

INDI'N HUMOR, TRICKSTERS, AND STEREOTYPE IN SELECTED WORKS OF
GERALD VIZENOR, THOMAS KING, AND SHERMAN ALEXIE

by

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ABSTRACT

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Humor in American Indian literature is a popular and important area of study. Yet, to date few full-length studies have compared the role of humor in Gerald Vizenor, Thomas King, and Sherman Alexie. This study offers a comparison of the ways three of the best-known American Indian humorists use humor to talk about contemporary Native American experience. The dissertation explores the way humor—especially trickster humor—is used to re-imagine the Indian stereotype. The dissertation asserts, first, that American Indian stereotypes are created through American, utopian impulses and that the stereotypes are then distributed by colonialism to make both North American identity and North American history sacred; second, that humor and trickster disrupt audience expectations and provide useful tools for undermining the effectiveness of the stereotype; third, that Vizenor, King, and Alexie are all using humor to challenge the creation and distribution of the Indian stereotype, offering ways to view identity that do not rely on the stereotype; and fourth, that these challenges take

different approaches and show the dexterity of humor. The study asks scholars to re-evaluate the seriousness of humor by considering the way authors are using it to reclaim Native identity. Because of this, “Indi’n humor” and trickster humor are suitable theoretical frameworks for the dissertation since they provide ways to evaluate the cultural functions of humor. Chapter two will outline these terms and the functions of humor in tribal communities. Chapter three focuses on Gerald Vizenor, and his use of satire to condemn multi-cultural, academic discourse practices that stereotype American Indians. Chapter four discusses Thomas King, and his use of humor to rewrite Western, textual authority that “others” Native people. Using humor, King refuses the colonial gaze these texts assert. Chapter five addresses Sherman Alexie, making the case that scholars need to understand the ironic ways he uses the stereotype throughout his fiction. Chapter five explores the way Alexie confronts the internalization of the stereotype through both American cultural presentations about the West and assimilation practices that distance Native people from their tribal communities.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE INDIAN PALISADE

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. [...] It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick, he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe...[but] a new product that is American.

-Fredrick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the American Frontier"

1.1 The Indian Palisade: American Identity

If there is one thing that we can ascertain from the recent success of James Cameron's 2009 hit *Avatar* (and the previous success of Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves*), it is the frontier metaphor is a lucrative image. More strikingly, it is an image that does not thrive on originality since *Avatar* and *Dances with Wolves* tell the same story. Americans are eager for movies that retell our typical associations of the frontier: the contrast between savage and civilized, primitive people at one with Nature, a Euro-American's full immersion (and acceptance) into a primitive society, and the expulsion of evil. These movies end with a Utopic quality where the violence is distanced from our Euro-American heroes—the surrogates for the movie viewers—and contained within a corrupt pocket of Euro-American culture, usually a greedy, violent group of bureaucratic men. The containment allows viewers to distance themselves from the violence of the frontier while also allowing the frontier to be recast as a pure landscape.

And while Hollywood is recasting the frontier as pure, or at the very least reserving the violence for those easily identified as evil, these movies also remind viewers of the origins of American identity. In the end, the Euro-American hero and the primitive merge to become the new basis of society—seen metaphorically in both *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar*. This merging of American and primitive is deeply rooted in American consciousness, especially in depictions of the frontier experience. In his seminal book, *The Frontier in American History*, Fredrick Jackson Turner argues that American identity is built from an Indian palisade that surrounds the settler and forces him to submit to the violent, primitive ways before emerging to become not Indian, not European, but purely American. In many ways, the idea of the Indian palisade—the settler’s reluctant entrapment within the savagery of the primitive Indian violence (i.e. all things Indian)—represents the basis of my dissertation. Turner’s frontier thesis suggests that American identity and economic structures are possible by transforming “free land” (1) and “primitive economics” (1) into “the complexity of city life” (1).¹ His thesis, like the palisade itself, relies on a social evolutionary perspective that pits primitive against civilized, the latter being the privileged, final point. For Turner, the “distinguishing feature of American life” (1) is the transformation of primitive culture. Turner’s Indian palisade utilizes the Indian stereotype to obscure Euro-American violence. Although the settlers have “tak[en] the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion...” (4), thus, done violent, savage things, the violence is explained as a temporary bridge between primitive and civilized; in other words, the settler is only

¹ Turner, like many Euro-American settlers, identifies the land as free, which, like the American Indian stereotype itself, views expansion through capital production.

violent because of the Indian palisade.² Here, civilization remains un-tainted and pure since the Ignoble stereotype acts as a marker for the violence: i.e., it is the savage Indian who creates the violence, and the Euro-American is only violent because the Euro-American wears the Indian clothing.

Turner's imagery of wearing the Indian is an apt metaphor for what I will argue is the lasting power of the American Indian stereotype, a two-fold process that involves "wearing" the American Indian (metaphorically) and recasting this image to reinforce the sacredness of American origins. Euro-Americans continually return to the American Indian stereotype for two major reasons: 1) Euro-American identity is built from the evolution of the American Indian stereotype (both ignoble and noble contexts).³ 2) The American Indian stereotype persists because colonialism continually uses it to recast history and progress as pure. The stereotypes are given authority through primitivist viewpoints that authenticate stereotypes by continually discussing them.

This chapter will address the origins of the American Indian stereotype and its functions within American, national identity in order to define the problem that I will be addressing in the third, fourth, and fifth chapters. Turner implies that the Indian palisade only works one way, which is against the settler. But I will argue that the Indian palisade has always worked both ways; while Euro-Americans were using the American

² See Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* for an analysis of the way American mythology is built around viewing violence as a means to regeneration. In this, he argues the Indian stereotype was used to help justify the violence.

³ As I will discuss later, the American Indian stereotype appears through either noble or ignoble contexts. In many cases—most notably our American identity—the stereotype incorporates a tension between the two contexts. In the before mentioned example, the tension fluctuates between American's rebellious side and their Edenistic Origins.

Indian image to define themselves, American Indian tribes were creating a palisade to protect themselves from the Euro-American possession of the American Indian image. And this is an important point I want to make in this chapter: Native authors are actively rewriting these stereotypes and the damage they have on Native identity. In this, I will address the way the stereotype emerges from a primitivist perspective that, through what Said calls “textual attitude” which gives authority to the textual representation, is used by colonialism to reaffirm colonial benevolence (i.e. cast America as sacred).⁴ By considering the source of the stereotype, I can develop a picture of the significance of what these authors are critiquing. In challenging the stereotype, these authors are also challenging American identity, which relies on the stereotype to reinforce sacred history. Understanding this allows us to see the way these authors are asking readers to consider what is “America” and the impact this question has on Native identity.

These concerns provide the context for my dissertation, and I will build on them throughout the major chapters (three, four, and five). Chapter two will define the terms and methodology that I will use to evaluate the stereotype, specifically humor and the trickster. These concepts will be applied to my individual Gerald Vizenor, Thomas King, and Sherman Alexie done in chapters three, four, and five. I have chosen to discuss the authors separately because it will allow me to better handle the large volume of work each author has created. Handling the authors separately will allow me to look at the individual works with more depth since I will be able to trace humor across the

⁴ Colonial benevolence is the condition where colonialism recasts violence as benevolence. The Ignoble and Noble Indian stereotypes are used to suggest that colonialism helps civilize American Indian tribes—thus making their lives better. For instance, boarding school practices intended to “save the man, kill the savage.” American colonial benevolence attempts to reaffirm that progress is sacred.

author's larger body of work. The depth in which I handle the texts will help make the final comparisons between the authors more illuminating because I will have identified the textual nuances seen in each the author. This will be especially true for the different types of insider jokes each author makes. Chapter six will look more in depth at what the different insider audiences show about American Indian humor, and what we can learn from addressing humor in these three authors.

1.2 Discovering the New Wor(l)d: The American Indian Stereotype

In 1492, Christopher Columbus had finally done it; he had reached the edge of the World. Against all doubt, against months at sea, possible mutiny, and superstition, Columbus had made it to what he thought was India. Looking out from his ship, India must have looked strange to him: no buildings or city congestion, just empty, vast tropical beauty. European travel writers would later celebrate the abundance of the New World and perpetuate centuries of colonial discourse.⁵ But, before those writers described the landscape, before thousands of Europeans imagined it, before it even became the New World—and with it, a “no place” of European Utopic imagination—it was somewhere: India. Of course, though, it was never India. And the people were never Indians (at least not before Columbus arrived). Even upon first glance Columbus was making the landscape over in his mind. Columbus needed to find India so he looked out and saw India. Although Columbus would later amend his mistake and claim the new land (and people) for the Spanish, he never really stopped seeing India. What Columbus and several centuries of explorers, settlers, and patriots saw as they looked

⁵ In *Imperial Eyes*, Louise Pratt argues that travel writing gazes upon the landscape using “imperial eyes” that identify it as empty and abundant.

on the New World is exactly what they wanted to see: themselves, their anxieties, their anti-Europe, their second Eden, even nothing (just an empty landscape).

Columbus' gaze over the landscape, although based largely on a misperception, has become the basis of Euro-American's descriptions of the American Indians. In *White Man's Indian*, for instance, Robert Berkhofer argues, "the initial image of the Indian, like the word itself, came from the pen of Columbus" (5). Columbus' initial description of the West Indies natives carries many of the major trends of contemporary stereotypes. For starters, and despite his inability to communicate with the Natives (5), Columbus' travel narratives attempt to identify the beliefs of the Native peoples. The Natives, he notes, "do not hold any creed nor are they idolaters; but they all believe that power and good are in the heavens and were very firmly convinced that I, with these ships and men, came from heavens" (qtd in Berkhofer 6). In a typical Eurocentric posturing—European as God—Columbus views the Natives through European markers, identifying them by what they "lack" in the European.⁶ Here, the Natives lack a Religious creed, but not a Religious enthusiasm since they do believe in the power of heavens (even if it is misinformed). The description was especially appealing to early missionary settlers because Columbus describes the tribes as passionately religious, but lacking a religious doctrine; thus playing on the Christian desire to save individuals through the word of God. During the late 19th and early 20th century, boarding school

⁶ Berkhofer notes that Europeans often describe Natives "in terms of its lack of White ways rather than being positively described from within the framework of the specific culture" (26). Lacking becomes a common way to describe American Indians through much of the 19th and 20th century.

education practices would utilize this type of thinking in their attempts to “save” the savage through Christianity.

Moreover, Columbus’ description of the people and land harbors many of the same stereotypes that appear in Euro-American descriptions of the West and the American Indian. Columbus’ natives, like the Euro-American noble Indian stereotype, are passive primitives that “all go naked...as their mothers bore them, although some women cover a single place with the leaf of a plant or a net of cotton which they make for the purpose” (6). The Edenistic undertones⁷ are complimented by the natural simplicity of the Natives. The natives are intelligent, Columbus notes, but this intelligence is dictated by the natural and the tasks they need to perform to survive. Thus, their intelligence is uncultivated in the European sense. Additionally, the Natives seem to welcome Columbus’ arrival and “refuse nothing that they possess, if asked of them; on the contrary, they invite any one to share it and display as much love as it they would give their hearts” (6). Their passive welcome is coupled with their inability to defend themselves, should the need arrive: “they have no iron or steel weapons, nor are they fitted to use them” (6).

The rhetoric of Columbus’ early arrival is consistent with nearly 500 years of American Indian stereotypes, partly, as I will argue, because it becomes so tightly wound around our depictions of the New World that it becomes the basis of Euro-American origins (or creation stories) and partly because his descriptions are appealing to Europeans longing for escape from the corruptions of Europe and civility. Europeans

⁷ Berkhofer notes that it was not until Columbus’ third trip that he openly discussed the Natives through the Eden storyline. But, here, we get a glimpse of this association.

readily accepted early depictions of Native tribes because for most people travel literature was their only source of information about the Americas. And these depictions were so attractive, exotic, yet strangely familiar that it was easy to be drawn to these depictions. After all, they were reflecting many of the tensions felt by large populations of Europeans. Problematically, Columbus' Indian is developed from Eurocentric viewpoints or what Berkhofer calls "heresy" (7) and is accepted as realism without much question. Because the image is so closely tied to discovery, and seen so obviously through Eurocentric, colonial markers, the image Columbus presents (the Indian) becomes readily available to fulfill the needs of colonialism.

The term Indian, like the image it invokes, is largely a Euro-American creation: "Native Americans were and are real, but the *Indian* was a White invention and still remains largely a White image..." (1). As an invention, the term contains a simulated representation that confuses the real and the unreal. The stereotype is created from the simulation of the real, which divorces representation from Native tribal realities. In *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*, Kimberly M. Blaeser discusses the way Gerald Vizenor views the stereotype through Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation (56). Simulation is the process where the simulation of an object, its mirror double, is mistaken for the original object. The mirror double, or the simulation, inhabits the space of the original object, using the signs of the original object: "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard 2). In this territorializing of the signs, the simulation erases the presence of the original; it becomes the hyperreal. The hyperreal is the

reality of simulation: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1). Simulation starts to entangle the difference between the original and the simulated. This entangling makes it so that the hyperreal erases any trace of an original (it no longer exists). Baudrillard believes the process starts with the reflection of the real in an image. From here the image denatures the real because of its artifice. Once the real is denatured, it starts to hide the absence of the real so that it finally becomes a simulation without a referent to the real (6). It becomes the presence of an absence. Because of this process of replacing the original for an absence, “simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (3).

Vizenor situates the Indian in this absence created by simulation:

The word *Indian*...is a colonial enactment, not a loan word, and the dominance is sustained by the simulation that has superseded the real tribal names. The Indian was an occidental invention that became a bankable simulation; the word has no referent in tribal languages or cultures. The postindian is the absence of the invention, and the end of representation in literature. (Vizenor, *Manifest* 11)

Vizenor argues that because the Indian has no referent it never existed in reality (Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor* 56). In Baudrillard’s terms, the Indian is a hyperreal: a space that has no origin.⁸ Vizenor explains the problem of a hyperreal and absence by saying,

⁸ Vizenor uses the hyperreal to explain the lack of representation for the term Indian outside of the simulation. Although the hyperreal is very similar to the general idea of the stereotype, I will continue to use the term stereotype because the hyperreal assumes there is no meaning outside of the simulation. This might work for the term Indian (since there is no tribal real), but makes it difficult to discuss the meaning behind the simulation since the hyperreal assumes there is no meaning beyond the simulation.

“simulations are the absence of the tribal real” (*Manifest* 4). Because the term lacks a tribal real, Vizenor stresses tribal communities have no use for the word.

Both the term Indian and the stereotypical image are created through histories of misrepresentation—one is a simulated word without a tribal real and the other an image that reflects European ideals. The stereotype never speaks for itself. Or put another way, the image does not represent the interests or concerns of American Indian tribes.

Instead, the Indian stereotype provides a means to view, define, and address Euro-American identity: “in imaging the Indian, America imagines itself” (Owens, “As if An Indian” 15). The Indian simulation involves centuries of primitivism, which Berkhofer argues looks at the present in order to dream of an alternative that is somehow more pure (72).⁹ Seeking solace from European corruptions, primitivists turned to the American Indian as the anti-thesis to civilization and themselves (29). Michel de Montaigne’s 1580 essay, “On Cannibals,” for instance, describes the Indian as barbaric (yet more pure) in order to undermine European enlightenment (Montaigne 217). This is typical of primitivism, which seeks to discover “people dwelling in nature according to nature, existing free of history’s burden and the social complexity felt by Europeans... and [offers] hope to mankind at the same time that they constituted a powerful counter-example to existing European civilization” (Berkhofer 72).

Primitivism then causes at least two major problems concerning the American Indian stereotype. 1) Since the American Indian stereotype disavows the American Indian from history, it contains the stereotype within a static, contained moment. I will

⁹ I will argue later that because of this and three other major reasons the stereotype is used to make American history sacred.

argue later that because the identity becomes fixed, the image becomes more readily available for colonial discourse to distribute and authenticate the image.¹⁰ 2) Primitivist practices view the primitive as a site void of meaning and fill it European ideals.¹¹ By nature, the American Indian stereotype assumes the American Indian image cannot change. As Berkhofer argues, “if the Indian changed through the adoption of civilization as defined through Whites, then he was no longer truly Indian according to the image, because the Indian was judged by what Whites were not” (29). Importantly, because the Indian stereotype is typically described through primitivist tendencies, the image itself is empty of meaning outside its European author.¹² The primitive lacks agency to speak for itself. In *Gone Primitive*, Marianna Torgovnick argues, “The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it” (9). The stereotype then becomes a vessel for European meaning and lacks an actual representation.

In “As If An Indian Were Really An Indian,” Louis Owens argues, “the colonizer attempts to empty out and reoccupy not merely the geographical terrain [of the Indian] but the constructed space of the indigenous Other” (16). As Owens argues, the constructed space of the Indian “reflects the Euro-American consciousness back at itself” (17). The Indian image is without history outside of the colonial context since it relies on it to “fill” it with meaning. Similarly, the image itself is without meaning as

¹⁰ Vizenor calls this Manifest manners, which are American discourses that attempt to fix the Indian in an authentic meaning.

¹¹ This is similar to Gayatri Spivak’s subaltern where the subaltern is placed outside colonial discourse. Here, primitivism places the American Indian outside history, which denies the American Indian access to colonial discourse.

¹² The stereotype becomes so prominent in Euro-American culture that in contemporary contexts it functions as what Roland Barthes calls a myth. As a symbol, the image will always contain an already defined meaning that is an alteration of the original meaning. This is why the American Indian stereotype becomes such a prominent image for product and capital.

well since it gains its meaning by speaking “Euro-American.” As Owens argues, American conquest involves both control of the land and the people, a control that do not seek to just erase the American Indian, but to usurp and control how popular culture views the American Indian. In other words, “America must make the heterogeneous Native somehow assimilable and concomitantly erasable. What better way to achieve that end than to invent the Indian as an Other that springs whole-formed from the Euro-American psyche?” (18)

As a site that speaks for the Euro-American, the American Indian stereotype becomes an important component colonial discourse. In his groundbreaking book *Orientalism*, Edward Said postulates that Western cultures speak about the other in order to control the way the other is seen. For Said, the image of the other “has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (12). Orientalism, which he defines as “the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice” (73), attempts to classify the other through textual and educational authority. Said offers that our descriptions of the other hold a “textual attitude” (93) created because humans “prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human” (93). As Said continues,

Texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produces a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of the given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it (94).

My interests here are the traditions (or discourses) used by colonialism that distribute stereotypes about American Indians in order to justify colonial violence.

