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Sharing Cultures. Sharing Stories. Sharing Lives.
Sharing Respect: An Examination of the Gift Cycle
in Fools Crow

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Sharing
Cultures.
Sharing
Stories.
Sharing
Lives.
Sharing
Respect:

An Examination
of the Gift Cycle
in *Fools Crow*

By Faith Roncoroni



“Untitled” by Hyun Kim

Inspired by a moving experience at a retreat, this author examines the impacts and implications of gift giving and storytelling in American Indian culture. Framed in a study of anthropological perspectives, this introspective analysis of the characters of James Welch’s *Fools Crow* reveals how actions within the gift cycle and storytelling simultaneously construct and strengthen the American Indian identity. Going beyond textual analysis, “An Examination of the Gift Cycle” illuminates the cultural dynamics of gift giving, telling stories, and the giving of stories in *Fools Crow* through Welch’s personal sharing of his history, beliefs, and tribal practices.

Dedicated to Shorty

All of our eyes focused on him as he silently walked towards us tightly clutching six sticks against his chest, cradling them like an infant, making his way down the isle. Our conversations came to an abrupt standstill. As he approached us, time slowed down, each moment beating in rhythm with our hearts’ drumming, quickening in pace as our anticipation grew.

*With each beat his foot hit the ground.
With each beat he captured more of our attention.
With each beat our confusion mounted.
With each beat we felt more unified.*

We clumsily stood up from our seats, struggling to maintain some form of decorum in the church that we had been preparing to rest in for the night. Some of us were already in our pajamas, some had their sleeping bags strewn across the pews, and some were brushing their teeth in the bathroom, but all of us showed respect by standing in his presence. When he stopped before us, the beating paused; he lifted his eyes from the sticks that seemed to beckon such concentration, allowing us to motion for the rest of the group to gather around him. Intimately, we huddled together in absolute silence waiting for Shorty to explain his

unexpected visit. He spoke no unnecessary words, but delicately extended his arms, carefully moving as though protecting the sticks from touching the ground. The sticks called for our gaze again; transfixed by such unexpected generosity.

we just stood there.

His arms remained outstretched, leaving the sticks vulnerable.

We just stood there.

Everyone’s stare now turned from him to me, expecting me, as their leader, to accept his offer of friendship, but I hesitated; I knew that asking to buy a set of sticks was inappropriate for a woman because only men played with sticks, but I wasn’t sure if accepting the sticks would offend him.

*We just stood there.
I just stood there.*

“Take them. They are yours. Take them.”

As a girl from the group began to reach for them, I put my arms out, palms facing upward, ready to

receive the sticks. He passed them off to both of us and we stood there as he looked down at his feet.

“Just promise that you will pass them on to someone who cares; pass on the tradition of the game to someone who appreciates it, understands it.”

I looked down at the sticks which now rested in my arms; unable to even utter a generic “thank you,” this exchange left us sincerely unable to articulate our overwhelming emotions. In an attempt to explicate our unfathomable gratitude, I raised my head and had to clear my throat before I could mumble, “We are speechless, we don’t even know how to respond to such generosity. Thank you. We are completely speechless.” I choked back tears, simultaneously noticing that the boy across from me was similarly looking down to hide his glossed eyes, but his hard swallowing betrayed his effort. Everyone had a similar humbling reaction and proceeded to thank Shorty, shake his hand, and even exchange hugs.

*Sharing cultures.
Sharing stories.
Sharing lives.
Sharing respect.*

Sitting in the van for twelve hours gave us plenty of time to dread the workload awaiting us on our return to campus, classes, life. Even those of us nerdy enough to bring work on our spring break realized how small a dent we put in our academic studies over the course of the week. For me specifically, thesis research loomed over my head and weighed down my duffle bag, still unread. Our excuse: we were immersed in life. Who could blame us? It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and our gift of Fish sticks became our living proof. With plenty of time to recount the events surrounding the gift exchange, we tried to figure out why he chose us and what the gift meant. The deeper we delved, the more questions we uncovered. Fascinated by this unexpected gift from Shorty, who belongs to a culture that is distrustful of whites, I realized I needed to research gift economies in American Indian culture and tradition to grasp a better understanding of his generous gift.

