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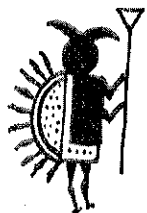
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Unearthing the Chumash Presence in *The Sharpest Sight*

MELODY GRAULICH

The world was like that, full of hidden, half-forgotten things.
Louis Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*

He had arrived at a convergence of patterns; he could see them
clearly now.

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

"Tangled, mixed, interrelated." In these three words police deputy Mundo Morales succinctly sums up Louis Owens's representation of the racial history of California. "Indians, Mexicans, gringos, mixed-bloods" are all "caught up" in the story of migration, dispossession, erasure, and survivance that is *The Sharpest Sight* (197). Throughout the novel Mundo ponders his family's role in this colonial story, knowing that the "Morales[es] used to own all this place, . . . given it by a Spanish king" but recognizing that his family is not an innocent victim of the "gringos," that their dispossession is part of a larger pattern:

And it belonged to the Indians and we sold it for a quart of whiskey, Mundo thought. That's all it had taken Dan Nemi's grandfather to get his cattle onto the grant and begin the take-over that, in only ten years, would make him sole owner of all the Morales land. Back when it was illegal for a Mexican or an Indian to testify against a white person in court. (42-43)

While Owens's second California novel, *Bone Game*, exposes the history of the Ohlone, who lived, and live, on the northern coast of Monterey Bay, *The Sharpest Sight* is set in the coastal foothills at the southern end of the Salinas Valley, Owens's childhood home, which, as Hoey McCurtain points out, "all used to be Chumash country, you know. Everything you see. And now there ain't no Chumash here at all, and we're here. . . . Us Indians are a mixed-up bunch. It's like somebody took a big stick and stirred us all up" (19).

Attention has been paid to the Choctaw mythology and history in the novel; to Owens's satirical references to canonical writers; to his use of "blended mythologies" (Dwyer 43); to his style, which "conjoins indigenous and alien cultural materials" (Taylor 221); but no one has explored how Owens, attentive to the interplay between land, local Indigenous identities, and intersecting tribal histories, crafts the novel on remnants of Chumash culture through nature symbolism and landscape descriptions that reference Chumash stories and through the Chumash material objects Cole and his brother dig up.¹ The Chumash also surface in the (erased) genealogy of one of the novel's main characters. Mundo knew he "was part [generically] Indian, though no one in the family had ever liked to admit it. Pure Castillian, they had always pretended" (197). Not until the novel's end does he find out that he is descended from the Chumash. Hoey turns out to be wrong that "there ain't no Chumash here at all" as Owens subtly counters the age-old story of the "vanished" Indians.

In this novel so self-consciously about "design" and interrelationships, Owens drops brief references to the Chumash into the landscape of the text for the reader to unearth. An early passage establishes the model for the reader.

[Cole McCurtain] would think about the people who had made [the arrowheads and stone figure], trying to imagine their lives in the coastal hills. Chumash, a people who seemed to have vanished into the pale hills the way the river disappeared into the sand. He'd heard that there were a few of them left somewhere, but he'd never seen one of them. And then he and Attis, who were Indians too, sort of, came to dig up what those vanished people had made. It was funny. He would

try to understand the convergence, what strange design could have brought Choctaw blood so far from Mississippi to find these Chumash things. (53–54)

Cole's brother, Attis (both, at this point in the novel, "sort of" Indians), found the arrowheads and the "white stone doll . . . as crudely formed as the arrowheads were fine, its face and limbs merely suggested by the carver" while digging a cave behind their house (53). (In the twentieth century, archeologists and adventurers removed many Chumash carvings from caves, which also contained rock paintings.) Having lost Attis, "the brother he'd known . . . better than he'd known himself," to the Vietnam War, Cole cherishes the memory of that day, of all of his times with Attis in the California foothills (22). In tribute to those feelings, uncertain about the rituals of his ancestors, he places the arrowheads and doll in a leather bag Attis made, which he carries with him or wears around his neck. His Choctaw uncle Luther later refers to it as "a medicine" and reminds him to wear it (116). (I will return to Owens's representation of Attis as a transmitter of the Chumash.) Like Cole, readers are asked to dig into the Chumash past and attempt to understand the convergences between various characters, natural forces, and the Chumash.

