The Death of Jim Loney as a Bicultural Novel

The Death of Jim Loney as a Bicultural Novel

Yosuke MURAKAMI

i

The Heath Anthology of American Literature has been very influential in expanding the canon of American literature. The section titled "Contemporary Period: 1945 to the Present" of Volume 2, for example, includes, with brief introductory essays, some representative passages from works by four contemporary Native American novelists, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, and Louise Erdrich. The over-all effort is highly commendable, but if we look at the details, we sometimes find some questionable statements. The short essay by Linda Wagner-Martin on James Welch is a case in point. I believe that it largely misrepresents Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979). Let me quote a paragraph from the essay:

> In *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*, Welch drew with superb understatement the unlived lives of the contemporary Native American men, shut off from college educations because of family poverty and ignorance, warded away from financial respectability because of that education cut short. In each book, the protagonist had been a star high school athlete. Now, a decade or more after that athletic career ended, the men have no direction and no

> promise. They lead aimless lives of drinking, sex (and the promise that a healthy sexual relationship might hold is undercut by their own nihilistic attitudes), and apathy. Confused relationships with parents, especially with the father, whose life as an outsider to the white culture has set the model for the son, dominates [sic] what plot exists. But more than plot, these novels are marked by mood and tone, atmosphere as precisely drawn as anything by Hemingway or Richard Wright. Alienation and loss are what remain from reading these stunning texts. (2739)

I believe that Wagner-Martin's comment distorts, to a great extent, both *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*. The nature of the distortion, however, differs for each novel.[1] For the sake of clarity, then, I will limit my discussion in this paper to *The Death of Jim Loney*, Welch's second novel.

The most fundamental problem with Wagner-Martin's reading of *The Death of Jim Loney* is that she is looking at a bicultural novel from a monocultural perspective, totally disregarding the phenomenon of the conflict between the European-American worldview and the Native American worldview, with which Welch is centrally concerned in the novel. In *The Death of Jim Loney*, Rhea Davis, a white woman of 29 from Dallas, Texas, most clearly represents the European-American cultural values, while Jim Loney, a half-breed of 35, born and bred in Harlem, Montana, represents the Native American cultural values.

It might be helpful to review here quickly the essential differences between the European-American worldview and the Native American worldview in terms of their three components. The first component is the view of time. According to the European-American worldview,

time is linear and progressive, while, according to the Native American worldview, time is cyclical and cumulative. Thus, European-Americans tend to be future-oriented, while Native Americans have deep respect for the past. The second component is the view of place/space. European-Americans readily accept the idea of geographic mobility based on the assumption of boundless space, while Native Americans value the sense of attachment to a specific place. The third component is the view of human relations. European-Americans assume that one ought to be autonomous and individualistic, while Native Americans are traditionally tribal and communal, valuing kinship relations in particular.

Of course, these three components are closely intertwined. James Oliver Robertson, for example, argues as follows, after pointing out that "Americans do not believe that individuals ought to stay in one place" (147).

> [T]he first requisite of individualism was the "wish to change your lot." . . . The significant outward sign of the process of changing one's lot, increasingly its most powerful symbol, was to move beyond one's native spot, leaving behind "the village where Pa and Ma do stay." Both village and parents became symbols of origins, nativity, stability, and civilization; in a wider context, they were the Old World as contrasted with the New World of youth, of the frontier, of somewhere else. . . . The geographical or physical move became and is the essential step in the formation of the American individual. . . . (148-149)

It is obvious that Robertson is not simply expanding the initial idea that "Americans do not believe that individuals ought to stay in

one place." The geographical move that Robertson discusses necessitates a break with the past and a break with one's parents. Thus, the three components are often inseparably connected with each other.

Having said this much, I will next try to illustrate how Welch has constructed *The Death of Jim Loney* around the conflicts between the aforementioned two worldviews.

ii

When the novel opens, the time is the first week of October, 1977.[2] By this time, Loney, living all by himself, has almost completely stopped going out. For nearly two months, he has been seeing only Rhea, his love. For a month, he has been spending a lot of time, thinking of his life, while drinking wine at the kitchen table. As Welch commented in an interview, "[Loney is] on a kind of search for something that will give some meaning to [his life]" (Coltelli 187). Loney realizes, however, that he does not know "one damn thing that [is] worth knowing" (18). One reason why he feels this way is that he senses that he is disconnected from the past. His memories of the past, particularly those of the people most closely related to him, are fragmentary and confusing.

