



“BRINGING THINGS TOGETHER”:

Tribalography, Lakota Language,
and Communal Healing in Frances Washburn’s
Elsie’s Business and *The Sacred White Turkey*

When in the first chapter of *Elsie’s Business*, Frances Washburn’s 2006 debut novel, George Washington arrives in Jackson, North Dakota, he wants to unravel the mystery of Elsie Roberts, a Native woman murdered in mysterious circumstances. Searching for answers, George approaches Oscar DuCharme, a Lakota elder who is believed to know everything about life in the community. Oscar welcomes the stranger, invites him for a cup of coffee and narrates the story of Ite’s attempt to become the wife of Anpetu Wi, the Sun. Hanhepi Wi, the Sun’s wife immediately demands punishment for the bold girl for her transgression, and consequently, Anpetu Wi points a finger at Ite, and half of her face becomes ugly. She is therefore called in her community *Anukite*, the Double Faced Woman. Obviously, George is confused: neither did he ask for a traditional story nor does he have the time and patience for Oscar’s storytelling performance. What does Elsie have to do with this Double Faced Woman? Indeed, the first chapters of the novel leave George discouraged and disappointed. However, as his search progresses, the parallels between Elsie’s and Anukite’s lives become evident and an understanding of the mythical story proves instrumental in reconstructing Elsie’s life. What soon becomes apparent for the reader, too, is that by interacting with Oscar, listening to his stories interspersed with Lakota terms and concepts, George becomes immersed in the Lakota culture so that he would better understand Elsie’s decisions

Joanna Ziarkowska
Institute
of English Studies
University of Warsaw
Poland



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5110-4104>

and life choices. Washburn's representations of the Lakota language and cultural material vis-à-vis the motif of communal healing clearly reveal her interest in practices aimed at cultural preservation and revitalization of the Lakota language, here demonstrated as relevant and evolving in the context of the second half of the twentieth century.

That as a vehicle of creative and cultural expression, language shows an impressive potential to challenge Western paradigms of knowledge production is fully apparent for Washburn, who situates the Lakota language and culture as central in the text.¹ By such positioning of Lakota epistemologies, she follows the steps of Dean Rader's writing on practices of resistance in Native art and literature. In his illuminating study *Engaged Resistance*, Rader elaborates on how "Native cultural expression comprises a strategy of aesthetic activism fashioned by Natives for both Native and Anglo publics [and how] Native art, literature, and film [are situated] in context and in conversation with one another to create a cross-genre discourse of resistance" (1-2). In his analysis of indigenous cultural productions, Rader distinguishes between "contextual resistance", which refers to themes and issues touched upon by Native artists and writers, and "compositional resistance," which manifests itself on a structural level, "how the text is composed: the materials the artist uses, the organization or plot structure of a film or novel, or the inversions of Western poetic genres" (5). The two levels of resistance jointly form what Rader calls "aesthetic activism," which refers to "a manner of political and social activism that finds representation in the artistic realm" (5). Interestingly, *Elsie's Business* and Washburn's other literary texts, by thematically and structurally revolving around the Lakota language, its use and preservation, engage both forms of resistance described by Rader. Therefore, Washburn's work

1. As Katherine Carter and Judy Aulette write, "Language is a fundamental part of our character, an expression, and a mirror of what and who we are. Ethnic groups in particular use language as one of their identifying features. But just as all ethnic groups are not equal, all languages are not equal either. The power inequalities that exist between different sections of a society are reflected and reproduced by language. Language represents and creates relationships between the speaker and the receiver and these relationships can include the factors of power, control and domination" (214).

can be seen as entering and expanding the space of indigenous cultural production, and aimed at challenging Western paradigms of knowledge production and meaning making, thus contributing to the already rich body of Native American literature of resistance.

