

The Great American Mixed Blood

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As an introduction to my paper, one first needs to ask two questions: “What is Native American?” and “What is Native American literature?” Must it be written by a Native American for only Native Americans? Must all the characters be Native American, and must the issues and themes deal only with the Native American society? While we have several noteworthy examples of Native American literature from our past, there is an increasing number of outstanding, modern Native American works of literature. The Native American writer still exists on the edges of society; however, due to the influx of Native American writers, such as Gerald Vinzenor, Leslie Silko, and Louise Erdrich, Native American literature is moving into the mainstream, just as that of other ethnicities. The literary canon is no longer that of the white male writer and the white society. In moving to mainstream culture, we have given a voice to the Native Americans. The voice is not just that of the author, but of a total society, the individual and the tribe. Through this, readers become aware of the Native traditions and the life of the modern Native American.

As readers of Native American literature, we also have unique tasks to complete. We need to understand the background and culture of the tribe being addressed in order to more fully understand the text. While one can read many of these works at a literal level, in order to gain full knowledge of the text, an analysis of tribal beliefs, customs, and identity must be done to fully understand and appreciate these works. The reader has to pull back each layer to fully expose the text. A Native American author of both fiction and non-fiction, Louis Owens writes, “Contemporary Native American authors are requiring that readers cross over the conceptual horizon into an Indian world” (*Mixedblood* 20). Owens’ works address the issues of Native American identity, society, and culture. No longer does society exist as the land of the White man or as that of the Indian; readers must learn that the two now overlap, and one must understand the cross culture.

Many contemporary Native American writers and scholars attempt to define a new group of Native Americans, those who are not a full-blood Indian. What is their place in Native American culture and society, and how does this affect their identity in everyday life? It is through the works of Owens that one can begin to understand, define, and identify this unique group of Americans, “the mixedblood.” As a man with Choctaw, Cherokee, and Irish descent, Owens identifies with the new breed of Native Americans. Throughout his works, Owens manages to address the question of Indian identity, while providing a critique of Native American works.

Although most of his novels have similar themes, his last novel, *Dark River*, is an excellent example of the complexity of the definition and description of the modern

Native American. *Dark River* is said to be his most autobiographical novel with the main character Jake Nashoba's life mirroring that of Owens'. Both Owens and Nashoba are mixedbloods and work to find their identity as such.

In examining Native American society, the concept of identity is vital for the Native American, both the full blood and the mixed blood, the ancient as well as the modern. Native American identity is far more complex than the White man's individual definition of himself; it involves his relationship with others, with his tribe and with himself. It is his relationship with the past, his spirituality, and with nature. Identity is not just his own, but also the background of his people.

While most contemporary Native American writers incorporate aspects of many cultures, I will address Louis Owens' non-fiction work in order to define the term "the mixedblood," and illustrate the definition using the Black Mountain tribe from his last novel *Dark River*. While each of his novels deals with specific tribes and societal issues, the mixedblood is a major focus of each of his novels.

In his approach to dealing with Native Americans of multiple tribes and varying degrees of Indian blood, Owens uses the term "mixedblood." In defining a "mixedblood," he writes, "However, although the mixedblood in Native American novels does indeed live between, or within, borders and often shapeshifts across that space with tricksterish dexterity, the mixedblood in literature by mixedblood authors does not conform to this strangely mercantile and Eurocentric concept" (*Mixedblood* 40). The mixedblood character is as much, if not more, complex, than a pure blood. These characters exist in more than one state of being and enter and exist in different cultures. These Native Americans are not those stereotypical, flat, incorrect images of an Indian created by a White man, but of a complex individual created by a mixedblood author. Being an Indian is not what the White man has created, in that the Native American does not fit the picture society placed on the Indian. Owens admits to being both a mixedblood individual as well as a mixedblood author. Owens states, "I conceive of myself today not as an "Indian," but as a mixedblood, a person of complex roots and histories ... I am the product of liminal space, the result of union between desperate individuals on the edges of dispossessed cultures and the marginalized spawn of invaders" (*Mixedblood* 176). Owens does not deny his Indian blood, but sees his existence in more complicated terms. In many ways, being a mixedblood is being neither, and at the same time, a Native American or a white American. Owens realizes that these individuals have the blood of many different ethnicities flowing through them, and as a part of their past, history creates a complicated picture of who they are. In being a mixedblood or multicultural author, Owens believe that the mixture of races in his background makes him a more complex person, as he has a vast history and his roots are not solely from one race or background. More importantly, Owens uses the term to define, not just himself, but all individuals who are the product of more than one tribal affiliation and with various degrees of Indian blood. Owens is not a full-blooded member of one tribe; he is a man of mixed ancestry as are many of the Indians in his literature and those existing in modern society.

Not being a full-blooded Indian does not make a person less of an Indian or of an individual; it adds to the complexity of his identity. Also, as society has changed with fewer Indians living in isolation, there are fewer full-blood Indians around and one must not only see, but understand, the importance, as well as the confusion, of these individuals. In *Dark River*, the character Mrs. Edwards states to Jake Nashoba, "They don't know who you are, maybe because *you* don't know who you are" (47). Both Jake Nashoba and Louis Owens have to find out who they are in order for others to understand them as they try to find their place in different societies.