> He had tried to think of all the little things that added up to a man sitting at a table drinking wine. But he couldn't connect the different parts of his life, or the various people who had entered and left it. (20)

The phrase, "all the little things that added up to a man sitting

at a table drinking wine," points to the Native American perception of time as a cumulative entity. Welch emphasizes the point by having Loney say to himself:

> "Okay, from this very moment I will start back—I will think of yesterday, last week, last year, until all my years are accounted for. Then I will look ahead and know where I'm going." (21)

Loney is desperately in search of a sense of continuity over time, but he simply cannot account for his past years. As the novel progresses, we come to realize the nature of the difficulty that Loney encounters in his search.

As he tries to see "the order in his life" (21), he has to face the fact anew that he has been deserted over and over again. First of all, in 1943, when he was one year old, Loney was abandoned, along with his sister Kate, by his Native American mother. Much later on, when he was in high school, Loney learned from George Yellow Eyes, who was on the same basketball team with him, that his mother, after abandoning Loney and Kate, lived with Yellow Eyes' father in Harlem. Other than that, Loney knows practically nothing about his mother's past. He erroneously believes, for example, that his mother was a Westwolf from somewhere around Hays on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation to the south of Harlem. Kate has told him that their mother went insane after she left them, but he does not know whether it is true or not.

After his wife deserted the family, Loney's father, Ike, became "mean, and then bitter" (70). Ike felt that "he was left with two kids and no desire to be a father" (99). Loney was raised by his embittered European-American father for nine years, and then,

when he was ten, he and his sister were abandoned by Ike. Eventually Ike came back to Harlem 12 years later, that is, 14 years ago. We learn that Ike, after bumming around for a year, worked for 11 years as a miner in Butte, Montana. We also learn that he had three vertebrae crushed on the job and that he has lived, after returning to Harlem, on the settlement money, and then on monthly disability checks. Loney, however, did not learn any of these things, because he and Ike had never talked since Ike's return to Harlem.

Kate, Jim's sole sibling, left him when he was ten "to go to a better place" (90), that is, to attend a mission school in Flandreau, South Dakota. Kate had been taking care of Loney for some time, teaching the things that she had learned in school, so that Loney felt all the more rejected and forsaken when she left him. Loney and Kate met "only four or five times, all in the last ten years, since they parted as children"(56). Kate obviously did not come back to Harlem to see Loney until she started working for the government in Washington, D.C., ten years ago. It has been three years since she last returned to Harlem.

After Ike deserted him, Loney lived with a woman whom he believed to be "an aunt" (19) for two years, but she eventually left him, too. Subsequently, Loney left Harlem to attend a mission school in southern Montana for about a year. Then he returned to Harlem to go to Harlem High School, living in a boardinghouse run by a minister and his wife. Unfortunately, while he was in these schools, he was not able to meet an adult or adults who would function as a surrogate parent or parents. After graduating from Harlem High School, the narrator says, Loney "never saw the minister and his wife again" (53).

By the time the novel opens, Loney has started seeing a vision

of a large dark bird every night. He does not know, however, how to interpret the vision. In addition, his hands have begun to tremble for a reason unknown to him. It is undeniable, though, that the vision of the bird and the trembling of his hands have both stemmed from his attempt to piece together the past into a comprehensible whole. The attempt is crucial, because, from a Native American perspective, time is a continuum and, therefore, the present is indivisible from the past. It is unthinkable, from a Native American point of view, to simply forget the past. Thus, Loney "ha[s] always admired Kate's ability to live in the present, but he ha[s] also wondered at her lack of need to understand her past" (88). The tragedy for Loney is that what little memory that he has of the past suggests the terrible fact that he has experienced virtually no parental or familial love.