This passage about the Chumash, like many others in the novel, is autobiographical, generated from Owens's deep and abiding connection to the California foothills. The incident was so significant to him that he returned to the story again and again. Describing one of his childhood homes in the Santa Lucia Mountains, he writes,

That was a secure and private world, where my older brother, Gene, looked up at me from deep in the cave we were digging and said, "Look at these Indian things," and we sat together in the sun to study two lovely arrow points and a tiny white stone doll dug from six feet down in the shaley earth. What were those Indians, I wondered. . . . Why had they set such things so carefully in the earth, and where were those people now? ("Motion" 175)

We naively collected the beautiful items, taking the doll to our mother as a gift. We thought it strange and disappointing that

she “lost” the little carving almost immediately, and it was not until years later that I realized she had respectfully returned the figure to the soil from which it had come. (“Mapping” 207)

Owens’s retrospective understanding of his mother’s actions offers a fitting end to the story, for “not until years later” would he attempt to find out the answers to his boyhood questions about the “Indian things” and “where were those people now.” He must have been tempted to put this touching concluding detail into his novel, but he chose not to. Instead, Choctaw/Cherokee/Irish Cole (and other characters) wear the items of Chumash material culture, thereby creating a physical connection, a “convergence,” with the Chumash even though Cole does not know enough about them to understand why the material expressions of their worldview should protect him.

Owens presents no clear answer to this question but implies that Cole’s journey to recover his cultural identity originates in his sense of feeling “indigenous to the place” that is the Chumash homeland. The phrase belongs to Potawatomi Robin Wall Kimmerer, who points out, “Traditional knowledge is rooted in intimacy with a local landscape where the land itself is the teacher” (101). Cole has been well taught by the land, but he is ignorant of the Chumash lived presence on it, where, Owens suggests in a cross-Indigenous move, his traditional knowledge must originate. His desire to understand “why they had set such things so carefully in the earth,” a metaphor for their efforts to preserve their history, is a desire to understand their cultural identity, rooted in the land.

Owens’s focus on mixed-blood and cross-tribal convergences such as this one has been controversial among some Native writers, but recently Sean Kicummah Teuton has pointed out that “in situating Indigenous literature within narrative histories that intersect, scholars expand and empower Native Studies” (xv). Owens’s exploration of Cole’s connection to the Chumash through their land, stories, and material culture allows him to excavate a seemingly vanished tribe in *The Sharpest Sight*.

The Chumash people and their culture were decimated by the Spanish conquest of the California coast and by the mission system,

but a large portion of their oral tradition lives on, preserved in part by John P. Harrington, who spent decades working with six Chumash informants to record their stories. As Robert O. Gibson notes, “The project eventually produced several thousand pages of notes that today stand as a testimony to the rich religious and cultural traditions of the Chumash Indians” (32). These stories offer insight into recurrent image patterns in the novel—the oak trees, the flooding Salinas River, the bridges, Cole’s leather medicine bag. I have no direct evidence that Owens read these stories, but anyone familiar with his work knows how widely he studied North American Indians and Indigenous California history and about his meticulous research. Unearthing the submerged Chumash stories in *The Sharpest Sight* helps readers understand what was lost or destroyed in California’s colonial past, a history still “buried” today. As Owens says,

I guess one thing I’m working on in most of my writing is the way America has tried, and continues to try, to bury the past, pretending that once it’s over we no longer need to think about it. We live in a world full of buried things, many of them very painful and often horrific, like passing out smallpox-infested blankets to Indians or worse, and until we acknowledge and come to terms with the past we’ll keep believing in a dangerous and deadly kind of innocence, and we’ll keep thinking we can just move on and leave it all behind. (qtd. in Purdy 11–12)

Owens’s young protagonists possess that “deadly kind of innocence” until they explore the past—and indeed, so did the boy Owens and his brother Gene. And yet like Owens and his alter-ego, Cole, we can also find sustenance and a sense of connection to what we dig up out of the past. I contend that Owens, who claims “silence a people’s stories and you erase a culture,” seeks to find a way to let the Chumash influence the “tangled, mixed, interrelated” identities of contemporary Californians (“Mapping” 211).

