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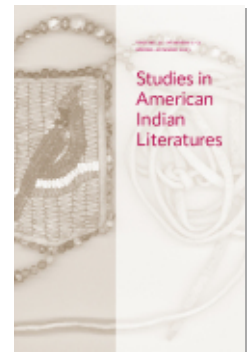
The Hermeneutics of Starvation: Alienation, Reading, and  
Fish in James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*

Lloyd Alimboyao Sy

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# The Hermeneutics of Starvation

Alienation, Reading, and Fish in James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*

LLOYD ALIMBOYAO SY

**Abstract:** This essay proposes that James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) considers what it might mean to perform interpretation in decrepit situations. To do this it traces various forms of lack in the novel and their conjunction with practices of reading or comprehension, but it especially focuses on the novel's depiction of scarcity with regards to an important part of the Blackfeet/Gros Ventre diet: fish. The essay argues that the novel's dearth of fish—among other destitute conditions—forces characters to interpret their situations through what I call the “hermeneutics of starvation.” I suggest that this form of reading, which I base on the statements of the book's elder Yellow Calf, could characterize the literature of the Native American Renaissance more generally.

**Keywords:** James Welch, starvation, hermeneutics, reading, fish, interpretation, memory, miscomprehension

Near the end of James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974), the Gros Ventre elder Yellow Calf muses on a harrowing winter decades earlier. During that season, the Blackfeet chief Standing Bear died during a period of conflict with the American military. Pursued by the army, the tribes were forced to move around their homelands, surrounding what would later become the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana. Cold and bereft of nourishment, the Blackfeet and Gros Ventre died in large numbers. But Yellow Calf's depiction of the winter of starvation contains a surprising evaluation of the tribes' dire status and their handling of it: “You must understand how people think in desperate times. When their bellies are full, they can afford to be happy and generous with each other—the meat is shared, the women work and gossip, men gamble—it's a good time and you do not see things clearly. There is no need. But when the pot is empty and your guts are tight in your belly, you begin to look around. The hun-

ger sharpens your eye.”<sup>1</sup> As he summarizes, “When you are starving, you look for signs. Each event becomes big in your mind.”<sup>2</sup>

In the terrible conditions of food deprivation, Yellow Calf suggests one might read *more* assiduously into events and “signs.” In times of hunger, signs come readily and demand intense attention; put another way, hermeneutic desire erupts amidst shortage. When nothing is left, interpretation becomes readily practiced, perhaps to make the best of whatever remains. As the Indigenous population shrinks, Yellow Calf implies, every vestige and fragment of life becomes more significant—that is, more likely to be interpreted.

This essay proposes that Yellow Calf’s representation of the interpretive mode produced by starvation reveals a vital aspect of Welch’s literary project. While the nameless narrator of *Winter in the Blood* does not suffer from starvation *per se*, he does suffer from a kind of psychological starvation. In the novel, the narrator’s alienation from himself and from others is repeatedly represented through a lack of one of the most significant components of the traditional Blackfeet diet: fish.<sup>3</sup> Fish and fishing are leitmotifs throughout *Winter in the Blood*. Besides scenes of fishing and discussions about it, a medicine man is named Fish. By centering fish in this essay, I focus on the most significant and dynamic strand of food-related desolation in the novel.

I suggest that Welch’s novel seeks both to display a hermeneutics of starvation (most notably in the memories of the medicine man Fish) and allow for its development in the narrator. A hermeneutics of starvation, to be precise, is a way of interpretation marked by its practitioners’ existential fragility, especially bodily fragility, which has direct effects on critical perspectives and methodologies. Drawing from Yellow Calf’s suggestive evaluation of the critical apparatus born out of Blackfeet starvation, I contend that sparsity in one’s reading conditions—whatever form they may take—elicits a form of interpretation that in the face of paucity reads hyperbolically into signs while never quite losing sight of the bleak conditions of its practice.

Describing the hermeneutics of starvation falls into the danger of advancing what Daniel Heath Justice calls “the most corrosive” of all stories about Indigenous peoples: “Indigenous deficiency.”<sup>4</sup> From the outset, then, I wish to state that starvation is not the marked condition of all Indigenous life at any period in American history but rather a specific historical condition of particular Indigenous tribes at particular

times—like the Blackfeet and Gros Ventre tribes as detailed in the flashback sections of *Winter in the Blood*. Although the conditions of starvation may give rise to a unique kind of aesthetic interpretation, they are not the only circumstances through which Indigenous literatures may arise, and certainly not a default marker of any Indigenous work. What the hermeneutics of starvation hopes to do is, in fact, to answer one of Justice's aims—to replace the story of Indigenous deficiency with a different story, of “complexity, hope, and possibility.”<sup>5</sup> Welch's novel, I argue, shows how a hermeneutics—a creative comprehension—is possible *even amidst* starvation. One can read sparse texts; even the barest connection to the past can be gleaned for meaning.