Washburn's novels often allude to contemporary language revitalization practices and programs which have become an important point on political agendas in Native communities in the U.S. as well as a key empowerment tool. The loss of Native languages, a direct effect of colonization and forced assimilation, is a condition which demands immediate actions on a community as well as federal level. As Ellen L. Lutz points out in an article for *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine*, "among the estimated 154 indigenous languages still remaining in the United States, half are spoken by only a handful of elders over 70 and are not being taught to children. Many tribes have the will to revitalize their languages, but urgently need a substantial influx of funding, training, and technical support to produce new fluent speakers" (Lutz). Indeed, at the heart of the problem is a development of methodology of Native language acquisition that emphasizes the importance of natural context and linguistic (and cultural) immersion. In his study of Native American/First Nations language revitalization programs, Frederick H. White stresses the need to rethink the model in which Native languages are taught using second-language acquisition methodologies (SLA/A) (91–109). What is needed in communities struggling with the loss of a Native language is a reconstruction of the connection between the language, Native philosophies, and the contemporary context in which it is meant to function. Indeed, Vine Deloria, in a foreword to Albert White Hat's *Reading and Writing the Lakota Language*, emphasizes the need to see Native languages not as linguistic systems to be studied but as illustrations and manifestations of indigenous epistemologies:

Albert White Hat reverses the traditional method of explaining language by showing through examples, anecdotes and lessons on the world view, and values of the Brule Lakota, how people speak and think. He takes the proper and only correct step to help our understanding of this language by showing that "abstract concepts" are abstract primarily to people who study languages as if they were multiplication tables. Once the words and phrases are seen in the context of people's social

Joanna Ziarkowska
Institute
of English Studies
University of Warsaw
Poland

lives, however, language comes naturally it flows, and it educates and incorporates the reader into the community (xi).

While Washburn does not directly describe various language revitalization methodologies in her fiction, the idea of Native languages as a living and vibrant element of contemporary indigenous cultures is widely supported. In her fiction, the Lakota language does not struggle for survival but “simply is,” informing the lives of Native and non-Native characters. Her approach departs from practices described as “language loss lamentation” (83–98), a motif not uncommon in contemporary Native American literature, but instead, is an example of a belief in an unchallenged position of Native languages as vehicles of cultural material and tools of empowerment. Studies on contemporary indigenous language revitalization programs consistently emphasize an instrumental role of language in the processes of cultural preservation. As Colleen Fitzgerald writes, in indigenous contexts, there exists a need for an “organic, all-encompassing, and holistic views of language [...] at the center of well-being, culture, and social structures, and what it means to be human” (285).

Since Washburn’s *Elsie’s Business* and her second novel *The Sacred White Turkey* engage Native and non-Native contexts and characters, the critical method applied in the following analysis relies on the theory of tribalography, introduced and developed by Choctaw/Cherokee scholar and writer LeAnne Howe. Howe’s illustration of how Native epistemologies pinpoint various complex interrelations between Native and non-Native communities, histories, geographical places, and temporal dimensions is an example of how indigenous texts can be approached from a multidisciplinary perspective. Moreover, like Washburn, Howe extensively relies on her knowledge of a tribal language, Choctaw in this case, to illustrate the relevance of Native languages in explaining indigenous philosophies. Thus, tribalography can be seen as a theory of cultural empowerment through the application of Native points of view and languages. As Joseph Bauerkemper notes in his introductory essay for the special issue of *SAIL*, “tribalography evokes a long-standing and enduring tradition of transformative literary and intellectual practice while also emerging as a new critical lens capable of illuminating a wide array of issues within and across

Native American and Indigenous studies” (4). It is this transformative quality of Native literature, a quality that tribalogy emphasizes and cherishes, that informs the readings of Washburn’s *Elsie’s Business* (2006) and *The Sacred White Turkey* (2010). Both texts relate events through stories told by the protagonists, a technique which, first of all, provides multiple perspectives on narrated events, and secondly, illuminates how seemingly unrelated people, places and their histories are interconnected on communal, cultural and socio-political levels. What tribalogy offers in the reading of Washburn’s novels is a critical lens that allows us to look at the stories embedded in the texts and rendered in Native languages as more than just effective narrative strategies. While the following analysis of the novels by no means exhausts all interpretative possibilities offered in the texts and their cultural and linguistic richness, it presents the embedded stories as tribalographic in nature in the sense of their transformative and healing potential.