In this paper I focus on the functioning of gift economies in American Indian culture according to Marcel Mauss's theory of the

The act of giving establishes a social bond between the giver and recipient, where the recipient becomes obligated to reciprocate in order to demonstrate his own honor, power, and wealth.

gift—involving the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate—as well as Marshall Sahlins's account of each party's responsibility while involved within the gift cycle. More specifically, I expand upon Lewis Hyde's notion of the artist's gift by examining the importance of American Indian story gifts in protecting one's reputation, maintaining one's power, and strengthening one's bonds as portrayed in James Welch's novel *Fools Crow*.¹ I will first summarize Marcel Mauss, Marshall

Sahlins, and Lewis Hyde's accounts on gift giving. Then I will discuss how, within the Blackfeet tribe Welch depicts, a man named Fools Crow gets rewarded for adhering to the social laws of gift giving, while his peer Fast Horse fails to reciprocate, breaks the gift cycle, and suffers from the consequences. In this way, Welch depicts how narratives within American Indian culture function: boosting the status of the storyteller, increasing self confidence in the audience, providing explanations for the storyteller's misfortune, and preserving the tradition of his or her culture. *Fools Crow* demonstrates how stories themselves can function as gifts that adhere to the cycle of giving, receiving, and reciprocating: Welch emphasizes the necessity of passing on the American Indian narrative in the survival of native history and culture. In short, Welch's novel portrays the gift cycle in its entirety, including appropriate examples of obligated giving, accepting, and reciprocating, the exceptions to these obligations, and the consequences which result from failing to adhere to the social laws of gift giving. The narrative

Fools Crow provides examples of successful and unsuccessful gift exchanges, while simultaneously revealing how the characters' narratives themselves function within the gift economy of American Indian culture.

Part I: The Gift Cycle

Ethnologist Marcel Mauss lays the foundation for theory on gift economies by examining historical examples of gift giving and the rise of reciprocal exchange. After recognizing the pattern of giving, he begins to analyze

the relationship between the giver and gift; his goal is to discover why the recipient pays back the gift. Mauss specifically examines the gift exchanges in Maori culture by listening to Maori informants such as Tamati Ranaipiri, who reveals the secrets of the “theological and juridical spirit” to him:

Now, this *taonga* that he gives me is the spirit (*hau*) of the *taonga* that I had received from you and that I had given to him.

The *taonga* that I received for these *taonga* (which came from you) must be returned to you. It would not be fair (*tika*) on my part to keep these *taonga* for myself, whether they were desirable (*rawe*) or undesirable (*keino*). I must give them to you because they are a *hau* of the *taonga* that you gave me. If I kept this other *taonga* for myself, serious harm might befall me, even death. This is the nature of the *hau*, the *hau*, of personal property, the *hau* of the *taonga*, the *hau* of the forest.²

In short, Mauss concludes that the giver personally and spiritually (*hau*) invests himself in the gift (*taonga*), giving away a part of himself in the act. Therefore, the act of giving establishes a social bond between the giver and recipient, where the recipient becomes obligated to reciprocate in order to demonstrate his own honor, power, and wealth. If the recipient fails to present a return gift after a reasonable amount of time, he becomes vulnerable to punishment. More generally, Mauss suggests that three related obligations comprise gift economies: the obligation to give (to create and maintain social relationships), the obligation to receive (to accept the social bond), and the obligation to reciprocate (to show respect and to exhibit power).