Quite early in the novel, Rhea says to Loney:

> "Oh, you're so lucky to have two sets of ancestors. Just think, you can be Indian one day and white the next. Whichever suits you." (14)

At that time, Loney says to himself that "it would be nicer to be one or the other all the time, to have only one set of ancestors" (14). Later on, however, Loney realizes that "[i]n truth he ha[s] none" (102).

In this context, it is important to notice Loney's attitude toward his past, observable in the following dialog that he had with Rhea:

> "Did it ever occur to you that if you left you would leave these . . . visions behind? You might become so involved

with a new life that your past would fade away – that bird would fade away for good."

"I don't know that I want that to happen." (105-06)

Thus, even if he finds his past damning for him, he is reluctant to try to wipe out the past and start "a new life," if such a thing is indeed possible.

iii

In the time present of the novel, Loney does not "even know what [his mother] looks like, or even if she's still alive"(18). He does not even know his mother's name. Loney dreams about his mother searching for him in the graveyard behind the Catholic church down in the valley east of the Fort Belknap Agency, but in actuality she has never come back in search of him. His dream of his mother looking for her son is a projection of his present need for an affectionate mother or it is a projection of his wish to have had his mother come back in search of him when he was still a child.

As we have seen earlier, Loney's father returned to Harlem 14 years ago. He has lived in a small trailer house alone since then. Ike is now 62, and on some of his frequent visits to bars, he catches a glimpse of Loney but he refuses to recognize his son. Loney has been waiting for his father to approach him but his father never makes a move. Loney guesses that his father doesn't "think it [is] worth it"(17).

Loney twice has a hallucinatory vision of his father looking into his room at the window. When Loney has the first hallucinatory vision, his father is looking at Loney weeping at the table. Soon

Loney himself joins his father outside, looking in at the weeping man. Loney explains to his father that the man is weeping because "[h]e has no family" (23). Just as Loney's dream of his mother in search of him does, the hallucinatory visions of his father visiting him also indicate his deep sense of loss.

Ike, on the other hand, resents "the fact that he and his son [live] in the same town"(99). Loney reminds him of the unpleasant time that he experienced when his wife deserted the family. As Ike has no sense of parental responsibility, "[it doesn't] occur to him to feel guilty for abandoning his children" (100).

Come to think of it, theirs is indeed a very strange father-son relationship. Living in a small town and coming across each other occasionally, they have never even saluted each other for 14 years. It is no wonder, then, that Loney feels that his existence is pointless. He has been repeatedly abandoned and most of the time ignored. He has not been allowed to develop a sense of his own worth.

Three or four years ago, Kate started to offer to pay Loney's way to Washington, D.C. and to get him a job there. Two days after Thanksgiving, Kate comes back to Harlem, intending to take Loney back with her to Washington, D.C. Rhea herself wants to take him, in the opposite direction, to Seattle.[3]

As I have pointed out, of all the characters in the novel, Rhea most clearly represents the European-American cultural values. Born and raised in a very wealthy family in Dallas, she has an M.A. in English from Southern Methodist University there. She was once engaged to a lawyer. She came to Harlem two years ago to "run away from her family [and] the man she was engaged to" (31). To individualistic Rhea, her relations with other people are "entanglements" (22). She came to Harlem seeking freedom from these entanglements and "a complete break with [her]

past" (86). When we think of Loney's sense of despair over the disconnectedness from his family and the past, it becomes obvious that Welch has conceived of Rhea as his antithesis.

After living in Harlem for two years, teaching English at Harlem High School, Rhea now thinks of moving to Seattle with Loney.

> [H]er most common fantasy involved starting fresh in a place where neither of them had been. Lately that fantasy place was Seattle. She liked the idea of lush greenery, of mountains and salt water. Her friend Colleen was from Seattle and Colleen had painted a picture of heaven on earth. It did sound like the perfect place, and not far. They could be there in two days. Maybe he wouldn't feel so *displaced*. (26)

It is true that Loney sometimes feels out of place in Harlem and its environs. One time he says to Rhea:

> "I've never understood [the country around Harlem]. Once in a while I look around and I see things familiar and I think I will die here. It's my country then. Other times I want to leave, to see other things, to meet people, to die elsewhere." (106-107)

But it is a bit absurd to imagine, as Rhea does, that Loney would be less "displaced" in a place where he has never been before. As a matter of fact, Loney visited Seattle a couple of times when he was receiving basic army training at Fort Lewis near Tacoma and felt "displaced" in the city. Then he did come home to

Harlem. It is obvious that Welch is critical of Rhea's "fantasy."