*Winter in the Blood*, I advance, presents Fish as a model for reading within sparsity that the narrator gradually approaches. Justice complains of our disconnect “from one another, from the plants and animals and elements upon which our survival depends.”<sup>6</sup> Early scenes and conversations in the novel exhibit this tendency through their presentations of failed fishing, which stand in for the narrator's inability to handle his traumatic memories more generally. By the end of the novel, however, the narrator's recognition of Yellow Calf as his grandfather through a correct interpretation of the past indicates his capacity to read even in his deprived psychological state. Importantly, the narrator recognizes Yellow Calf because the elder was a *hunter*. Yellow Calf's identity as the person who provides sustenance finds affirmation through the narrator's interpretations within the condition of psychological starvation.

Critical commentaries on *Winter in the Blood* have paid due attention to the various instantiations of fish in the novel, usually pointing out the supernatural and spiritual significance of fish in Indigenous contexts. According to Louise K. Barnett, fishing is one of the rituals helping the novel's characters “survive psychically” in the bleak Montana environment, which “offers . . . nothing positive and much that is threatening.”<sup>7</sup> Paula Gunn Allen remarks upon the “perplexing” nature of fish in the novel that “magically appear and disappear from the filthy river.”<sup>8</sup> As Allen sees, fish behave strangely in *Winter in the Blood*, variable in their existence and even more variable in their myriad appearances. Fish, as I will argue, connect the novel's disparate temporal and thematic elements; this essay expands upon and takes more seriously what Stephen Tatum calls the “inside joke” of the fish in *Winter in the Blood*.<sup>9</sup> Tatum sees the novel using fish as a node within a “logic of substitution,” a tool

in making “equivalence[s]” between themes like gender and history, fighting against the novel’s “dispersive features.”<sup>10</sup> Fish are impressively mutable in *Winter in the Blood*, an *ad hoc* symbol, as these critics note. But I hope to show how fish—and their absence—drive the novel’s characters and readers into a consideration of interpretation coming out of material lack. This essay centers on close readings of various moments concerning fish in *Winter in the Blood*, using the conditions presented in Yellow Calf’s memory as a means of specifying the hermeneutic form at work during these piscine appearances. Welch uses fish to provide us with a guide to understanding how reading and comprehension might uniquely occur in a barren landscape.

Importantly, the book’s transtemporal narrative shows us the transformation in the conditions of starvation within which Indigenous actors have operated. Yellow Calf and the narrator starve in different periods and different ways. Indigenous studies scholars have articulated the changing circumstances of deprivation for Indigenous peoples across American history. For example, Gerald Vizenor writes that while nineteenth-century Indigenous persons were subject to “[s]tarvation, disease, and soul death,” they were also “liberated in the shadows of their natural meditations, memories, visions, and stories.”<sup>11</sup> In the twentieth century there are contrastingly “new worries,” without “narratives of regeneration” that have been murdered in the century’s “radioactive ruins and chemical wastes.”<sup>12</sup> If starvation persists into the twentieth century, it has morphed from a strict starvation of food into a more generalized starvation exemplified by *Winter in the Blood*’s narrator: fear, trauma, environmental deprivation, self-alienation. The narrator sits without much hope of regeneration—an “heir,” but also the “orphan[]” of “dead tropes and narratives.”<sup>13</sup> His starvation, suggestively revealed in the novel’s bleak narration, is a starvation of identity.

Although Fionnghuala Sweeney argues that starvation “produces the ghost of a subject,” whose imploring cries are the “final iteration of the subjugated body biologically divested of social and cultural capacity,” *Winter in the Blood* offers a different thesis.<sup>14</sup> The novel suggests that starvation prompts the expansion of the interpretive function, spinning out Justice’s wished-for narratives of “complexity, hope and possibility.” The literary becomes hyperactive when the physical is threatened. In a land without fish (and without a sense of coherence with the past) everything becomes interpretable—indeed, everything can and must be

interpreted. Because of its sparse and difficult language, *Winter in the Blood* demands its reader also interpret from a position of relative scarcity, gleaning meaning from the signs given to us.<sup>15</sup> These signs, often vestigial and frequently confusing, may be guided by characters who must themselves read and interpret in a destitute landscape from which new stories might be told.

#### FISH INTERPRETING

Though many characters in *Winter in the Blood* fish and talk about fishing, fish themselves hardly appear in the book; as many of the Indigenous characters note, there are hardly any fish in the river, dooming would-be fishers. But Fish *does* show up prominently in the novel—as the name of the Blackfoot medicine man who appears in the memory of several elderly characters. Fish is hailed for saving the Blackfeet during the winter of starvation. The narrator introduces Fish in a memory of his grandmother’s storytelling that is doubly removed: as a recollection of a recollection, it is stuck deep in the past. “The old lady,” he remembers, had “related this story, many years ago.” Nonetheless the story is strewn with the feeling of Indigenous success, rare in this novel: “the small black hands drew triumphant pictures in the air.”<sup>16</sup>