Using the Maussian triad theory of gifts as his basis, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins delves deeper into the exploration of how the spirit of the gift in the physical object perpetuates the cycle of giving. He also examines how the rules of both parties, the original giver and the recipient, should interact within the social confines of a gift economy by examining critiques of Mauss. He cites



“Tree” by Sarah DePietro

Claude Levi-Strauss's argument on the validity of the Maori's rationalization, believing that “the *hau* is not the reason for exchange, only what one people happen to believe is the reason, the way they represent to themselves an unconscious necessity whose reason lies elsewhere”.³ Sahlins then shifts the dispute and finds fault with Mauss's interpretation of the Maori view of *hau*. To support this theory, he quotes ethnologist Raymond Firth, who states, “Mauss confused types of *hau* that in the Maori view are quite distinct—the *hau* of persons, that of lands and forests, and that of *taonga*—and on the strength of this confusion he formulated a serious error...the *hau* of persons was never at issue”.⁴ After thoroughly examining these conflicting positions on the spirit of the gift, the *hau*, Sahlins concludes that the *hau* refers to a return or product which should be given to the original donor.⁵ While Sahlins acknowledges the power of

hau involved in compelling the recipient to reciprocate, he also mentions specific forms of self interest which motivate and perpetuate the cycle of giving. Self interest provokes people to exchange gifts because they know that a person adhering to the social laws of gift giving will receive some form of reward, or at least avoid the punishment that accompanies the breaking of the gift cycle. Giving maintains and improves the reputation, status, and power of the giver, while avoiding psychological burden, fragmentation, loss of authority, and/or physical harm. Giving ultimately benefits the giver even if he acts out of obligation.

Building upon Mauss and Sahlins, who mainly discuss concrete gifts, scholar Lewis Hyde focuses on the inner gifts of creativity and art which, he argues, follow the same communal laws as external gifts. Therefore, non-tangible inner gifts also follow the

cycle of obligatory giving, receiving, and reciprocating: “a gift [inner or outer] that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift. The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation”.⁶ According to Hyde, an artist's talent functions as a gift which increases as it passes through the self because “the artist makes something higher than what he has been given, and this, the finished work, is the third gift, the one offered to the world in general or directed back specifically to the ‘clan and homeland’ of an earlier gift”.⁷ The artist acts as the recipient who becomes obligated to reciprocate, which in this case means that he must pass his gift to others through creation. His inner gift, talent, transforms into an external gift, product. Despite the variations in their understanding of the gift cycle, Hyde, Sahlins, and Mauss agree that a seemingly simple gift carries obligations and restrictions; if the giver and recipient adhere to the social laws of gift giving they will find reward, but if they fail to follow these principles severe consequences will ensue.

Part II: The Gift Cycle in *Fools Crow*

In the novel *Fools Crow*, James Welch's characters, Fools Crow and Fast Horse, do not merely exemplify appropriate and inappropriate action within the gift cycle, but emphasize the importance of the role that gift giving plays in their maturation. As they “come of age” within their Blackfeet culture, tribal members show them more respect and, consequently, give them more responsibility. For instance, both Fools Crow and Fast Horse enter into the gift cycle when they receive their visions (respect), but then they must adhere to the social laws of gift giving (responsibility). Fools Crow becomes responsible for forewarning his tribe by sharing his dream with others, while Fast Horse must move a boulder that blocks a spring. Neither responds properly. It seems as though Fools Crow's fear prevents him from initially relaying his dream to his tribe and Fast Horse's selfishness inhibits him

from seeking out the boulder. Despite their failure to follow the laws of gift giving, Fools Crow and Fast Horse avoid the serious consequences which typically precede such cultural infractions, and even receive a chance to redeem themselves. Why do they escape the severe punishment that Mauss, Sahlins, and Hyde claim result from failing to reciprocate? And more importantly, how do their actions in the gift cycle fit into a

Instead of forcing the gift's recipient to provide an exchange gift solely out of selfishness, out of fear for the negative consequences of their actions, Welch portrays the American Indians as people who generally care about the well-being of other tribal members.

coming-of-age story about American Indians caught between mainstream white culture and traditional customs?