Joanna Ziarkowska
Institute
of English Studies
University of Warsaw
Poland

In her 1999 article “Tribalogy: The Power of Native Stories,” LeAnne Howe writes: “Native stories are power. They create people. They author tribes. America is a tribal creation story. Creation stories, as numerous as Indian tribes, gave birth to our people. It is with absolute certainty that I tell you now—our stories also created the immigrants who landed on our shores” (118). Rather than evoking biblical associations of immediate creation from darkness and dust, the passage figures this act as contingent on narrating stories which ultimately shape and alter realities. When the first settlers arrived at the American continent, they did not know how to survive in a foreign environment. It was the indigenous people of the Northeast who told the newcomers stories about their new home and its resources, and these stories were in turn incorporated into the lives of the newly-established communities. Thus, Howe writes, “Native people created narratives that were histories and stories with the power to transform. I call this rhetorical space ‘tribalogy’” (118). In “The Story of America: A Tribalography,” published in *Choctalking on Other Realities* in 2013, the concept is further developed with special emphasis placed on the ability of tribalogy to unite, create unions and coalitions and thus, to transform and heal. Howe delves

into American history and demonstrates how the ideas of consensus and brotherhood, so appreciated by indigenous people, gave rise to and were incorporated into the drafting of the American Constitution. The idea of the union “created an image so powerful in the minds of colonists,” writes Howe, “that they believed if ‘savages’ could unite, they ought to be able to do the same thing” (30). One story gave rise to another, and an idea imagined by one group was adapted and expanded by another. The same mechanisms of interconnectedness are found in traditional Choctaw stories, Howe’s family memories, in Lynn Margulis’s theory on symbiogenesis which emphasizes the importance of the merger of previously independent organisms in evolutionary changes and, interestingly, in Choctaw prefixes *nuk* or *nok* signifying and triggering the creation of new things and concepts. In fact, before elaborating on what her theory communicates, Howe admits that the entire idea is encapsulated in this Choctaw prefix which “has to do with the power of speech, breath, and mind” (15) thus illustrating how instrumental the Choctaw language is in describing the world from the tribal perspective. In summarizing what tribalography is, Howe asserts that

native stories [...] seem to pull all the elements together of the storyteller’s tribe, meaning the people, the land, multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in the past, present, and future milieu [...]. I have tried to show that tribalography comes from the native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another (31).

It is this ability to see different, seemingly unrelated, narratives as connected that provides an interpretative framework for the reading of Frances Washburn’s novels. In both texts, stories provide healing and resolution for individuals and communities that find themselves in emotional and spiritual crises.

Elsie’s Business tells a story of Elsie Roberts, half-Native half-African American, who moves to Jackson, North Dakota, after an assault by a group of white teenagers near the Standing Rock Reservation, and is mysteriously murdered. The novel begins one year after Elsie’s death, when George Washington, her African American father, comes to exhume his daughter’s body and take it to Mississippi. The setting for Elsie’s tragic life and death are

two small towns: Mobridge and Jackson. Numerous poignant comments about human interactions in the towns draw a picture of communities marred by power-struggle, corruption and jealousy as well as indifference and egoism in interpersonal interactions. Sheriff Peterson from Mobridge is reluctant to pursue and name the rapists involved in the assault, as they are sons of a prominent businessman whose support he needs in upcoming elections. It is common knowledge in the town that Mr. Packwood, the owner of the Steak House, repeatedly sexually harasses women who work as cleaners at his house. Father Horst, a Catholic priest in Jackson, is unable and unwilling to respect Elsie's cultural and religious difference. The inhabitants of Jackson tolerate John Caulfield, a local drunk, but never offer him substantial help to fight his addiction. The Lakota community is similarly marred by internal quarrels and misunderstandings. When Elsie settles down in Jackson, no one from the Indian community reaches out to her to help her integrate into the new environment: "It wasn't that they were unkind to Elsie, but that they were a little afraid of her, being as she was, the embodiment of past transgressions, living proof of what happens when people upset the social order of things" (68). But the most serious ailment that characterizes the two communities, white and Indian, is a complete and paralyzing indifference towards each other, which reduces any cross-cultural interactions to a minimum: "The Indians and the whites in Jackson occupied congruent spaces, but lived separate lives. While the Indians knew all about the white world, had to know for their own survival, events in the Indian community—gossip—seldom crossed from the Indian world to the white world" (41). It is as if an invisible wall divided the two groups, hindering any gestures of kindness and communication. Elsie's tragic death aggravates the situation as a sense of guilt penetrates both communities. For the white people of Jackson, Elsie is a reminder of their passivity in the face of violence, violence towards the girl, but perhaps also historical violence written into the American past. The Lakotas, on the other hand, fear the spirit of Elsie, who is strikingly similar to the deer woman or the Double Faced Woman, characters from traditional stories which revolve around the theme of social transgressions.