Later on, Rhea says to Kate, "Don't ask me why I chose Seattle. I guess it just seems like a place to escape to" (87). It is clear, therefore, that Rhea is again trying to "run away from things" (31). After deciding to separate from Loney, Rhea, quite in character, "want[s] to be gone, to be on the road, in Denver, Amarillo, anywhere but here" (134). She thinks "how wonderful it [will] be to be in a motel room in Billings or Cheyenne, somewhere on the map, in transit" (134). The phrases, "on the road" and "in transit" most aptly characterize her basic urge. It is interesting to note that there is a somewhat similar passage about Kate when she is stranded in Denver because of a snowstorm on her way back to Harlem.

> The plane from Phoenix had been able to land but no flights got off the ground after that, so she had spent the night in a Ramada Inn next to the airport. She had been annoyed at first, but after she got settled in she had found herself enjoying the night's isolation. It always surprised her, when she was *on the road*, how pleasant it could be without people, to lie half naked on a queen-size bed and watch a couple of hours of silly shows on the television. (63; my emphasis)

Rhea is a small, green-eyed, blond white Texan, while Kate is a six-foot tall, dark-eyed, black-haired half-breed Montanan. Rhea is a daughter of a millionaire, while Kate is a daughter of a social derelict. At first, therefore, we have the impression that Rhea and Kate are contrasting figures, but as parallel descriptions like the above gradually accumulate, we begin to realize that Rhea and Kate are similar in many ways. As Rhea occasionally seeks "a

complete break with [her] past," dreaming of "a new life" and "starting fresh," so does Kate, as we have already observed, deny the importance of the past. Welch comments in an interview on the difference in the attitudes of Loney and Kate toward time as follows:

> [Loney] can't understand [Kate]. His sister is able to just forget about her past and just think of the future. He can't forget about his past . . . . (McFarland, "An Interview" 10-11)

On the night before Rhea leaves Harlem, she becomes conscious of the wind, while she is in the living room.

> Then she heard the wind rattle the glass doors. She had become used to the north wind in her two years, but tonight it meant something. After tonight she would never know that particular wind again. (135)

We realize here that she plans never to come back to Harlem. When Kate senses that Loney is not coming to Washington, D.C., with her, she says flatly, "I will never come back [to Harlem]" (88). When Rhea finally decides to leave Loney, we wonder how important her relationship with Loney has been to her. We get the impression that Rhea is essentially afraid of being deeply committed to somebody. When Kate eventually gives up on Loney, we also wonder how important Loney has been to her. She coldly says to Loney, "You are not a part of [my life] anymore. . . " (88). Kate is after all a self-sufficient person. Ron McFarland seems to notice the similarity between Rhea and Kate, and I believe that he is correct when he says:

> Jim Loney accepts neither of the options offered [by] Rhea and Kate, and in truth they amount to little more than two versions of the same thing: denial of serious, deep confrontation of the self. ("Women's Roles" 157)

Loney refuses to leave Harlem because, in his search for his identity, the place is inseparably connected with his past memories.

> "I can't leave," [Loney] said [to Kate], and he almost knew why. He thought of his earlier attempts to create a past, a background, an ancestry – something that would tell him who he was. (88)

Thus when Kenneth Lincoln says that "[Loney] has no place to leave . . . " (166), he seems to be completely missing the point.

iv

As we have observed earlier, when Loney tries to reconstruct his past, he has to admit that he was abandoned by everyone of importance to him. There is one thing, however, that seems to redeem his past. That is his vague memory of the two years that he spent with a woman after his father abandoned him when he was ten. She told Loney that she was his "aunt" (89). She was a white woman, so that Loney must have thought that she was related to his father. Loney does not even remember her name. He only knows that her name was "Sandra, or Susan, or something that started with an S" (19). Just as Loney does not know "what [his mother] looks like" (18), he doesn't even know the color of the woman's hair. Loney, however, remembers that "she liked

him" (19). Furthermore, tiny little things remind him of the happy times that he experienced with her. A Christmas candle that he picks up by chance reminds him of Christmas that they celebrated together. A cup of tea that Rhea serves him reminds him of the cocoa that they used to have in the evening. It is significant that Loney has neither celebrated Christmas nor had cocoa since he parted with his "aunt." A particular Christmas Eve that he spent with her stands out in Loney's memory, fragmentary as it is.