Columbus' early travel documents helped produce ways to view the American Indian, and the centuries of explorers whose own travel documents seemed to confirm Columbus' perceptions, helped validate these depictions. Colonialism then spreads these representations through what Michel Foucault calls discourse in order to authenticate American Indian stereotypes. Discourse is the realm where power and knowledge become intermingled: "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, *HOS* 101). Discourse is a group of discussions that propel power through the disguise of knowledge, yet it is not representative of unified field of knowing.¹³ In "The Other Question," Homi Bhabha argues that the stereotype is created by colonial discourse that fixes meaning around the image while also thriving on the disorder of the image (94). The stereotype itself fluctuates between that which is "always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (Bhabha 95).¹⁴ In these terms, colonial discourse "produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (101). Within

¹³ See Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*.

¹⁴ The act of repeating functions like Stuart Hall's theory of articulation. Like Bhabha, who argues that colonial discourse makes itself appear real and thus repeatable, Hall argues that it is the act of repetition that creates the subject (or unites the stereotype into an articulated identity). For Hall, something is articulated, and in this articulation, is placed within a series of articulations that spread in to create relationships between ideas. Importantly, Hall argues that individuals produce the statements and place themselves within a system of ideology by repeating the articulation. Although Hall is concerned with ideology, I think the concept of articulation is important for understanding the way the validity given to the stereotype requires American Indians to represent the image.

this construction, colonial discourse “employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism” (Bhabha 101).

Colonial discourse adds authority to stereotypes by constructing them around historical “truth”—i.e. have “real life” correlations—that reinforces the validity of the representations, while erasing the colonial distribution of these representations. Philip Deloria argues the confusion between history and fiction appears as early as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. The show itself was a fictionalized account of the settling of the West that used real-life figures like Sitting Bull and Geronimo to re-enact prominent stories of the West. The real-life figures, Cody himself being one of them, acted out a simulation of historical events that often they themselves originally lived (58). The Wild West Show “dared the world to differentiate between two distinct forms of action—historical and representational...” (Deloria, Jr., *Indians in Unexpected Places* 58). This confusion between real and simulation denatures the historical event, making the event, and the Indian representations offered, “speak” for Cody. As Deloria argues,

The words and deeds spilling out of Wild West performances and public relations materials told three broad stories of expectation about Indian people. First, and most apparent in the show itself, was a story about Indian violence and American character. Underpinning this story was a second one, concerning the pacification that had necessarily preceded the Indian performances in the Wild West. [...] The show preferred to bury a third set of narratives dealing with Indians as modern people. Even when such stories emerged—and they did so

only when strategically necessary—they focused crudely on the Wild West’s role as an engine of assimilation and social progress. (60)

Deloria notes, American Indian representation seen in the Wild West Show—and later Western movies—offers validity to colonial discourse by using “authentic” historical players (both Cowboy and Indian) to confirm the benevolence of colonial history. It does this by using the savage stereotype to justify the violence and, when necessary, the noble stereotype to show the success of assimilation.

The validity given to stereotypes of the American Indian makes it so that American Indians must repeat the stereotype in order to be considered “authentic.” In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Pierre Bourdieu argues “[language] signifies to someone what his identity is, but in a way that both expresses it to him and imposes it on him by expressing it in front of everyone (121). American Indians are asked to “speak” the stereotype back to the colonial power that creates it. Louis Owens argues, “In order to be recognized, and to thus have a voice that is heard by those in control of power, the Native must step into that mask [the Indian stereotype] and *be* the Indian constructed by white America” (“As if” 17). The Indian stereotype identifies how an Indian should act since it creates an expectation of Indianness. As S. Elizabeth Bird reminds, “white culture seems to feel angry at Indians who do not fit the romantic mold” (4). Part of the anger stems from the failed expectations—as Said argues in *Orientalism*, textual authority creates our expectations (Said 93). But another part of the anger stems from the denial of the colonial authority given to the stereotype, and the functions of these stereotypes to reaffirm colonial benevolence.

1.3 Nationalism and the American Indian Stereotype: The Functions of the American Indian Stereotype

Although a large portion of my discussion examines the way Vizenor, King, and Alexie overturn the American Indian stereotype, I will also argue these authors expose the way the stereotypes are engrained in American origin stories and National identity.¹⁵ The authors do not just re-write the stereotypes, but also show readers the colonial discourses that create them. The American Indian stereotype emerges from a colonial pressure to reinforce the benevolence of American origins and justify the violence through sacred intentions. American perception of the Indian stereotype shifts around the Nations' relationship to progress (colonialism's need to reinforce the purity of progress). Although there are many variations of the Indian stereotype—the drunk Indian, the vanishing Indian, the squaw, the warrior, etc.—these variations are generally created through either noble or ignoble contexts, which shift around Euro-America's view of progress. The Drunken Indian, for instance, is part of the ignoble stereotype family and uses dialogues of victimry and degeneracy to reaffirm the value of progress and benevolence of assimilation. The Drunken Indian is incapable of handling the vices of civilization (perhaps because of his pure origins) and reaffirms Euro-America's need to reform the American Indians. In this process, it makes progress pure again since the stereotype justifies the assimilation practices. The stereotype, which is both ignoble and noble, allows Euro-Americans to talk about history, national origin, and progress itself through sacred definitions. Ironically, and because the process involves forgetting and

¹⁵ Nationalist origin stories emerge from the colonial need to hide violence and unite the people around an imagined ideal. Thus, nationalist discourse works as a component of colonial discourse.

remembering, the stereotype conceals the truth of that which it is narrating.¹⁶ The stereotype becomes a way for colonialism to purify progress since in both the noble and ignoble contexts the stereotypes reinforce the colonial view that progress is necessary in order to overcome primitive savagery.

Several critics have discussed the ignoble/noble representations of the American Indian. S. Elizabeth Bird, for instance, argues “the ‘noble savage’ has been with us for generations, along with his alter ego, the ‘ignoble savage.’ With the ebb and flow of cultural images of who *we* are, so the image of the Indian changes—now becoming everything we fear...then becoming everything we envy” (Bird 3).¹⁷ Her description, however, is a bit terse and does not identify how or why this shift occurs. Michel Hilger seems to address the issue more directly in his book *From Savage to Nobleman*: “The Western always measures the goodness of the Noble Red Man and the badness of the Savage by the way these character types react to the superior white characters” (3). But, Hilger’s scope is also too narrow and what he assigns to white characters is really a symptom of the larger nationalist storyline.

Thus, I will argue the way we view the American Indian (ignoble or noble) depends on a colonial, Nationalist discourse that is always trying to make its own origins sacred by using the American Indian stereotype. And this applies to both the

¹⁶ In the Roland Barthes sense, they function like myths in the Roland Barthes sense where they deform original meaning and divorce the symbol from history.

¹⁷ S. Elizabeth Bird’s claim has been reiterated by critics like Michael Hilger, Philip Deloria, and Robert Berkhofer.

ignoble and noble contexts.¹⁸ In the noble contexts, progress is made sacred by 1) reinforcing the benevolence of it and 2) by appeasing anxiety about it. In the first case, figures like Pocahontas celebrate progress. Pocahontas—arguably one of the most prominent stories about American Indians—has helped to create the lasting image of the Indian princess. The Indian princess stereotype is identified within the classification of the noble Indian stereotype where the Indian is one with nature and peaceful. In *From Savage to Nobleman*, Michael Hilger notes that, “the noble female characters are usually darkly beautiful and sensual ‘princesses’ who show a special willingness to love and be loyal to white men, even though they must often suffer for their devotion” (Hilger 3). The Indian princess stereotype embodies the tensions between fear and desire, where the author desires the Indian princess, yet fears the outcome of this desire. Hilger argues these stories usually stress that, “like Pocahontas, the typical noble young woman will almost always choose to marry a white man rather than a man of her race” (4). This favoring reveals white, male attitudes that inscribe Indianness (or female Indianness) through white identification—i.e. the American Indian female always desires the white male. Yet, the desire is also kept at a distance, where, as Hilger argues, these marriages usually end poorly for the American Indian woman; they are either killed or if they are lucky enough to survive, they can only do so “in wilderness, far away from society” (4). By keeping the American Indian woman at a distance, the male

¹⁸ In *Uncommon Ground*, William Cronon argues that nature is constructed along the same path. At times, Native is sublime, at others, demonic. These constructions, though, like the American Indian, who, really, is defined through Nature, are always othered and defined through what Cronon calls a moral imperative. This recovery narrative makes it possible to ‘save’ nature, much like it does for ‘saving’ American Indians.

heroes in these accounts are able to remain pure, without miscegenation, while also removing the Indian princess from the landscape (thus unable to breed more American Indians) either by relocation or death.

Pocahontas, the most famous and revered American Indian Princess, represents a Euro-American, white ideal that uses the American Indian Princess image under the mask of “historical truth.” The Pocahontas story is told and retold through art, movies, Disney cartoons, and history proper. At the center of the story is an act of sacrifice and survival where the noble and beautiful Pocahontas sacrifices her self to save the daring and courageous John Smith who is condemned to death by her father. In the introduction to *Dressing in Feathers*, S. Elizabeth Bird argues “these stories, at a mythic level, explain to Whites their right to be here and help deal with lingering guilt about the displacement of the Native inhabitants—after all, the ‘good’ Indians helped us out and recognized the inevitability of White conquest” (2).¹⁹ Pocahontas’ act of sacrifice, then, works to appease the white guilt of conquest; it reminds people that some Indians, namely the “noble ones,” wanted Euro-Americans here.

In “Tricksters of the Trade,” John Purdy argues that the Pocahontas story stresses the value of progress and the inevitability of it. Pocahontas’ sacrifice, Purdy argues, chronicles the attraction to social progress, namely the “inevitable...colonization of America” (105). The storyline itself reiterates the “triumph

¹⁹ The white guilt of conquest becomes a storyline in itself, seen, most notoriously in the movie *Dances with Wolves*.

of the colonists” (105). For Purdy, the story ends with the celebration of conquest.²⁰ John Smith, the innocent victim—a classification that erases the colonial violence—confronts Indian savagery and survives. The violence rests on one side (the savage Indian), both reinforcing the savagery of the primitive—thus, the need to “civilize” them—and erasing the historical violence of the colonists. In this classification, “the ‘best’ of the ‘primitive’ had been subsumed (anything serving to help forward the current social order) and the worst rendered invalid and impotent (anything resisting)” (105). Both are placed within Euro-American structures—“vanishing” from the story—to allow progress to take place. The most common version of the story ends in servitude where the American Indian princess devotes her body (and life) to John Smith.²¹

The Noble savage stereotype also reinforces progress by appeasing cultural anxiety about progress. While this often takes the shape of critique, I will argue that the critique is meant to reinforce the purity of National origins. In *Going Native*, Shari Huhndorf argues Euro-Americans rely on the American Indian stereotype to appease anxiety about progress (14). Because the American Indian stereotype exists before progress—and so it exists before the moment of crisis the author is acting out against—it allows the author (and the reader) a momentary escape to a purer historical moment.²²

²⁰ Purdy is discussing the most common fictionalized account of Pocahontas. Although there are variations to this story that depict more realistic accounts, the prominence of Pocahontas popular cultural imagination suggests that the sacrifice of an Indian princess (even if she marries someone else) is particularly powerful.

²¹ The American Indian servant or buddy sidekick is a prominent storyline that is seen in popular culture throughout the 20th century. The Lone Ranger and Tonto are the most prominent examples. Like Pocahontas, these storylines identify the American Indian as servants to progress.

²² Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Henry Longfellow’s “Song of Hiawatha” are great examples of this process. The fact that, with at least the latter, these stories become so engrained in our

Further, the American Indian stereotype appeases anxiety about progress by allowing a space to contrast Euro-American problems: “Going Native constitutes a series of cultural rituals that express and symbolically resolve anxiety about the nation’s violent origins” (14). Problematically, however, this process continually identifies the American Indian as “before progress,” in a time that does not exist and cannot exist, at least not in the way it did with the American Indians. Thus, progress, which has veered from its pure course, can be regained by revisiting the pure intentions of the past, a past that might not exist, but supposedly can again.

The Ignoble stereotype, the savage side of the American Indian, reinforces the necessity of progress and justifies the violence visited upon the Indians.²³ In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin argues that the American Indian was commonly demonized through rhetorical strategies intended to mask the economic intentions behind conflict (560). This ignoble stereotype became a major force in nineteenth century fiction, a time period Arnold Krupat says in the “Introduction” to *Savagism and Civilization* represents the third (and final) stage of Indian representation. In this, the American Indian was “bound to noncivilization: and so the Indian must vanish, for noncivilization is not life” (xii). Krupat’s final stage occurs late in the nineteenth century as America’s expansion west is coming to a close. The ignoble stereotype provides settlers a way to justify the expansion and make progress pure and

culture helps support the need (and importance) of the American Indian stereotype for progress and American identity.

²³ The Ignoble stereotype also represents the rebellious side of American identity seen in storylines like the Boston Tea party

necessary since the savage Indian represents “anti-civilized.” The turn to the ignoble stereotype provides a way to celebrate the triumph of progress over savagery.²⁴

The stereotype’s relationship to progress evolves from a nationalist discourse that uses the stereotype to reaffirm nationalist origins as pure. Because the stereotype is created outside of historical time—in a place before progress—it is aligned with sacredness.²⁵ This sacredness is used to reinforce Nationalism and the purity of National origins. The stereotype does this in three major ways. 1) Due to centuries of primitivism, the American Indian becomes The America’s Adam and provides access to a time before the fall; 2) Nationalism is defined through a process of remembering and forgetting that rewrites history as sacred; 3) Because the American Indian stereotype becomes the basis of American identity, it allows Americans access to the origins of the nation, or the democratic ideal.

1.3.1 America’s Adam: American Utopianism and the American Indian Stereotype

Because of the its primitivist links that view the Indian outside historical time—in what I will argue is a sacred time before the history and the fall—the stereotype itself becomes a way to purify history. For early explorers, America represented a second

²⁴ Of course the stereotype can be used to reinforce American or personal identity. A surface glance at the 1960’s shows that Americans sought the Indian stereotype because it represented the tensions of the decade since the stereotype is both savage (rebellious) and noble (peaceful).

²⁵ History as sacred remembering refers to William Cronon’s argument in “The Trouble with Wilderness.” In this essay, Cronon argues we view nature through sacredness, which divorces it from history and places history in a pre-history context, in a time before history existed (a time before the “fall”). For Cronon, constructions of wilderness are defined around sacred re-imaginings of Eden narratives, which view history outside historical time and through biblical time (allows access to a time before history). I will apply this idea to The American Indian stereotype, arguing it is also located before the fall in a pre-history, sacred time.

chance, a New World that did not contain the pressures of the corrupted Old World.²⁶ The New World was “out there,” outside European civility just beyond our imagination, and became an ideal place to imagine a new beginning. This is what Joel Nydahl in “From Millennium to Utopia Americana” calls an outward utopia, which “is represented by repeated attempts to locate a temporal paradise somewhere over the horizon, usually in the West” (238).²⁷ An outward utopia assumes that “a New Eden (perhaps the old one recreated or rediscovered) existed and that a new chance for man *on earth* could be had merely by going from here to there” (238). Nydahl notes that the new world merged these outward Utopia leanings with an upward utopia that believes “otherworldly (heavenly) future [can be] reached only by death” (238). The New World then was fashioned around the belief that a new Eden existed “out there” and that it provided a link to heavenly perfection. The combination of outward and upward utopias viewed “space as a metaphor for time—as a short cut to the future and to moral and spiritual ‘progress’, which symbolically and paradoxically took them on a journey to the past” (238).²⁸ The utopian leanings viewed the New World through a spiritual time capsule that identified time as space—here time was Eden or the past—and the space as our link to future, heavenly Utopia.

²⁶ In *American Adam*, R.W.B Lewis looks at separation in a different way, arguing that the break from Europe allowed early American writers to imagine America and its citizens through Eden narratives. Lewis focuses mainly on the way Euro-Americans identified themselves as Adam, but I think his concepts apply to the Indian as well since many of the same motifs—tragedy, without history, not Europe—are used.

²⁷ I would argue that our depictions of the Frontier were also created in this way.

²⁸ Here, we can already start to see the way progress is defined through the sacred.

Primitivist depictions of the New World aligned the Natives with a gentle landscape of lush, empty landscape,²⁹ allowing writers to reinforce the Edenistic qualities of the New World.³⁰ Within this landscape, European writers begin to see the Indian as the New Adam (Carr 25). In Utopian terms, the Indian became the surrogate for European Utopianism—the means for which Europeans could achieve Utopia. Seeking to “prove that an alternative to the present age could exist” (72), the European explorers viewed the Natives through Edenistic narratives (72). The narratives, which became “standard illustrations for texts about Native Americans for two centuries” (73) were enough to prove to later generations of European writers that a second Eden existed (73).

The sacredness of the American Indian stereotype is compounded when considered through primitivist tendencies that 1) speak for the primitive³¹ and 2) “connotes...a place in time” (2) that “describes the earlier stage of human development” (2). As America’s Adam, the American Indian did not just exist before civilization, as in the case with primitivist depictions, but before time (and progress) itself. By keeping the American Indian stereotype confined to a time before the fall, Euro-American

²⁹ In *Virgin Land*, for instance, Henry Nash Smith argues the frontier was imagined as a blank space that provided potential for economic and masculine renewal.

³⁰ Nydahl notes that early travel depictions help reinforce these ideals. See also Robert Berkhofer’s *The White Man’s Indian*. Similarly, in *Imperial Eyes* Mary Louise Pratt argues accounts of the New World in travel writing paved the way for imperialism by imagining the Americas through European contexts. Further, in “Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen” she argues that Natives are often written as “scratches on the Earth”; they are not seen bodily, but represented through the landscape, as if the traces are all that remain. In this, Pratt argues Mr. Barrow uses a “normalized discourse” that identifies the indigenous people through their customs and preserves them outside the landscape, leaving the landscape empty for European settlement.

³¹ In *Gone Primitive*, Marianna Torgovnick states, “the primitive does what we ask it to do. [...] the primitive can be—has been, will be (?)—whatever Euro-Americas want it to be” (9).

culture can easily call upon it to purify the anxieties of progress. In this context, the stereotype becomes a contrast to European civility that not only speaks for us, but also reaffirms Euro-American sacredness. Helen Carr argues that this involved a rhetoric revolving around three major leanings. If the “European is over-civilised,” and the American Indian “is not sufficiently civilized,” then the “Euro-American is just right” (34). The associations are typical of what Mircea Eliade calls the Noble savage in “The Myth of the Noble Savage”:

The myth of the noble savage, was but a renewal and continuation of the myth of the Golden Age; that is, of *the perfection of the beginning of things*. Were we to believe the idealists and utopians of the Renaissance, the loss of the Golden Age was the fault of ‘civilisation.’ The state of innocence, and the spiritual blessedness of man before the fall, in the paradisiac myth, becomes, in the myth of the good savage, the pure, free, and happy state of the exemplary man, surrounded by a maternal and generous Nature. (41)

But it is also important to note that the ignoble stereotype is also subject to these tendencies since early depictions of the savage Indian were a “projection of the fears and repressed desires [of the Puritans]” (Berkhofer 83). In this way, the violence visited upon the Indians was a way for the Puritans to cleanse themselves of sin (83). By cleansing the landscape of the savagery, we are able to make the landscape sacred

again.³² Importantly, the ignoble stereotype, like the noble stereotype, places the Indian outside civility and historical time.