*Joanna Ziarkowska
Institute
of English Studies
University of Warsaw
Poland*

The arrival of George Washington and his uncomfortable questions initiates a healing process which rests on storytelling and its ability to promote a sense of integrity and spiritual rebirth. It is the very act of retelling Elsie's story that actively engages both communities to examine their shortcomings, improve neighborly relations and find a sense of closure on emotional and spiritual levels. Alternate chapters in the novel retell Elsie's life and engage different narrative genres, e.g. Elsie's memories, other people's comments and those relating the process of George's uncovering of the life and death of his daughter. How the stories transform the environment and its inhabitants is best demonstrated in the transition that George Washington experiences. Initially a stranger in town who invites curious and hostile stares, George is invited by Oscar, a Lakota elder, to stay at his place and save money he will later need to pay for the transport of Elsie's remains. The novel opens on January 16, 1970 when Oscar informs George that Elsie's story is not to be found in police records: "If you want to know more about Elsie's story [...] you have to ask one of the grandfathers, because they know all the stories as well as the new ones, the latest gossip, and sometimes it's all the same stories happening over and over" (1). From the very first sentence, Oscar emphasizes the tribalographic nature of Elsie's story and all the stories in circulation, thus drawing attention to how everything is interconnected.

The use of second-person narration in the chapters referring to George's stay in Jackson signals the process that George will undergo. While the reader quickly learns that the stranger whom Oscar addresses is George, the narrative "you" implicates the reader as well, drawing her into the story. As a result, this somehow forces the reader to participate in the events, the ever-present "you" demanding attention and emotional engagement, and hence it becomes virtually impossible to remain an indifferent observer on the outside of the narrative. More importantly, however, the process of narration ceases to be associated with passive exposure to truth being communicated by an omniscient entity but instead becomes an invitation to participation in the narrative moment. Secondly, a non-Lakota reader, whether he or she wants to or not, is immersed in the Lakota culture (just as George

is) and gradually learns some of its mechanisms. As Frances Washburn states in an e-mail interview with Mary Stoecklein, the second person “is a technique often used in oral tradition storytelling” (Stoecklein), and its recreation was one of the goals.

Before George constructs the story of his daughter’s life, he (and thanks to the second person narration, non-Lakota readers as well) needs to first learn how to listen to and make meaning from the stories he hears. George does not possess this skill at the beginning, and this becomes evident in the opening scene when Oscar invites George for a cup of coffee and shares with him a story about the Double Face Woman, *Anukite*. Unaware that the story provides a commentary on Elsie’s life, George dismisses it as having nothing to do with Elsie and serving as pure entertainment (Washburn 5). Another telling example is found in the scene in which Oscar tells the story of how crows became black. George’s reluctance to hear the narrative is easily detectable: “‘Long time ago,’ Oscar begins, and you know you’re going to get a story whether you want one or not. You just hope that it isn’t one about patience because yours is about to run out, and you don’t want to hear about your own faults” (93). Before he begins, Oscar creates a wonderful storytelling atmosphere. He brews some more coffee, sits comfortably, takes a sip, enjoys it, “slaps both hands down on his thighs” (93) and only then does he start his narrative. It is a story about the times when crows were white, and as they were friends of the buffalo, they always managed to warn them of approaching hunters. Thus, it became very difficult to hunt buffalo and the people began to starve. The council gathered and the people decided to catch the biggest white crow, which happened to be the one that warned the buffalos most often. One of the hunters disguised himself as a buffalo and when the unsuspecting white crow approached, the man caught it. Then the council debated for a long time about what to do with the white crow. One young warrior became impatient and threw the white crow into the fire, and so the bird’s feathers became black from soot. From then on, all crows are black. George’s inability to profit from the story and understand the Lakota context, and in a wider sense his daughter’s choices in life, is beautifully illustrated in the conversation that follows:

You wait for more of the story, but Oscar has stopped.

"But" you ask, "did the crows still warn the buffalo? How did the people keep from starving?"

Oscar looks disgusted. "It isn't about *that*," he says. "It's a story about how the crow became black."

"Yes," you say, "but I still want to know about the starving people."