Owens uses Chumash references to implicate the young protagonists of the novel in his design. In an early comic passage, Hoey and Cole discuss the “Indian stuff” Cole learned in Boy Scouts, including “how to mash up acorns and make flour.” When Hoey asks, “How’d

that acorn stuff taste?," Cole responds, "Like shit" (55). One of the few things California schoolchildren of Owens's generation were taught about the state's original inhabitants was that acorns were a major food source. Exactly Owens's age, I made and ate "acorn mush" in fourth grade in the foothills of the Salinas Valley, where the Chumash lived; the mush tasted so bitter because our teachers did not understand that it needed to cure to get rid of the tannic acid. Acorns appear frequently in Chumash mythology, where what appears to be food is sometimes really feces, a detail that perhaps provokes Cole's comment (see Blackburn 85).

In *The Sharpest Sight*, acorns are linked to the disturbed young heroine, Diana Nemi, who believes that by murdering Attis, she is taking revenge for her sister Jenna's death (she was killed by Attis in a psychotic break) and, perhaps, framing her father. Inheritors of what Owens calls "the systemic land theft [in California] that had made a few white men rich," the Nemi girls fall from grace for the sins of their fathers (101). Owens extends the Christian imagery by representing Diana as a rebellious Eve: her emerging womanhood and sexuality, once innocent and natural, have become perverted (perhaps the acorns are her apple), and she persistently—and rightly—blames her father. A hunter, associated with the moon, darkness, and endings, a grove of trees, and a watery pool, she also seems kin to the Roman goddess Diana, as critics such as Chris LaLonde have pointed out. Owens offers readers guidance in understanding characters such as Diana.

[C]ontemporary Native American authors are requiring that readers cross over the conceptual horizon into an Indian world. In addition to Roman and Greek mythology, today it helps a great deal if a reader knows Choctaw, Chippewa, Navajo, or Blackfoot mythologies in order to read Native American works. . . . To cite an example with which I am intimately familiar, a reader should know something about both European and Choctaw mythologies and cultures to understand what to make of a mixedblood character significantly named Attis McCurtain who, while spinning in a black river, encounters tribal bone pickers in my second novel, *The Sharp-*

est Sight. In a multicultural world both the name Attis and the traditional bone pickers have significance. If we miss one, we miss the whole. ("Beads and Buckskin" 20)

In the Greek mythology Owens expects his readers should know, Attis is a god of vegetation and a sacrificial victim whose death and resurrection near the vernal equinox bring about the renewal of fertility to the earth. His effigy is hung in a huge pine tree, a convergence with Choctaw mythology, where the dead body is put to rest on a scaffold of trees, where it remains until most of the flesh is gone. Near the close of *The Sharpest Sight*, in the springtime, Cole finds Attis's body deposited by the flooding Salinas River, "cupped . . . as if he had been placed there with loving precision," in the arms of "four small oaks," trees prevalent in the California foothills and significant in Chumash mythology (251–52). The river has already stripped the bones of much of the flesh, but, like the Choctaw bone pickers, Cole is necessary to bring Attis's journey to completion, cleaning the bones and taking them to Mississippi to his Choctaw relatives. (The Greek meaning of Cole is "victory of the people.") Only then can spring lengthen and the riverbed become again a rich source of life in chapters 53 and 54 (259–61).

To readers familiar with Chumash mythology, Diana, like Attis, is an ironic figure, a murderer, an anti-fertility goddess. In connection to Diana, one of the primary symbols of the life cycle for the Chumash, the acorns, offspring and seeds of the oak, become associated with death and destruction. The Chumash "viewed" the moon to be a single woman, a "cleansing agent over all that was considered 'dirty,' . . . [who] affected all other earthly creatures, even the oak," and Diana appears to be a negative manifestation of her (Hudson and Underhay 75). The "sacred grove" of Owens's life-denying Diana is made up of the oaks that surround her home, a site of repeated dispossession, once belonging to the Moraleses and before that the homeland of the Chumash. When Diana visits her sister's grave, "beneath a live oak," she counteracts the life-resurrecting forces of spring: "In the early summer Diana had gone there to pluck the sprouted acorns from the grave, hating the little curling

roots that split each shell and twisted into the earth like the tails of pigs" (190). Later in the novel she steals Cole's life-sustaining medicine bag, which connects him to the land and to the power of the Chumash culture.