1.3.2 Nationalist Amnesia: Nationalism and the Discourse of Aesthetic History

In order to discuss the way Nationalism uses the American Indian stereotype to make history sacred, it is important to build a clear picture of how Nationalism functions to perpetuate a fixed or singular storyline. This is important because the American Indian stereotype fits within this storyline to rephrase dissent within National discourse and make history sacred again. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines nation as “an imagined political community” (6) that unites individuals around an imagined “deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). The shift from hierarchal power to lateral power is significant for Anderson who notes that the lateral distribution of power relies on an imagined fraternity between individuals that unites around a sacred, ordained belief that we are free because God willed it (7). In order to create a shared connection, Anderson argues that American Revolutionaries defined America outside of history, relying on, instead, a “the antiquity of the American people” (193). This is what in other terms Anderson calls the “expression of an historical tradition of serial continuity” (195). Nationalism was built from the associations of the people that came before it—and in the American sense, the American Indians that died for the sake of the nation.

It should be noted here that nationalism takes place outside of historic time. In Anderson’s argument, nationalism is not reliant on historical truth or past events;

³² In later depictions of the ignoble Indian, the stereotype provides colonial discourse a way to justify violent assimilation practices since the savage is before progress and in need of civility.

instead, it relies on linking itself back to the pre-history. Anderson identifies the photograph as an example of the complications of this linking. Here, he argues that the photograph “is only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence...which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from memory” (204). This fluctuation between remembering and forgetting—a tension that plays out in the national, historical origins as well—requires that one narrate the origins: “Awareness of being embedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of ‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity...engenders the need for a narrative of ‘identity’” (205). Here, Anderson views Nationalism as aesthetic. Or more particularly, national identity is aesthetic—and with this, the history and narrative used to perpetuate identity.³³ In “Dissemination,” Homi Bhabha notes that the “narrative performance” of nationalism “interpellates a growing circle of national subjects” (209). Like Anderson, Bhabha argues that individuals are identified as national subjects through the narrative of nation.

In order to make identity aesthetic, Anderson argues that nationalism turned to the printing press, which “link[ed] fraternity, power and time meaningfully together” (36). The printing press was particularly potent in distributing this image because it allows the image to reach a larger audience, giving the perception of a fixed, shared identity.³⁴ Anderson contends that the perception of a fixed, shared national identity that could be shared by large audiences made national identity “module”; it could be used

³³ Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West Show” (and the frontier more generally) is a good example of the performative nature of Nationalist history.

³⁴ See Henry Nash Smith, Richard Slotkin, and R.W. Lewis for discussions on the way literature reinforces and perpetuates a national mythology.

for social, political means (Anderson 4). Similarly, Bhabha argues that Nationalism attempts to evoke “essentialist identities” (213) by continually uniting individuals around a collective sameness. This is done by “turning...the differentiated spatial boundary, the ‘outside,’ into the authenticating ‘inward’ time of Tradition” (213). Here, Bhabha is looking at the way Nationalism usurps dissent and reframes it through essentialized tradition that unifies national perspective around a collective, singular identity.

In *Rites of Assent*, Sacvan Bercovitch expands on this, arguing that National identity continually rewrites dissent through models of assent—or the belief that all men are created equal and can achieve the American dream. For Bercovitch, National identity revolves around the assumption that Americans are pre-ordained, which places “past and future in sacred history” (41). History, in this context, involves a tension between inclusion/exclusion where those tied to this history (namely Euro-American settlers) are allowed access to national involvement, while those outside these definitions are either remodeled through inclusive models of American ascension (the American dream) or placed outside the system.³⁵

In order for narratives about National origin to create cohesion (or shared identity), American Indians are identified through Euro-American conceptions, one that identifies itself through sacred time, or ordained destiny. The stereotypes of the American Indian not only give Euro-Americans the ability to speak for the other,

³⁵ Importantly, those cultures excluded in this arrangement (American Indian tribes) are allowed imagined access once they adapt the dominant cultural viewpoint, where, once they are assimilated within American models of identity, they can gain assent.

something Bhabha argues is a basic function of Nationalism (214), but the stereotype provides a way for Euro-Americans to unify National identity around a shared context that both remembers origins (the American Indian) while forgetting the continuity of these origins (the violence visited upon the Indians). The American Indian stereotype provides Nationalism a way to rewrite dissent through sacred contexts.

1.3.3 Creating American (Indian) Identity: National Identity and the Indian Stereotype

Previous to the declaration of Independence and the military defeat of England, Benedict Anderson argues that American settlers “imagine[d] themselves as communities *parallel and comparable* to those in Europe” (192). However, the events of 1776 severed this link and with it the way Americans defined themselves. In order to create the imagined fraternity that creates Nationalism, Americans turned to something that was purely American and could represent everything that England was not. Luckily, and thanks to several centuries of primitivism that viewed the American Indian as the anti-Europe, the American Indian stereotype allowed revolutionaries a way to 1) create a more “American” ancestry and 2) define themselves as “not Europe.”³⁶ It should be no surprise, then, that in 1773, as the revolutionaries were starting to break with European parallelism, they turned to the American Indian for immunity from British identity. Donning Indian clothing, American revolutionaries revolted against

³⁶ The American Indian becomes a liminal space that provides Euro-Americans an entry point to becoming American. This is Turner’s Indian palisade, and it is seen in several decades of literature and films about the frontier: William Faulkner’s “The Bear,” *Dances with Wolves*, Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Longfellow’s “Song of Hiawatha,” James Fennimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans*, and so on.

British taxation (and British rule) with the Boston Tea Party and created an American tradition of what professor and Indian activist Philip Deloria calls “playing Indian.” Deloria argues that the disguise used by the revolutionaries allowed them “to experience and perform the opposed identities of rebel and citizen” (*Playing* 26). For Deloria, the Boston Tea Party became a “key origin story” (2) in creating American identity. In Nationalistic terms, it became a way to create a shared fraternity.

In *Playing Indian*, Philip Deloria asserts that the American Indian stereotype (and the colonists’ desire to play out this stereotype) becomes the basis of American identity. He notes “through Indianness, colonists articulated a revolutionary identity, drawing on the deeply rooted power of familiar ideologies surrounding Native Americans” (20). The American Indian stereotype is appealing because it allowed Americans to draw from their utopic, sacred origins (the Noble Indian) while also celebrating their rebellious nature (the Ignoble Indian). For Deloria, this is only possible by dividing characteristics of the American Indian between positive and negative values that could easily be assigned (or distanced) from American identity (20). The positive values—seen most commonly in the Noble Indian—become the mouthpiece for Euro-American colonial benevolence and the primitivist link to Nationalist origin stories. The negative values distance the American Indian by focusing “not on good or evil, but upon the relative distance that Indian Others were situated from this Self-in-the-making”.³⁷

³⁷ Nationalism relies on the fluctuation between inclusion and exclusion where individuals are allowed access to power (or the belief they have access) only to the point that it does not unsettle established

Deloria calls this division noble savagery, “a term that both juxtaposes and conflates an urge to idealize and desire Indians and a need to despise and dispossess them” (4).³⁸ Noble savagery views the American Indian through both self-criticism (the pure Indian as everything we are not) and through conquest (the savage Indian hinders the evolution of civilization) (4). For Deloria, American identity is created through this context and relies on the affinity to learn from the natives, while simultaneously desiring to purge the landscape of the Natives in order to allow Euro-American control (5).³⁹ The stereotype allows Americans to imagine themselves outside these tensions by viewing their origins through sacredness:

If the white American could at the country’s inception identify with the Native American as natural, uncorrupted man, soon only the white American could be eligible for that role. The United States was the country of the future, where the westward course of Empire made its way: as its citizens transformed the plains and deserts, the Indian along with the wilderness would give way to a modern culture (Carr 9).

In both noble and ignoble contexts, the American Indian stereotype continually reinforces the act of vanishing.

In order to more readily assign values such as positive and negative, the American Indian stereotype must remain in a singular history, one that remains outside

power—something they cannot access. The American Indian stereotype provides a way to both include and exclude the American Indian. This is compounded by primitivist tendencies that involve both fear and desire.

³⁸ See also Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration Through Violence*.

³⁹ Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* is a good example of this process.

American origin stories. The American Indian stereotype represents the starting point for American identity, yet because it exists before civilization (as anti-Europe, anti-civilized, before the fall, etc.) the American Indian stereotype does not have access to progress. In order to make history pure, and rewrite the violence visited upon Natives through National, utopic contexts, what Shari Hundorf calls “going Native” (and Deloria calls “playing Indian”) continually re-enacts “rites of conquest...by redefining Native Americans as part of [Euro-Americans’] own past” (Hundorf 15). By “going native,” Hundorf argues Americans are able to “[regenerate] racial whiteness and a racially inflected vision of Americanness” (5) while also “reflect[ing] on the national history by providing self-justifying fantasies that conceal violence marking European America’s origins” (5). Here, the stereotype provides Nationalism the ability to conceal violence and redefine National origin stories through sacredness.

1.4 Laughing Back: Models of Dissent in American Indian Literature

By exposing the way the stereotypes function within National discourse, Sherman Alexie, Thomas King, and Gerald Vizenor are not just rewriting the stereotypes, but also exposing the way these stereotypes function within a Nationalist discourse. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues stereotypes involve a colonial fetishism that attempts to gain access to “an identity which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it” (107). Although the stereotype openly displays difference—in that the image represents “other”—the stereotype is constructed through colonial origin myths. As Bhabha

argues, “the myth of historical origination—racial purity, cultural purity—produced in relation to the colonial stereotype functions to ‘normalize’ the multiple beliefs and split subjects that constitute colonial discourse as a consequence of its process of disavowal” (106). The Other is constructed “as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (122). Kept at a distance, the stereotype always fluctuates between the ambivalence of what is already known and what needs to be proven (95). The stereotype “speaks” difference, but restructures this difference within a stable “same.”

The singularity of this vision, Bhabha argues, opens up the possibility of reconfiguring the stereotype and resisting the colonial gaze. Through what Bhabha calls hybridity,⁴⁰ the colonized subject can reconfigure the singularity of colonial representation by repeating the colonial identity through other:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal... Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power

⁴⁰ Bhabha’s hybridity is different than something like The Indian Palisade I discussed earlier. The Indian Palisade is technically a hybrid identity since it incorporates American and Indian. However, the Indian Palisade reinforces the stereotype because it identifies the Indian as “other,” and it this marker as “other” that is productive (and repeated). In this, it distributes colonial power by insisting on difference and concealing the authority created by the representation (i.e. that Europeans have authority over Indians because they are more socially evolved; they are almost like Indians, but better).

but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. (159-60)

This ability to turn the gaze back onto colonial power is of central importance to the reversal of the stereotype. In confronting the stereotype, Gerald Vizenor, Sherman Alexie, and Thomas King, do not just re-configure the image, but expose the power contained within discourses that fix the image. Hybridity, in Bhabha's argument, reveals the "presence of power...as something other than what its rules of recognition assert" (160). It denatures the stability of the singular vision while also revealing the power hidden within the initial representation.

By revealing the power hidden within these stereotypical representations, American Indian authors are rewriting the colonial discourses that view the American Indians within controlled, Euro-American contexts. These colonial discourses, which are built from the stereotypical images of Noble and Ignoble Indians, influence both government policies and how the general public interacts/views American Indian people. These representations create "poses" that American Indians are asked to replicate. Louis Owens argues that in order to be heard, many American Indian authors are donning the poses created by colonialism and producing texts that "present to such readers a carefully managed exoticism that is entertaining but not discomforting to the non-Native reader" ("As If An Indian" 22). These texts do not challenge the constructions of Indianness, nor the colonial storylines that create these representations. Gerald Vizenor, Sherman Alexie, and Thomas King, on the other hand, work within these systems of representation—at times even wearing the poses given to them by

colonialism—and use trickster humor to overturn, expose, and rewrite the colonial authority created through the stereotype.

The problem then is one of control and agency. It is a question of who gets to define the American Indian identity and to what ends? As Louis Owens argues, “for American Indians, the problem of identity comprehends centuries of colonial and postcolonial displacement, often brutally enforced peripherality, cultural denigration—including especially a harsh privileging of English over tribal languages—and systematic oppression by the monocentric “westering” impulse in America” (4). American Indian authors seem to have come to arms and have created a significant body of work that confronts, challenges, and reinvents these colonial discourses in order to move the American Indian out of the colonial past. In the “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, Kenneth Roemer writes, “American Indian writers often “challenge popular notions of specific events and figures” (11), offering “an alternative worldview” (11). This worldview runs counter to the unified vision of Nation Anderson describes; it opens up the possibility for what Cathy Moses calls dissenting fictions. This dissention is nothing short of a means toward survival, for as Kimberly Blaeser argues, “Native peoples can actually survive only if they dissociate themselves from ‘Indianness’ as it now exists” (*Gerald Vizenor* 39).

Working within this context, American Indian authors Thomas King, Gerald Vizenor, and Sherman Alexie challenge popular notions of history in order to expose the way colonial discourse uses the Indian stereotype to make history sacred. They do

this while avoiding the Euro-centric desire to offer “authentic” identity models that view race through an either/or process. As such, this study asks the question, “how has the humor of Gerald Vizenor, Sherman Alexie, and Thomas King—particularly trickster humor—disarmed colonial, Nationalist discourse by confronting and overturning the textual accounts that both shape a larger American historical narrative and define a specific image for the American Indian?”

The purpose of humor for this study is significant since it provides a way to address some of the larger concerns: notably, the intersection of subversion and cultural identity. Humor confronts static notions of American Indian by challenging the validity of colonial stereotypes. In *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*, Kimberly Blaeser argues, “the most compelling and ultimately most rewarding literary representations of history by Native American writers are those which, by their humor, work to unmask and disarm history, to expose the hidden agendas of historiography and thereby remove it from the grasp of political panderers and return it to the realm of story” (85). In this context, humor will help provide a way to view the colonial power distributed through these shared texts. Humor then, in the context of my research question, provides a means to discuss the way these authors confront and challenge the stereotypes that place them within certain identities—identities that are often tied to matters of colonial dominance.

Additionally, humor provides a means to overturn cultural ignorance by requiring readers to engage with an American Indian culture. As Vine Deloria notes, “one of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh.

Laughter encompasses the limits of the soul. In humor, life is redefined and accepted” (146). Importantly, humor works against stereotypes by offering cultural perspectives. As Kenneth Lincoln reminds, “If Americans attribute a sense of humor to Indians, they may come off as more human, less treacherous, quicker-witted (as the caricature masks white betrayal)” (*Indi’n* 83). Theoretically speaking, and as Lincoln notes, humor asks the reader to participate in the teasing process. Importantly, it creates a way to “poke fun at Indian-white issues,” to bring forward the tensions, laugh at them, and provide the “other” access to the inverse viewpoint (25). Humor goes a long way in reversing cultural ignorance, since it relies on a shared connection between audience and text. In order to laugh, the reader must situate the joke within a specific cultural context.⁴¹

When humor is applied to the trickster figure it has the potential to not only reinforce cultural values and collective identity, but also the ability to challenge static identities that depict American Indian identity within stories of dominance.⁴² The trickster reinforces cultural values and works between cultures to undermine authority, making humor particularly potent.⁴³ The trickster survives chaos and uses humor to advert tragedy. As Vine Deloria claims, “when a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at other and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to

⁴¹ Humor also runs the risk of alienating the audience, as I will discuss in the next chapter. This is because the subject can reject the counter-perspective or miss the joke due to the lack of insider knowledge.

⁴² Additionally, the trickster runs the potential of essentializing Native fiction. In *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations* editors Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra provide a collection of essays that warn critics against the overuse of trickster criticism, which they feel too often assumes the trickster can be applied to all Native texts.

⁴³ One of my favorite examples of this is from Neil Diamond’s documentary, *Reel Injuns*. In this documentary, he discusses a movie where Navajo extras asked to speak in their native language tell the main character, “you are snakes crawling in your own shit.” Because none of the filmmakers actually spoke Navajo, the quit subversion went unnoticed.

extremes, then it seems to me people can survive” (167). Given the cultural role of humor, studying the way humor intersects with colonial discourse is an important undertaking, since it provides a means to address the way these authors are working to create identity, work against colonial certainty, and undermine structures of dominance that place American Indian people within specific representations.

While it has been well argued by critics like Kenneth Lincoln, Vine Deloria Jr., and John Lowe that humor has value in confronting cultural ignorance, the focus, at least in Lincoln and Deloria’s case, has largely been on the link between humor and culture. That is not to say that my study does not rely on the way humor opens up cultural outlook since my research question uses this link to look at how humor (re) asserts a Native cultural identity. As such, my study will use Deloria and Lincoln’s work to discuss humor’s role in confronting colonial benevolence. This approach opens up the possibility to address identity politics and stereotypes. Significantly, my study will address the way Alexie, King, and Vizenor work against the dehumanization that occurs with stereotypes. More specifically, my study will analyze how these authors attempt to detach stereotypes from colonial aims that undermine American Indian’s identity process. It is important to consider how these authors are attempting to use these stereotypes to find agency in creating their own identity, while also avoiding the trap of asserting an “authentic” identity for Native people. These processes should provide a good record of how American Indian authors are using humor to challenge stereotypes and create an identity outside colonial discourse.

It seems fitting then that my study will examine Sherman Alexie, Thomas King, and Gerald Vizenor since they are arguably the most prominent American Indian humorists writing today. Yet, despite their respective acclaim, few studies have examined these authors together. James Cox's *Muting White Noise* is one of the few books that looks largely at these three authors together, and even his book devotes a great deal of attention to the larger field of American Indian literature. I think looking at these three authors in connection will provide ample opportunity to both fulfill a missing area of research within American Indian literature and produce significant discussion on the implications of the authors' different approaches to humor. While these authors are handling similar subject matter, and using humor to work within this subject matter, the outcome and approach are diverse. Analyzing these differing outcomes will provide opportunity to discuss the implications of their different approaches. This discussion will be important in defining the larger purpose of humor as well the theoretical undertakings of this humor.

CHAPTER 2

THE LAUGHING COYOTE; OR TRICKSTER GOES THERE LAUGHING:

DEFINITIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON HUMOR AND THE TRICKSTER

It has always been a great disappointment to Indian people that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by professed experts of Indian Affairs. Rather the image of the granite-faced grunting redskin has been perpetuated by American mythology.