Oscar holds out his arm and says: "Feel. Go on, touch me."

Not understanding, you touch his arm, his skin feels old and papery.

"See?"

"No," you say.

He rolls his eyes. "The people didn't starve! I'm here, we're here, that's proof we didn't starve." [...] "Some people can't figure out their own answers," he complains. "Gotta have it all explained for you" (94-95).

On another occasion, Oscar tells a story about an Indian man called Two Boys and a white man who leased his land and wanted to trick him out of the money. At the end of the story, it is Two Boys who emerges as the smart one, while the white man is the victim of a practical joke. Oscar finishes the story, and his daughter Irene breaks into laughter, but George is again confused: "If I couldn't tell better by looking at you, I'd say you're part *wasicu* yourself," says Oscar. "You got to listen to the stories," Irene says. "They will give you the answers." "What answers?" you ask, and you feel like a dumb little kid for asking. "The answers to everything," she says" (195). George is clearly a stranger to native storytelling and initially fails to see the connections between Oscar's stories. The story about Two Boys comes after George's conversation with the town undertaker, Mr. Staley, who demands an exorbitant price for the exhumation of Elsie's body and its transport. While George has some savings, they are not enough, and he feels frustrated and tricked by the undertaker's greed.

A solution comes with the Wiping of the Tears ceremony that is organized for Elsie and George by the Lakota community. As Oscar explains: "It's been just a little over a year since she died, so it's time to put away mourning now and let her go from us. We should have done it back in December, but you know, people kind of wanted to forget about Elsie. Until you showed up. You need to go. Kind of put her to rest for you" (195). In the novel, the ceremony itself is not described: it is simply announced as commencing and then as having finished. During its course, however, George thinks about his life as an African American caretaker in a school

in the South. He thinks about the hard work, hardships, and humiliations, and the small savings he managed to accumulate, which is now going to be spent on Elsie's funeral. In the meantime, the ceremony is complete, and people share gifts and donate money for the cause. The amount collected is \$316.25, still less than the sum quoted by the undertaker. However, it is the collective act of helping George to pay for the funeral, an effort shared by Native and non-Native members of the community that is of critical importance here. Usually divided and existing in two distinct cultural spheres, the people of Jackson unite in an act of compassion and sharing. The workings of the ceremony then demonstrate their true force—driven by the guilt experienced by the entire town, Mr. Staley lowers the cost and a mysterious unknown person decides to contribute. Finally, George is able to complete the mission he arrived with.

The very act of telling Elsie's story emerges as transformative for the entire community. Elsie is finally properly grieved and both communities realize the extent to which they failed her. Healing also means forgiving: Nancy attends the exhumation of Elsie's body despite the fact that she was probably romantically involved with her husband; Jack Mason, the father of the rapists from Mobridge, in search of closure, approaches George to tell him that he is not responsible for Elsie's death. The name of the killer will never be known, but it seems plausible to say that the real point is that Elsie's story is known and passed on and thus, not forgotten. As Elsie's body is put into the hearse, George leaves behind a transformed community. As he sits in the front seat, George too emerges a changed man: "You turn around and glance back at Elsie's coffin in the back, remembering that word that Oscar said to Irene. *Cunksi*. *Cunksi*. We're going home, daughter" (212). While he does not speak Lakota, George's use of the word demonstrates the effects of Oscar's lessons and his understanding of how certain concepts, like the one of kinship, cannot be easily translated into English. Hence, he realizes that to know Elsie he needs to situate her life in the Lakota context, and thanks to Oscar's stories, he is now more competent in this respect. Considering the importance and complexity of kinship in Lakota culture, George's internalization of the word *cunksi* demonstrates his symbolic identification

Joanna Ziarkowska
Institute
of English Studies
University of Warsaw
Poland

with Elsie and her Lakota culture. In her analysis of interconnections between indigenous language and tribal-centered literary theory, Penelope Kelsey asserts that “One of the most critical values in Dakota life is that of kinship, a value that guarantees survival in a harsh plains environment whether in the eighteenth or twenty-first century” (28). Similarly, Kellie Hogue observes that the understanding of kinship included relationships with birds and other non-human beings, thus creating a complex network of relationships and interdependencies (128–29). Thus, when George uses the Lakota term, not only does he ensure that the memory of his daughter remains alive but also he contributes to the cultural and linguistic survival of the Lakota people.