> [His aunt] started to cry. He was twelve and he put his hand on her hair. He couldn't look at her, but he held his hand there until she stopped. She was good and he moved his fingers through her hair until she stopped. He had felt like a man, and after mass they opened presents and he felt as happy as anyone in the world. (50-51)

It is important to notice here that the "aunt" was not just a surrogate mother to Loney. He felt that he was an adult male responding to her as a lover.

We gradually learn that Loney is primarily tied to the past and to Harlem because of his memory of his "aunt."

> Maybe [Kate] had the right idea; maybe it was the present that mattered, only the present. But even as he thought this he saw the woman that Christmas Eve, his hand in her hair. (88)

We realize that if Loney was ever loved, he was loved in Harlem, and Harlem alone. It is no wonder that he is reluctant to leave

Harlem.

On her last visit, Kate tells Loney that the name of the woman who took care of him after he was abandoned by his father was Sandra and she was "[his] father's lover" (89). It appears that Kate is suggesting that Sandra was not Loney's "aunt." We cannot say anything conclusive here, because, Loney, later on, tells Rhea that "[his trouble] has to do with an aunt [he] lived with when [he] was a kid" (104). We cannot tell whether it is true or not, but Kate also tells Loney that Sandra is dead now.

V

After accidentally killing Myron Pretty Weasel, a Native American friend of his on a hunting trip, Loney begins to feel that he may have killed Pretty Weasel "on purpose" (147). Pretty Weasel, who was on the same basketball team with Loney in high school, attended the University of Wyoming, but he decided to come back in his junior year to work with his father. Eventually, he and his father have come to run the biggest ranch on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. We do not know exactly why Loney finally convinces himself that he meant to shoot Pretty Weasel to death. The following comment that Welch made in an interview is of no great help.

> [Loney] could have probably gone to the authorities and said, "This is what happened; it was an accident; I mistook him for a bear," or whatever, and he would have probably gotten off; they would have had no proof that he intended to shoot Pretty Weasel, but instead he chose to think of it himself: "possibly I pulled that trigger for some reason,

maybe I did know it was Pretty Weasel." (Coltelli 192-193)

My reading is that Loney has been subconsciously jealous of Pretty Weasel. He had a father, who was a tribal chairperson for a number of years, to come home to, and he had his father's ranch to come home to. His is also a broken family, as his mother and two older sisters moved to Billings, while he was away at the University of Wyoming, but he has withstood the split. After all, Pretty Weasel can go and see his mother, whenever he wants to. Another thing which may have disturbed Loney is the fact that Pretty Weasel appears to be securely rooted. It is also very likely that Loney subconsciously begins to conceive a way to destroy himself. By believing that he has killed Pretty Weasel on purpose, Loney is closing his way out.

After the accident, Loney searches for Sandra's grave in the cemetery of the Catholic church, but in vain. After the futile search, Loney once again reviews his life. As we have seen earlier, Loney learned from Yellow Eyes that his mother left his father for Yellow Eyes' father. The news was stunning to Loney, but he finally accepted it. What he still cannot accept is "the idea that she ha[s] never tried to see him"(133). Loney knows that his mother remained in Harlem for several years after she left him. As we have noted already, his hands have begun to tremble some time ago, and he now realizes that it is "because there [is] no real love in his life"(134). Kathleen Sands claims that "[t]hroughout the novel Loney fears life, fears pleasure, love, new experiences"(129). On the contrary, Loney is deeply wounded because "there [is] no real love in his life."