-Vine Deloria, Jr, "Indian Humor"

In *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*, Barry Sanders explores ancient philosophy on laughter and notes, "Of all the creatures in the animal kingdom, humans alone possess the remarkable ability to laugh. Very little distinguishes us from other animals, finally, except language and laughter. For the ancients, however, only laughter grants humans their unique, spiritual life" (21). As Sanders points out, ancient philosophers saw laughter as a strictly human activity, something that defined humans as "not-animal." This social marking represented a distinction, or division, between humans and animals, where the latter, because of their inability to laugh, were a lesser species. The laugh and the laugh nots, it seems, were held to different standards.

Although contemporary science has proven that the ancients were wrong—that humans are not the only species to laugh—ancient philosophers were right about the importance of humor. What happens then when we view a culture outside laughter? The stoic Indian stereotype depicts American Indians without laughter. The "granite-faced grunting redskins" (Deloria, Jr. *Custer* 146) of popular culture are all business. The

stoic Indian representations are expressionless and lack personality; they seem to suggest that the world is tragic and serious.

Yet, American Indians know how to laugh: at themselves, at others, as a culture. As Charles Eastman reminisces in his autobiography, *Indian Boyhood*, “I don’t believe I ever heard a real hearty laugh away from the Indians’ fireside” (267). Laughter is part of the tribal culture and is engrained in the stories, particularly trickster stories. Laughter is “the cement by which the coming Indian movement is held together” (*Custer* 167) since it shares a common viewpoint. Although American Indian humor approaches humor through shared themes, these shared themes are addressed in vastly diverse ways. This is especially true of Sherman Alexie, Thomas King, and Gerald Vizenor, who collectively laugh at false representations of the American Indian, but do so with different textual strategies. The different approaches show the dexterity of humor, and when addressed comparatively, can also reveal the relationship between the author’s personal and cultural philosophies and their respective humor.

Humor, I will argue throughout the dissertation, requires the reader to engage with the speaker’s perspective, making it a useful tool for replacing colonial stereotypes with Native perspectives. In this chapter, I will define humor and the trickster, which are the primary terms of my dissertation. The chapter will have three major purposes: 1) to outline the scope for my larger project, 2) to define humor and trickster in a theoretical way, outlining how I will use them within the larger project, and 3) to justify the value of humor, specifically trickster humor, in overturning colonial discourse that depicts American Indians within certain stereotypes.

The definitions I present will highlight the reader response functions of humor because those are the most relevant for my larger argument: i.e. the larger idea that humor involves a certain reader response—the reader must interact with the humor in order to find it funny—which undermines stereotypical depictions by asking readers to engage with Native perspectives. I will argue the reader’s involvement in humor becomes particularly potent when viewed through the trickster because the trickster helps challenge and undermine stereotypical representations by re-creating these representations in ways that stress cultural correctives and challenge “authenticity.”

2.1 The Unexpectedness of Being Funny: American Indian Humor and the Stoic Stereotype

...Yes, I will disprove the professorial contention
That a serious man is not supposed to be funny.

-Sherman Alexie, “Inappropriate” from *Face*

Despite the value of humor, Academia has traditionally undervalued the role of humor in American Indian literature—perhaps due to centuries of stoic Indian stereotypes. For some reason, few studies have addressed the way humor functions in American Indian cultures (and even few have looked at King, Alexie, and Vizenor together).⁴⁴ John Lowe sees this as a problem of the value we assign to humor:

We tend to become suddenly solemn when we begin to write, particularly for scholarly journals and books. To be funny indicates a lack of seriousness.

Perhaps for this reason, histories and studies of ethnicity, assimilation, and

⁴⁴ Scholarship exists, like Kenneth Lincoln’s *Indi’n Humor* or Eva Gruber’s *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature*. Yet, there are few full length studies on American Indian humorists such as Sherman Alexie, Thomas King, and Gerald Vizenor—the latter being the most widely discussed—and almost no studies that look exclusively at the humor seen in all three authors (see James Cox’s *Muting White Noise* for an exception).

ethnic literature have frequently ignored a vital aspect of their subject. (Lowe, “Theories” 439).

Humor is crucial to American Indian literature—and ethnic literature more generally—in that “acknowledging and understanding the role of humor in the lives of the American Indian is important if for no other reason than to counteract stereotypes” (Ballinger, *Living* 61). Historically speaking, American Indians aren’t supposed to be funny. They are serious and stoic. They do not laugh, because their world is tragic. By keeping the American Indian stoic, silent, and without laughter, American culture dehumanizes the American Indian. They become a caricature, relegated to the tragic past.

It was not really until the 1960s that scholars began to address the importance of humor in the American Indian movement. In 1969, Vine Deloria Jr. released his book, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, which not only explored the importance of American Indian humor, but also showed, through Deloria’s wit and irony, that American Indians are funny. Typically, Deloria argues, American culture “favor[ed] the granite-faced Indian of American mythology” (*Custer* 146). By looking at laughter, he argues, we can start to humanize the American Indian. As he writes, “If Americans attribute a sense of humor to Indians, they may come to see natives as more human, less treacherous, quicker-witted” (83). That is because humor and laughter is a very social endeavor. It relies on audience engagement. American Indian humor, more specifically, contains a cultural perspective that encompasses social values, offering said values to audience. By understanding humor, Deloria contends, one can start to understand a culture: “one of

the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh. [...] In humor life is redefined and accepted. Irony and satire provide much keener insights into a group's collective psyche and values than do years of research" (146). American Indian humor helps identify perspective and also reaches across cultural lines and asks the reader to engage with the perspective offered. In this way, American Indian humor is an important strategy for reinforcing bonds in Native communities (167).

One of the most common and important approaches to humor in American Indian literature is "teasing," which creates community bonds by reprimanding behavior that is out of line with cultural values.⁴⁵ Traditionally, humor was used to address social issues. Through teasing, the tribe could playfully reprimand members out of line with tribal consensus: "for centuries before the white invasion, teasing was a method of control of social situations by Indian people. Rather than embarrass members of the tribe publicly, people used to tease individuals they considered out of step with the consensus of tribal opinion" (147). Rather than directly confront the subject with criticism, the individual must interpret the criticism himself and weigh his behavior against tribal values. The behavior is funny, entertaining, and part of the communal bonding process. In order for it to be funny, however, the audience has to identify the behavior being teased and consider this against the behavior being encouraged since teasing forces the individual to engage with a communal outlook. For it to work, the audience must engage with both perspectives and evaluate them.

⁴⁵ Teasing is a common method of humor in several different cultures such as African American humor. My main interest here is the way the traditional, tribal functions of humor translate to cross-cultural contexts in contemporary Native humor—especially the way the humor teases both American Indian and Euro-American behavior. See Kenneth Lincoln's *Indi'n Humor*.

This traditional function of teasing is also seen in contemporary American Indian humor where teasing becomes a way to address cross-cultural audiences in order to expose the problems that exist between white/Indian relations. Kenneth Lincoln argues, “[teasing] once meant to raise a nap of cloth; now it means to annoy and/or entertain by aggressively focusing play toward extended kin. So tribal teasing, pan-Indian style with red English, targets issues with an attention that roughs its audience affectionately, Indian-to-White” (Lincoln, *Ind’n* 25-6). Columbus, Crazy Horse, and Custer are common figures used to arouse issues within cross-cultural settings because these figures are shared in both pan-tribal and Euro-American histories.⁴⁶ For instance, in *Medicine River*, Will and Harlen go visit the Custer Monument, only to discover it is closed for the day. King creates two ways to view this: one where the attendant is friendly and an imagined one where the attendant closes the gate in fear of the invading Indians. The latter option asks the readers to focus on white/Indian relations by laughing at the tensions of the historical event and ultimately suggests the monument is not built for American Indians. In the alternate version, Will imagines the “kid hiding in the dark, hunkered down...his hands shaking around his rifle, waiting for us to come screaming and whooping and crashing through the gate” (King, *Medicine* 112). The joke uses the tensions of the last stand and laughs at the fact whites might still be defending the land from Native people. These moments are common in King’s fiction and ask the reader to evaluate the relationship between white/Natives as well as the historical representation of the American Indian.

⁴⁶ Deloria notes that Columbus jokes are important for creating bonds in Native communities because all tribes share this history. See *Custer*.

Because this type of humor relies on confronting behavior with a second outlook it runs a high risk of being rejected. In “Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter Laughing,” John Lowe says humorists are like high-wire performers, trying to balance the various audiences the humor addresses: “ethnic humorists, when writing for both ethnic and non-ethnic audiences, are in one sense walking a high wire aesthetically, subject to falling into disfavor with their ethnic group on the one side, and with the dominant cultural on the other” (440). This is because humor involves a dual presentation that, on one hand, seeks to establish common ground between speaker and audience, and on the other hand, challenges the outer-circle to re-think their personal beliefs. If the reader dismisses the humor, denies that the “teasing” is funny, then humor runs the risk of becoming identified as an aggressive attack.

Alexie’s teasing, for instance, is easily misread as aggressive since it commonly utilizes anger to criticize behavior. In his poem “Postcards to Columbus” from *Old Shirts & New Skins*, Alexie creates common ground through Columbus, but uses sarcasm to criticize historical representations of Columbus. Alexie’s sarcastic presentation of the way he will celebrate Columbus’ 500th birthday runs a high risk of alienating audience members because it directly confronts the sacredness of American discovery. He writes, “...we’ll honor the 500th anniversary / of your invasion, Columbus, by driving blindfolded cross-country / naming the first tree we destroy *America*. We’ll make the fist guardrail / we crash through our national symbol. Our flag will be a white sheet / stained with blood and piss” (41). The poem relies heavily on sarcasm, a form of humor that does not conceal the criticism being offered. In many

cases, sarcasm can be viewed as less amusing since the reader does not have to discover the meaning (Gruber 58). Gruber makes the case that despite sarcasm's "crude assault" (58) on the reader it should be considered in the framework of humor because "it is frequently used as a coping tool and weapon against misrepresentation and oppression" (58). Gruber notes that sarcasm often targets the "darkest sides of colonization, be they genocide, cultural destruction..." (58). The sarcasm of the poem targets the problems of colonization, and the poem suggests that celebrating Columbus Day is equivalent to driving recklessly across the country. Alexie sarcastically reminds the reader that Columbus not only accidentally discovered America, but that his discovery was marked by destruction. The re-classification of Columbus Day teases the readers for celebrating Columbus' discovery by asking them to consider what they are celebrating.

Although there is no sure way to avoid alienation created from teasing—especially since teasing confronts personal outlooks—the basis of humor asks readers to reflect on a different perspective. Teasing is about establishing a cultural perspective that challenges behavior with the intention to solicit change. A reader that views Alexie's sarcasm literally ultimately denies this request. However, the reader must first engage with the alternate perspective Alexie offers; they still have to confront the violent history Alexie critiques. If the humor is denied, and the request to change not accepted, then the humor still succeeds in forcing the readers to evaluate their behavior by engaging with a new outlook.

Alexie's humor also asks the readers to identify themselves in relation to the perspectives offered. This is typical of teasing, which, by its nature, draws attention to

the individual. When we are teased, we are identified as “not the same” and made aware that something is different. In American Indian literature, teasing asks the reader to identify themselves as insiders or outsiders—cultural members or not. Alexie says American Indian humor can be very insider oriented—he calls this “Indian trap doors”—humor that American Indians fall into and Euro-Americans pass right over (Alexie, “Interview with John Purdy” 145). This type of humor helps create communities by offering subtexts intended for Native audiences. To some extent, ethnic humor more generally is about these distinctions. John Lowe argues ethnic humor is about defining ethnicity in order to “to communicate further between cultures and to obviate ethnic differences” (“Theories” 440). Although American Indian humor tries to establish common ground and tease forward cross-cultural relations, American Indian humor also establishes a cultural perspective that distinguishes between those that are part of the culture and those that are not.

The multi-perspective nature of humor allows American Indian writers to challenge outlooks by providing views that replace (and rewrite) perspectives. American Indian humor uses a process similar to what post-structuralists have termed “play,” or the dislocation of centralized meaning through a process of substitutions.⁴⁷ Like play, Kenneth Lincoln’s *Indi’n* humor often substitutes meaning in order to de-center dominant outlooks. These types of substitutions help present Native perspectives and rewrite stereotypes created through colonial discourse. The intention is to create a

⁴⁷ *Implicit Meaning* by Mary Douglass gives a good outline of the way humor uses play. Douglass’ exploration of way humor substitutes the expected with the unexpected is a good example of the way humor functions.

new outlook or understanding of the world (and the self in that world), and it is this “turn to understanding” that distinguishes humor from play:

Both play and humor ‘express’ human pleasure, but play derives from the noncognitive... while humor as its conscious extension is triggered by a mature moment of bisociative ‘in/sight.’ That is, humor (with its doubling comic mode and discharging jokes) turns on *understanding*, whereas play often libidinally pits one vector against another (*antagonists*) and games toward a resolution, cognitive or not. (Lincoln, *Indi’n* 81)

The intention of American Indian humor is to create a new understanding and through substitution, humorists are able to replace the expected with the unexpected. Puns for instance celebrate the substitution of meaning possible with language (play). The humorists ask the reader to reflect on the moment of understanding and laugh at the possibility that meaning might be fluid. But, in American Indian literature puns also present the reader with a new understanding of the term. The pun itself exposes the colonial intentions within dominant outlooks, unsettles the singularity of these visions, and re-imagines them through Native contexts. Thomas King is the best example of the function of puns in American Indian literature. Dr. Joseph Hovaugh from *Green Grass, Running Water*, a character obsessed with his Garden and finding the Indians that escaped from his ward, is a pun on Jehovah. The pun is funny because it replaces the original word with an alternative, while also asking the readers to consider the ideological functions of Christianity in enforcing Native captivity.

Another common form of substitution in American Indian humor occurs through the re-imagination of historical figures like Columbus and Custer.⁴⁸ Using these figures also allows American Indian authors to re-imagine the past through Native outlooks and expose the power contained within the figures. Take, for instance, this Columbus joke Deloria presents: “Another version [of Columbus’ arrival] states that Columbus didn’t know where he was going, didn’t know where he had been, and did it all on someone else’s money. And the white man has been following Columbus ever since” (Deloria, Jr., *Custer* 148). The joke is funny because it plays on expectations and critiques Euro-American culture. In doing this, it alters the heroic depictions of Columbus and re-imagines him as a free-loading fool.⁴⁹ In this case, and as I will argue throughout, the humor challenges the dominant value, refuses this value, and substitutes the value with an alternative perspective. The humor does not attack the moment itself—something already written in time—but what this moment represents; it attacks the colonial discourse perpetuated through the historical moment.⁵⁰

Exposing the colonial intentions held in historical representations of America allows American Indian writers to continually re-identify the past through survival. Humor in American Indian literature stresses the act of survival, and humor is a perfect tool for this because it liberates one from suffering. In “Humour,” Sigmund Freud states that humor is created by a momentary dismissal of expectations. We expect the reader

⁴⁸ Importantly, these figures also create pan-tribal bonds since the joke uses shared histories.

⁴⁹ An extended example of this process is seen in Gerald Vizenor’s *Heirs of Columbus*, which re-imagines America’s founding through native contexts.

⁵⁰ The authors I will be addressing throughout my dissertation are not only reacting to the image of the stereotype, but also to ideological moment that creates the stereotype. By rewriting and exposing the ideological source, these authors are more effectively re-writing the image.

to present a certain outlook that, when not presented, creates laughter (264). Humor rebels against our perceived expectations, giving humor a “*liberating* element” (265). The liberating element of humor is drawn from its refusal to suffer. For Freud, humor celebrates “the triumph of narcissism, the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure” (265).⁵¹

Overtuning tragedy through humor helps create bonds by celebrating the survivability of tribal communities and rewriting the tragic storylines that have historically insinuated American Indian communities were vanishing. According to Vine Deloria, “tribes are being brought together by sharing humor of the past. [...] The more desperate the problem, the more humor is directed to describe it” (*Custer* 147). Humor works both as a glue and a shield where, on one hand, the shared focus on the past unites tribes around a collective history, and on the other, re-contextualizes the more “desperate problems” around comedy. Importantly, re-imagining tragedy also means undermining colonial storylines and stereotypes that define American Indians through tragic and stoic representations. This ability to re-conceptualize tragedy is important in helping re-define American Indian representation. Laughing at the past helps expose the contradictions hidden there, namely the way tragedy re-enforces the “vanishing Indian” stereotype. In “Coyote’s Jokebook,” John Lowe argues, “but Indians...have proved capable of taking what appears to be a tragic history, winnowing

⁵¹ “The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor” by Sherman Alexie outlines the way humor refuses audience expectations about tragedy.

out and cherishing what contradicts it, and inverting the rest; thus the communal verbal tradition of joking lives, with a vengeance, providing a cornucopia of jokes and comic motifs for writers” (196). A lot of the humor in *Green Grass, Running Water* emerges from King’s revision of tragic history. King re-imagines Columbus’ arrival with the destruction of the dam done by a Pinto, a Nissan, and a Karmann Ghia. Rather than destroy Native communities, the pun suggests that the destruction of the dam allows these communities to heal. Similarly, he re-imagines Fort Marion⁵² through escape and survival, refusing the historical assertion that no Indians left Fort Marion. By changing the terms of history, King undermines the fatalistic outcomes these accounts typically display.

King’s use of Fort Marion starts to reveal the way that American Indian humor helps erase cultural ignorance by requiring readers to engage with Native outlooks. American Indian humor works against cultural ignorance by exposing the misconceptions that exist within historical conceptions of American Indian identity and placing these misconceptions in conversation with an American Indian pan-tribal cultural perspective. This allows American Indian authors to re-order fields of representation by 1) identifying a history that is constructive for Native identity (namely, one that is about survival) and 2) substituting the Euro-American history with this Native perspective. Vizenor’s novel *Heirs of Columbus* for instance replaces American origin stories created from Columbus’ arrival with a trickster re-imagination

⁵² Fort Marion is a military fort in Florida that housed several Native American prisoners during the aftermath of the Indian Wars. Under the direction of Captain Pratt, the prisoners were educated in Christian values, marking a precursor for the boarding school project. King uses Fort Marion as a representation of Euro-American history that stresses Native confinement and reform.

of America built around survival, not tragedy. His use of satire requires the reader to compare the two historical outlooks, and his eventual re-creation of America through trickster aims offers an alternative perspective built around survival. These types of re-imaginings go a long way to defining a cultural identity:

Knowing and having pride in one's own history are important factors in the cultural identity formation of a group, since the group's self-conceptualization strongly relies on the imagination of its own past. The victors, however, write history, and Euro-American colonial paradigms have long denied Native people a history of their own. (Gruber 21)

American Indian humor re-writes history through a Native perspective that changes the way the reader views the past. Laughing at the absurdity of the historical past—namely, the stereotypical representations of the American Indian—combats cultural ignorance: “[American Indians] laugh hard and deep among themselves and grimace around whites, exorcising the pain, redirected their suffering, drawing together against the common enemy—cultural ignorance” (Lincoln, *Indi'n* 5). Humor presents a Native viewpoint on the past, but also exposes—and teases—the historical misconceptions of the American Indian.