This final scene, in which George uses the Lakota term to address his daughter, as well as the scenes in which Oscar exposes George to storytelling conventions, depend heavily on the use of the Lakota language, which demonstrates Washburn’s preoccupation with language revitalization practices. The importance of the Native language is signaled in the title of the very first chapter: *Anukite*, a Lakota word which is not translated and whose meaning will become apparent later in the text. The technique of introducing Native words without translation into English, thus communicating to the readers the presence of indigenous epistemologies, was used by such prominent writers as N. Scott Momaday in *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Louise Erdrich in *Tracks* (1988). Washburn clearly applies this strategy with a similar goal in mind, but, as Mary Stoecklein observes, her method functions to “educate” non-Lakota readers in the Lakota language and culture (Stoecklein). While many words and phrases in Lakota are not translated, the meaning of some of them can be inferred from the context. This strategy, combined with the second person narration, implicates the reader in the process of learning the language, comprehending its importance and the complexity (and often impossibility) of translation into English. Following the logic of tribalography, Lakota and non-Lakota cultural and discursive contexts are combined to create an experience of making sense of events when Western and Native epistemologies coexist as parallel tools of knowledge. Finally, Washburn’s illustration of how the Lakota language functions for the Lakota community

best illustrates the concerns voiced by White in his study of Native language re-learning methodologies. In the words of Albert White Hat, “when we teach a language to a student, we should develop in that student another heart and another mind” (11).

The Sacred White Turkey begins on Easter Sunday, 1963, when a mysterious white turkey appears on the doorsteps of Hazel Latour, a Lakota medicine woman, and her twelve-year-old granddaughter, Stella. While the girl immediately believes the bird to be sacred and possess special powers, Hazel dismisses it as only a dumb bird. The white turkey, sacred or not, will later play its part in the unfolding events. The novel is narrated in alternating chapters offering Hazel’s and Stella’s perspectives on the events respectively. Accidentally, Hazel discovers a scheme devised by George Wanbli, head of the BIA leasing department and a medicine man, and four other BIA employees to steal money from lease payments. The plotters consider Hazel a threat to their actions and are trying to scare her. When she leaves her house to participate in the Sun Dance ceremony her chickens are slaughtered and the white turkey is crucified on the front door but as it turns out, miraculously not killed; As Hazel begins to understand all the implications of her discovery, violence escalates and Stella’s friend is kidnapped to force Hazel to not reveal the scheme. Hazel’s solution, interestingly, excludes the use of violence altogether and instead rests on the tribalographic potential of storytelling and the belief in the regenerating power of a community.

The motif of healing and positive transformation is already included in the fact that Hazel and her antagonist George, are medicine people. While both are believed to possess healing powers, from the very beginning it is emphasized that George uses his potential in a wicked and dubious way. Hazel recalls several situations in which George emerges as a “jealous man, vindictive and cruel” (48) to his wife, as well as to all who dare to disagree with him. Similarly, despite her young age, Stella sees the critical difference between the two healers: Hazel “was a healer and a good one: sometimes her cures were so immediate, so long-lasting, that people talked. They said that anyone that effective had to be in touch with more than just the good spirit [...]. The biggest talker was [...] George Wanbli [...]. He scoffed

at everything good said about Hazel. He was jealous of her, I know now” (26–27). It is not only Hazel’s good-naturedness that differentiates her from George but also her, as she calls it, “practicality” when spiritual beliefs are concerned. Brought up in a boarding school run by Roman Catholic nuns, Hazel rejects Christianity as full of hypocrisy and relies on traditional practice. “I am a bit of an idealist,” she says

but enough of a realist to know better. I believe in traditional spiritual practice, yes, mixed with a lot of practical practice like praying for a cure but taking your medicine, too, and sometimes that means herbal remedies and sometimes that means pharmaceuticals, much as I despise the prices and the lies those corporations put out. You have to be careful, but when all the fog is blown away, I believe in the One Commandment. This is not traditional, but as the Christians say, out of the mouths of babes [...]. ‘Don’t be shitty’ (81–82).

While many members of the Lakota community converted to Christianity or chose to combine traditional and Christian beliefs, Hazel’s code of behavior rests on the principle of being a good person, a rule that makes her a respected member of the community. Her common sense and good judgment, on the other hand, make her an efficient healer and a helpful neighbor.

