

Greg Sarris's *How a Mountain Was Made: Stories*
as a Transformative Indigenous Futurism



Arwen Spicer

This is how Greg Sarris tells it: “I begin my American Indian literature course by telling a story told to me by my Kashaya Pomo elders. I then ask students . . . to repeat the story as they heard it. Invariably their stories tell them more about themselves than about the story or the speaker and culture from which the story comes” (*Keeping* 149). As a white reader of Sarris’s story cycle *How a Mountain Was Made: Stories*, I am a student, my retelling inflected by where I come from. In a science fiction studies context, I identify the text as indigenous futurism, though, to my knowledge, this is not a label Sarris has claimed. By default, I read the text first and foremost as a message to me, though its primary audience is clearly Sarris’s Pomo and Coast Miwok people. My engagement with these stories is partial, both in the sense of “incomplete” and “biased,” yet this text is partly written to white settlers like me, especially us folx who come from the Mountain—Sonoma Mountain, that is, near Santa Rosa, California. Sonoma Mountain is my home, and these stories summon me as a white settler to be part of the work of decolonizing my homeplace, with all the hope and responsibility that work implies. In a 2012 interview, Sarris, who is the chairman of the Federated Tribes of the Graton Rancheria, discusses the benefits of the casino they had recently opened, observing, “I have a big dream that it can somehow bring us all—Indian and non-Indian—home again. And the big question for today is, how do you stop this us/them dichotomy that is a cancer that will kill us?” (“Dreaming” 19). The story cycle he published five years later is, I think, a piece of the answer. It is a call to all of us from the Mountain to come home.

Framing: The Act of Transmission

How a Mountain Was Made consists of sixteen short stories from the time when animals looked like human beings, framed by a series of conversations between Question Woman and Answer Woman. These two sisters rely on each other for the transmission of stories: Question Woman cannot remember the stories on her own, and Answer Woman cannot tell them unless asked. This structure echoes a theme of Sarris’s scholarship: that stories always exist within an act of transmission. Sarris recounts how his elder relative Essie Parrish, religious leader of the Kashaya Pomo people, would add a narrative frame (“This is a story of . . .”) to stories told to white scholars but not to her own daughter; in the same way, all stories are molded by the context of the telling (“Encountering”). *How a Mountain Was Made* exists within diverse contexts, and the answers it offers depend on the questions brought to it. As a story cycle, the text is recursive, looping on itself to generate multiple layers of meaning. I have structured this essay the same way.

Layer 1: What Does it Mean to Live Respectfully?

On a basic level, the stories follow a consistent pattern: some character becomes discontent with what they have and resorts to selfish, underhanded behavior to get what they want. Their malfeasance is exposed, and they face some consequence. Mole, for example, marries the beautiful Fog, but when he meets and marries a second woman, Warm Wind, he forgets about his first wife. Incensed at his neglect, Fog spurns him. Warm Wind also disapproves of his fickleness and kicks him out of her house, leaving Mole humbled and hiding in the ground. In this case, Mole's selfish behavior is his neglect of one family in favor of another, and the consequence is losing both his wives and being shamed.

The story cycle's structure teaches that the cardinal social ill is greed, whether it is Mole's discontent with one wife, Coyote scheming to get fantastic clothing, or a woman obsessed with gathering rocks for a gorgeous necklace to impress a man. Whether it is desire for more possessions or more attention, grasping after more than one's fair share damages relationships, and it always backfires on the greedy individual. Mole loses his wives, Coyote ends up looking like a fool, and the woman is left searching vainly for rocks. Greed is bad: this message sounds simple, but it stands diametrically opposed to the hegemonic assumptions of capitalism, grounded in the idea that perpetual increase in consumption is essential to preventing economic collapse. Or as infamously summed up by profiteer Gordon Gekko in the 1987 film *Wall Street*, "Greed is good."

Yet resisting greed is essential to the Honorable Harvest, which Potawatomi environmental scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer characterizes as taking only what we are given, sharing, showing respect, and minimizing harm (183). Sarris's characters break these guidelines repeatedly. They trick friends out of their possessions. They call in favors to demand an unreasonable amount of work. They break the rules set as conditions for borrowing something. Sometimes, they even act out in violence. Their missteps describe a cautionary framework for approaching the fundamental question of how to live in a respectful relationship. Kimmerer observes that while indigenous ancestors devoted immense thought to the question of how to consume respectfully, modern society largely ignores it (177). Our dominant culture does not recognize exploitation, extraction, and the greed that underlies them as problems. In fact, to centralize greed as a sickness requires reimagining our entire socioeconomic system, a visionary futurism, but one which our current ecological emergency demands with increasing urgency. Such fundamental change is not easy, however, and one of the impediments to overcoming greed is trauma, which reinforces it.