American Indian humor enhances this process by asking the readers to consider the act of viewing—namely, forcing the readers to reflect on the way they see Indianness—in order to evaluate the colonial stereotype. In *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature*, Eva Gruber argues,

Humor in contemporary Native writing to a substantial degree centers on the way in which Native identity and existence are in constant jeopardy as a consequence of colonization. It subversively ridicules features of dominant society and, arising from the situation of seeing oneself as Other, stereotypes that members of the dominant society hold about the subaltern ('the Indians'). (Gruber 41)

American Indian humor navigates these representations in order to expose the "gaze" associated with the stereotypes. As Gruber explains, the exploration of representation works within colonial systems, utilizing a hybrid model of resistance, one that "emphasize[s] interconnections rather than rigid dichotomies" (31). American Indian humor certainly seeks connection between audience and speaker, while also establishing a new understanding. Hybridity, for Gruber, has "potential to reformulate rather than replicate" (31). In this way, the authors do not attempt to replace colonial models of representation, since that would just replace a model of "authenticity" with a second. Instead, the process is "one of reshaping or even constructing palimpsests, where the original representations remain visible but are ridiculed and recontextualized in order to achieve defamiliarization and, consequently, reorientation" (30). The reader is presented with familiar conceptions of Nativeness as a way to "defamiliarize" their value. The process works through imagination where the reader must imagine first the familiar—thus relating to the image more generally—before re-imagining the new image. In other words, Gruber argues the readers imagine their own conceptions (the familiar) before addressing the un-familiar (33).

Smoke Signals offers a good example of the way humor uses viewing to challenge the readers' conceptions of Indian. The scene is set up around Victor's critique of Thomas' "Indianness." The scene invites the audience to view the Indian through the stereotype. Initially, the joke starts when Victor teases Thomas for his stereotypical identity, which Victor mocks is created from watching *Dances with Wolves*: "You're always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I mean, how many times have you see [sic] *Dances with Wolves*? A hundred, two hundred times?" (Alexie, *Smoke Signals* 61). Victor's suggestion that Thomas should "get stoic" (61), however, replaces the stereotype with another stereotype. The scene is funny because it invites the reader to consider the problems of these representations. For Alexie, there is no clear-cut way to be "Indian," only a way to be visually Indian. The joke ends by focusing on the visual nature of the Indian stereotype. Heeding Victor's advice, Thomas changes his look in order to become more visually Indian. The scene focuses on the familiar components of Indianness like hair while also offering the unfamiliar Fry Bread Power shirt: "VICTOR'S POV as Thomas comes striding out of the convenience store. He has taken the braids out of his hair. It flows in the breeze. He's discarded the suit. He's wearing a Fry Bread Power T-shirt and blue jeans" (63-64). The POV shot invites the reader to gaze at Thomas and mocks the audiences' expectations about Indianness. When Thomas emerges from the restroom, he appears to be more visually in line with our expectations about Indians. Of course, this confronts the visual cues and the audience's expectations of "Indianness."

Humor encapsulates a culture, defines a culture around shared values, and speaks between cultures in order to create common ground and re-imagine dominant values. It is important to keep in mind, as we continue through this chapter and into the next, that at its core, humor creates a new understanding of the world and asks the reader to engage with this understanding: “humor forces us to reinvent the world anew” (Lowe, “Coyote” 203). In creating the world “anew,” American Indian humor re-evaluates dominant values, particularly colonial models of representation, in order to re-imagine Native identity. It does not just address the historical moment or the stereotype itself, but instead looks at the colonial power behind the representations to laugh at the colonial discourse. American Indian humor makes us confront the colonial biases of our past—the way colonial discourse reinforces colonial benevolence through stereotypes—and, through this confrontation, seek new ways to define American Indians. Humor then is about survival; it is about overturning destructive, colonial outlooks through the act of laughing. As Vine Deloria, Jr. said, “When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive” (*Custer* 167).

2.2 The Trickster Turn: Defining the Trickster

Central to American Indian humor is the American Indian trickster, who John Lowe notes is a “key player in Indian humor” (“Coyote” 194). The trickster, as Kimberly Blaeser writes, is the ultimate “comic survivor” (Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor* 68), and thus, strengthens the goal of American Indian humor to stress survival. The trickster survives through all odds. He survives through chaos. Survives cultural mediation.

Survives his own folly. Trickster survives by adapting to situations. Often times a shape-shifter, the trickster celebrates the ambiguities of identity. The trickster is both male and female (Babcock and Cox 100), both human and animal. The trickster lives between binaries, pushes certainty toward absurdity, a “mediator who breaks down any hard and fast distinctions” (Blaeser, “Trickster” 51). The trickster lives in the in-between, and “moves on a diagonal to the rest of society’s parallels” (Ballinger 74). A comic wanderer, the trickster is “a warning” (74). The trickster defines the limits of culture: “lives sideways in society, many times bending normal wishes and values, whether personal or social, to his own ends and knocking awry...the social will they customarily satisfy” (75). Because he lives peripheral to society, he can upset order and certainty to reveal cultural ideals. Yet, in all of this, the trickster teaches. He presents lessons in order to “enlighten the audience to their own flaws or to caution against certain actions by exposing the ludicrousness of Trickster’s actions” (Blaeser, “Trickster” 55). In short, the trickster is a lot of things: teacher, hero, fool, life bringer, and death bringer. He holds together contradictions. At times both organizing the world and upsetting order, the trickster defies classification. He is a mediator and a cultural hero. He is a fool and a prophet. He is all of these things and none of them. And while the trickster might have many different poses, one aspect of the trickster remains certain: he is funny.

And so the “trickster turn” celebrates this unknowing. It lavishes the contradictions that exist between binaries in order to expose the flaws that exist in these distinctions. Yet, it leaves the scholar with a theoretical dilemma: how does one attempt

to define something that resists categories? Unfortunately, many attempt to view the trickster through rigid definitions and fail to account for the cultural variations of the trickster. Equally problematic is the fact that “most [accounts of the trickster] have come to us filtered through the voices of dominant-culture researchers” (Ballinger 7). Thus, it is important to remember the trickster has several cultural variations. Not only is the figure seen in diverse ways in different Native tribes (Yellow Woman, Coyote, Nanabush, Wolverine, etc.), but also many cultures outside American Indians have trickster figures. The Greeks had Hermes. The Euro-Americans celebrate the Con Man. The African-Americans have Tar Baby. Even popular culture seems to celebrate the trickster with that wreescally wabbit, Bugs Bunny. It is important then, as Franchot Ballinger argues, to “make earnest efforts to convey the American Indian view of trickster whenever possible” (6). While the section will address the trickster through American Indian viewpoints, I will also utilize a more general approach. Unfortunately, and to borrow Kimberly Blaeser’s words, “even in an abridged form I couldn’t possibly hope to deal with all these manifestations. So in my comments today, I restrict myself to generalizations about the trickster figure among Native American peoples” (“Trickster” 49). Unfortunately, I understand that defining the trickster as I do (generally) can potentially lead to cultural misrepresentation, a problem, I hope, I do not aggravate. The section is not intended as a strict definition; instead, the section is meant to outline the different ways the trickster illuminates American Indian humor, particularly the way the trickster helps reinforce some of the inherent values of humor: providing counter perspectives, enforcing a cultural center, upsetting certainty, to name a few.

In this section, I will look at the trickster primarily as a literary device since I will be looking at the trickster in contemporary American Indian literature (namely selected works of Gerald Vizenor, Thomas King, and Sherman Alexie). Coinciding with this, I will discuss trickster definitions that illuminate the goals of American Indian humor and my dissertation more generally. Thus, I will be looking at the way trickster helps rewrite colonial storylines that create stereotypes. In this, I will discuss: 1) the way trickster reinforces cultural values by teaching lessons; 2) how these lessons evaluate current (and destructive) behavior; 3) how the trickster interacts with the audience in order to facilitate change; 4) how the trickster is a mediator between cultures, a hinge point, that both explores the interaction that takes place at a contact zone and dismantles the power that is often asserted at such interactions; 5) how the trickster challenges certainty by celebrating multiplicity; 6) how the trickster reiterates a communal (not an individual) viewpoint. Within these contexts, the trickster allows these authors to uproot stereotypes (and power) without replacing these stereotypes with new forms of authenticity; the trickster dismantles authenticity all together. The trickster reveals cultural ideals, explores cultural identity, and works against false representation—and humor strengthens these outcomes.

One of the most common functions of the trickster is to teach lessons about communal behavior. Kimberly Blaeser asserts, “Perhaps the most frequently noted purpose of trickster tales is their teaching dynamic. Obviously lessons are conveyed through the stories by example: Trickster learns lessons the hard way, we work learn them the easy way, vicariously” (“Trickster,” 55). The stories are models for social

behavior. They define cultural values. The lessons learned are often moral ones, where the trickster teaches by doing what is not acceptable and displays the taboos of the culture. These lessons do not just teach, but also explain the world: how coyote's eyes became yellow or how hare lost its tail. Thus, the teaching dynamic works both to explain a specific cultural outlook while also defining how the community should act within this outlook. In *Our Stories Remember*, Joseph Bruchac argues, "Teaching by negative example, [trickster stories] reinforce the very cultural norms that their foolish heroes ignore: *Don't be like Coyote when he is that way*" (102). Trickster's foolishness teaches and entertains. His escapades make us laugh because they usually involve human error—thus, they are always strangely possible.⁵³

The trickster creates a vicarious experience for the reader and provides audiences with a way to experience taboos that do not hurt the tribal community:

The fascinating aspect of this instructive function of the stories is that the performance of the tales manages to transform the learning process into a communal, joyful, active process. Trickster errs, we learn. The stories relate the faulty thinking of the trickster figure so that we may recognize the folly of our own erroneous thinking. Trickster saves us from mistakes by making them for us—in story. (Blaeser, "Trickster" 56)

Part of what makes the trickster such a powerful figure is that we can identify with the trickster. We laugh at the foolishness because the situation is familiar to us. We can locate ourselves within the trickster foolishness and laugh at the familiarity of the

⁵³ In this context, Andrew Wiget argues the trickster shows a moral dilemma. See "His Life in His Tale."

moment. Laughing at one's self, as Radin notes, "means accepting the ambivalence of the human condition, for which civilization gives us very little instruction or structured opportunity" (Radin xiii). Readers can identify with Coyote's boredom in King's "A Coyote Columbus Story" from *One Good Story, That One*. Readers can even identify with Coyote's manipulation of rules in order to win at baseball. But, Coyote's selfish acts that eventually create three ships, a bunch of people, and Columbus warn readers about blindly following these selfish desires.

Because trickster stories are grounded "solidly in tribal norms" (Ballinger 60), the stories provide a space to reinforce cultural values. The trickster may be a wanderer by nature, but he cannot escape his community: "we should notice that most of their shenanigans do indeed occur in one way or another within social boundaries, although they certainly strain or violate the values that produce cohesive societies" (72). For Ballinger, trickster stories often take place within social boundaries, the trickster serving as a reminder of social responsibility. Ballinger offers the example of a Coyote story where Coyote gives himself oral stimulation, but is caught by the clouds. Although Coyote appears to be alone, the story shows that he cannot escape social relationships (73). Ballinger argues that this shows that despite his seclusion or outcast status, "the impossibility of escaping the social eye or social relationships and responsibilities may be the theme in some stories in which at first glance a trickster appears to be removed from society and alone" (73). In this way, the hyper-individualism of the trickster can be used to stress the need of the collective; the trickster helps individuals locate themselves within culture by reiterating the importance

of communal values. As Ballinger argues, “through relationships—family, clan, tribal—American Indians discover who they are and how identities give them presence in a social web” (66).

Trickster defines behavior limits and “implies for their audience both ‘funny and dangerous’ behavior” (62). Trickster’s behavior is funny. But, trickster’s behavior is also dangerous. Trickster is dangerous because he pushes tribal values to the extreme: “the trickster often pursues no uncommon desires but rather socially acceptable goals or values (only the degree of the trickster’s desire is extraordinary) and manipulates the social contract in some fashion, violating it in the process” (75). Trickster’s exploits are not foreign to the audience, but, instead, familiar. This familiarity creates humor, but it also creates a link between audience and story since the audience can (at least initially) identify with the trickster’s goals. Identification with the story is important for the teaching component of the stories, where, when the eventual transgressions occurs, the audience can create a link between self and community values. Trickster acts within social and cultural bonds, but does so in a way that manipulates these values to their most outer limits.⁵⁴ It is not always trickster’s motives that are at question, but the way he goes about achieving them; his behavior becomes errant when it moves beyond the limits of prescribed behavior. For example, Alexie’s poem “The Business of Fancydancing” from *The Business of Fancydancing*, shows both funny and destructive behavior for the audience. The readers can identify with the starvation that drives the

⁵⁴ Gerald Vizenor’s novel, *Bearheart*, for instance, is a trickster novel (see Alan Velie’s argument in “The Trickster Novel”). It teaches by pushing behavior to the extreme. Despite its violence, which is meant to warn its audience, the novel is funny and a perfect example of the trickster teaching corrective.

narrator's exploitation of Vernon, a child Pow Wow Dancer. The narrator describes Vernon as "some promise / to pay the light bill, a credit card we / Indians get to use" (Alexie, *Business* 69). The narrator, however, pushes the cultural values to the extreme with the exploitation of the young boy and the self-destructive tendencies that follow. The money does not solve the problems, and part of this is because the money is being used to buy alcohol. In this way, Trickster's errors are a "warnings," as Ballinger claims, a chance to correct our behavior before it is too late (74).⁵⁵

Trickster reflects culture, embodies the values, pushes these values to the extreme and as such, offers a way to view the structures of society. In this way, Trickster does not just define social and cultural limits, as Radin argues. Instead, trickster stories utilize a certain amount of satire, where "we see another level of the teaching function of the tales in their frequent use of satire, the presentation of comic evaluation or reassessment of certain behavior or certain situations. Here rather than reinforcing established values, the stories often question the status quo..." (Blaeser 56). For Blaeser, these social critiques are often political, "warn[ing] those holding power against acting powerful instead of acting like the mediators of power" (56). In this way, Trickster stories teach, not just how the individual should behave in the community, but also how those in power should act. Vizenor's criticism of AIM or Bureau of Indian Affairs offer good examples of this type of humor. The opening of *Bearheart* for instance criticizes tribal leaders "not honest enough to bear the dreams" (Vizenor, *Bearheart* 33). Jordan Coward is driven by personal revenge and greed when he decides

⁵⁵ In contemporary terms, this allows the audience (and authors) to explore multiple cultural viewpoints.

to drive Proude out of the cedar nation for the government. The opening questions the motives behind tribal leadership and satirizes the personal abuses that can take place with leadership roles. These types of warnings “help release the tensions and negative feelings that naturally arise when humans subject themselves to the rules and customs of the community” (75). As John Lowe notes, “such tales actually support the norms they rupture, while providing a comic ‘release’ from societal pressure” (“Coyote’s” 195).

These traditional roles of the trickster are important for considering many of the contemporary functions of the trickster. A lot of the concerns seen in oral performances of the trickster appear in contemporary literature—such as the teaching and reinforcing cultural values. However, contemporary theories (and literature) tend to focus more exclusively on the way the trickster navigates culture. These theories tend to view the trickster as a positive liberating example rather than a negative example of bad behavior. This apparent contradiction represents a shift in the way trickster is used in Native communities. In contemporary terms, the trickster is a cultural explorer that navigates the spaces between cultures. In *Trickster Lives*, Jeanne Campbell Reesman argues, “tricksters...stand where the door swings open on its hinges” (xiv). Like Reesman, Jeanne Rosier Smith views the trickster as a figure that “dwell[s] at crossroads and thresholds...” (7). In this role, Trickster has the capacity to address extremes of culture in cross-cultural settings, both challenging dominant conceptions of culture and (re) creating spaces that exist outside dominant constructions. Because the

tricksters exists at the hinge point—a liminal space where boundaries dissolve—he has the ability to disrupt certainty and help establish “personal and social identity” (2).

As a figure that exists in-between categories, the trickster provides a space outside of Euro-American discourse that can create meaning without reinforcing Euro-American frames of knowing. Because the trickster exists on the fringe, the place where meaning is kept, Elizabeth Ammons argues the trickster offers a way to explore ideas “without relying on dominant cultural maps.”⁵⁶ (Ammons X). As a mediator, the trickster “liberates humans from traditional social-moral categories and dramatizes new ways of perceiving and the possibility of new orders” (Ballinger 134). The trickster creates a counter space for Native perspectives, and according to Elizabeth Ammons, “trickster strategies are not just a way to get ‘in’ or ‘back at’ the dominant culture. Tricksters and trickster energy articulate a whole other, independent, cultural reality and positive way of negotiating multiple cultural systems” (xi). These spaces are important for identifying the way Native communities can navigate cross-cultural relationships. Noreen Lape sees the trickster a teacher that identifies for Native communities how to “survive on the margins of Anglo American culture and how to establish tribal patterns for relations with whites” (Lape 61).⁵⁷

Like the teaching corrective, the trickster’s in-betweenness is meant to elicit audience interaction and evaluation. Kenneth Lincoln argues “the tribal issue is one of

⁵⁶ Ammons views the trickster as a mediator between viewpoints, an idea that is useful considering James Ruppert’s argument that American Indian authors write through mediation. Also see Ruppert’s book, *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*.

⁵⁷ Trickster stories, like American Indian humor, stress cultural survival, which includes navigating structures of power. See Franchot Ballinger and Gerald Vizenor for more detail on the trickster’s survivability.

audience response within a cultural context. Trickster does not occupy an amoral corner of tribal thought; his escapades are neither contextually unfocused nor easily tossed off (*Indi'n* 158). In a cross-cultural setting, one that involves multiple viewpoints, the audience is barraged “a multiplicity of voices and perspectives...[which] can effect change in the reader; by engaging in dialogue with a text, readers open their own thoughts to change” (Smith 24). These perspectives are evaluated through the mediation of differing viewpoints: “Trickster mediates between supposed contradictory forces or elements by retaining aspects of both, by revealing them to be coexisting parts of one whole, interconnected, often indistinguishable elements of the one. Ambiguity approaches truth in a way that clarity cannot” (Blaeser “Trickster” 51).⁵⁸ The intertextual explorations in *Green Grass, Running Water* comically require the reader to navigate different viewpoints in order to illuminate the interconnectedness of the perspectives. In his celebration of the multiple, Trickster stresses interconnectedness; culture is made up of multiple viewpoints. In this turn to multiplicity, the trickster undermines singular, dominant perspectives.