Death also calls to her from "an ancient white oak" in Diana's grove when she hears a "great horned owl" and imagines herself soaring with the owl along the river where Attis's body floats (149). She becomes the voice of death, the role played by owls in Choctaw mythology: as Owens writes, "we feared the owls that brought warnings of death. To hear the owl was to know death was near" ("Shared Blood" 197). Yet looked at from a cross-Indigenous perspective, Diana's association with owls suggests the duality of her role in the novel. For the Chumash, "[t]he Owl represents clarity of mind and spirit, and wisdom" (Waiya, par. 14) and is often the "personal spirit guide" or "dream helper" of shamans and doctors (Timbrook and Johnson). According to pharmacologist James Adams, who recorded and sang a version of the Chumash owl song, "Yamaqueeday," used in healing ceremonies, "The owl song is the song of the 'Antap,' the [shaman] healers. The owl protects us as it flies at night with its keen vision and keeps danger away. Traditionally, many 'Antap' had owl feathers on their clothing or in their hair."²

As Mundo's Viejo says, Diana is "not entirely wrong" in the actions she takes (223). Attis's murder of Jenna was the act of a madman, his spirit destroyed by Vietnam, and Diana's murder of him allows him to enact the myth of sacrifice and resurrection that will bring the universe back into balance, to heal. The healing capacity of the owl plays another role in her story as well. Diana, in her "deadly innocence," becomes a victim of violence at the hands of Jessup, the character dedicated to the dark designs at work in the universe, allowing Hoey, waiting outside her house to murder her father, to display his "clarity of mind and spirit, and wisdom." Instead of resorting to murder, Hoey becomes a healer, building a sweat lodge (used by both Choctaw and Chumash) to heal the girl who killed his son. Significantly, he encourages her to "let go of the things that prevent you from breathing" (242), a key practice of Chumash healing (Adams and Garcia, par. 13). Afterward, sitting with his back against

an "oak tree," he hears "in the branches of the tree a great horned owl beg[i]n to call in a deep, cautious voice" (243). Here the owl is the voice of Chumash survivance.

Owens also uses natural imagery associated with the Chumash to characterize Mundo, but the Chumash appear more directly, if belatedly, in his story. Like California, whose "Mission" architecture and focus on its Spanish heritage whitewash history, Mundo's family denies their Indigenous past and erases the presence of those they dispossessed. Owens excavates Mundo's Chumash ancestry, later writing, "Because I wanted to explore mixed and relationship identity—the liminal landscape of the mixedblood—more fully, I also included in *The Sharpest Sight* a young mestizo named Mundo Morales who discovers in his own blood an inextricable web of inherited identities" ("Motion" 182). Owens often uses the metaphor of the "web" with Mundo, echoing Silko and emphasizing convergence and design.

Although he suspects he is part "Indian," Mundo does not find out until he finally fulfills his plan to ask the elderly Mondragon sisters "about the threads that linked him to them somehow in a past that was as distant and ambiguous as the winter sky" (143). At the top of the family tree they have maintained for years are three names, the Spanish family patriarch, his "Castillian" wife, and Adelita, a Chumash girl the "patrón took from the mission." "Moraleses," they tell him, were "sired by the old patrón on a slave girl" (228). The cross-cultural name Owens chooses, however, suggests that she is more than a victim, for "Adelita" was a legendary *soldadera* in the Mexican Revolution, the subject of a *corrido*, so well known that women of strength and bravery came to be called "adelitas" (Longeaux y Vasquez 445). The sisters have begun to chart a "whole new tree. . . . Adelita's Indian people are over there, off the paper." This "new chart . . . goes backwards instead of forwards" (230). In telling his history of California, Owens is also "going backward" to insert the Chumash presence in order to go forward.

When Adelita died after being converted to Catholicism, which prevented her from joining her own people, the dead Moraleses, ashamed of their own blood, "made her an outcast, wandering

between the worlds of dead because no one would claim her" (228). Adelita's story adds a deeper layer of denial and dispossession to the novel—and she needs to be accepted and laid to rest in a story parallel to Attis's. Even Mundo's Viejo had not known about her until he died and took pity on her and "made them take her in" (229). In addition he has tried to track down her dead relatives, but, he says, "You can't get there from here" (230). Because it is the ghostly presence of his Viejo who returns to earth to lead Mundo to his past, we see Adelita as an ongoing, albeit ghostly, presence in his life. Owens gives the Viejo one of the novel's concluding lines: "My grandson has become more comfortable with the dead. . . . He knows at last who he is" (262). Perhaps he knows in his blood, as we will soon see, but his lack of knowledge about the past leaves him with more questions than answers, leaves him "imagining the young Chumash girl, one of his grandmothers, taken by the brutal patrón. Or had it been love? Maybe the great man had rescued her from pain and taken her to his heart? Maybe she had ruled the heart of the man, and his relations had ostracized her in death for that reason" (230-31). What could he know, having been denied information about California's first inhabitants, his "Spanish" past systematically romanticized, culturally appropriated, while its descendants are called "spics" in local bars (208)?³