First, although Fools Crow and Fast Horse break the rules of the gift cycle, Welch portrays them as neither understanding the seriousness of the contract they have entered, nor knowing how to respond to their gifts. Since they must learn the social laws surrounding gifts, their inappropriate action, due to their ignorance of gift giving, gets forgiven by the tribe. Their actions do not pass by unnoticed, though. Fools Crow and Fast Horse experience the psychological burden of guilt, but Fools Crow's remorse brings him closer to the tribe while Fast Horse's shame distances him from the Blackfeet. For instance, Fools Crow does not know how to act after receiving his vision, so he seeks help by confiding in an older man in the community, Mik-api. Mik-api explains that Fools Crow must share his story because the spirit within him has become poisonous. He also shows how Fools Crow can atone for his unsuitable response to his dream, honor the

gods through a healing ceremony, and help Yellow Kidney's family. Like Fools Crow, Fast Horse's inexperience with the gift cycle leads to his failure in understanding the implications of neglecting reciprocity. He boasts and laughs about his interaction with Cold Maker while the older, wiser Yellow Kidney worries about fulfilling the obligation to the god. In both instances, the young men's inexperience with the social structure of gift giving hinders

them from responding appropriately, but the older tribal members recognize the danger of not returning a gift and act as a resource by explaining proper responses and teaching methods for atonement when asked. The young men's mistakes become a chance for them to interact with older members of the tribe, learn about their cultural laws of the gift cycle, and maintain a sense of tradition through the older tribal members' teachings. To summarize, Fools Crow and Fast Horse respond inappropriately because they lack the experiential knowledge of gift giving and must turn to the older members for guidance. By showing how the youths are forced to rely on the older members of the tribe in order to learn the culturally accepted rules of the gift cycle, Welch sheds a more positive light on what Mauss refers to as "obligated reciprocity." Instead of forcing the gift's recipient to provide an exchange gift solely out of selfishness, out of fear for the negative consequences of their actions, Welch portrays the American Indians as people who generally care about the well-being of other

tribal members. They seek unity and use the gift cycle as a social method of interaction to show acceptance and respect.

Since *Fools Crow* commonly gets referred to as a "coming-of-age" novel, it is important to examine if and how the characters' maturation within American Indian culture is impacted by gift giving. Fools Crow and Fast Horse's acceptance into the tribal gift cycle signifies the beginning of their initiation into adulthood within the Blackfeet tribe, where their response to receiving gifts functions as a social determinant of their identity. In *Rites of Institution*, Pierre Bourdieu suggests that social rituals divide society into those who experience the rite and those who do not experience the rite. Only a select few in the tribe get personally invited into the gift cycle with the gods, and even fewer experience the powerful vision gifts given to Fools Crow and Fast Horse. Due to their native lineages, the men from the tribe include Fools Crow and Fast Horse in their hunts, horse thievery, ceremonies, and gift cycle, while other boys remain left behind. Including them in these cultural practices places a great deal of pressure on Fools Crow and Fast Horse to live up to the standards of respected, powerful hunters and medicine men within their society. Mirroring Bourdieu's claim that rites of institution "transform the representations others have of him and above all the behaviour they adopt towards him,"⁸ Fast Horse's failure to adhere to the social laws of gift giving and inability to achieve full acceptance into the tribe changes the tribe's perception of him. Although the Blackfeet initially honor Fast Horse for his looks, strength, and lineage, his negligence of the rules of gift giving overshadows these positive attributes and ruins his reputation. Others view him as disrespectful, selfish, foolish, and a poor leader, and their behavior toward him reflects their changed perception. Instead of treating him as a leader by flocking to his stories and looking to him for guidance, the tribe completely separates itself from him through his banishment. Similarly, Fools



Detail of "Untitled" by Hyun Kim

Crow's inclusion in these tribal rites and successful completion of these rites also impose an identity on him, allowing him to become included in more tribal events and ultimately earning him the respect needed to choose his wife, smoke with the elders, and receive ceremonial gifts from tribal members.