A couple of days after shooting Pretty Weasel, Loney at last confronts his father in his trailer house and asks him to tell him

about his mother and Sandra. They talk with each other for the first time in twenty-five years. In this talk, Loney is finally able to learn that his mother's name was Eletra. He also learns that his mother, Eletra Calf Looking, was from Lodgepole on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. Ike's account of Loney's mother, however, is not only brief but also falsified. Ike, for example, tells Loney that he has heard that she is working as a nurse in one of the reservation hospitals in New Mexico, but Loney intuits that his father is lying. We learn that Eletra is in a "bughouse" (144), most likely in "Warm[s]prings" (70), Montana, but Loney himself gains no knowledge of his mother's whereabouts. He is not even sure if she is alive or not.

In this encounter, Loney comes to know for certain that he and Sandra are not blood kin to each other. The more shattering revelation in this encounter with his father is that it is very likely that Sandra took Loney in because she was "a social worker" (145). Ike says that, as far as he knows, that was the only reason she took him in. As we have observed earlier, Loney remembers that "[Sandra] liked him." It is not too much to say that this memory of Sandra's liking him has somehow sustained him over the years. And yet, Loney must now be wondering if Sandra was dealing with him merely as a social worker. It is possible that Loney mistook her pity for him as genuine affection. She was not a surrogate mother, then, and Loney could never be a lover to her. It is possible that, to Sandra, he was simply an abandoned child who needed looking after.

> Loney felt a kind of distant shame for having thought up until now that he had been a kind of lover to Sandra. He had deluded himself all these years. (145)

As "of all the women in his life, [Sandra] was the one [Loney] tried hardest to love" (51), the new knowledge that he has gained about Sandra is all the more devastating to him.

vi

It is when "he no longer [thinks] or care[s] about his mother or the social worker" (146) that Loney announces to Ike that he has killed a man. He also tells Ike that he is going to Mission Canyon in the Little Rockies, which is on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. The narrator says, "It [is] part of a dim plan that he [doesn't] understand" (149). The plan soon turns out to be that he will be shot to death by the reservation police. Welch explains Loney's reasoning:

> . . . Loney increasingly makes [the accidental shooting of Pretty Weasel] a murder in his own mind. So, finally, he comes to think, "I did murder Pretty Weasel and therefore, the same should happen to me."
>
> (McFarland, "An Interview" 10)

It may be so, but it is also true that Loney decides to be shot to death because he feels that his painful life, completely devoid of love, is pointless. Loney must have felt that his life could have a real meaning only in relation with other lives.

In discussing *The Death of Jim Loney* and five other novels by Native American authors, William Bevis says, "Curiously, all six novels are from inland West reservations. . . " (592). As a matter of fact, the central locale of *The Death of Jim Loney* is Harlem, not the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. Thus, Bevis

seems to miss the point of Loney's deliberate choice of Mission Canyon as the place of his death. Mick McAllister also has a mistaken notion about the locale of the novel:

> Reading Jim Welch's early novels (*Winter in the Blood, The Death of Jim Loney*), we will find in them paralyzed, trapped narrators, young Indians incapable of rescuing themselves from the spiritual and material poverty of their lives on the reservations. . . . (151)

Because McAllister believes that Loney lives on a reservation, he fails to see what actually happens in *The Death of Jim Loney*. (Incidentally, Loney is not, of course, the narrator of the novel.) As Loney's inner turmoil has resulted from his commitment to the Native American cultural values, he chooses a spot on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation for the place of his death. His mother, as we recall, grew up on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. As we have seen earlier, Loney has been unable to interpret the vision of a dark bird satisfactorily. He, nevertheless, has a vague notion that "it is a vision sent by [his] mother's people" (105). Quite appropriately, then, at the moment of his death, "the last thing he [sees are] the beating wings of a dark bird as it climbs to a distant place" (179).

William Thackeray argues that "[Loney]'s too stubborn and honest and aloof to be White or Indian. He is a half[-]breed" (135). It is true that, in terms of racial make-up, Loney is a half-breed, but, as we have seen so far, his cultural identity is closely tied with the Native American worldview. It is true that the narrator tells us, "[Loney has] never felt Indian" (102), but it is because Loney senses that he does not fit his own image of

a typical Native American at all.