Layer 2: How Does Trauma Impact Life Choices?

How a Mountain Was Made takes place in an age before animals took on their present-day animal shapes. It simultaneously takes place in modern times, coexisting with fences, bicycles, and asphalt roads. This slippage between ancient and modern sharpens the relevance of cultural rootedness to the work of healing indigenous trauma sustained through generations of colonial violence. Sarris observes, "I try to make people conscious of the homelessness that seeps in the pores of my people. Why do we turn against one another? Why do we destroy one another?"

That's what we know from colonization" (Sarris, "Dreaming" 17). The stories in *How a Mountain Was Made* condemn greed while honoring the reality that greed is an outgrowth of anxiety and self-doubt. While we all experience these feelings to some degree, trauma can endow them with outsized power, leading to destructive patterns.

In some of the stories, the patterns of greed evoke addiction, a common mechanism for coping with the stress of ongoing trauma (Maté 207). The woman obsessed gathering beautiful rocks does not need those rocks, yet her craving is so dire that she browbeats her friends into helping her make a necklace of them, overworking them until they quit and she is left alone, "wandering about, wondering how she will get someone to help her make a necklace" (Sarris, *How* 11). Though she does not really need the necklace, she does need something and is living under an unrelieved stress that urges her to seek a substitute for solving her real problem: her lack of belief in her own self-worth. This is the fundamental pattern of addiction, and Sarris's emphasis on it speaks to the twenty-first-century context of his narrative. It is a narrative for people carrying the trauma of colonization; it is also a narrative of healing.

Layer 3: How Can the Community Heal?

The stories in this cycle all involve some wrongdoing and accountability, but they don't stop with punishment. The final step is reconciliation and reintegration of the community, a stance that walks hand-in-hand with the principles of transformative justice. According to Ejeris Dixon, "*Transformative justice and community accountability* are terms that describe ways to address violence without relying on police or prisons. These approaches often work to prevent violence, to intervene when harm is occurring, to hold people accountable, and to transform individuals and society to build safer communities" (16). While transformative justice focuses on physical violence, the principles can apply to any kind of harm. Transformative justice differs from restorative justice in that the former seeks solutions outside state systems and the latter seeks solutions within them, by reforming them. Like many involved in transformative justice work, Sarris has expressed ambivalence about restorative justice. In conversation with Cristina Perea Kaplan, he discusses restorative justice in schools:

I think Restorative Justice is a great idea. But again, from what little I know of it, and I have talked to some people in this area about it, you've got people who are not prepared to really deal. It's an idea. I hate to say it, it's a liberal, I hesitate to say, a white liberal idea of doing the right thing. They don't know our people. . . .

But, fundamental change has to be in our communities. And so, if you're going to have Restorative Justice, you have to have people who are prepared to talk to our folks and council [sic] our folks, our students, and be familiar with where they are coming from and what has motivated them to fall away. (Sarris, "Learning" 13)

While restorative justice requires larger systems to reach out to communities, transformative justice originates within the community itself. It unfolds through the people directly affected.

In *How a Mountain Was Made*, the form this community reintegration takes varies from story to story: no single solution works for every situation. The price of Coyote's attempts to dress impressively is merely Coyote looking like a fool. Other times, solutions are not so easy: Mole's fickleness leaves him scorned and alone. That's the end of one story but not the end of the transformations. A full seven stories later, Mole resurfaces, this time to warn his daughters that their jealous husbands, the Bat Brothers, will do them harm. At first, they do not believe him. As the oldest asserts, "You were an untrustworthy husband and Mother had to raise us by herself . . . Why should we believe you?" (*How* 158). But when his warning helps them evade their husbands, trust begins to regrow, and Mole and Warm Wind eventually reconcile. Transformation is a process that does not answer to a timeline or follow a formula. Sometimes, it takes more than one story to hold.

One theme, however, remains constant: no one is expelled, not Mole, not the jealous Bat Brothers, no one, not even Coyote after he discovers Death by inadvertently killing his own sons. This radical inclusivity is more than just a thought experiment. The Graton Rancheria itself enacts this principle by specifying in their constitution that "no current members or their offspring can ever be disenrolled" ("Dreaming" 16). That means they are always a part of the community, regardless of any harm they may commit. It should go without saying this is not a free pass to do harm; rather, it is an expression of the principle that harm is a community phenomenon and must be addressed within the community, even when doing so is messy and solutions incomplete. Exclusion cannot be the answer. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs asserts, in the work of transformative justice, "there is no way beyond but through" (2).