Bourdieu's rites of institution not only recognize and emphasize the differences between members of these groups, but legitimize the differences by transforming others' views and treatment of Fools Crow, while simultaneously shaping his own representation of himself and "the behaviour he feels obliged to adopt in order to conform to that representation."⁹ In short, Welch's novel shows that identities impose boundaries on the individual because that person must act in accordance with his identity and will be judged

Stories function as more than just coping mechanisms which displace blame and provide comfort. Stories create. Stories define. Stories ascribe identities.

and treated according to this representation. This distinctive treatment encourages him to realize his essence and conform to living in accordance with his assigned identity. While Fools Crow's identity impacts other's behavior and actions towards him, his own actions also adhere to Bourdieu's theory, which states that a person conforms to society's representation

of him because he feels obligated to act within the confines of the identity given to him. For instance, Fools Crow feels obligated to atone for tribal infractions of the gift cycle, and as a leader, the tribe expects him to play an integral role in the ceremony. He endures torture during the Sun Dance Festival to help heal and protect his people from the consequences of Fast Horse's failure to reciprocate. Before the festival he prepares by fasting, but when the day arrives, elders pierce the flesh of his chest with spears while he dances to the beat of the drum. They apply weight to the sticks until the skewers break free from his body, tearing his flesh and leaving a permanent reminder of his offering for his tribe, his gift to the Sun god, and his new-found leadership role within his tribe. The violence associated with this pivotal ceremony shows Fools Crow's

strength, increasing his power and influence in his community while psychologically making it harder for him to distance himself from social expectations and rites. Bourdieu explains this heightened cultural entrapment, claiming that "people's adherence to an institution is directly proportional to the severity and painfulness of the rites of initiation."¹⁰

Although Bourdieu cites exceptions to conforming and remaining within identity's restraints, such as the "nobleman who demeans himself" and the "priest who abandons his calling,"¹¹ the boundary of the identity remains clear, intact, and still functions to permanently discourage people from crossing the boundary through punishment. Therefore, the reality that he achieves is not based upon his own personal conviction but rather is dependent upon the institution's collective belief reinforced and made prevalent through symbols, qualifications, and other attributes. In *Fools Crow*, tribal members show respect for one another by following the social laws of gift giving, or they dishonor the tribe and cause suffering by disrupting the gift cycle. For instance, when Fast Horse fails to adhere to the social laws of gift giving, the tribe no longer considers him one of its members and physically separates itself from Fast Horse by banishing him. Fast Horse acts as an example of punishment used to dissuade inappropriate behavior in the gift cycle because he gets stripped of his tribal identity and any features which would delineate him as part of the Blackfeet. Soon after his exile, Fast Horse joins a rebel group known for their theft, torture, and murder of others. He spirals down a dangerous path and finds himself trapped in the identity of an outlaw. After joining this new group Fast Horse must act within the confines of his new identity even when he acknowledges the immorality of his actions and feels opposed to carrying out

his part. On the other end of the spectrum, Fools Crow values gift giving and learns how to respond properly when presented with a gift. He gives, accepts, and reciprocates appropriately, solidifying his identity as a respected, powerful man in the tribe.

The Blackfeet culture of Welch's *Fools Crow* finds itself rapidly changing and being divided into groups of people who favor

The artist must labor over his internal gift until he creates a work of art, which he can give to others, and distributes it, so it can be accepted by others. Once people accept the gift of art—in this case, hear the story—they must reciprocate, even if that means simply passing the story onto others.

mainstream culture or those who follow traditional ways. By applying Bourdieu's theory to this American Indian culture in the novel it becomes apparent that native people further divide themselves according to their adherence to the gift cycle, which determines whether they can be respected and trusted as leaders or even participate in the traditional culture. Specifically, Welch shows how an American Indian's heritage plays a role in his acceptance and exemplifies Bourdieu's theory through Fools Crow's socially-ascribed identity. As Fools Crow builds a reputation for adhering to the social laws of gift giving, he builds relationships with the elders and the tribal members treat him with a greater respect. This admiration makes him feel obligated to live up their expectations as a leader by partaking in the excruciatingly painful Sun Dance ceremony to atone for his tribe's failure to reciprocate. Meanwhile, Fast Horse's continual failure to reciprocate to Cold Maker dishonors the god and the tribe, destroying his reputation, leading to his exile, and forcing him to adopt the life of an outlaw.

Part III: The Function of Stories within American Indian Culture

Storytelling plays a crucial role in the survival of the American Indian culture because stories empower the tribe by providing explanations for their misfortune and eliminating them from responsibility by placing blame on trickster characters. But stories function as more than just coping

mechanisms which displace blame and provide comfort. Stories create. Stories define. Stories ascribe identities. Similar to the ways in which Fools Crow and Fast Horse's adherence to or insubordination of the gift cycle define their identity and role in the tribe, storytelling further develops and reveals their identity.