The work of Chad Allen helps provide an answer. He argues that "rebuilding the ancestor and becoming ancestors for future indigenous generations is a major theme" in American Indian literature (161). "Once identified," he says, "knowledge of specific indigenous bloodlines—ties to specific nations, bands, families, and individuals . . .—can serve as a catalyst for the recuperation of an integrated and successful contemporary American Indian identity" (177-78). Mundo begins this process as the novel ends—"the dark one who bears the name of the world is becoming aware now that his own story is very, very old and complicated," says Luther (244)—but his identity will always require the integration of his Spanish, mixed-blood Mexican, and Chumash blood. Yet even early in the novel Mundo seems to possess what N. Scott Momaday calls "blood memory." (Owens makes an ironic reference to the concept in *Bone Game*

when the postmodern trickster Alex Yazzie says, "We're going to bring back all those bow-and-arrow skills. Give that memory in the blood a wake-up call, so to speak" [81].) As Allen describes,

What I call the blood/land/memory complex is an expansion of Momaday's controversial trope blood memory that makes explicit the central role that land plays both in the specific project of defining indigenous minority personal, familial, and communal identities (blood) and in the larger project of reclaiming and reimagining indigenous minority histories (memory). (16)

This is Owens's project, a relatively straightforward one in his portrayal of Mundo but far more complicated in his treatment of Attis and Cole, as we will see.

Mundo has no knowledge of the Chumash, but from the very beginning of the novel, Owens symbolically reveals his Chumash blood through his behavior. The novel opens shortly after the most significant ceremonial day in the Chumash calendar, the winter solstice (King 71). Mundo finds himself drawn to a bridge over the Salinas River, "swollen at flood-stage, nervous and out of control," "the thick brown water mov[ing] past, clots of yellow foam and trash in the troughs of waves" (3, 10).

It was an underground river. . . . Most of the year it was nothing, like the people who had come to live along its banks, just a half-mile-wide stretch of sand and brush and scattered trees. But in the winter and early spring, when the rains came pounding down out of the coastal mountains, the river rose out of its bed and became huge, taking everything in its path. Growing up on the edge of the river, he'd come to wait each year for the rising waters, grown to love with a kind of ache the seasonal violence when the river tried to destroy everything within reach. It was a strange, violent backwards, upside-down river. (5-6)

And then, sliding slowly from beneath the bridge, was a face [Attis's]. The long, black hair washed away from the forehead,

and the eyes were open and fixed. He saw the dark eyes and broad nose and the mouth drawn back over white teeth and the body like one of the drowned logs swinging slowly so that now the feet aimed north. A hand rose in the choppy water as if in casual farewell. And then only the river. (6)

Mundo is repeatedly (at least five times) drawn to bridges over the river, remarking later to his wife, "I keep feeling like there was something that brought me to that bridge right when I was there" (100). Descriptions of the flooding river—and memories of its seasonal tranquility—dominate the novel.

The Chumash mythological past was inhabited by supernatural creatures—some malign, some benign, some celestial (notably the "Sky People," including the moon deity)—as well as "First People" with both human and animal characteristics. As Travis Hudson and Ernest Underhay note, "For reasons not explained in the myths, a transformation of the cosmic composition took place during antiquity to bring the universe to its present form. It involved a great flood" (40). This flood was the most significant event in the Chumash past. The only survivor, Spotted Woodpecker, was saved when his uncle, Sun, threw him acorns. After the flood, historical time began, and First People became the flora and fauna that made up the Chumash ecosystem. Hudson and Underhay explain further, "Man was also created at this time, and death was instituted" (40). "One of the most interesting [of the First People] is the old woman Momoy, who becomes the narcotic plant *Datura meteloides* at the time of the Flood," Thomas Blackburn notes (36). Like the Choctaw, the Chumash believed the soul could live separately from the body, especially after death, and the stories describing the soul's long journey to Šimilaqša (the Land of the Dead) are quite detailed. For our purposes, the key moment is when the soul confronts "a body of water that separates this world from the next, with a bridge that the soul must cross to reach Šimilaqša." A Chumash informant, María Solares, recounts what happens:

The souls of murderers and poisoners and other evil people never reach the bridge, but are turned to stone from the neck

down. They remain there on the near shore forever, moving their eyes and watching other souls pass. When the pole begins to fall the soul starts quickly across, but when it reaches the middle two huge monsters rise from the water on either side and give a loud cry, attempting to frighten it so that it falls into the water. If the soul belongs to someone who had no [fetish or spirit helper] or who did not know about the old religion and did not drink toloache [*datura*]*—*someone who merely lived in ignorance*—*it falls into the water, and the lower part of the body changes to that of a frog, turtle, snake, or fish. The water is full of these beings, who are thus undergoing punishment. . . .