Years ago, the grandmother recounts, two bands of the Blackfeet were wintering together, hiding from white soldiers. Her portrait is wistful, even idyllic: “The days remained hot . . . Fires dotted the campsite, and in the middle, around a larger fire, men sat and talked and played stick game . . . A feast celebrated their coming together.” The grandmother is herself a picture of youth, “owl-danc[ing]” with the others.<sup>17</sup> Two days go by as the bands winter together, but “on the third morning . . . Fish made his prophetic announcement” that the white men were coming to their campsite. “Fish had warned them. Fish, the medicine man. The Long Knives will be coming soon, he said.”<sup>18</sup>

The grandmother’s temporal details provide Christological links: on the third day, Fish the medicine man makes a prediction renewing life for the Blackfeet. Because of his accurate prediction of coming white intrusion, the scouts “rode down from the butte, their horses lathered and out of breath,” finding only an abandoned camp.<sup>19</sup> One of the few victorious scenes in *Winter in the Blood*, Fish’s prophecy submits the possibility of Indigenous self-determination arrayed against white own-

ership: Fish avoids the white intrusion entirely, leaving them only “a few sticks which had been the racks that held the drying meat,” a “barren scene.”<sup>20</sup> Though he only has access to the barest environmental registers in the brutal wintry conditions in which he reads—conditions of starvation, as Yellow Calf will remind us—Fish outsmarts the white soldiers. The sparse signs that Fish reads include a “smell of steel” in the air, a description that speaks to how technology might permeate the environment while also punning on the word “steel,” revealing how theft might be a stench imbricated with that technology.<sup>21</sup>

Fish’s ability to seemingly interpret nature shows what the Blackfeet scholar Rosalyn LaPier describes as the tribe’s perception of reality. Blackfeet tradition, according to LaPier, is marked by an emphasis on the intermingling of the natural and supernatural. What the Blackfeet might call “real stories” are in fact descriptions of the relationship between Blackfeet happenings and supernatural invisibilities.<sup>22</sup> Thus for the Blackfeet, reality is rooted *in conjunction* with the spiritual. For the tribe, the “invisible dimension was the real world and . . . the visible dimension was a partial expression of this world.”<sup>23</sup> LaPier’s characterization of the Blackfeet view of the material world shows how Fish’s hermeneutics of starvation might arise. A connection with supernatural forces allows for the ability to “smell steel,” to perceive hints that are, in truth, but synecdochal components of a broader picture of reality.

As LaPier explains, Blackfeet memory relies on objects which “serv[e] as mnemonic devices” for their stories. Chief among these entities is the landscape, which is both a “narrative” and an “ancient manuscript.”<sup>24</sup> Compared to Western practices, Indigenous storytelling marks less of a boundary between land and language. Sidner Larson explains that Indigenous storytelling takes on an elevated position because “words make things and . . . changing words changes things.”<sup>25</sup> Welch’s novel holds the “attendant power to change the American Indian world.”<sup>26</sup> The dispossession of Indigenous lands is at once a loss of Indigenous history and memory. Though that dual loss may be applied to most Indigenous tribes, the emphasis that the Blackfeet place on the relationship between nature and the supernatural expands the scope of the loss. Environmental loss concurrently strikes at the Blackfeet relationship with the divine. This goes some way to explain why Fish the medicine man was capable of reading in his condition of starvation while the narrator of *Winter*

*in the Blood* seems to fail at a coherent storytelling: environmental loss has multiplied, as we shall see, matching the narratorial loss of cultural memory.

Through Fish, Welch expands the temporal reach of the piscine symbol. The memory of the medicine man comes early in the novel so that the past and present are given narrative equality early in *Winter in the Blood*. More literal fish also receive mention in the novel, as I detail in the following sections; by having both fish *and* Fish show up early in his novel, Welch renders fishing a symbol of transtemporal persistence. Specifically, the conditions of Fish's prophecy—his reading—mark fish as a representation of the contentious relationship between settlers and the Indigenous more generally. Fishing might illustrate the traumatic history of exchange and war between the Blackfeet and the white settler military regime. Fish signify long-standing currents of dispossession, presaged by this prophetic spiritual antecedent. The medicine man's predictions live long, echoing contemporary acts of white deception and theft.

#### INTERPRETING FISH

Alienation rules the opening chapter of *Winter in the Blood*, emerging for the nameless narrator on multiple fronts. There is a lack of familial connection: "Coming home to a mother and an old lady who was my grandmother . . . none of them counted; not one meant anything to me. And for no reason. I felt no hatred, no love, no conscience, nothing but a distance that had grown throughout the years."<sup>27</sup> This familial lack is reflected in the area's environmental destitution: "The country had created a distance as deep as it was empty, and the people accepted and treated each other with distance."<sup>28</sup> But both of these forms of alienation are nothing compared to the narrator's alienation from himself: "But the distance I felt came not from country or people; it came from within me. I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon."<sup>29</sup> For the narrator, the personal and collective unite in negativity, both arenas for alienation. We might, by analogy, describe alienation as a kind of starvation—from social bonds, from emotional health. Indeed, as if to reveal the symbolic import of nourishment and its lack for the narrator, he ends the meditations on "distance" in the first chapter by remarking, "My throat ached with a terrible thirst."<sup>30</sup>