Stories greatly influence Fools Crow's identity; he earns his first name from his fascination with storytelling and his second name from the stories that other tribal members tell about him. Names distinguish people from others, but the Blackfeet culture views American Indians' names as more than just an "individual designation by which a particular person or thing is known, referred to, or addressed."¹² Instead, a Blackfoot American Indian gets named by other tribe members according to his qualities, experiences, or some other form of individual description. Fools Crow first gets named according to his interest in stories and his response to that interest. As a child, Fools Crow loves listening to stories and follows the tribal storyteller around as though he were a loyal dog. His passion for hearing stories

leads to his adolescent name, White Man's Dog. The tribe refers to Fools Crow by the name of White Man's Dog until he begins transitioning into adulthood and becomes the subject of stories. Fools Crow, no longer a passive listener who depends on others to tell him stories, becomes a part of the story itself.

After the raid of Crow horses, tribal members begin to drop Fools Crow's name in conversation, and soon after his accomplishments spread throughout the tribe, men eagerly gather around the storytellers to continually hear about Fools Crow's bravery, skill, and honor. With each telling the danger grows, Fools Crow's actions become more fantastic, and he earns more respect. As the story evolves so does Fools Crow's identity, which gets reflected in his name change from White Man's Dog to Fools Crow. With his new name Fools Crow grows into his newly-ascribed identity as a courageous, powerful leader in the Blackfeet tribe. After he gains his independence and status in the tribe, Fools Crow takes on the most active role in storytelling, empowering others through his stories. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Fools Crow tells One Spot, the little boy attacked by the wolf, the story of Poia in an effort to comfort and rebuild his self-confidence. Stories now become tools that Fools Crow uses to help shape and define others.

In short, Welch shows how stories play an integral role in the identity formation of American Indians through the character Fools Crow. Fools Crow begins as a listener of stories and gradually progresses in his involvement of the storytelling process by inspiring stories with his accomplishments and eventually becoming the storyteller who helps define others. His growth from listening to telling stories corresponds to his maturation and identity development, similarly to the way in which his actions within the gift cycle determine his identity. Although Welch emphasizes the importance of these cultural practices in the Blackfeet tribe by showing numerous examples of stories being told and gifts being given, how can both of these social customs simultaneously define an individual? In what

ways do telling stories and giving gifts overlap, contradict, or reinforce identity development in Welch's depiction of an American Indian tribe? How does a story function as a gift? What does it mean when an individual needs to give a part of oneself to fully realize their identity and place in their culture?