And when trauma is severe, the only way through it is the promise and the pain of radical transformation. In the story "Ant Uncovers a Plot," four doctors conspire to keep Eagle sick so that they earn more pay from treating her, and in their selfish ignorance, they bind her legs so tightly that her legs become infected and fall off, thus introducing Pain into the world. In this case, the harm the doctors have caused is so heinous that only fundamental transformation can redress it. Thus, Coyote, the headman, declares the doctors will give up their former lives to become the four local mountains: Mt. Tamalpais, Mt. St. Helena, Mt. Taylor, and Sonoma Mountain, each with its own essential healing property. Ultimately, Coyote explains that while pain is now a feature of life, the four doctors "have learned their lesson well and yearn each and every day to be of service to us" (Sarris, *How* 180). They learned their lesson but had to become new beings to do it.

It is not an accident, I think, that cycle's grisliest story is also its titular story, the story of how the Mountain was made. It is a story of trauma yielding a different understanding of life. A community working through intense traumatization can never be the same community it once was. It can, however, climb higher, like the flat land transformed into the Mountain. The story of the Mountain's making is simultaneously ancient and happening now. It is a story of atonement, transformation, and healing in the midst of irrevocable pain.

Layer 4: Why Does Remembering Matter to Healing?

Remember the woman who ended up looking vainly for pretty rocks to impress a young man? That was her first story, not her last. In the cycle's final story, her father attempts to shift her attention onto a different necklace, one that contains the songs and stories of the people. She listens to him, "but only as before, with the desperate hope that she might at last capture the young man's heart" (188). Her learning is piecemeal, like any journey through trauma. There's a small change; half of a message reaches her. After several misadventures, however, the songs and stories this other necklace holds begin to capture her interest, redirecting her eyes to her home and people. Eventually, she herself becomes a storyteller, and in the end, it is her storytelling that wins the young man's heart. Transformations don't happen all at once, but step by step and sometimes when least expected.

Hers is a story of decolonization. The woman's obsession with pretty stones is symptomatic of a fundamental fear she is unworthy, that she can't "[stand] on her own merits" (11). It is a fear built on generations of derogation under colonialism. Over the course of the story, this fear evaporates as she rediscovers her cultural identity and the worth already inside her. Finally, she finds meaning not by dazzling someone into loving her but by reconnecting with her home and sharing her knowledge. Self-worth, contentment, healing: these transformations of trauma come from remembering, from looking back.

Sarris articulates the scope of this work in a 2005 speech at the Jewish Community Center in San Francisco:

There are 1,079 enrolled members of the Federated Indians of the Graton Rancheria. All are descendants of 14 survivors. None has living memory of any of the thirty to forty aboriginal villages. None is fluent in any of the ten to twenty native languages. None has memory of the ancient redwoods, the bunch grass, or the purple needle grass. None has seen a flock of birds so thick that it obscures the sun. None has seen a single pronghorn, a wild elk, or a grizzly bear within the native landscape. None can read that native landscape well. Never mind memory, the place has been all but destroyed. . . .

Still, we sing. We dance. We speak some old words. Humbled and hurt as we face Creation, that is, as we face this place that remains home, no matter how uncomfortable at times, we pray. . . . We hope that each new song learned, each word, each dance, each remarkable basket will do what it has always done for us: awaken us to our home, and, in turn, awaken our home to us. ("Culture" 19-20)

The full title of this story cycle is *How a Mountain was Made: Stories*, and the subtitle is the answer to the question. The stories made the Mountain and can heal it and us. Remembering is a central metaphor for the work of decolonization, but it is not only the colonized people who need to remember.

Layer 5: What Does it Mean to Remember as a Forgetter?

In “Apocalypse Logic,” Cowlitz essayist Elissa Washuta states, “the most thorough answer to the question, ‘What can [white people] do?’ is, ‘Remove your settler state from this land and restore all governance to its forever stewards.’” When I read this, I thought, “Yes, that’s the truth,” yet I am not sure what role it asks me to fill. If the settler state of the United States ended, would I live under tribal governance? Would the tribes want to govern hundreds of millions of non-indigenous people—and if so, how? And if not, would I be repatriated to Europe? In this case, I have to say Europe is not my home. Sonoma Mountain is my home; I am inseparable from it. Yet it’s a home where I have no right to be. Indeed, for a long time, I have been aware that I do not belong in the land I belong to.