The narrator's comment underscores the connection between Welch's portrayal of themes like alienation and psychological lack and his descriptions of hunger, thirst, and food in the novel. These descriptors provide outposts in a novel that can be difficult to grasp, given its nonlinear plot structure and sudden temporal jumps. Critics have been apt to point out the book's evasions of meaning. Christopher Nelson, for instance, classes *Winter in the Blood* as a deliberately nonhermeneutic book, eluding interpretation because of the "narrator's flat descriptive style" and his "lack of inflection."<sup>31</sup> Like Nelson, Sidner Larson finds in *Winter in the Blood* a "failure of written discourse to provide resolution," a reflection of the "limitations of language in general." Larson wields the novel's setting in the American West to reappropriate the vexed concept of the frontier, arguing that the narrator exists in a place bereft of not only infrastructure but also of "language and understanding."<sup>32</sup> The desolation of the frontier zone is pronounced for Indigenous Americans, as it is the place where English, a "foreign language," has substituted Indigenous language and been used "primarily for deception."<sup>33</sup>

It is no wonder, per Larson, that the narrator finds "history, reality, and language" so far apart from each other. Since *Winter in the Blood* takes place in the mid-twentieth century, its narrator is "faced with the aftermath" of colonial dispossession rather than the actual process. This wasteland may flummox interpretation out of its sheer sparseness—but we ought not mistake sparseness for emptiness, as even Larson admits a "few subordinate signifiers" who have "managed to survive and who bother the margins of the new imposed order."<sup>34</sup> Larson lists Yellow Calf as the exemplar of those "subordinate signifiers" who I hope to center here. Yellow Calf's dictum validates and encourages the process of interpretation that I hope to embark upon here; it advocates for an interpretation *specifically* within the conditions of lack that the narrator admits in the opening pages and represents through his "terrible thirst." Given a taste of the narrator's detached style in the first chapter, we receive an exposition of it when the narrator goes fishing in the third chapter.

Against critical warnings of the narrator's impenetrability, the fishing scene is ripe with symbolic action suggestively juxtaposed with the narrator's memories. The fishing scene shows failed fishing alongside the narrator's lugubrious meditations on loss and dispossession. Fishing on the Milk River, the narrator recalls a sugarbeet factory that once operated downstream of his fishing site, causing indelible pollution.

Explaining the river's name through its appearance, he remarks, "Everybody had thought the factory caused the river to be milky but the river never cleared."<sup>35</sup> Efforts at restoration come to no good end, for in spite of attempts to restock the river with pike, it "ignored the fish and the fish ignored the river."<sup>36</sup> The river manifests the failure of white government and science to encompass and function on Indigenous territory, embodying how Indigeneity forms part of the "repressed knowledge of white Americans," as Catherine Albanese puts it.<sup>37</sup> Here "ignoring" loads the epistemological failure between fish and river—the implication of abject ignorance—with the verb's sexual undertones. The river and fish fail at miscegenation. The fish escape, "refus[ing] to die" in the river and "simply vanish."<sup>38</sup> These fish, seemingly able to perceive environmental change and subsequently leave their habitat, escape just as their nominal predecessor, the medicine man Fish, drove the Blackfeet away from the white soldiers upon perceiving a "smell of steel."

But humans cannot escape so easily, creating a problem for white efforts at brushing aside Indigenous existence. By remaining on the reservation, the narrator is practically abandoned, "ignored" as the fish were. That the factory whose operations ruined the river's fish has now closed combines the loss of nourishment with economic dispossession more generally. Welch cleverly points at the area's lack of economic activity in his summative statement about the repopulation efforts of the "white men from the fish department": "Nothing worked."<sup>39</sup> Pollution's aftermath brings only occupational starvation that falls exclusively on the Indigenous who remain on the reservation and is represented through the loss of potential sustenance: "The fish disappeared. Then the men from the fish department disappeared, and the Indians put away their new fishing poles."<sup>40</sup>

The economic conditions Welch presents allude to the long and wretched history of Indigenous and white squabbles over fishing. Treaties establishing reservations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took care to specify tribal rights over fishing. As Jovanna J. Brown explains, when Indigenous tribes in the Pacific Northwest signed treaties with the federal government, they reserved the right to fish off of the reservation, in their historical fishing sites—the "usual and accustomed grounds and stations."<sup>41</sup> On the surface, then, the right to fish was a rare area in which Indigenous rights extended beyond the reservation. However, by the early twentieth century, Indigenous fishers had to com-

pete with white settlers who often possessed a technological advantage through their frequent ownership of mechanized boats. White fishing “squeezed” Indians “out of the fishery.”<sup>42</sup>

During the 1960s, Indigenous fishers in Washington and Oregon organized and participated in a series of “fish-ins,” demonstrations in which fishers who had refused to comply with fishing license standards and various game regulations occupied land and water while performing their technically illegal activities. The Blackfeet were among the tribes who sent representatives to Washington to help with the fish-ins. According to Bradley G. Shreve, their cooperation helped mark the event as a prime moment of pan-Indian identity and intertribal alliance.<sup>43</sup> These fish-ins, which attracted national attention, culminated in 1974’s *United States v. Washington*. In what has come to be known as the Boldt Decision, District Court Judge George Hugo Boldt ruled that Indigenous tribes in Washington could claim fifty percent of the salmon harvested in the state and actively participate in the management of salmon fisheries.<sup>44</sup> Welch’s novel was birthed in the same year in which fishing rights were the locus of Indigenous activism—in which the fight for Indigenous rights pursued the ability to acquire sustenance.