In this way, the trickster helps expose the boundaries established between cultures and ideas. These boundaries are subject to change in trickster stories, which undermine a singular, “absolute” perspective—particularly a Euro-centric perspective—in order to stress “that each perspective is different” (12). Importantly, the trickster’s unhinging of singular viewpoints is not meant to re-establish a singular perspective. Instead, and as Reesman notes, “Trickster exposes institutional power...[suggesting]

⁵⁸ Also see Jarold Ramsey’s essay in *Reading the Fire* where he argues the trickster works by mediating contraries and holding together polarities.

any attempt to place order upon human behavior is presumptuous and bound to fail” (xvii). Taken in literary terms, the trickster helps “[disclose] the potential for abuse inherent in social structures of any kind, [which] also makes him a useful medium for attacking the institutions of invading people” (Wiget, “His Life” 90).

Because the trickster is capable of exposing social structures, the trickster provides Native writers a way to re-imagine identity that does not reinforce singular perceptions. The trickster’s fluid identity helps undermine mis-representations that occur when culture is viewed as absolute and singular.⁵⁹ Trickster is ambiguous, fluid, and through his ever changing identity, he “resists classification and survives outside the boundaries of time” (Blaeser, “Trickster” 51). Yet, he does not just resist classification; he confronts them. Trickster challenges stereotypes that define American Indians within specific, un-changeable identities. He works through language and story, overturning false representation without replacing the representation with a new identity model. Instead, Trickster celebrates the uncertainty of identity by disrupting identity models with an “imaginative energy” (51) that works through language to move the focus away from the individual and into the communal. *Dead Voices* for instance uses the traditional wanaki game to show the way trickster identity is both constantly changing and interchangeable between species. The card game stresses that identity is built from chance and subject to change, and Vizenor uses this stance to counter anthropological discourse (dead voices) that attempt to make Indian identity singular.

⁵⁹ Namely, the American Indian stereotype, which, as Vizenor argues in *Manifest Manners*, relies on static (or singular) representations.

For Ojibwa scholar and author, Gerald Vizenor, this puts the trickster in the postmodern realm.⁶⁰ Vizenor argues trickster stories use imagination to “[open] up the potential of language without for a moment feeling compelled to suggest or fix meaning” (Babcock and Cox 103). That is because the trickster never offers absolutes, but instead, “trickster stories arise in silence (Vizenor, *Manifest* 15). These silences are meant to make the reader an active participant in the production of meaning. For meaning to occur, the reader must interpret the gaps left in the stories (or the silences). Silences do not impose a world-view or invite closure, but stress the imaginative relationship between reader and text where the reader functions much like an author and interprets in order to produce meaning. In this context, Trickster “invite[s] reader involvement...[and] challenge[s] the reader to step into the gap rather than use the writer as an easy bridge to another culture or perspective” (Smith 25). In this invitation and involvement, trickster stories “trick hearers and readers into drawing their own morals...” (11). Meaning is not imposed on the reader, but inferred through the reader’s interaction with the text.⁶¹

By nature, of course, these stories remain open and “never reach a closure in stories” (Vizenor, *Manifest* 15). Thus, they continue in the imagination of the reader. Vizenor calls the trickster stories “holotropes of the imagination” (*Manifest* 15). The holotrope, as Alan Velie notes in “The Trickster Novel,” is “freestanding, both signified and signifier” (Velie, “Trickster” 131). Because the trickster stands alone, he argues,

⁶⁰ This makes sense considering the similarities between the trickster and postmodern theory such as Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome outlined in *A Thousand Plateaus* and Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* where he discusses “play.”

⁶¹ In this way, the trickster ensures the American Indian identity seen in the text is never absolute.

“Vizenor conceives of the trickster as a product of language” (131). The trickster is “a sign in a language game” (Vizenor, “Trickster Discourse” 187), where the “signifier in a trickster narrative is signified in chance” (189). For Vizenor, meaning is created through the chance relations between language and meaning, which is laid bare in trickster novels. In Vizenor’s own words, the trickster is “comic shit”:

The trickster narrative situates the participant audience, the listeners and readers, in agonistic imagination; there, in comic discourses, the trickster is being, nothingness and liberation; a loose seam in consciousness; that wild space over and between sounds, words, sentences, and narratives; and, at last, the trickster is comic shit. (196)

Yet, the trickster is the active force behind “meaning” since the trickster “is outside comic structure, ‘making it’ comic rather than inside comedy, ‘being it’” (Vizenor, “Introduction to *Narrative Chance* 13). The trickster creates and challenges.

Yet, for Vizenor the trickster exists “as a part of a greater whole” (Velie, “Trickster” 131). The trickster is a “comic holotrope,” or a “communal sign shared between listeners, readers, and four points of view in third person narratives” (Vizenor, “Trickster Discourse” 187). The stories stress a communal multiplicity that moves discussion (and representation) away from the individual and into the communal. As Vizenor argues, trickster is never divorced from a communal perspective, but works as “communal signification” (“Trickster Discourse” 187). Trickster speaks back to a communal center and moves the discussion away from the isolated individual by focusing on the multiplicity of imagination. Vizenor argues, “the trickster in modernist

literature was invented to be an individual, or at least the metaphor of individualism; this image supported the notion of vanishing tribes” (193). By focusing on the communal, the trickster avoids fatalistic stereotypes and establishes a communal center since the stories “do not represent...the glorification of the isolated individualism” (193).⁶²

The trickster is a positive example of liberation in contemporary American Indian fiction, and his fluidity provides examples for overcoming stereotypes. Survival in contemporary American Indian communities also means surviving what Vizenor calls the “words wars.”⁶³ The stereotype imposes a strict, singular viewpoint on reality, one that Vizenor believes cannot account for the changing identity of the American Indian. As such, it keeps the American Indian relegated to the past. The trickster helps liberate through imagination and silence: “If culture lives, it changes, it always changes. If people live, they imagine themselves always in a new sense” (Vizenor, “Interview with Laura Coltelli” 164). The trickster, then, is a powerful tool in evaluating the relationship between the word and the world. Although critics have faulted Vizenor’s postmodern tendencies, I feel they miss the point, namely that dislocating the word—the colonial word “Indian” with all its stereotypes and pre-constructed certainties—in order to imagine a new tribal identity, one that celebrates the trickster’s communal identity and is created through comic chance, is a powerful and positive thing. As Eva

⁶² Despite Vizenor’s connection to the communal, critics like Karen Oakes still take fault with Vizenor’s postmodern trickster, arguing that it “disconnects the relationship between the word and the world” (“Reading Tricksters” 138). However, this fails to account for the communal links created through trickster (and the dislocation of the stereotype from identity).

⁶³ These are manifest manners that attempt to define American Indian identity. See Gerald Vizenor’s *Manifest Manners*.

Gruber notes, Vizenor's definition of trickster "defies the existence of one (ethnocentric or 'monologic') authorial voice or one fixed meaning. Instead, storytelling becomes a communal venture of multiple voices and perspectives, intertwining in a multilayered, heteroglossic narrative" (Gruber 103).

2.3 Three Faces of Laughter: Vizenor, King, and Alexie's Diverging Humor

Without laughter, it is easy to view American Indians through the tragic, a view that, for American Indians, leaves them stuck in an "unusable past" (King, *Truth* 106). Laughter, and humor more generally, speaks across gaps and asks the readers to engage with the text, dislocating the readers, at least for a moment, from their preconceived expectations. Humor is a driving force in American Indian tribes. Put simply, they find humor in most everything: ranging from tribal relationships to historical past. At the heart of this humor is the trickster, a communal presence that, through teaching and laughter, defines the limits of culture. Trickster humor is tricky, in that it never settles on certainty. Instead, it questions, challenges, and ultimately re-imagines possibility and our perception of the world.

Critics such as myself should also be cautious of using trickster too readily to discuss American Indian literature since over-use of the trickster runs the risk of implying that there is a specific "type" of humor in American Indian fiction.⁶⁴ In the recent publication *Troubling Trickster: Revisioning Critical Conversations*, editors Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra caution critics against using the trickster too loosely to talk about Native literature. The collection of essays look at the way "trickster

⁶⁴ Fittingly enough, the critical impulse to quantify Native literature is a common source of humor in Sherman Alexie and Gerald Vizenor.

criticism”—a popular method of discussing Native literature in the 1990’s—discussed the trickster in a pan-tribal, generalized way that treated the trickster as a representative of Indianness, a “timeless...manifestation of Indigenous tradition” (Fagen 5).⁶⁵ Thus, many of these critics reinforced some of the stereotypes Native writers were trying to rewrite (5). Naturally, my discussion on Vizenor will rely heavily on trickster because trickster is essential to understanding his postindian and the way he creates humor. And similarly with King, I will discuss his use of Coyote and trickster discourse—especially the pan-tribal nature of his trickster humor. However, my analysis of trickster will only appear when the text explicitly references the figure. After all, humor is my primary interest. Additionally, I intend to show that there are multiple uses and types of humor in American Indian fiction—that even when the material is the same, the approach to create humor is often different—which stresses the diverse approaches used to create humor in Native literature.

While this chapter has outlined the scope of my project—both the value of and different functions of humor and trickster—it does well to close the chapter by stressing the diversity that is seen in American Indian humor. I have focused my study on selected works by Gerald Vizenor, Thomas King, and Sherman Alexie because, as prominent American Indian humorists, they are known largely for their humor. I will be able to look comparatively at their strategies and discuss the different approaches available for creating humor in American Indian literature. Even though I will argue

⁶⁵ Treating the trickster as a timeless representation of “tradition” is similar to the “sacred time” of the stereotype. In this, my development of the term stressed the changing nature of the trickster, especially with the contemporary definitions of the trickster (i.e. his affiliation as a negative example in oral traditions and a positive example in current stories).

that these authors share a common goal—that they all undermine stereotypes through humor—I will also argue they address these issues differently by approaching humor through their personal theories on American Indian reality.⁶⁶

Sherman Alexie creates humor through what he terms, “reservation realism.” Alexie’s texts often use the reservation to produce humor that revolves around racism, alcoholism, and pain. By pairing sadness and laughter, Alexie confronts these issues and provides release through the act of laughter. He laughs at sadness, and through the laughter, helps re-identify this pain. Alexie uses reservation experience to bring forward what Meredith K. James calls a “reservation state of mind,” which she uses to suggest 1) that there is no separation between the reservation and the mind—the land is part of the body—and 2) there is an imposed worldview that these authors are working against; the “reservation of the mind” “can be used to describe a worldview imposed upon Indians by the United States government” (8). James argues that the reservation exposes ethnicity by confining people based on their race—not to mention forcing tribes to conform to Euro-American values (i.e. the imposition of individual land ownership) and regulations (1-2). Alexie, among other authors, “recreate[s] reservation space in positive ways” (2) and undermines imposed definitions. Alexie continually brings forward the reality of reservation life—hunger, poverty, racism—while also providing a means to laugh at the situation as a way to laugh back at this pain.

⁶⁶ I will provide a more detailed comparison of these authors throughout the chapters, one that is more grounded in their specific literary works. For now, I just want to provide a brief overview of their approaches and develop the more theoretical elements of their differences.

Gerald Vizenor's humor emerges from the trickster, a figure that creates meaning through narrative chance. For Vizenor, meaning is created through imagination and the associations created by the reader to form a coherent understanding of the text. The trickster, Vizenor argues, resists closure by utilizing survivance, or the need to continually change and grow. In this context, Vizenor's humor relies on comic revisions that distance the reader from the text by continually drawing attention to the text and the reader's role within this text, making humor more self-aware than seen in Alexie (and to some extent, King).

Similar to Vizenor, Thomas King creates humor through an intertextual play that works to open up singular viewpoints of reality. The major difference between King and Vizenor is how they use intertextuality. King places these connections in conversation with each other, stressing what he calls an "associative literature." King argues associative literature speaks between different associations to stress community and culture (King, "Godzilla" 187). Associative literature does not place blame on anyone and writes outside a center that relies on the arrival of Europeans for its literature. King argues literature should address associational values between traditional stories, Native life and culture rather than post colonial pressures (185).

CHAPTER 3

‘NOW LET’S SEE HOW MANY ANTHROPOLOGISTS WE CAN MAKE OUT OF SHIT THIS MORNING’: THE COMIC EVALUATION OF ACADEMIA’S (AND AMERICA’S) INDIAN IN SELECTED WORKS OF GERALD VIZENOR

Anishinaabe-born author Gerald Vizenor is perhaps the most prolific American Indian author of the late 21st century. Publishing his first novel during what Kenneth Lincoln calls “The Native American Renaissance,”⁶⁷ Vizenor would come to publish more than 25 books during the late 1900s. Vizenor’s literary proliferation was destined from the start. Vizenor descends from the crane clan—one of the original five totems of the Anishinaabe—who are known for their commanding voices and oral storytelling abilities (Vizenor, *Interior* 4). Relying on oral techniques,⁶⁸ Vizenor’s fiction covers the gambit of genres. He has published short stories, poems, novels, a successful screenplay, literary analysis, critical theory. He has edited several literary and critical anthologies, and he is a very successful Haiku poet. In short, Gerald Vizenor’s interior landscapes are vast and diverse and cannot be contained within one genre. Even his more traditional novels incorporate several different genres. All this suggests that imagination cannot be classified and defined; stories change and with it our own

⁶⁷ Gerald Vizenor mocks Lincoln constantly in his fiction and disagrees with the way Lincoln essentializes Native writing.

⁶⁸ In Gerald Vizenor: *Writing in the Oral Tradition*, Kimberly Blaeser argues Vizenor uses the oral tradition in his fiction.

outlook. Kimberly Blaeser sums up his work in this way: “his work, his life, and his theory exist in the continuous process of unraveling truth, because the unraveling demands imaginative participation and the freedom to continue growth and discovery” (*Writing* 4).

The major part of this chapter will explore the way Vizenor uses imagination to counter stereotypical representations of Native identity. These concepts will pave the way for my analysis of King and Alexie, two authors that modernize many of Vizenor’s concepts. But first, it is important to consider the potential problems that arise in Vizenor’s creative works. His fiction incorporates two primary identity poses: Vizenor’s academic identity and his trickster Anishinaabe identity.⁶⁹ These poses commonly utilize insider jokes that are easily missed by non-academic or non-Native audiences. These insider jokes can create large gaps between audience and writer, especially when the joke is missed (as it often is). His references to figures like Bakhtin or Deleuze are easily missed or potentially alienating to audience members unfamiliar with these concepts (or those unwilling to struggle through the jargon). To make matters worse, his fiction is loaded with academic jargon, postmodern theory, Anishinaabe stories, and personal stories that continually alter the meaning of his stories—his academic jargon especially contains loaded words meant to celebrate the fluidity of language.

⁶⁹ His story “Crows Written on Poplars: Autocritical Autobiographies” is a good example of the way he infuses theories about writing autobiography (his academic identity) with the struggles to avoid reinforcing the Indian stereotype (his trickster identity).

Much of these concerns about Vizenor's humor revolve around the question of audience: who is (or should be) the intended audience? Sherman Alexie for instance criticizes Vizenor for his inaccessible writing, stating that most reservation children will not be able to understand or be taught Vizenor's texts (Alexie, "Interview with John Purdy" 137). Certainly, Alexie's point is an important one because it shows the problems of Vizenor's heavily academic insider jokes—namely, that most Native children, the ones perhaps most in need of these ideas, will not understand the humor. Most of these kids will not know Kenneth Lincoln or Arnold Kroeber, nor will they even know the traditional, Anishinaabe functions of the trickster. Louis Owens' mishap teaching Vizenor's *Bearheart* (I will discuss this later) is a perfect example of the problems that arise with his texts: a classroom of students that miss all the jokes.

Within these concerns it becomes clear that Vizenor is probably not writing for the average reservation teenager (or even the average college student). His insider jokes would suggest that his intended audience are educated, literary scholars capable of identifying the different critiques he raises. And this is important because his fiction is highly critical of the academic control of Native identity—thus, it makes sense that his fiction is directed toward those scholars. Vizenor's fiction offers a Native, academic approach to talking about American Indian identity. His overly abundant use of postmodern jargon places these theories into Native perspectives. His ability to critique academic practices while transforming the language into Native perspectives is perhaps the reason he is so important for American Indian writers. Alexie and King might not

have the same intended audience or make the same jokes, but it is clear that Vizenor's theories (like survivance and manifest manners) are used in each of the authors' work.

In this chapter, I will argue that Vizenor directs much of his humor at multi-cultural, academic discourse in order to critique the research practices that claim "ownership" over Native identity by asserting specific ways to view American Indians. The anthropologist is a common figure of ridicule in Vizenor's fiction because anthropology (as a practice) attempts to know, display, and speak for Native experience.⁷⁰ Vizenor's teasing asks the reader to consider multi-cultural, academic practices, and the problems they raise for Native identity. His life narrative offers an example of ways to rewrite anthropological authority, while his more satirical texts re-imagine the benevolence of National origin in order to look at the violence multi-cultural and colonial discourses create for American Indians. Vizenor offers that we can escape this violence through trickster imagination, or stories that stress continuation, not domination.

3.1 A Pile of Shit: Gerald Vizenor's (Re) Creation of the Anthropologist

The origin of the anthropologist is a mystery hidden in the historical mists. Indians are certain that all societies of the Near East had anthropologists at one time because all those societies are now defunct. Indians are equally certain that Columbus brought anthropologists on his ships when he came to the New World. How else could he have made so many wrong deductions about where he was?

-Vine Deloria, Jr, *Custer Died For Your Sins*

I don't know any more than an anthropologist and that's true—I don't know, but I don't pretend to invent culture, either. I do my best to imagine myself, and my acts of imagination, I believe, leave open the possibility for human and spiritual experience.

-Gerald Vizenor, Interview with Laura Coltelli in *Winged Words*

⁷⁰ In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues power is distributed by attempting to know and display the madman. The museum and anthropology function in a similar way.

Despite the abundance of fiction within Vizenor's canon, he commonly returns to the "simple interrelated essentials of writing and life: liberation, imagination, play, and discourse" (Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor* 4). These four essentials reach their full fruition in Vizenor's fiction through the figure of the trickster. For Vizenor, the trickster is "a comic sign, communal signification and a discourse with imagination (Vizenor, "Trickster Discourse" 187). The trickster is a liberator, and his imaginative energy helps overturn what Vizenor calls manifest manners—discourse practices that perpetuate static, singular truths that hold dominance over the other. Throughout Vizenor's work, he continually uses the trickster to challenge and disrupt manifest manners and the practices that create them. Much of his fiction targets multi-cultural academic discourse (especially the social sciences) and uses the trickster to offer an alternative to the systems of knowing created in these practices. His fiction critiques the current path and past approaches of scholarship surrounding the American Indian in order to stress the importance of imagination in talking about American Indian communities.