Once the soul has crossed the bridge, it is safe in Šimilaqša. (qtd. in Blackburn 100)

Tormented by the sight of his dead friend who, a murderer, could not cross the bridge, but determined to stand by him, tempted by the siren cries of the novel's sultry murderess, Diana, and threatened by the dark designs of its truly evil villain, Mundo nevertheless remains footsure and steady. Threatened by death, in Vietnam, the "dead place," and in California, he, unlike Attis, manages to keep his soul intact. He stands in the middle of the bridge, reaching toward the future but also beginning to listen to the voices of the dead, who can tell him about the past. His attraction to the bridge bespeaks his liminal status as a character who must look back to move forward.

Throughout the novel, characters envision the flooding Salinas washing away the corruption of the historical past. Diana thinks in Christian terms, imagining the flood destroying the sinners and their sins: "it would cleanse the earth of her father's foul constructions, of all the works of men, of her own bloody sinew and bone" (189). Yet her visions also echo the role of the Chumash moon deity: "Water was rising over everything, rushing from the bowels of the earth in a fountain until it covered all, cleansing the earth in a whirling flood" (197). The Choctaw recounted a similar story, probably corrupted by the missionaries who preserved it, of a cataclysmic flood that resulted from the "Great Spirit's" anger at the "corrupt

and wicked" (Bushnell 531). No supernatural being causes Owens's flood: the dammed river cannot follow its natural seasonal course. The sinners, referenced through allusions to Jonathon Edwards, are those who attempt to control nature.

By uniting the flood with a river, Owens emphasizes a convergence between Choctaw and Chumash mythology. While I argue that Mundo's blood memory draws him to the bridge, he may also have been influenced by a story Attis told him in which a bridge plays a key part, a story very similar to the one recounted by Solares.⁴ Mundo remembers:

Attis began to see the dead, the lonely ghosts . . . wandering the jungle, ghost patrols marching forest trails. . . . And at night, in whispers, he would describe them to Mundo, explaining how the dead never left, how the war was being crowded with the dead who kept fighting in their death-sleep. He'd talked of shadows, and wondered aloud. "There's a slippery log, Mundo. Most people can get across and find the bright path to a good place, but murderers can't get their footing. They fight to stay on, but they always slip. They try to hang on, but their hands won't hold. They fall into a black river full of snakes and dead things, and they go into a whirlpool that takes them around and around until they wash ashore in a terrible, dead place that they can never leave." (131; for the Choctaw story, see Cushman 167)

Attis's recounting of this story is another example of blood memory. Cole knows little about Choctaw beliefs—and there is no evidence that Attis knows more—until Onatima and Luther tell him that "every person has two shadows, . . . an inside shadow and an outside one," but "only in death did one become two" (110, 113). When a murderer dies, his "inside shadow is taken down a black river full of snakes to a place where all the trees are dead and the people cry and suffer all the time" (111), while the outside shadow wanders, haunting others, feeling a "terrible loneliness" (112). After Vietnam, Attis, unlike Mundo, cannot get his footing; a murderer, he knows he cannot cross to the "good place," symbolized by the innocent prewar

days in the California countryside with Jenna and Cole, when the riverbed is represented as a sunny, generative place. By picking and returning his bones, Cole saves Attis from being one of the dead who cannot leave the place that stole his soul. As Onatima says of Attis's outside shadow, "He's waiting for his bones, and he can't go on until we bring them back" (113). Although I cannot locate any specific Chumash stories about twins, Owens's reading of Momaday and others may have led him to represent Mundo and Attis as the novel's hero twins: best friends who sign up together for a war fought largely by people of color, they are simultaneously joined (by virtue of where they are led by their blood memories) and separated in the novel's first chapter, when Mundo, whose future is represented by his baby, stands on the bridge as Attis passes beneath it.⁵ Readers are encouraged to believe in the novel's ending that Mundo will be able to bridge his past and his future, and his name makes clear that he is the novel's moral center.