But when I first read the stories, my world tilted. I learned that I do, in fact, come from the Mountain. In “Coyote Creates People,” Coyote’s shenanigans end up creating duplicates of the people of his village. These new people, my ancestors, eventually learn the stories of the Mountain and most go off to create new villages. We settler colonists, metaphorically, are from the Mountain too, the descendants of the ones who left. But by the time we returned, we had forgotten the stories. As Answer Woman explains,

[T]he Forgetters . . . killed all of the bears and the elk and the pronghorn. They cut down trees. You see, they forgot the stories. They forgot we are all one People, and the animals, indeed the entire Mountain, began to suffer. Now, we must all try to learn to live together. We must remember the stories again. (Sarris, *How* 176)

This is Sarris’s futurism, a world in which everyone remembers the stories, indigenous and non-indigenous alike. It is a gentle way to speak about people who have destroyed your world and continue to destroy it. To call us not genocidal or terracidal, but people who have forgotten is more generous than we deserve, but it is also sagacious in reaching out to an audience that includes white settlers. The story is shaped in transmission, and if the message is that we need to work together, it makes sense to provide a path for that work.

I opened with Mole’s misadventures with Fog and Warm Wind because this is the story of my home. While most of the stories are set on the west side of the Mountain, Mole’s village, like mine, is on the east, the side where the Mountain often blocks out the cooling effect of the Pacific Ocean. The first time I read it, I could picture it exactly. Fog appears over the western slopes, singing,

I am coming
Singing, I am coming
The people of your village rejoice. (32)

And I thought, “Yes. Yes, we do.” Those hot summer evenings, when Fog rises in the west, I can assure you we rejoice because the next day is not going to broil us. But when Warm Wind saunters over, I wrote in the margin of my book, “No!” like a squeaky Darth Vader because I know Warm Wind too from those summer days, when she sweeps off the Central Valley like

a furnace blast and drives all prayer of Fog away. I know Warm Wind in the summer. But the story is referring to Warm Wind in the spring, the wind that brings the flowers. I know the flowers, yet truth be told, I have no particular memory of Warm Wind in the spring. I think this is because summer on the east of the Mountain has always been something to reckon with. The heat describes what we can or cannot do and what times of day we can do it. That requires communication with the land, something a little bit like the awareness of the Old People. But spring is easy to live with. And because we do not rely on the Mountain directly for our food, we are not required to observe spring very deeply. In spring, we laze and let the details flow by us. I have seen over forty years of springs on the east of the Mountain, and I never paid attention to Warm Wind. I had forgotten the story.

This liminal space between intimate recognition and revelation encapsulates my experience as a Forgetter. It is a reawakening to what has always been there. We on the east side have always been Mole, pinched tight between Fog and Warm Wind. I have always known it, and I have never known it. If you asked me at any point of my life where I came from, I would have said Glen Ellen because that is the town where I was raised. I would have said I come from the west, from the West Coast of the United States, a person of Western European descent, with no ethnic roots anywhere but Western Civilization. But now I know I come from the east, and the map of my life is reversed.

Coda: How Can We Remember the Future?

How a Mountain Was Made is a call to healing, and any such call implies action in the world. If the task is to restore the stories, the work is fundamentally educational, and the text was written with explicitly educational intent. In fact, Sarris wrote several of the stories as a collection of theatrical works already performed in over ninety schools before the book was published (Mansergh). Sarris says of the book, “I hope kids will get the message that we are all beautiful, we are all special and the minute we think we’re better than, or separate from, or want to exploit somebody, or disrespect somebody, karma will happen. . . . We’re going to need young people with a deep ethic of place and land if we’re ever going to survive” (qtd. in Rose). I am not a kid, but I am (re)learner, and as I continue to deepen my own knowledge of my home and its Old People, I hope to live into my own responsibility to lend my partial and imperfect voice to the work of bringing the present and future back into continuity with the indigenous past and, thus, help us all to be whole again.

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Arwen Spicer comes from Sonoma Mountain in California and is an associate English professor at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington. Her doctoral work at the University of Oregon focused on evolution and ecology in utopian science fiction. Her recent scholarship includes studies of culture and ecology in the science fiction of Jeff VanderMeer and Ursula K. Le Guin.