A common figure of ridicule in Vizenor's fiction is the anthropologist, and it is this figure that most openly offers a counter example to trickster imagination. Vizenor is highly critical of the cultural representation created through anthropological discourse, and targets these practices as a primary source of misinformation about tribal communities that perpetuate the Indian stereotype. Problematically, Vizenor thinks anthropology offers certainties about Native culture and life. In an interview with Laura Coltelli from *Winged Words*, Gerald Vizenor states,

Anthropologists believe they are right and what they have methodologically constructed is true because of the socioscientific method. I...think that their methodology is narrow, bigoted, and colonial...and that most of what they say, if not all of what they have said about tribal people, is at best, at very best, bullshit. Now, at best being bullshit, there still is some room for humor. See? But, they don't have any humor. I mean, they don't have anything. (161)

Anthropologists fail to listen to the silences—the spaces between the stories that hold meaning. They hear tribal stories as a representative of culture, imposing strict definitions of tribal identity. Vizenor states, the anthropologist “borrows everything from tribal culture” (162) in order to “[impose] identification tags or methodological inventions of cultures and [maintains] these inventions so as to maintain their power” (162).

Part of Vizenor's evaluation of the anthropology is done by comparing the terminal practices of anthropology to the fluid, ever changing practices of the trickster. Through comparison, Vizenor is able to both suggest an alternative practice and meditate on the false knowledge held by the anthropologist—the latter is commonly the source of the humor. In *The Trickster of Liberty*, for instance, Vizenor uses a conversation between Sergeant Alex Hobraiser “the best listener that ever lived on the reservation” (Vizenor, *Trickster* xi) and an anthropologist to ask the readers to consider the gap in knowledge between the two about role of the trickster in tribal imagination.⁷¹

⁷¹ The conversation format is a common trope in his fiction and encourages audience interaction; the reader evaluates the discourses against each other in order to interpret the intentions. In Gerald Vizenor:

To help the reader identify the evaluation, Vizenor solicits audience interaction by remaining vague about the audience. Initially, the reader is placed in the role of listener through a series of quotes without an identified audience. These statements are meant to be read as a map for evaluating the text and the readers' role in it. The narrator states, "the active reader implies the author, imagines narrative voices, inspires characters, and salutes tribal tricksters in a comic discourse" (xi). The readers are told of the value of their participation and the role it plays in creating comic discourse. The trickster is created through imagination and the reader is to understand that this imagination provides comic liberation: "To imagine the tribal trickster is to relume human unities; colonial surveillance, monologues, and racial separations are overturned in discourse" (x).⁷²

The prologue⁷³ offers that viewing identity outside of anthropological discourse allows Native communities to imagine the world anew. Vizenor argues anthropology attempts to make the trickster real by assuming the trickster is a representation of a real person (Vizenor, "Interview with Laura" 163). Yet, the narrator is clear that the "trickster is comic nature in a language game not a real person or 'being' in the ontological sense" (x). The narrator of *Trickster* reminds the reader "we create our bodies with words, and there is a difference in each word" (Vizenor, *Trickster* xi).⁷⁴ The

Writing in the Oral Tradition, Kimberly Blaeser argues the reader response method applies the oral tradition to written form.

⁷² I will argue that these impulses manifest themselves greatly in *Interior Landscapes*, *Bearheart*, and *The Heirs of Columbus*. The latter, particularly, offers discourses that undermine racial separation.

⁷³ Vizenor commonly uses prologues and conclusions to mirror the conventions of academic writing, providing a pseudo-academic structure to fictional texts.

⁷⁴ There are some problems with viewing the body as imaginative, as Vizenor does here, since it does not have a way to discuss the material problems that arise with physical racial difference such as skin color.

trickster celebrates fluidity while the anthropologist attempts to make imagination real. These latter practices perpetuate power by making identity singular. Conversely, the trickster exists in the silences created by language and is behind “what discourse says” (xi); the trickster offers a counter to discourse practices that attempt to fix meaning. As the narrator offers in the closing of the prologue, “this is the way the world begins, this is the way the world begins...this is the way the world begins, not with an anthropologist but with mongrels and tricksters in a language game” (xvii). This re-alignment starts the world anew and provides American Indians a way to imagine themselves outside American, Nationalist discourse.

Vizenor is also critical of academic practices that favor non-Native scholars, and their representations of Native identity. These types of practices are a common source of ridicule in his novel *Hotline Healers: An Almost Browne Novel*. Throughout the novel, Vizenor critiques academic practices for perpetuating manifest manners and refusing to listen to Native experience. For example, in the chapter “Transethnic Commencements,” Vizenor directs his humor toward two purposes: 1) the story mocks academia’s expectations for Indianness (i.e. the masks Indians must wear). 2) The story ridicules academia’s refusal to listen to speakers that are not visually Indian or do not repeat manifest manners.

But, Vizenor’s concept of the body as imaginative provides a good way to counter the anthropologists reliance on the physical body for display.

The story revolves around Almost Browne, a tribal trickster born in a car almost on the reservation.⁷⁵ Almost is invited to give a commencement lecture at the Ishi Auditorium at the University of California,⁷⁶ and he quickly learns that they were expecting a different kind of Indian speaker. Much of the humor of the story emerges from the friction between the Berkeley faculty's desire for an authentic, pure Indian and Almost's constant subversion of this outlook—the name in itself, “Almost Browne,” is a great example of the way Vizenor mocks the authenticity with humor. Take this exchange, for instance, where Vizenor mocks racial classifications and native authenticity:

‘What kind of native...are you?’ said another student. / ‘The kind that never turns the wit of shamans...into academic manners...’ said Almost. ‘The kind of native that teases the transethnic mutants of nationalism.’ [...] / ‘So what’s your native name?’ / ‘Almost,’ said Almost. / ‘You’re no Indian,’ said the native student. / ‘You’re a white man.’ / ‘Almost,’ said Almost. / ‘Almost nothing,’ said the student. / ‘Almost true,’ said Almost. (Vizenor, *Hotline* 83)

The repetition of “almost” is effective in subverting the students’ questions in a way that undermines the authentic models the students expect. Almost who is half white, half Indian is almost a lot of things and this is part of the joke. He is almost the speaker the type of speaker the students and faculty were looking for. But, Almost does not

⁷⁵ The image of being born in motion (especially a car) is a reoccurring motif in Vizenor’s work and fulfills his commitment to survivance. I will discuss this idea again in *Interior Landscapes*.

⁷⁶ Vizenor campaigned Berkeley to name a building after Ishi, their famous living Indian exhibit. As I will discuss in a moment, Ishi is a prominent figure in Vizenor’s fiction and represents many of his critiques of Academic discourse.

perform the tricky stories in the way the students desired; instead, he presents tricky stories of survivance, the kind that “no one could be sure what he meant” (81), mostly because Almost is always changing the script.

Naturally, the survivance stories that Almost offers are not received well by the audience since the lecture questions the authority given to multi-cultural discourse. The narrator tells the reader that it is after Almost “announce[s] that academic evidence was ‘nothing more than a euphemism for anthropologism and the colonial dominance over native memories and stories’” (80) that the “common attitude soon turned to cynicism, accusations, and aesthetic evasions” (80). It is this aversion to Native alternatives that contains much of the humor of the story. The Berkeley audience is unable to relinquish their perceptions and because of this they are unable to comprehend Almost’s lecture; they eventually rebel against it by walking out of the graduation, Vizenor’s critique of the way social sciences refuse to listen to counter-perspectives. But, Vizenor is also clear that this refusal is based on visual expectations:

‘Nothing you’ve said makes any sense, and that’s my major objection, not that you were the student’s choice, with no credentials, not even a traditional name, but that you think you can tear down what we have taken so many years to build.’ [...] / ‘Does that mean dominance’ / ‘Someone must preserve native traditions and the standards of research...’ (89)

Although the faculty states their objection is based on merit, not race, it is clear that Almost’s lack of authentic Nativeness discredits his lecture in the eyes of the faculty. The real problem might be that Almost is “tearing down” multi-cultural discourse, but

Vizenor's joke about the lack of credentials shows the way that only certain players get to talk about Native experience. Comically, however, the story overturns this favoring by refusing to grant these students graduation, at least in the fictional world of the story. Since the students and the faculty walked out on the lecture, there is nobody left to graduate; the student's denial criticizes the type of education these students are receiving.

In the story, Vizenor suggests that the type of education these students are receiving is based on the manipulation of Native stories in order to create manifest manners that re-classify counter-discourse as dominant discourse. Almost presents a lecture of survivance that constantly changes and despite the fact that the faculty did not understand the lecture and refused to give it authority, the lecture becomes part of multi-cultural discourse. At the start of the story the narrator states, "his notions were evaded at the time, and since then his words have been twisted, revised, and terminated in hundreds of extreme comments and criticism at the university" (82). The control over Almost's lecture is a symptom of the larger control over Native stories.

In the chapter preceding titled "Fifth Deal," Vizenor continues his criticism by suggesting that American Indian scholars are continually performing Indianness. The story celebrates the performative nature of identity, and uses this performance to criticize academic practices that reinforce stereotypes. In this chapter, Almost hosts a heart dance and invites prominent Indian scholars and authors to attend. The masks the attendees wear are of different Native and Non-Native scholars Vizenor feels reinforce

stereotypical representations.⁷⁷ The masks ask readers to focus on the gaze, and the way the act of viewing creating identity. The masks celebrate the performance of identity while also reversing the hierarchy between creator/created. Here, the scholars are created as other (rather than creating other). A graduate student wears the mask of Kenneth Lincoln; a group of students wear masks of Alfred Kroeber, Claude Levi-Strauss and other famous anthropologists; Thomas King even makes an appearance and “decorates the [Levi-Strauss and Kroeber] with academic accoutrements that he carried in a ‘culture trunk’[...] Kroeber posed with five pocket watches...[and] Levi-Strauss...wore the black masks of the Lone Ranger” (74).

Although the absurdity of the performance is immediately obvious to most audiences, much of the criticism of the individual academics relies on insider knowledge.⁷⁸ For instance, Kroeber’s pose with five watches references a gift given to Ishi, an American Indian that was an exhibit and Kroeber oversaw: “Ishi was given a watch ‘which he wore and kept set,’ wrote Theodora Kroeber... He understood time by the sun and other means, but his ‘watch was an article of pride and beauty...not a thing of utility’” (Vizenor, *Manifest* 127). The story asks Kroeber to perform this Native pose, presenting him with the watch, which reinforces divisions between civilized and savage. The performances reverse the gaze by asking scholars to perform their simulated

⁷⁷ Vizenor criticizes both Native and Non-Native scholars that he feels are out of line with constructive approaches to discussing American Indian communities. Paula Gunn Allen is a good example of the former.

⁷⁸ This is a great example of the concerns I raised in the introduction. Those unfamiliar with Ishi and Kroeber (or only slightly familiar) will miss the satire/joke about the watch. I think Vizenor handles this through the performance of these roles—i.e. even if the joke is missed it is funny because these performances are absurd.

Nativeness. Mocking the link between the other and the self is the intention in this story and is reinforced by Baudrillard's statement in the closing lines: "everyone wants their other. Everyone has imperious needs to put the other at their mercy, along with a heady urge to make the other last as long as possible so as to savour him" (*Hotline 77*). Multi-cultural discourse assumes the other can be known and identified. But, the story itself undermines this reality and shows that these moments are nothing but a dance, a performance of Nativeness that has no reality.

Ishi is an important figure in Vizenor's fiction and is commonly used to criticize the academic practices that distribute notions of savagery through performance. In his essay "Ishi Obscura" from *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor argues anthropology uses the Indian body as a simulated display for savagism and manifest manners. Ishi was billed as a pure savage, a bona fide last of his tribe. Alfred Kroeber, the archeologist in charge of Ishi and the man who gave Ishi his nickname, described Ishi as "the last 'uncontaminated aboriginal American Indian in the United States'" (qtd. in Vizenor, *Manifest* 188). Naturally, the anthropologists attempted to capture this vanishing tribesman with photographs, which, problematically, obscure the story the photographer is presenting: "The camera captures others, not the experiences of the photographer; the presence of the other is discovered in a single shot, the material reduction of a pose, the vanishing pose, and then invented once more in a collection of pictures. The simulation of a tribe in photographs" (186). Photography does not reveal its intentions. Instead, it fixes the story around a simulated image. For Vizenor, the anthropologist attempted to make Ishi a symbol for "manifest manners and the histories of dominance" (127) and a

representative of “savagism and a vanishing race” (126). Vizenor gives the example of Ishi’s tattoo, a stain that appeared on Ishi’s chest in one of his photographs. The stain became a way to visually mark Ishi as “savage.” However, the tattoo is a “simulated tattoo, or a negative stain, [which] enhances the image of a naked savage” (Vizenor, “Ishi” 190).

In Ishi, Vizenor also finds an apt metaphor for approaches that overturn and challenge these manifest manners. Although Ishi was a colonial invention, he was also a figure of trickster survival. In this, Vizenor uses Ishi to show the value of imagination and humor in the evaluation of American Indian cultures. Despite the control of Ishi’s image, Vizenor views Ishi as a trickster survivor. Kimberly Blaeser offers, “Vizenor also sees Ishi as a symbol of ‘tribal survivance,’ the real who endured in spite of or alongside of the simulation. He notes, for example, the way that Ishi never revealed his sacred tribal name, and claims...Ishi’s storytelling [was survivance]” (*Gerald Vizenor* 59). Vizenor is clear that Ishi’s stories were never captured in the museum and that his real name was never revealed (*Manifest* 185). These types of survivance exist beyond the simulation and despite the attempt to bill Ishi as “the last,” Vizenor argues, “nothing is the last because the last is the absence of stories” (186).

Vizenor’s fiction commonly rewrites anthropological discourse through trickster imagination in order to re-imagine the manifest manners that perpetuate stories of dominance in more productive ways. His texts offer a Native model for talking about American Indian identity that stresses continuation (not finality). Take for instance his novel *Dead Voices*, where the action revolves around a traditional Anishinabe card

game that “protect[s] us from the dead voices of the wordies” (Vizenor, *Dead Voices* 33). With each turn of the card, the characters embody a new identity, relying on trickster chance to escape anthropological certainty (the title itself is a reference to the empty voices of anthropologists). In the novel, ““Naanabozho made [anthropologists] out of shit”” (Vizenor, *Dead* 108), making anthropologist part of Anishinabe identity. And it is this pile of shit that is productive for Native communities. As John Gamber reminds in “Outcasts and Dreamers in the City,” “anthropologists might be cultural waste, but that waste is part of us and needs reclaiming and reuse like all the trash on the Landfill Meditation Reservation” (189). The inclusion of the anthropologist within Anishinabe identity suggests that American Indians cannot escape the image created by the anthropologist. Instead, the trickster creates stories from this pile of shit in order to make people laugh (Vizenor, *Dead Voices* 108). And with laughter comes change.

3.2 Re-writing the Autobiographical Identity in *Interior Landscape*

The tribal trickster is a comic *holotrope*: the whole figuration; an unbroken interior landscape that beams various points of view in temporal reveries. The trickster is immortal; when the trickster emerges in imagination the author dies in a comic discourse.

-Gerald Vizenor, *The Trickster of Liberty*

Gerald Vizenor’s major contention with the Indian stereotype emerges from his criticism of anthropologists, who he believes attempt to quantify culture in order to offer certainties.⁷⁹ The anthropologist relies on static representations, ones that define

⁷⁹ Vizenor and other Native authors commonly refer to anthropologist generally—i.e. one anthropologist is equal to all—which in many cases runs the risk of stereotyping anthropology. In some cases, the anthropologist is created as a caricature that asks the readers to consider the creation of the gaze (see *Dead Voices*). In other cases, authors criticize the physical and cultural display created through anthropology. Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish* that power is spread through the attempts to “know” and “display” the criminal, which identifies him as different. I think this is one of the major

“Indianness” through strict, recognizable images. Gerald Vizenor’s life narrative *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors* confronts the anthropologists’ lack of humor and play by creating identity around imagination and the trickster. The trickster then is an apt figure to address the anthropologist since, as Andrew Wiget argues, the trickster exposes the arbitrariness of culture (Wiget, “His Life” 94). The trickster celebrates the play and humor in the anthropologist doctrine, something Vizenor believes is missing from anthropologist’s own approach: “...most anthropologists deny the possibility of humor or play. They are tragic people who have a tragic worldview and they just can’t allow play. If they allow play, they might have to face the fact that they’re losing their power over their images and control of cultures” (162). The trickster disrupts these images in novels by celebrating the fluidity of identity. Unlike the anthropologist, who is a “material creation” (163), the trickster is a “spiritual, imaginative act” (163) and subject to humor and play. Kimberly Blaeser puts this in another context, arguing Vizenor “contrasts academic invention with tribal imagination; the social scientific accounts he views as lifeless and false, while the imaginative tribal accounts portrays as vital and true” (*Gerald* 87).

It is evident from the start of the narrative that the trickster will play an important part in Vizenor’s development of “self.” In the first chapter, Vizenor develops his ties to the family of the crane, descendants of the trickster. Further seen in the opening of the narrative is this connection between the imagination and the trickster. The opening page discusses how the trickster exists in the interior landscapes of his

problems Native writers like Vizenor have with anthropology practices, which is why the anthropologist is often used generally.

imagination (1). Vizenor also connects himself to the trickster through his mixed blood heritage: “mixedbloods are the best tricksters, the choice ticks on the tribal bloodline” (Vizenor, *Trickster* xii). Mixedbloods are good tricksters because they are able to get close enough to whistle. Fittingly enough, Vizenor says, “Trickster stories arise in silence, not scriptures, and are the *holotropes* of imagination; the manifold turns of scenes, the brush of natural reason, characters that liberate the mind and never reach closure in stories. Trickster stories are the postindian simulations of tribal survivance” (*Manifest* 15). The trickster is a figure of survivance: always changing. By connecting his self to the trickster, Vizenor is creating a landscape of shadows where no solid identity is present. This makes the autobiographical “self” reminiscent of survivance stories, where the subject must always change his identity in order to survive.

Survivance is a derivative of the word survival. Survivance is meant to represent the idea of continual growth and change: “Survivors actively engage themselves in the ongoing process of discovering and creating their own lives. Those who survive are those who continuously grow” (Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor* 63). The idea of growth and fluid identity is one of the ways Vizenor imagines his “self” through the postindian and challenges anthropologists’ insistence on static identity. The postindian replaces the invention of the Indian through stories of survivance: “the postindian warriors hover over at last over the ruins of tribal representation and surmount the scriptures of manifest manners with new stories; these warriors counter the surveillance and literature of dominance with their own simulations of survivance” (Vizenor, *Manifest* 5). Although the postindian is still working through the shadows of

simulation, the postindian creates simulations of survivance rather than of dominance. This is an important distinction between the simulations of manifest manners and the simulations of the postindian. The postindian uses stories of survivance, stories that reflect the process of constant change, to overcome stories of dominance.