Welch’s presentation of the river in the aftermath of dispossession showcases the reservation’s dire economic straits, particularly in light of this dispute over fishing rights, as the novel is set decades before the 1970s fish-ins. But the narrator’s dispossession is not only linked to the dire straits prevalent on the reservation. Indeed, if anything, his family’s farm is relatively prosperous, and he seems able to move around with relative ease. His starvation, as he presents it in the opening chapter, is from himself. Specifically as we see in this fishing narrative, he has some ill-formed relationship with the memories of his past.

The actions of his fishing reflect this trauma, and alert us to the symbolic charge of his fishing. After noting the river’s milkiness, the narrator reports, in its own paragraph: “I cast the spoon again, this time retrieving faster.”<sup>45</sup> Once more Welch’s verb choice is significant. Unlike, for instance, in hunting, where “retrieval” implies the successful acquisition of meat, in fishing “retrieval” may be done without a catch, as it does here. “Retrieval” in this case is part of the pursuit of fly fishing and is thus arguably a representation of the narrator’s desire to find his history, to sort through his memory—especially when considering how “retrieval” also refers to the attempt, with marked intentionality,

to remember. The word may also hold a more general political significance. As Karla Holloway explains, for Black Americans retrieval might signify an “overthrow of power and a reinvestment in self-determination.” But retrieval is simply “not possible” to some extent, performed only as an “act of spiritual memory.”<sup>46</sup> Retrieval displays the horizon of necessary failure within the pursuit of an inaccessible past. It is a grasping within a fragmented history, a futile—though essential—attempt to squeeze understanding out of starved archives. The novel’s various themes coalesce on the “retrieving” of the spoon while fishing, an act which comments on the problematics of the narrator’s memory and the dispossession of the Blackfeet.

Upon “retrieving” the spoon the narrator reminisces upon his father First Raise, whose life was marked by a passivity in desire and incomplete striving, despite his easy integration with the multiracial community surrounding the reservation: “He drank with the white men . . . He made them laugh until the thirty-below morning ten years ago we found him sleeping in the borrow pit.”<sup>47</sup> In construction, a borrow pit refers to the depression resulting when soil and dirt are extracted from the ground for usage elsewhere. First Raise’s death in a borrow pit hints at the material dispossession of his impoverished life, while also illustrating a more general image of Indigenous American death—rotting in stolen land that specifically points at the absence of earth. These memories arise while fishing in a fish-deprived river; the mental resembles the environmental. We too, perhaps, are always in the borrow pit in this novel, surrounded by conditions of narrative lack.

Sliding between memory and materiality, the fishing scene ends with a convergence of the past and present, of the seen and spiritual worlds: “My lure caught a windfall trunk and the brittle nylon line snapped. A magpie squawked from deep in the woods on the other side of the river.”<sup>48</sup> The breaking of the thin nylon line, alluding to the Greek Fates’ enactment of death, catches onto another image of death—the fallen tree. This constellation of symbols, arrayed next to the magpie, the classic bird of theft, marks First Raise’s death as a robbery of dreams and promises. The narrator’s fishing activates, while also coming to represent, the precise imbrication of environmental degradation, Indigenous oppression, and grief that populates the novel. For now, in this early scene, the narrator’s memories show the destitution of his psychological state, the “distance from” himself.

## FISHING AND MISCOMPREHENSION

Thus far I have suggested that Fish displays a hermeneutics of starvation when outsmarting the invading white soldiers, drawing on a religious and supernatural wisdom that whites cannot perceive. On the other hand, the narrator of *Winter in the Blood* faces conditions of metaphorical starvation—psychological alienation, emotional distance from his family—that he cannot initially solve by reading his past or interpreting himself in the aftermath of trauma. This failure of hermeneutics, as I showed in the preceding section, is represented by the narrator’s inability to fish. In this section, I show how the narrator’s failed self-discourse extends out into a failure to discourse with white people in the novel, once again centering on failures to fish.

Lack of nourishment—verbal or piscine—marks the narrator’s interactions throughout the middle of the novel. For example, while sitting in a bar, the narrator alerts another bargoer, a hopeful fisherman who the narrator calls the “airplane man,” that the rivers nearby are empty. The conversation is repetitive, nearly circular:

“. . . picked up my fishing gear and drove away!”

“You won’t have much luck here,” I said.

“What? Fish?”

“You won’t have much luck here.”

“Caught a mess of them yesterday.”

“But there are no fish around here.”

“Pike—three of them over five pounds. Caught one big northern in Minnesota that ran over thirty.”

“That was Minnesota. That wasn’t here. You’d be lucky to catch a cold here.”

“Caught some nice little rainbows too. Pan size.”