> When Loney thought of Indians, he thought of the reservation families, all living under one roof, the old ones passing down the wisdom of their years, of their family's years, of their tribe's years, and the young ones soaking up their history, their places in their history, with a wisdom that went beyond age. (102)

Loney knows very well that he can never conceive himself to be a member of a multigenerational, extended Native American family. It is evident, however, that Welch has designed the novel in such a manner that Loney gives preference to the Native American cultural values over the dominant European-American cultural values. When he plans his death, then, Loney restructures the unbearable reality and forces his will upon it. He dies as a Native American warrior on a reservation. I believe that Loney's vision of the large dark bird derives from his wish for some kind of contact with his mother. Loney knows that his mother has never come back in search of him, but, at the moment of his death, he imagines, by sheer will, that she is actually with him. If this is overstretching the point, it is at least evident that Loney dies thinking of his Native American mother. Thackeray's assertion that "[Loney]'s too stubborn and honest and aloof to be White or Indian. He is a half[-]breed," then, seems to be widely off the mark.

vii

It is noteworthy that Welch has referred to Loney's organizing

of his death as a positive act. According to Dexter Westrum, Welch said in a panel discussion in 1984:

> [Loney] becomes a man of action. . . . He realizes he has done something traumatic here and he takes the blame for it. . . . He treats himself as a criminal. And he plants clues around so the cop will know to find him in Mission Canyon and he knows which cop will come to get him and he knows that cop won't be afraid to shoot him. To create one's own death is a positive way of acting. (143)

In an interview in 1985, Welch commented as follows:

> He does orchestrate his own death very well, and I think he enjoys in a grim way doing that, so that he knows that finally it will come to this: him on the cliff, Doore taking the caps off his scope so he can line Loney up. So I think in some ways it's probably the only really positive thing that he does, and it's positive by being an act that he has created. (Coltelli 193)

I argue that, on these two occasions, Welch was endorsing Loney's death as a Native American in terms of his cultural identity. If so, Welch was indirectly endorsing Loney's preference for the Native American cultural values over the European-American cultural values.

As a matter of fact, Welch is critical of Rhea's rejection of her past, her longing for being always "in transit," and her detestation of involvement with others. After quitting her job in Harlem, Rhea wonders, "Whatever am I going to do with myself?" (127)

In the quotation at the beginning of this paper, Wagner-Martin points out that Loney has "no direction." Well, Rhea is equally directionless, if not more. Similarly, Welch is obviously critical of Kate's disregard of the past, her denial of her tie with her birthplace, and her readiness to sever her tie with Loney. At the age of 40, she is leading a solitary life, living all alone in an apartment in Washington, D. C., and she is clearly friendless. It is true that, unlike Loney, a part-time agricultural laborer, Kate has a "a real job" (7). It is not specifically stated in the novel, but it is reasonable to assume that Kate is a college graduate. She enjoys "financial respectability" from which, as Wagner-Martin points out, Loney has been warded off. Nevertheless, there is no question that Kate is as alienated as Loney. We should realize that Rhea's and Kate's lives are not presented as a possible alternative to Loney's life.

Colleen, a minor European-American character, is a clear sign that Wagner-Martin's reading is biased. Colleen is apparently college-educated. She drinks more heavily than Loney and regularly "[comes] apart" (127). Wagner-Martin says that Loney leads "[an] aimless [life] of drinking, sex . . . , and apathy." As a matter of fact, the description fits Colleen better than Loney.

viii

Peter Wild claims that "Rhea . . . is . . . convincing" (42). I feel, however, that Rhea is not a fully developed, convincing character. Welch was probably too busy making her think and talk according to a predetermined cultural outlook. Loney also sometimes appears clumsy. We can argue that the novel is overly schematic; Welch has spelt out things too much. Therefore, it is

all the more surprising that Wagner-Martin completely misses the bicultural nature of the novel. Wild also reads *The Death of Jim Loney* from a monocultural perspective and asserts that "[c]ritics who insist on seeing 'Indianness' where there is little of it to be found . . . do a disservice to James Welch. . . " (45). We would indeed do a great disservice to Welch, if we refuse to see the conflict between the Native American cultural values and the European American cultural values in *The Death of Jim Loney*. It is of a much smaller stature than *Fools Crow*, Welch's third novel, but it is a noble attempt at a moving and memorable bicultural novel.