Part IV: Stories as Gifts

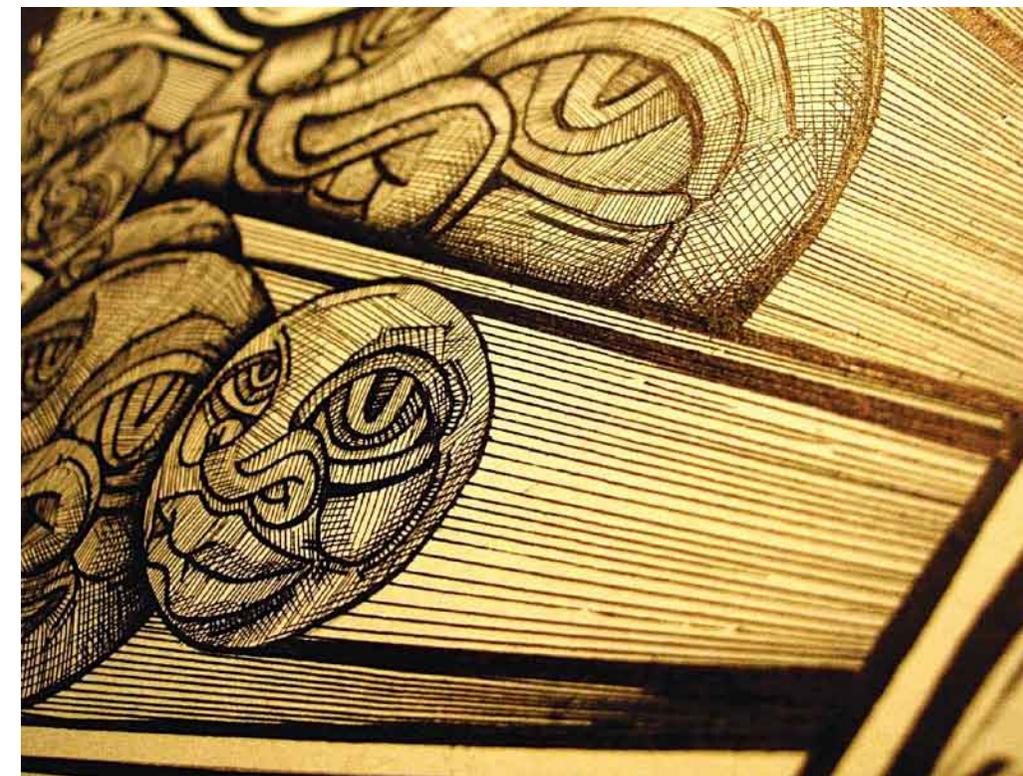
While Welch portrays storytelling as a gift and social determinant, sharing stories functions as more than just a form of giving gifts or method used to ascribe identities to members of the tribe. Stories, or any form of art, contain a deeper personal investment than already-existing tangible gifts. While Mauss and Sahlins's theories on the gift cycle correspond to the vision gifts and responses of Fools Crow and Fast Horse, the author Lewis Hyde specifically focuses on gifts of art. He uses the theories of Mauss and Sahlins as a foundation to draw correlations between the creation and distribution, acceptance, and continuation of stories to the gift cycle's process of giving, receiving, and reciprocating.

The cycle of giving must start with an initial gift, and in the case of an artist's gift, the gift originates internally as a creative spirit. Due to the nature of the gift, the gift of the creative spirit, the artist cannot simply pass the internal gift to others, but neither is he exempt from obligated reciprocity. Instead, the artist must labor over his internal gift until he creates a work of art, which he can give to others, and distributes it, so it can be accepted by others. Once people accept the gift of art—in this case, hear the story—they must reciprocate, even if that means simply passing the story onto others. While the general cycle of giving stories mirrors Mauss and Sahlins's model of the gift cycle, the initial step of creation makes the process of sharing stories intimate and in some instances more valuable. Hyde refers to this process of transforming an internal gift into an external gift as "creation" and believes that the artist's imagination acts as the instrument which "brings the work to life."¹³ The

creation of art occurs while transforming the inner gift and object of the artist's labor into an outer gift, which Hyde refers to as "a vehicle of culture."¹⁴ Hyde's use of the word "vehicle" implies that the artist acts as a medium through which the internal gift gets transmitted, while the artist's gift becomes a means of expression and communication with others. Realizing his gift and creating artwork provides the artist with a method for sharing his gift with others, but since his life and surroundings influence his gift, he cannot avoid sharing his culture and himself with his audience. The work of art still possesses part of the artist even after the gift leaves his possession because "the legal tie, a tie occurring through things, is one between souls, because the thing itself possesses a soul and is of the soul. Hence it follows that to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself,"¹⁵ through his gift he gives a voice to his talent,

culture, and himself. This interpretation of the artist's gift reinforces Hyde's belief that "these creations are not 'merely' symbolic, they do not 'stand for' the larger self; they are its necessary embodiment, a language without which it would have no life at all."¹⁶ When applied to the stories of American Indians, these creations literally keep alive the identity, traditions, and culture of Native Peoples despite the death of certain ceremonies, languages, lineages, and customs.