Owens' life is that of a mixedblood, and as such, he does not always claim one tribal affiliation, but recognizes all of his identities. Having no concept of a mixedblood and trying to understand what Nashoba is doing with the Black Mountain tribe, his former friend states, "I thought you were some other kind of Indian, Jake, one of those southern kinds," to which Nashoba replies, "Choctaw, just half. We get around. Choctaws everywhere you look these days." (*Dark River* 137) In this example of the semi-autobiographical Jake Nashoba, Owens shows that Nashoba, while he may not understand the concept, realizes that he is not a Black Mountain Indian, nor is he a Choctaw Indian. He is the mixture of many ethnicities. This goes back to the fact that he lacks history and identity. Like Owens, his background is the memories of the stories told to him by his family.

Not knowing the meaning of the mixedblood, the men on the paramilitary expedition in the novel *Dark River* discuss the Indian in Vietnam who claimed to be neither Indian nor white; he is the in between. The character Atkinson says, "He got to be something. You the man, so you tell the brother he got to be Injun or white, he got to choose. The Indian can't be no in-between." (*Dark River* 123). People in mainstream society want to classify everyone, and here is an individual who refuses to be classified. He is not Indian, is not white; instead, he is the mixedblood. Even he refuses, or does not know how to explain his identity.

As Nashoba puts it, "As long as he, a mixedblood from some tribe most of them had never heard of, and had married into their tribe, then he had to be accepted" (*Dark River* 46). This comment about Jake Nashoba is another reflection of the life of Owens. Nashoba recognizes the fact that his identity affects his relationship with the tribe he is working for and married into against that of his own tribal affiliation. Even though members of the tribe do not understand his culture, or that of any mixedblood, because of his marriage, they have to accept him into their tribe.

"So maybe, he thought, there was such a thing as an Indian, something that cut across the lines of Choctaw and Cherokee and Black Mountain and Lakota to make some kind of connection" (*Dark River* 106). These thoughts of Jake Nashoba look at both the fictional character, as well as Owens himself, in trying to define a "modern Indian" or that of a mixedblood; someone who is trying to define himself as parts of many tribes as well as that of a White man. Nashoba's Indian is that of many Indians coming together as one person.

Chris LaLonde examines this trait of Owens. Of the mixedblood, LaLonde writes, “If the mixedblood can choose to be in-between, then the efforts to fix the Native as Other comes to nothing. The mixedblood comes back to the dominant culture unceasingly, to be sure, but it has traditionally been as the figure of the doomed half-breed, tragically caught between worlds” (LaLonde 16). Here, when the individual chooses the in-between, society’s only reference is to that of the half-breed, the derogatory term used for many years by both the Whites and the Indians to explain someone with no society.

Owens also deals with the same issues. Owens knows that he is part Choctaw and part Cherokee, yet he does not believe that he fully fits in with either. Also, Owens does not believe that he has had a true Indian upbringing in that he never lived on an Indian Reservation or attended the Indian school. All that Owens can remember are stories from his family’s memories. LaLonde writes, “Owens recognizes that what he knows of Oklahoma has ‘come to me almost entirely through stories: my mother’s uncle’s, aunt’s, and grandmother’s stories of growing up in what they insisted on calling the ‘Nation’” (LaLonde 7) Owens’ memories of Oklahoma are that of “a green place of dark green trees, red earth, sweating heat, canvas water bags, and stops beside the road to eat watermelons” (*Mixedblood* 143.) Another image of his past derives from the stories of the Indian migration: “The result of something called the Trail of Tears – The Trail Where They Cried – where one quarter of the Cherokee people died. And the Choctaws as well, on another long walk, dead by the thousands.” As Karen I. Blu observes:

For Whites, blood is a substance that can be either racially pure or racially polluted. Black blood pollutes White blood absolutely...White ideas about ‘Indian blood’ are less formalized and clear cut.... It may take only one drop of Black blood to make a person a Negro, but it takes a lot of Indian blood to make a person a “real” Indian. (qtd. in Owens, *Other Destinies* 3-4)

While society uses blood to determine the race of an individual, Native Americans are defined not only by their tribal affiliation, but also as a full-blood, one-half, a quarter, or an eighth Indian. One drop does not make us an Indian, nor does it pollute. Instead, this creates some of the confusion existing in society today about Native American Identity. In *Dark River*, Nashoba states, “Being a grandfather isn’t just blood. Who measures blood except the white government?” Here, Owens uses the main character to examine “Indian Blood.” According to Nashoba, Native Americans do not measure the amount of blood you have in you; it is a term of honor, of respect. Both the full-blooded and the mixedblooded are men of honor and respect.

Owens works to use the term “mixedblood” to define himself and at the same time to develop his characters as a means of looking at the modern Native American society. In doing so, he proves that not just a full Indian, but also the “mixedblood” are men and women of honor who deserve the same respect.

Works Cited

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