Moreover, a sensible approach to life produces a convincing picture of the Lakota community, as neither overtly critical nor idealized. Hazel is well aware of the corruption and abuse that are part of the tribal government: “Every person running for tribal council president campaigns on the idea that he—or she—is going to clean up the corruption, but of course it never happens, and no one believes it’s going to, but that is the standard campaign promise the voter expects and always gets” (81). Corruption, nepotism, ill-meant small-town gossip—Hazel is aware of all of them but nevertheless cherishes being part of her tribal community with its vices, yes, but also, its language, traditions and history. A truly tribalographic sense of connection with the people and their history is brilliantly expressed in Hazel’s explanation for why she insists on collecting her lease payment in person rather than have it mailed, which is George and his accomplices’ idea. Despite having to wait in line at the BIA office, Hazel enjoys the payment day since it provides a unique opportunity for the people from the entire

reservation to meet, gossip and barter. “It was that bad top wait in line,” Hazel says, adding:

I rather enjoyed it. You see the same people there every time, and you get to catch up on what is going on with their families, hear the latest gossip, you know. In a strange way, lease-payment days are a Lakota tradition. It reminds me of the old days that my parents told me about, the days when government food supplies that had been guaranteed to us by treaty were issued (78).

By juxtaposing her parents’ memories of early-twentieth-century Lakota reality, shaped by the discriminatory policies of the U.S. government, with a contemporary social event taking place in an office of an institution inextricably linked with and an invention of these policies, Hazel draws attention to how tradition, in a tribalographic sense, is a vibrant and dynamic entity which defies notions such as fixity of authoritatively defined authenticity. In the words of Jill Doerfler, “[t]ribalography offers an important perspective on history, which does not limit our understanding of history to the past but acknowledges a dynamic interaction between the past, present, and future” (67). Indeed, Hazel’s perspective first links a BIA waiting room with a memory of oppression, and then, the room is subversively turned into a space of tribal integrity and sovereignty.

Similarly, in solving the problem of the lease-payment sham, Hazel resorts to the power of storytelling and the mechanism of how stories and gossip circulate in the community. After Stella’s friend Avril is kidnapped and then returned safe and sound to his family, Hazel realizes how much is at stake—George and his gang are stealing around one million dollars a year and will want to continue to profit from their conspiracy. Rather than report this to the FBI, which Hazel resents in the first place, she relies on the power of story. She devises a simple tale about how the white turkey, for so many in the community considered sacred, appeared to Avril and revealed the names of those who stole from their own people. What turns out to be of extreme help is the effect that the white turkey has in the community—especially the episode of its crucifixion and, following Jesus’s footsteps, resurrection. Not surprisingly, the story returns to Hazel somewhat transformed:

On Thursday afternoon when I went to pick up my mail at the post office, Mrs. Henry, the postmaster asked me if it was true that the Great White Turkey had abducted Avril. Lately from the shores of He Dog Lake, transported him miles away, and revealed wonders to him in a vision [...]. Then Mrs. Henry told me about the cloud that the turkey had taken Avril to, how the turkey had put her wing around his shoulder and told him that he was to be a watcher, a protector of his people, and that he would come into possession of great powers someday, and that he had to use those powers to protect all the people. That part was embroidery. I never said anything of the kind, but I know that gossip is like gossip—any story, no matter how simple, gets bigger and fancier with every telling. I had counted on it (181).

As the story and all its versions traveled fast around the reservation, George Wanbli's and the Tribal Leasing Chairman's reputations were tarnished and they could no longer steal the lease-payment money. However, the final effect of the story is not only the end of the illegal dealings. With the stories of corruption and injustice, the community experiences a sense of rebirth and regeneration. As Stella narrates in the last chapter, speaking from the perspective of a grown woman, in the upcoming elections it is Ed Lately, Avril's father, who is elected tribal council president and effectively reduces corruption and nepotism during his two consecutive terms. What begins as Hazel's simple story, created to unmask the crimes of George turns into a part-storytelling part-gossiping event which, even if only for a brief time, unites the community. Finally, for Stella, Hazel's act becomes one of protection—not only of herself, but also of the land that she grows to love. Even though she and Hazel later move to the city, the Lakota land remains sacred: "I never sold the land, nor will I ever. Descendants of the Olsen family still lease it from me, people that I visit every year along with Avril Lately and his family and others when my kids and I go home for the Sun Dance" (197).