Storytelling allows them to interact with tribal members, reminisce about their past, share their history, teach their culture, and maintain their American Indian identity. In *Genocide of the Mind*, American Indians who find themselves trapped between mainstream culture and their traditional culture—similarly to the characters in *Fools Crow*—emphasize the importance that storytelling plays in establishing and strengthening their identities. Kathryn Lucci-Cooper refers to her Cherokee



"Untitled" by Hyun Kim

heritage as “mixed” because her family incorporates traditional ancestral beliefs along with mainstream Christian practices. After trying to discover herself at an American university, she comes to the conclusion that “those of us who are Indian understand that it is the telling of stories, our very breath, that brings forth tribal identity and defines purpose. Our oral tradition, which is both ceremonially sacred and ritualized through the

connect with other tribal members and people outside of their tribe. Fools Crow bonds with his tribe over stories because he becomes acquainted with older tribal members by hearing and eventually telling stories to the youth in hopes of inspiring them. Despite the copious examples of storytelling between tribal members, the characters within Welch’s narrative do not generally tell their stories to people outside of the tribe. Instead,

Stories not only define American Indians by the role they play in the storytelling process – as shown through Fools Crow’s maturation and name changing – but stories actually create a world where American Indians can experience their traditions and connect with other tribal members and people outside their tribe.

use of language, is also living thought.”¹⁷ She describes stories as living entities that help American Indians retain their past culture in a present-day setting. Similarly, Lee Francis believes that the identities of American Indians are “inextricable, interwoven in the stories they were told. For Native People, story was and continues to be essential to an individual’s identity construction and development.”¹⁸ American Indians can literally reclaim their identity through storytelling. Contrary to Lucci-Cooper and Francis, another American Indian author Gerald Vizenor does not believe stories merely define a person, but that “the real world exists in stories,” and that the act of storytelling liberates the mind through these language games.¹⁹ Stories not only define American Indians by the role they play in the storytelling process—as shown through Fools Crow’s maturation and name changing—but stories actually create a world where American Indians can experience their traditions and

Welch himself acts as the character who shares a part of himself and his culture with his readers by introducing his audience to the life of a Blackfeet in 1870. Since the majority of his audience probably identifies themselves with mainstream culture, Welch shares the past of his people, the Blackfeet, with outsiders. He provides his readers with a detailed description of ceremonial events like the Sun Dance, incorporates elements of trickster discourse through Fools Crow’s interaction with Raven, and examines the painful history of the Blackfeet characterized by war, disease, and infractions within the tribe. More specifically, Welch bases the ending of *Fools Crow* on the historical event of the Marias River Massacre in the winter of 1870, where a small group of renegades targeted women and children, killing a total of 173 Blackfeet in hopes of halting the white settler’s raiding. Welch heard about this tragic event through the stories of tribal members, but on a more personal level, he learned about

the massacre from his father, whose mother survived the event and told her son about it.²⁰ The tales of his tribe’s history were verbally passed down through his family, and he shares these personal, meaningful stories with his audience through the characters and events in *Fools Crow*. By presenting society with his story of *Fools Crow*, Welch gives his readers a part of himself through the creative spirit in his writing of the story, but more importantly, his gift invites his readers to experience the personal, heart wrenching past of his tribe that lives in his story.

Conclusion

Looking back on the gift of Fish sticks, I still struggle to understand Shorty’s gift, but I do realize that the tangible gift of sticks pales in comparison to his gift of stories involving the sticks and the cultural practices surrounding the Fish games. Shorty accepted us into his culture, even if it was just for that night, but now we must reciprocate. We must pass his story, our new story, onto others; we must continue the tradition.

we came as just a group of white college kids who hid from one another on campus, nearly touching shoulders as we passed by, too busy texting on our cell phones and listening to our iPods. always looking down as we pass, avoiding conversation, interaction. adopting avoidance out of fear of our differences, even though we all look and act the same. cultured to rush, to ignore.

we left as just some white kids. the same white kids, yet transformed by friendship. we try to understand, are learning to understand our story, and how our story intertwines with others. others who trust us, open their arms, open their culture. we accept hesitantly. in sincerest awkwardness, we honor them, him. the drumming begins again, not calling us home. we are not indian. we are just white kids drumming out the rhythm of our steps, hoping to share our story, give you our story. this was our story.

ARTWORK



“Your Dissecting Judgment Doesn’t Hurt Me as Much as My Own”
by Samantha Rivera