“There aren’t any rainbows.”<sup>49</sup>

Twice, the narrator repeats the froward advice: “You won’t have much luck here.” On the surface, his statement elucidates the dismal environmental conditions that stand in for bleak life on the reservation. The inability to fish might represent an inability to do anything productive, to create value in the first place. If fishing indeed depends on “luck,” that luck comes from an empty bank at Fort Belknap.

“Here” recurs in the narrator’s admonitions, appearing in four con-

secutive statements. The repetition draws attention to the reservation's geographic singularities; Welch uses this discussion of fishing to represent comparative racial perspectives that, especially in the divide between Indigenous and white people, are geographically determined. The white fisherman's claims attempt to import Minnesotan circumstances into the Montana reservation. This is a transference the narrator denigrates, reminding us that circumstances, environmental or economic—readily represented by the act-cum-trope of fishing—are hyperlocal in the United States. Bounty somewhere in the country does not negate starvation elsewhere in it. Fishing *here* is unwieldy, whatever it may look like elsewhere—however near that elsewhere may be. Fishing, an easy metaphor for searching, striving, and economic pursuit, suffers from, and stands for, the general desolation of the reservation.

But importantly Welch has set up our reading to hearken back to the memory of Fish's prophecy. When the airplane man makes his first response to the narrator—“What? Fish?”—might he be summoning the medicine man? Welch's text lets us link this barroom conversation to that moment of Blackfeet history, and in the ensuing conversation the narrator offers a prophecy of his own: “You won't have much luck here.” Like Fish's, his is a prophecy of doom (and also accurate, given the earlier fishing scene's failure). The airplane man's inadvertent (or failed) recognition identifies the narrator with Fish, who is verbally reincarnated, if only for a moment. Gleaning the currents of his spiritual predecessor, the narrator's prophetic ways catch the same sort of white ignorance that had led to the medicine man's triumph. Having once reincarnated Fish in his grandmother's memory, the narrator now embodies Fish's prophesying in the face of white hostility.

The airplane man's defense against the narrator's admonitions is simply the fact that he had caught fish yesterday. As the airplane man lists the fish he has caught in spite of the narrator's persistent insinuations, the conversation fails to arrive at any true system of exchange. The same dialogue repeats, the Indigenous narrator's efforts useless in the face of the white man's own ineffectual attempts at justification. This futility rehashes the failure of the fishing department's white men to spur renewal in the Milk River. A failure to move on—to move past harm—incarnates environmentally and in the narrator's traumatic stasis of memory, but it also occurs conversationally here. One might be stuck in communication, predicated upon a failure to listen.

As the interchange goes nowhere, what the narrator and airplane man settle upon is what the latter suspiciously refers to as a “deal”:

“Tell you what—” He snorted into his hand. “I’ll take you out with me tomorrow and if we don’t catch any fish, I’ll buy you the biggest steak in—where are we?—Malta! You have an outfit?”

“At home—but that’s fifty miles away.”

“No problem. I’ve got a spinning rig you can use. Furthermore, I’ll use my fly rod and if I don’t catch more fish than you, you can have both outfits. Now you can’t beat that deal.”<sup>50</sup>

Deals between whites and Indigenous people have a wretched history in America. Deals about fishing especially have involved the harmful history of land exchange, resource extraction, and environmental degradation that fishing has signified throughout the novel. As mentioned above, the series of nineteenth-century treaties that the United States made with Native nations often included specific provisions about hunting and fishing on traditional lands. As Zoltán Grossman explains, throughout the twentieth century Indigenous tribes pursued sovereignty by invoking nineteenth-century treaties that “contained clauses for the continued use of the ceded lands . . . for cultural or economic sustenance uses.”<sup>51</sup> Federal officials evidently knew that tribes “could not survive solely on reservation resources.” Indigenous activists argued for conceptions of nationhood out of these “usufructuary rights.”<sup>52</sup> Thus a deal about fishing is a deal about sovereignty and political rights.

And, in this context, though the deal looks free, its involvement of fishing means that the contract is being signed on an expired battlefield, on territory already long lost. The airplane man will not successfully catch fish, but only because white men before him have already razed the land and poisoned the river; what remains is only leisure, pure enjoyment, self-imposed challenge. The Indigenous narrator’s sole refuge sits in the knowledge that the fish, indeed, have already departed from the river. There is no catching what has already died, and the narrator is destined to receive the mere scraps of the white man’s deal, a pitiful handout in the wake of devastation, a one-time meal to a starving person. The bare statement of environmental devastation—“there are no fish”—washes over all other considerations. It is a summative utterance of the starvation characterizing the narrator’s life and his perspective of the social and environmental conditions on the reservation.

## FINDING FOOD

The narrator's inability to perform a hermeneutics of starvation à la Fish within the conditions of his social and personal alienation are reflected in his failed interactions with the airplane man. The narrator is unreadable to himself and to those around him. *Winter in the Blood* provides no grand conclusion, no finality to the narrator's troubles. But Welch does, near the end of the novel, provide a glimmer of hope in a moment that I will describe as an incipient reading within this traumatized alienation. In this concluding section, I show how the narrator makes strides towards a successful hermeneutics in his discovery of his true heritage at the end of the novel, an event marked once more with imagery and language about nourishment.