Notes

[1]*Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney* are, in many ways, quite dissimilar to each other. First, the unnamed narrator of *Winter in the Blood*, the protagonist of the novel, lives on a reservation, while Jim Loney does not. Second, the relationship between the narrator and his father in *Winter in the Blood* is certainly not "[c]onfused," while we might be justified in calling the relationship between Loney and his father "[c]onfused." The narrator of *Winter in the Blood* has an unequivocally fond memory of his dead father, First Raise, who truly loved him. Third, the narrator of *Winter in the Blood* learns, very near the end of the novel, that he is after all a full-blooded Native American, while Loney has a mixed racial heritage. As Welch said in an interview, the moment of discovery for the narrator of *Winter in the Blood* of his true lineage constitutes "a giant epiphany" (McFarland, "An Interview" 11). As the novel concludes, the narrator no longer feels alienated. For these and other differences, it is inappropriate to bundle together

Winter in the Blood and *The Death of Jim Loney* as Wagner-Martin does.

[2]The time of the plot in the novel is the period from "the first week of October" (3) to Christmas of an unspecified year. Loney is "[t]hirty-five" (139) years old when he confronts his father during the Christmas season. Loney was on the basketball team that won Harlem High School's only state championship in "1958" (21), and soon after graduating from Harlem High School, he enlisted in the army. Then, "sixteen years ago" (44), that is, when he was 19, he was sent to Fort Lewis, Washington, for basic training. One can reasonably assume, then, that the year of the events of the novel, should be 1974, 1975, 1976, or 1977. According to the novel, Thanksgiving Day, the fourth Thursday of November, falls on "the twenty-fourth" (50) of November that year. The year in question must be 1977, because, of the years 1974, 1975, 1976, and 1977, Thanksgiving Day fell on the twenty-fourth of November only in 1977. We can tell that Welch was careful about the calender, for the twenty-third of December in 1977 was indeed a Friday, as it is a "Friday" (128) in the novel.

[3]The two cities, Seattle and Washington, D.C., may have been chosen for their symbolic meanings. Kenneth Lincoln notes the interesting fact that "[a] distant sister and a transient lover want to hide Loney away in mirroring coastal cities, Washington, D.C., and Seattle, Washington, American capitals named for white and red 'fathers.'" (165) Welch may have found it significant that Rhea, a white woman, wants to take Loney to Seattle, and Kate, a half-breed, wants to take him to Washington, D.C.

Works Cited

Bevis, William. "Native American Novels: Homing In." *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*. Eds. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987. 580-620.

Coltelli, Laura, ed. *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1990.

Lincoln, Kenneth. *Native American Renaissance*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.

McAllister, Mick. "Homeward Bound: Wilderness and Frontier in American Indian Literature." *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream: Essays on American Literature*. Ed. David Mogen, et al. College Station: Texas A & M UP, 1989. 149-58.

McFarland, Ron(ald). "An Interview with James Welch." *James Welch*. Ed. Ron McFarland. 1-19.

———, ed. *James Welch*. Lewiston: Confluence, 1986.

———. "Women's Roles in Contemporary Native American Writing and in Welch's *The Death of Jim Loney*." *James Welch*. Ed. Ron McFarland. 147-158.

Robertson, James Oliver. *American Myth, American Reality*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.

Sands, Kathleen. "*The Death of Jim Loney:* Indian or Not?" *James Welch*. Ed. Ron McFarland. 127-133.

Thackeray, William. "The Dance of Jim Loney." *James Welch*. Ed. Ron McFarland. 135-38.

Wagner-Martin, Linda. "James Welch (Blackfeet-Gros Ventre) b. 1940." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Volume 2. 2nd ed. Paul Lauter, et al. Lexington: Heath, 1994.

Welch, James. *The Death of Jim Loney*. New York: Penguin, 1987.

———. *Fools Crow*. New York: Penguin, 1990.

———. *Winter in the Blood*. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Westrum, Dexter. "Transcendental Survival: The Way the Bird Works in *The Death of Jim Loney*." *James Welch*. Ed. Ron McFarland. 139-46.

Wild, Peter. *James Welch*. Boise: Boise State U, 1983.