But despite the tragic consequences of the Vietnam War, Attis too has served as a bridge between the past and the future, summoned to find evidence of the Chumash presence in California and transmitting fragments of their stories. Pointing out that "Momaday develops 'blood memory' as a trope for continuity across indigenous generations," Allen adds that one "related narrative tactic" is "the re-recognition of the artifacts of indigenous memory" (162). By focusing on the importance of the Chumash artifacts to Attis and Cole, Owens uses blood memory, I suggest, as a trope for continuity across Indigenous national boundaries. As Hoey says, "Us Indians are a mixed-up bunch" (19).

In an interview, Owens commented, "Stories, it seems to me, come out of the earth, and every culture's stories reflect the natural world within which that culture was formed" (Lee 39). Allen makes a similar point when he writes, "I argue that the blood/land/memory complex, like Momaday's trope blood memory, names both the process and the product of the indigenous minority writer situating him- or herself within a particular indigenous family's or nation's 'racial memory' of its relationship with specific lands" (16). Despite a complicated relationship to the state's history, Owens wrote lov-

ingly about the landscape that shaped him. The material items he found as a boy, reflecting the Chumash's relationship to the natural world he so loved, shaped his understanding of story. His California novels examine the natural world and the cultural productions that landscape produced in the past—he returned, for instance, to the story of Joaquin Murietta, the story of a Mexican written in California by a mixed-blood Native author. In digging a cave to unearth the Chumash artifacts, Attis intuitively unearths their story. Later Cole dreams of Attis coming to give him the evidence of a buried past, “opening [his] closed fist to show the stone doll” (68–69). In a passage echoing Momaday’s “Man Made of Words,” Cole thinks, “A long time before men had made the two points in the bag, chipping an idea of who they were into obsidian and flint, and somewhere nearby someone had picked up a white stone and imagined the figure in the bag. And now the old uncle was telling Cole he had an Indian name, a Choctaw name” (75). By trying to understand the expressions of the dead, Cole comes to understand, for the moment, who he is and how everyone is interconnected.

The pouch, its contents, and its symbolism of cross-Indigeneity resurface in *Bone Game*. It protects Onatima as she carries it to California around her neck because Luther thought Cole would need it. Caught up in another story about the violent dispossession of Native peoples, his life out of control, hallucinating on peyote, unable to separate the past from the present, Cole sees Attis, alive and dead, and is tempted by death, wanting to be joined again with him. Uncle Luther, his face “shining with love,” steps into the terrifying vision to offer Cole “the little medicine pouch,” which he puts around his neck (200, 201). Luther believes that Cole has been offered a “vision,” and Cole believes the pouch is central to its meaning: “Throughout the morning he had tried unsuccessfully to piece together the vision, coming always to the pouch and the sensation of being lifted from the earth by his brother’s hand” (204). The imagery echoes Attis’s discovery of the Chumash artifacts in the earth. Cole’s respect for the Chumash’s “idea of who they were,” transmitted to him via Attis, will allow him to bargain and make peace with the troubled spirit of the Ohlone gambler, to escape death. Yet Cole is

aided by yet another cross-tribal convergence.⁶ On his cross-country trek, Luther has helped a Navajo man, who gave him a medicine bag full of pollen. “You best add that to your medicine there,” he says to Cole (208). Had Owens lived to complete the stories only begun in his California novels, there is no telling what might have ended up in that leather pouch. . . . And perhaps Cole, like Owens’s mother, might have returned the Chumash figure and arrowheads to the land that engendered them.

* * *

Although Hoey might think that the Chumash are gone, Cole knows better: he says to Mundo, “You think those Indians are all gone from here? They’re not. You go out in the hills at night some time and listen” (182). The Chumash may have been largely invisible in California during the years Owens grew up there, the 1950s and 1960s, but various Chumash bands have made themselves heard at the turn of the twenty-first century. Beginning in 1978, they mounted a successful protest, including a nine-month occupation, against the building of a natural-gas plant at Point Conception, on the California coast, a site they call Humqag, the “western gate,” deemed a sacred “pan-Indian” site (Brown 187–92). They have continued to defend Point Conception from development, protesting against the U.S. government’s plans to build a “spaceport” there, on land annexed by Vandenberg Air Force Base, arguing that the site should be protected under the guidelines for the National Register of Historic Places.⁷ In 2003, the Santa Ynez Chumash opened a successful casino in Santa Barbara County, which has met with vocal resistance (see Walsh). On their Web site, the Santa Ynez point out what the casino supports:

Since Native American gaming became a reality for our tribe, we have begun to realize our dream of economic self-sufficiency. The revenues we earn from our Chumash Casino Resort are used to support vital government programs for our tribal members. From improved health care to increased educational opportunities for our tribal members and descendants, the lives of our tribal members have been greatly enhanced. (par. 2)

While the Chumash are willing to improvise to ensure their survival, they also recognize the sustenance of what Allen calls the “artifacts of indigenous memory.” When an anthropological study commissioned a “tomol,” their traditional canoe, the first to be built since mission days, descendants of the Channel Island Chumash borrowed it in 1976 to retrace “ancient trade routes” between the islands, but it was ultimately sold to a museum (Cordero 12). In 1996 they established the Chumash Maritime Association, which built a tomol for the use of the Chumash themselves. The tomol, writes Julie Cordero, “tells us a story of what was in the past and what will be in the future. It requires us to answer the questions of our future as indigenous coastal people” (8). In *The Sharpest Sight*, Owens too insists that California’s past is part of its present—and its future.

NOTES

I would like to thank my co-conspirator and collaborator Susan Bernardin for many conversations about Louis Owens.

1. See, for instance, Maggie Dwyer, Paul Beekman Taylor, and Carolyn Holbert. In *Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns: The Novels of Louis Owens*, Chris LaLonde provides some historical background about the Chumash, but his conclusion about their role in the novel is quite different from mine:

Owens links the Salinas River with Native Americans when he writes of Cole thinking of the Chumash (the original inhabitants of the area of the coast and coast range from around the present-day San Luis Obispo south to below Ventura) as “a people who seemed to have vanished into the pale hills the way the river disappeared into the sand.” The Chumash were “the first major group of California Indians to be discovered by Europeans,” the Spanish explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo first contacting them in 1542, and the mission system in which they were indoctrinated beginning in the eighteenth century broke the circle by severing the people from their culture and exposing them to the diseases that annihilated them. In order to avoid suffering the fate of the Chumash, Cole must work to restore the world to balance by finding his brother’s bones and returning them to Mississippi. (76)

2. Adams wrote this in a September 17, 2007, e-mail to me. For Adams’s

rendition of the song, visit <http://ecam.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/neh090/DC2>. Adams has studied Chumash culture and healing for over ten years and learned the owl song from his Chumash teacher and coauthor, Cecilia Garcia.

3. As El Viejo says, Mundo’s ancestry is even more complicated, a “mess” including “Irishmen and Italians” and “a Chinese gentleman from Canton [who] planted the seed of Moraleses with interesting eyes in one of your great grandmothers” (230).

4. Many Indigenous peoples share a similar story; Louise Erdrich employs an Ojibway story about crossing a bridge in *Love Medicine*. For a recounting of the myth, see Vizenor (85). In Erdrich, see especially chapters titled “The Bridge” and “Crossing the Water.”

5. In “The Ludic Violence of Louis Owens’s *The Sharpest Sight*,” Taylor argues that Owens “conjoin[s] . . . cultural myths of sacrifice that involve twins, brothers, or warrior pairs, one of whom dies, making the other a ‘last survivor’” (218). He sees Attis and Cole as this pair.

6. In yet another example of such cross-tribal convergences, Jacqueline Kilpatrick has explored what she sees as the parallels between Owens’s representation of Luther and Onatima and the Blackfoot stories of Old Man and Old Woman, which Owens himself discussed in writings about James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood* (58).

7. Their spirited resistance has prompted a backlash from some, who cite an essay by anthropologists Brian Haley and Larry Wilcox to suggest that anthropologists’ reconstruction (or indeed imagining) of a unified Chumash culture has unduly influenced self-designated Chumash traditionalists to participate in “an invention of tradition” (761). “Quotes from [their] article have been used by local California newspapers to raise questions in the public’s mind about the legitimacy of many Chumash families to participate in legal hearings about ancient Chumash sites” (Anderson, “Haley and Wilcox,” par 2.). For more on these controversies, see Web sites maintained by John Anderson: <http://www.angelfire.com/id/newpubs/haleylwil.html> and <http://www.angelfire.com/id/newpubs/spaceport.html>.

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