The event in question is the narrator's recognition of Yellow Calf as his real grandfather. Yellow Calf is the elder Gros Ventre whose comment about "signs" inaugurated my conception of the hermeneutics of starvation: "When you are starving, you look for signs. Each event becomes big in your mind." As I have argued, the narrator's alienation from himself, a psychological starvation, evades nourishment throughout the novel. But because the narrator's self-alienation is rooted in the trauma of his memories—most specifically the death of his brother Mose—a successful hermeneutics might involve a turn towards his ancestral past. The narrator knows his family history only sparsely: the memory involving Fish and the winter of starvation related by his grandmother is just about all he knows of her life.

Throughout the novel the narrator returns to one mystery about his grandmother's life: the identity of the narrator's grandfather. The confusion surrounding his grandfather gives the narrator something to muse upon; the grandfather's identity is a text to discern, but, appropriate for a hermeneutics of starvation, the grandmother leaves few clues. Under-scoring the connection between Yellow Calf's depiction of the starving time and the grandmother's vagueness surrounding the father of Teresa (the narrator's mother) is the narrator's description of his grandmother's insinuations. When the narrator considers who his grandfather might truly be, he notes that his grandmother "made signs that" it wasn't Teresa's alleged father, the "half-white drifted" Doagie.<sup>53</sup>

These signs, notably, are not well defined, only obscurely mentioned before a "low rumble interrupt[s]" the narrator's stream of conscious-



ness.<sup>54</sup> They remain in the background, unread and unresolved, until the pivotal scene when, after his grandmother's death, the narrator asks Yellow Calf about the winter of starvation. In the course of answering the narrator's inquiries, Yellow Calf tells him about how his grandmother was shunned by her tribe in the wake of her husband Standing Bear's death. This leads the narrator to a question: "What did she do for food?"<sup>55</sup> In the process of learning about his past, the narrator fixates on the detail of nourishment—"It seemed important for me to know what she did for food. No woman, no man could live a winter like that alone without something."<sup>56</sup> The narrator, realizing that she had to have had someone hunting for her, pieces together that Yellow Calf was her sustainer:

"Listen, old man," I said. "It was you—you were old enough to hunt!"

But his white eyes were kneading the clouds.

I began to laugh, at first quietly, with neither bitterness nor humor. It was the laughter of one who understands a moment in his life, of one who has been let in on the secret through luck and circumstance. "You . . . you're the one." I laughed, as the secret unfolded itself. "The only one . . . you, her hunter . . ." And the wave behind my eyes broke.

Yellow Calf still looked off toward the east as though the wind could wash the wrinkles from his face. But the corners of his eyes wrinkled even more as his mouth fell open. Through my tears I could see his Adam's apple jerk.

"The only one," I whispered, and the old man's head dropped between his knees. His back shook, the bony shoulders squared and hunched like the folded wings of a hawk.

"And the half-breed, Doagie!" But the laughter again racked my throat. *He wasn't Teresa's father; it was you, Yellow Calf, the hunter!* [emphasis Welch's]<sup>57</sup>

What finally leads to the narrator's positive identification, his successful determination of something in his past, is Yellow Calf's role as hunter. Yellow Calf's ability to provide sustenance helps the narrator fulfill the dictates of Fish's hermeneutics, an interpretive mode whose inaccessibility for the narrator has been marked by the paucity of fish. The past begins to make sense and become available for reading, through the rec-

ognition of a source of food. Yellow Calf himself is the reader for whom “hunger sharpens [the] eye.”

And when the narrator does find out that Yellow Calf is his grandfather, the image restores health to the initial representation of lack in the novel: the “wave behind” his “eyes broke.” This release of water stands in contrast to the empty stream at the book’s beginning; against that sick water this torrent comes forth, an image of bounty and healing repurposing the very substance used to represent lack. The wave comes at the moment when the narrator, finally comprehending his grandmother’s signs, begins to find a way to live with the past: “And so we shared this secret in the presence of ghosts, in wind that called forth the muttering tepees, the blowing snow, the white air of the horses’ nostrils.”<sup>58</sup> The symbolic import of water in this act of reclamation is reiterated in the closing paragraphs of the novel, at the narrator’s grandmother’s funeral. During it, the narrator reports, “The air was heavy with yesterday’s rain. It would probably be good for fishing.” Now possessing an understanding of his ancestral history, the narrator may retrieve more substantially, more fully.<sup>59</sup> Caught in a psychological state reflecting the starvation endured by the Blackfeet, the narrator reads into the few signs he has, finding what might be had when each thing becomes “big in your mind.”

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LLOYD ALIMBOYAO SY is a Postdoctoral Associate in English at Yale University, where he will become Assistant Professor in 2024. He recently received his PhD from the University of Virginia, where he was a Jefferson Fellow. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Early American Literature*, *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, *Poe Studies*, and *Victorian Studies*. He is currently working on a book about deforestation and nineteenth-century Native literature.