Similarly, as in *Elsie's Business*, the Lakota language functions as a powerful and conspicuous presence in the text. While there are fewer Lakota words and phrases used, the entire story is built around the mysterious Sacred White Turkey, which soon begins to function in the community as *wakan*, a concept charged with complex and elusive meaning. "[Y]ou know," Stella explains, some of our people say that the word means holy, and some say, no, it just means something unexplainable without being holy" (1).

Indeed, scholars and educators of the Lakota language repeatedly point to the complexity of the term. As William K. Powers explains:

The term *wakan* denotes a state of sacrality or incomprehensibility of any being or object that has been invested with a spirit. This spirit is called *tun*, a term which I have elsewhere translated as “potentiality” (Powers 1977, 52). The relationship between *tun* and *wakan* then is one between the potentiality of being transformed into a sacred state (*tun*) and the sacred state itself (*wakan*) [...]. The most incomprehensible characteristic of *wakan* is that neither it nor its potentiality are visible (23).

Unlike words whose meaning can be inferred from the context, *wakan* is a concept that escapes translation, and instead functions as an idea whose multiple meanings emerge in the process of reading and interpreting the text. Moreover, Washburn demonstrates that what it means to individual characters heavily depends on how they approach traditional Lakota culture, and whether they can, after centuries of colonization and forced assimilation, still relate to it in a meaningful way. As Regna Darnell writes, “Languages can no longer be isolated from their use in particular communities at particular points in time” (190) and Washburn seems to be well aware of this process. Thus again, she demonstrates that if language revitalization methodologies are to be successful, they need to work in tandem with Native communities and offer more than merely linguistic instruction. As far as Native languages revival is concerned, *The Sacred White Turkey* ends in a somewhat optimistic note. While it is true that Hazel and Stella can no longer support themselves from the land and are forced to move to an urban area, Hazel finds another way to function as a Lakota medicine woman, bringing health and balance to her community: she is offered a position to teach Lakota language at the university in Lincoln, Nebraska.

In a review of Greg Sarris’s *Keeping Slug Women Alive*, Washburn writes:

Stories—spoken or written—are important for two reasons: they are the means of transferring information, and/or they are valuable for the aesthetics contained within them that are intended to evoke an emotional response. Both information and aesthetic meaning carry the very essence of any group of people: what is necessary for survival, what they value, what they consider as simply beautiful, or, perhaps, what is necessary for the survival of the soul (70–71).

The description draws attention to different aspects that contribute to the process of how stories produce meaning, i.e. the content, the context, the form, and emotional impact. Tribalography draws attention to all of these as well as emphasizes interconnections between the past and the present, different cultures and various locations which at first glance may seem unrelated. In Washburn's novels the stories told and lived by the protagonists precisely cherish and point to these connections. Far from being merely an effective narrative device, storytelling which offers different insights and perspectives illuminates the importance of the Native context and its dialogue with other contexts that co-exist in the same temporal or geographical sphere. In *Elsie's Business* it is the non-Native context of George Washington whereas in *The Sacred White Turkey* it is the way in which Christian and tribal beliefs may cooperate to achieve a desired goal. The strength of Washburn's fiction lies in her ability to demonstrate regenerative potential of Indian cultures. Observance of ceremonies, use of Native languages, and storytelling practices are manifestations of how indigenous people creatively respond to the situation of ongoing colonialism, devising strategies of resistance. The influence of Anglo-American culture is subversively reworked to represent the transformation of Indian cultures rather than their demise. Interestingly, Howe's concept of tribalography translates well into acts of constructive resistance. In both novels, it is the transformative potential of tribalographic writing that is celebrated the most, whereby suffering communities find peace in the very act of telling a story and sustaining their culture. Washburn's illustrations of various markers of cultural survival—storytelling, Native language, traditional ceremonies adapted to contemporary contexts—create fiction that, in the words of Craig Womack, “breaks down oppositions between the world of literature and the very real struggles of American Indian communities, [...] emphasizes Native resistance movements against colonialism, [...] discusses sovereignty and native nationalism, seeks connections between literature and liberation struggles, and, finally, roots literature in land and culture” (11).

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