of *Powwow Highway* and *Thunderheart*." *American Indian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Contemporary Issues*. Ed. Dane Anthony Morrison. New York: Peter Lang, 1997. 347-62.

"Carbon Footprint." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2013. http://0-www.oed.com.uncclc.coast.uncwil.edu/view/Entry/27743?redirectedFrom=carbon+footprint#eid110705226

Columpar, Corinn. *Unsettling Sights: The Fourth World on Film*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010.

Gottlieb, Paul. "Ten Years Today After Historic Hunt Makah Wait to Whale Again." *Peninsula Daily News*, 17 May 2009. http://www.peninsuladailynews.com/article/20090517/news/305179997

"Greenhouse Gas Emissions from a Typical Passenger Vehicle." *Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)*, December 2011. http://www.epa.gov/otaq/climate/documents/420f11041.pdf

Harrison, Summer. "Sea Level: An Interview with Linda Hogan." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 18.1 (2011): 161-77.

Langen, Toby and Kathryn Shanley. " Culture Isn't Buckskin Shoes: A Conversation Around *Powwow Highway*." *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 3.3 (Fall 1991): 23-29.

"Mainstream Hollywood Actors with Native Ancestry." *Native Celebs*, 5 May 2009. http://www.nativecelebs.com/actors8.htm

"Makah Whalers Harpoon and Shoot Gray Whale in an Unauthorized Hunt on September 8, 2007." *History Link*, 2007. http://historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=9136

Mapes, Linda. "Grand Jury Indicts 5 Makahs in Illegal Whale Hunt." *Seattle Times*, 4 October 2007. http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/lo-

calnews/2003925167_webwhale04m.html

Martinez, A. "Interview Series Soap Opera Stars." 1986-87. June 2008. http://www.imagine92009.net/Interviews/8687SOStarsInterviewSeries.htm

Momaday, N. Scott. *In the Bear's House*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999, 2000. Rpt. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010.

---. *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997.

Peterson, Brenda, and Linda Hogan. *Sightings: The Gray Whales' Mysterious Journey*. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2002.

Powwow Highway. Dir. Jonathan Wacks. Perf. Gary Farmer, A Martinez, and Joanelle Nadine Romero. Handmade Films, 1989.

Seals, David. *The Powwow Highway*. 1979. New York: Plume/Penguin, 1980.

Shukovsky, Paul. "Makah 'Treaty Warriors': Heroes or Criminals?" *Seattle PI*, 16 March 2008. http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/Makah-treaty-warriors-Heroes-or-criminals-1267345.php

Walker, Carla. "A Virtual Visit with N. Scott Momaday." Oklahoma Humanities Council. 12 July 2008. www.okhumanities.org/momaday-interview

"Western Cities Move Aggressively to Clear Up Smoggy Skies." *New York Times On-Line,* 3 November 1987. http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/24/us/western-cities-move-aggressively-to-clear-up-smoggy-skies.html?pagewanted=2&src=pm)

Summary: In an effort to make an assessment of the place of an American Indian environmental consciousness, this essay compares two related Makah whale-hunting events with a completely different text, the American Indian film *Powwow Highway*, in which a character insists that trickster will protect Cheyennes and Indian people generally from environmental degradation. The film, the Makah whaling controversy, and other Indigenous writings offer texts through which one can theorize an American Indian environmental consciousness.

Key Words: Makah whaling, *Powwow Highway* (film), American Indian Film, N. Scott Momaday, American Indian land ethic

Lee Schweninger is professor of English at the University of North Carolina Wilmington where he teaches American Indian literatures and coordinates the American Indian Studies Minor. His recent publications include *Listening to the Land: Native American Literary Responses to the Landscape* (U Georgia P 2008) and *Imagic Moments: Indigenous North American Film* (U Georgia P, 2013). Currently he is at work on a manuscript concerning world Indigenous literature and film.

Résumé : Afin de tenter d'évaluer l'importance de la conscience environnementale/ écologique amérindienne, cet article se propose de comparer deux chasses à la baleine, impliquant toutes deux des membres de la tribu Makah, avec l'approche très différente proposée par le film amérindien Powwow Highway. Dans ce film, l'un des personnages est persuadé que le 'trickster', ou 'Décepteur', protégera les Cheyennes, et plus généralement le peuple Indien, de la détérioration de l'environnement. Le film, la controverse qui a fait suite aux chasses Makah, ainsi que d'autres écrits indigènes offrent un prisme à travers lequel on peut proposer une théorisation de la conscience environnementale amérindienne.

Mots-clés : les Makah et la chasse à la baleine, *PowWow Highway* (film), film amérindien, N. Scott Momaday, éthique amérindienne de la terre.

Lee Schweninger est Professeur au Département d'Anglais de l'Université de Wilmington, Caroline du Nord. Il y enseigne la littérature amérindienne et coordonne le programme d'études amérindiennes. Parmi ses publications récentes, on peut citer *Listening to the Land: Native American Literary Responses to the Landscape* (U Georgia P, 2008) et *Imagic Moments: Indigenous North American Film* (U Georgia P, 2013). Il travaille actuellement à la rédaction d'un ouvrage sur littératures et films indigènes à travers le monde.