#### NOTES

1. James Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Penguin, 2021), 116–17.
2. Welch, *Winter*, 117.
3. The tribes of the Northwest were known for doing “more fishing than fighting.” Andrew Fisher, “The Pacific Northwest” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 253. Tribes like the Blackfeet elude stereotypical conceptions of Indigenous people because they are not “the feathered braves on horseback.” Even today, the Blackfeet gain significant revenue from a fish and wildlife program they set up in 1978.
4. Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 2.

5. Justice, *Why Indigenous*, 4.
6. Justice, *Why Indigenous*, 5.
7. Louise K. Barnett, “Alienation and Ritual in *Winter in the Blood*,” *American Indian Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1978): 123
8. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 92.
9. Stephen Tatum, “‘Distance,’ Desire, and The Ideological Matrix of *Winter in the Blood*,” *Arizona Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1990): 79.
10. Tatum, “‘Distance,’” 80.
11. Gerald Vizenor, *Shadow Distance: A Gerald Vizenor Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 195.
12. Vizenor, *Shadow Distance*, 195.
13. Vizenor, *Shadow Distance*, 195.
14. Fionnghuala Sweeney, “Common Ground: Positioning Ireland within Studies of Slavery, Anti-Slavery, and Empire,” *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 3 (2016): 506.
15. Welch’s style can be seen as typical of postmodern novels—Bronwen Thomas writes that postmodernist fiction uses dialogue to “distance themselves from the popular or the everyday” as part of its destabilization of the “grounds establishing what constitutes the ‘real.’” Bronwen Thomas, *Fictional Dialogue: Speech and Conversation in the Modern and Postmodern Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 9, 34. But a better way to understand the novel’s language is provided by Sidner Larson, who argues that Welch’s novelistic style draws on the Indigenous storytelling practice of “minimization,” in which the “supreme skill of the storyteller . . . is knowing what to leave out.” Paring down the signs may concoct the conditions for an Indigenous literature. Sidner Larson, “Multiple Perspectivism in James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*,” *American Indian Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 515.
16. Welch, *Winter*, 27.
17. Welch, *Winter*, 27.
18. Welch, *Winter*, 27.
19. Welch, *Winter*, 27. The historical events concerning Fish dramatically represent a period in the 1880s when the US government attempted to “civilize” the Blackfeet. Violence ensued as the Blackfeet were increasingly forced into “American concepts of law and order,” according to historian Malcolm McFee. By the early twentieth century, the federal government aimed to end this transitory period of Blackfeet dependence, removing so-called “competent” Indians from trust status. Competent Indians—enumerated at about a thousand by 1920—were given land, but the overall result was to leave large numbers of Blackfeet landless. Malcolm McFee, *Modern Blackfeet: Montanans on a Reservation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 50, 53.
20. Welch, *Winter*, 27.
21. Welch, *Winter*, 27.
22. Rosalyn LaPier, *Invisible Reality: Storytellers, Storytakers, and the Supernatural World of the Blackfeet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 24.
23. LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 25.

24. LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 29.
25. Larson, "Multiple," 519.
26. Larson, "Multiple," 519.
27. Welch, *Winter*, 2.
28. Welch, *Winter*, 2.
29. Welch, *Winter*, 2.
30. Welch, *Winter*, 2.
31. Christopher Nelson, "Embodying the Indian: Rethinking Blood, Culture, and Identity in James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*," *Western American Literature* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 303.
32. Sidner Larson, "Colonization as Subtext in James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*," *American Indian Quarterly* 29, no. 1/2 (Winter-Spring 2005): 274.
33. Larson, "Colonization," 275.
34. Larson, "Colonization," 277.
35. Welch, *Winter*, 4.
36. Welch, *Winter*, 4.
37. Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 346.
38. Welch, *Winter*, 4.
39. Welch, *Winter*, 5.
40. Welch, *Winter*, 5.
41. Jovanna J. Brown, "Fishing Rights and the First Salmon Ceremony," in *American Indian Religious Traditions: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Suzanne J. Crawford and Dennis F. Kelley (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 322.
42. Brown, "Fishing Rights," 322.
43. Bradley G. Shreve, "'From Time Immemorial': The Fish-in Movement and the Rise of Intertribal Activism," *Pacific Historical Review* 78, no. 3 (August 2009): 418.
44. See Brown, "Fishing Rights," 321–22.
45. Welch, *Winter*, 5.
46. Karla Holloway, *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 20.
47. Welch, *Winter*, 5.
48. Welch, *Winter*, 5.
49. Welch, *Winter*, 34–35.
50. Welch, *Winter*, 35.
51. Zoltán Grossman, *Unlikely Alliances: Native Nations and White Communities Join to Defend Rural Lands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 19.
52. Grossman, *Unlikely Alliances*, 19.
53. Welch, *Winter*, 28.
54. Welch, *Winter*, 28.
55. Welch, *Winter*, 118.
56. Welch, *Winter*, 118.
57. Welch, *Winter*, 120.
58. Welch, *Winter*, 120.
59. Welch, *Winter*, 132.