In *Interior Landscapes*, Vizenor utilizes a genre more traditionally reserved for anthropologists:

The autobiographical form, when employed by ethnographers, anthropologists, and other collectors and translators of Indian culture, thus becomes...one of the 'strategies of containment,' a genre aesthetic that redesigns a Native accounting of life, forcing it to conform, for example, to strategies of lineality and cause-and-effect, to rhetorical patterns of paganism and conversion, savagism and civilization. (Bleaser, *Gerald* 100)

However, Vizenor's autobiography counters traditional, Euro-American logic in an attempt to reclaim the imagination that is lacking the anthropologists' definitions of "Indianness." Vizenor's autobiography is concerned with this notion of breaking down the simulation by countering it with an imagined story with substance: reclaiming imagination. The title, *Interior Landscapes*, alludes to this process of creating a physical landscape in the imagination. Through autobiography, Vizenor creates a sense of place in imagination.⁸⁰ This place is where he aligns his "self" with the concept of imagination by using his personal stories as a way to re-imagine the Indian—giving depth to the postindian. It is an autobiographical landscape where his stories are used to

⁸⁰ His larger body of work encourages this idea by creating a physical landscape between the different texts.

create a place where the postindian roams: “The postindian warriors of postmodern simulations would undermine and surmount, with imagination and the performance of new stories, the manifest manners of scriptural simulations and ‘authentic’ representations of the tribes in the literature of the dominance” (Vizenor, *Manifest* 17). Since the Indian is only a simulation, a created stereotype by manifest manners, the act of re-claiming the imagination allows for a space to counteract the manifest manners. Imagining stories of survivance gives depth to the postindian through the idea of constant change—he does not become a stereotype or a simulation without a connection to the real.

The word landscape also provides the title with a certain amount of substance: it provides a feeling of depth. In many ways, this is fitting because Vizenor develops the idea that imagination gives depth to reality. Although the Indian exists in imagination, it exists without imagination (depth). In chapter fourteen, “September 1952: The Pink Flamingos,” Vizenor tells the story of Superior, Wisconsin where he crossed the “moral boundaries and undressed for [his] first performance in a city of lonesome women, tired seamen, and pink flamingos” (*Interior* 101). The story starts by mentioning that Vizenor and a friend obtained an address to a brothel. They carry around the address until they get enough courage to drive to a house that could be mistaken for his “grandmother’s house” (103). Along with adding humor to the story, Vizenor’s mention that the house could have been his grandmother’s is a subtle nod to the idea that the imagined brothel does not match the real brothel: the exterior of the real brothel is like his grandmother’s house, without eroticism. Fittingly enough, Vizenor learns through the experience that

the act of sex is no match for the imagined act (107). There is a discrepancy between what is imagined and what is experienced, where the imagination of the experience is more erotic than the real experience. This is because, as we later find out, the act he experiences is a simulation of the real. This realization occurs later in the chapter when Vizenor visits a brothel a few years later. By asking the ladies to imagine what they would do to him he discovers, “what they promised was obscene, a simulation, but they could not imagine words with lust (111). What the ladies fail to imagine are words with a connection to the real. Their words are empty words, words without lust. This is because they are not imagined in relation to the real; they are creations without imagination.

The narrative explores the process of imagination and offers the ways imagination allows one to transcend the past. In the chapter “December 1946,” Vizenor tells the story of when he gets caught shoplifting. The chapter starts with an authorial re-imagination of the guards’ dialogue as they watch young Vizenor and his friend shoplift. He takes himself out of the memory and places himself above it where he can watch the whole of the incident take place. In the memory, he is both himself and the guards, creating a sense of play between memory and story as well as a fluid self. This is a distancing or conscious awareness that he is writing a memory. This dual presentation of the story does two things: it makes the story both imagined and real and it shows Vizenor’s presence in the present/future, rather than the past. The latter of these two outcomes demonstrates active survivance, where Vizenor does not engage in nostalgia, but in the process of writing: “Vizenor quotes from his previous

autobiographical writings as well as from theorists...suggesting that he wishes readers to understand that he is, assuredly, writing autobiography, autobiographical stories. But he is conducting his own style of autobiography in a highly self-reflective manner, so that, to use Paul Jay's analysis of modernist autobiography, basic aporias of the genre become 'foregrounded'" (Hutson 110). Although Hutson is referring to Vizenor's awareness of autobiographical conventions, I believe the retelling of the shoplifting incident shows the same awareness, but for the act of writing memory instead. He does not get lost in the memory, but instead, makes the reader aware he is rewriting the incident from the present.

The story also shows how Vizenor mixes the imagined and the real. Richard Hutson discusses this issues saying,

"Readers of autobiography like to be left to the task of pointing out there is a self-behind-the-self, that the autobiographer is, in fact, using metaphors and fictions and myths unintentionally, and it is the happy task of the reader to bring these matters to everyone's attention. Vizenor has anticipated the reader's critical task in advance. [...] Writer and reader, creative author and critic are thereby mingled in the narrative from the beginning to the end" (Hutson 109).

The title draws attention to Vizenor's awareness of this mixing of myths and metaphors: *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*. As Huston points out, Vizenor is making the reader aware (from the start) that his notion of "self" is

connected to the presence of myths and metaphors (109). In this awareness, Vizenor is aligning the concept of “self” with authorial play.

Blaeser sees this authorial play as a subversive act against the genre of autobiography: “Vizenor employs myth and metaphor to tell a personal story; but more than that, he recognizes the inherent, the inextricable presence and influence of both in the story of all human life. Autobiography for Vizenor must not only cross the lines of genre but also challenge their very existence. In his own accounts he recognizes and delights in the inevitable transformations of myth into life and life into story” (*Gerald* 103). What Blaeser points out in her discussion of Vizenor’s employment of myth and metaphor and its connection to “self” is that by subverting the autobiographical realm where the noble savage is often created, Vizenor is able to re-imagine a new space, one free of this Indian. After all, the postindian, as Vizenor says, undermines manifest manners through the use of imagination and new stories (*Manifest* 17). He also brings to the reader’s attention this process of writing self into existence, pointing out the power of language to create.

Vizenor’s attack on the autobiography genre manifests itself in his chapter, “The Death Song to a Red Rodent.” Most people who have read work by Vizenor have most likely encountered the squirrel story in some way; there are various versions, revisions, and retellings of this one story (I believe he has at least four different versions of this story). In most cases, the story is connected to the idea of autobiography: in *I Tell You Now*, it is offered as Vizenor’s autobiography in short form. Through the connection of the self to this story, Vizenor is connecting himself to this notion of continual change: a

fluid self. Because survivance requires change, this connection helps establish the idea of survivance. The story of the squirrel hunt balances the reader between this notion of urban and tribal. This balancing can also be seen as the positioning between the postindian and the Indian: “I pretended to be a tribal hunter, but my survival identities were urban. [...] My time in the cities did not depend upon the hunt” (167). Vizenor is making a distinction between the simulation and the real. The simulation exists in the act of the hunt; he does not need to hunt the animal for survival. Instead, he is pretending to be a tribal hunter. Vizenor associates the narrator with the city: “I had come from the cities to kill them with my rifle, to breathe concrete into their souls” (167). Arnold Krupat points out that Vizenor changes his earlier versions of this story by calling himself an urban hunter (*Turn* 85). This change to the urban hunter helps set up this distinction between the tribal hunter and the urban hunter. This separation between urban and tribal is echoed in the ending of the chapter when he says, “I sold my rifle and never hunted to kill animals or birds again. The violent death of a wild animal caused by my weapon was a separation from the natural world, not a reunion. I would defend squirrels and comfort them in death; that would be the natural human response” (Vizenor, *Interior* 170). Because of the tensions felt between the urban and the tribal, I associate Vizenor’s separation from nature as a result of the simulated Indian. He was playing the role of the tribal hunter; he did not need the food to survive. Because of this, he was becoming less Indian in the process of hunting.⁸¹

⁸¹ In *Landfill Meditations*, Vizenor suggests, “the perfect hunter turns on himself, hunts himself in his mind” (108). In this light, some of the motives behind the squirrel hunt become more focused.

This same image of relinquishing the rifle is later seen at the rally for the American Indian Movement. In the same manner, he is tempted by the nostalgia of the tribal before he gives up his rifle:

We were transmuted by the power of the drums, the sound of the drums, the drums, the drums. My heart responded to the drums, my chest became the drum, and my body was about to leave me [...] I had been close to my own truth, the absolute truth of spiritual conversion that night; a few more minutes, hours, and my name might have been lost to the tribe behind a bunker at Wounded Knee. I might have raised my rifle to that airplane over the village in the morning; instead, my pen was raised to terminal creeds.⁸² (235)

In both cases, Vizenor is able to avoid becoming the idea of an Indian, and instead, he evolves. Vizenor is able to move out of the stereotype of the tribal hunter and into the role of the urban hunter, who uses a pen rather than a gun.

The second notable change Krupat acknowledges is Vizenor's alteration of the squirrel's motives. Krupat points out that Vizenor changes the squirrel's motives by suggesting the red squirrel dared Vizenor to hunt it (*Turn* 85). In fact, it is the squirrel's desire to dare the hunter that leads to the squirrel's death: "He [the squirrel] had been a wise survivor, a curious rodent, but then he scolded and dared to come closer to a sleeping hunter. That he dared was the mortal ruin of the squirrel, not his curiosities"

⁸² Terminal creeds are statements/stories that perpetuate static, absolute truths.

(Vizenor, *Interior* 168). The idea of daring death is a reoccurring idea in Vizenor's narrative and is commonly connected to the image of the gambler.⁸³

The full story of the gambler is told in the chapter titled "April 1966: The New Fur Traders." In Vizenor's version of the story, he starts with Naanabozho, the tribal trickster, walking into the gambler's wiigiwaam; Naanabozho has come to gamble his life against the gambler. Naanabozho is not afraid of the gambler or the gambler's game. He is willing to bet his life. The gambler is one throw away from winning Naanabozho's life before Naanabozho edges close to the gambler and calls out a "whistle on the wind," causing the gambler's figures to fall. Vizenor ends the story when Naanabozho seizes the dish and starts his throw. This incompleteness of story allows Vizenor to end by pointing out that the game is still being played today (186). Although this is not the first occurrence of the gambler story (Vizenor mentions the gambler in relation to his father), it is the first case the reader is told the full story. Nora Barry points out that the gambler stories "occur in Native American traditions as a test for a trickster and/or culture hero, who must win the game in order for the tribe or something valuable to it to survive" (13). As Barry points out, the hero must win the game in order for something important to him to survive. In this sense, the dare is partly about survival: survival over evil, over the game, over the test. The dare, though, requires both a willingness to play as well as the ability to get close enough to make the whistle effective.

⁸³ The story of the gambler appears in almost every novel Vizenor writes.

The gambler story appears at the start of the chapter involving Vizenor's personal encounter with gambler type figures. Vizenor's own experience does not challenge death in the literal sense, but, instead, a death through word wars: these are the false representations of the Indian—which would be a figurative death. His battle is against the board directors for the American Indian Employment Center, a board full of people interested in manifest manners: "That the board of directors was white, dominant, and masculine was an indication that these patricians were misguided explorers, conspirators with a monotheistic determination to hold tribal people hostage in definitions of failure, or both. [...] They had lost their common sense and human compassion; they responded to most tribal people as they would children" (Vizenor, *Interior* 190). Vizenor's encounter with the gambler starts with the board. As Vizenor points out, the board support of manifest manners. They do not conceive of the Indian outside their own conception. Although they are established to "help" the tribal people, they are part of the problem. Vizenor's first action is to remove the board. He accomplishes this by using their tactics against them. He studies the bylaws and through the knowledge of the bylaws, is able to establish a new board in three months (190-91). Once the board is removed, Vizenor sets out to allocate more rights for urban reservations. Eventually Vizenor is able to achieve this objective by persistence: "We whistled on the wind, and the evil bureaucrats were maddened because we would not die; we won one more game and the center was funded by private foundations and community agencies" (196).

Vizenor is also highly aware of the way photography reinforces static identities. His narrative uses images to stress continuation and ask readers to consider the Indian stereotype. In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor argues photography is used to present a controlled image of Indianness. In the essay “Postindian Warriors,” Vizenor uses Andy Warhol’s *American Indian* series as an example of the way the Indian is visually represented. In the picture, Russell Means poses, dressed in visually Indian regalia, his braided hair resting on his shoulders. The portrait itself is a simulation of the real: both through the act of photographic reproduction and Warhol’s doctoring or superimposing of color onto the photo.

In order to counter these images, Vizenor presents several different types of images within the text. In fact, the reader encounters a picture the page before chapter one—before encountering written stories. In this light, Vizenor introduces the reader to the text with a picture of his father Clement Vizenor and a young Gerald Vizenor. Importantly, the picture, the reader’s first introduction into the autobiography of Gerald Vizenor, has no visual trace of Indian. Clement Vizenor is smiling as he holds his young son. Clement is dressed in a sports jacket and slacks, wearing a fedora on his head. Young Gerald Vizenor is dressed similarly. Behind the two is a wall made of loose bricks that appear to be falling down, the picture perhaps capturing the moment before the wall fell. Two buildings are joined in the backdrop of the picture by an alley. One cannot help but notice that the picture has an urban feel to it. (In fact, the reader later finds out the picture is taken in Minneapolis, the city in which his father was murdered). Gerald Vizenor, who dedicated *Interior Landscapes* to his father, most

likely has very personal, not to mention many reasons, to offer this picture at the start of the narrative. My concern is not so much why Vizenor uses the picture he does to start the book, but what the picture does for the reader.

The picture is printed on the same material as the book pages, making it is seamlessly integrated into the text. This is a big difference from the other images printed on white paper and placed in two different packets in the middle of chapter seven and twenty-four (the first packet also contains the same picture of Gerald and Clement). The two packets literally interrupt the reader's experience in the book while the first image offers a preface to the book. The reader knows from the dedication that the book is in memory of Clement Vizenor. Yet, the reader does not know the story behind Clement's death, nor does the reader even know that the picture is Gerald and his father. The picture is silent about its story. Silence is important to the notion of the postindian because "stories that arise in silence are the sources of a tribal presence" (Vizenor, *Manifest* 13). This silence allows the reader to create a story for the picture—to take an active role. As Blaeser discusses, Vizenor's use of silence is not just a dramatic or philosophic use of silence. Vizenor uses silence in order to engage the reader, requiring the reader to imagine the scene, the silence, and the importance (22). In the case of pictures, the scene is already imagined for the reader. What the reader has to create from the silence, however, is the history behind the picture: whom it is, why he placed it where he did, what this book will be about, etc.

The second type of pictures that are present in the book are the ones that interrupt the reading experience and are placed in the middle of chapter seven and

twenty-four. These images also provide silent stories, but in a different way. Although the pictures relate to the narrative, they often relate to issues that have very little mention. This is most noticeable in the picture of Judith Horns. Her appearance in the book is at the start of chapter twenty-two when Vizenor says, “Judith Horns Vizenor had been an elementary school teacher and she would return to graduate school in education. Our apartment was a summer adventure...” (*Interior* 171). Four pages later Vizenor has sold all his possessions and sailed to England (*Interior* 175). The next introduction we receive of Judith Horns Vizenor is when she appears in the second packet of pictures, now named Judith Horns. The visual image once again creates a story of silence. The pictures can be seen as both a mimicking and an expansion on the silences created in the written stories. Blaeser discusses the issue of absence in Vizenor’s autobiography by stating, “the reader may at first not notice the absence of details about his two marriages, his relationship with his son, or his day-to-day experiences within the literary and academic worlds” (Blaeser, *Gerald* 104). These silences are explained in the inclusion of portraits of his son, or his life as an academic. Yet, they are also silent. Vizenor provides the reader with the visual details of the silences. Although the reader might not know how these pictures fit into the life of Gerald Vizenor or the story behind his divorce, the reader is left to imagine. The reader takes an active role in creating the story.

In looking at the images, it is important to note that Vizenor’s pictures progress: they move from pictures of his family and his childhood, to pictures of his time in the military and Japan, then to pictures of his own family, next to his time as an employee

of the Indian Employment center, a picture of White Hawk (which tells its own story), to his time as an activist, to his new career as a journalist (through actual newspaper articles), to writer, to movie writer, and finally to professor. What happens in these silent stories is that the reader sees the visual progression of Vizenor; in survivance fashion, he continues to grow.

The pictures also present an absence of Indians. What I mean by this is that there are no “visually” Indian pictures. The presence of Indianness in pictures is something Vizenor discusses in his book *Fugitive Poses*: “Images and symbolic constructs of the past,” he says, “are imprinted, almost in the manner of genetic information, on our sensibility. [...] The Indian is an imprinted picture, the pose of a continental fugitive” (*Fugitive* 145). Yet, the pictures that are placed in the narrative are Vizenor in Japan, his son, his family (none dressed in line with the styles of the “typical” Indian), and Vizenor posing with Robert Redford and Charlie Hill. They are working against the fugitive poses⁸⁴ of the Indians imprinted in our minds by offering examples of contemporary American Indians. Although Vizenor allows the reader to take an active role in the creation of the stories behind the images, the portrait “imagines” or presents the scene: the visual “Indian.” Blaeser also picks up on this use of images in creating Indian by saying,

The literal and figurative picture of the tribal person in American has become the timebound Indian stereotype validated by the academic disciplines, a

⁸⁴ The term “fugitive pose” refers to Vizenor’s criticism that Native pictures attempt to capture the savage, fugitive Indian. These are pictures that include all the primitive associations of Indianness such as head-dresses, tomahawks, and that depict the Indian as stoic.

distorted, larger-than-life caricature representative of neither the historical nor the contemporary Native American, but which nevertheless serves as the model against which all tribal ‘specimens’ are evaluated. (Blaeser, *Gerald* 58).

By using pictures that have no “visual” resemblance to the Indian (only the postindian), Vizenor is presenting his “self” outside this measuring stick Blaeser is talking about: he is imagining himself outside of the containment of the “Indian.” Importantly, and as Blaeser mentions in her book, “[Vizenor has suggested] Native people can actually survive only if they dissociate themselves from ‘Indianness’ as it now exists” (*Gerald* 39). The pictures serve as a way to visually connect his self with the exclusion of “Indianness.” In this sense, the pictures serve as stories (in silence) of survival over the sign of the Indian.

3.3 The Darkness in Christopher Columbus: Gerald Vizenor’s Trickster Parodies of American Utopianism in *Bearheart* and *The Heirs of Columbus*

There’s a darkness in me and there’s light in me. I think I have blazing light, at times. I think I have blazing wit, at times. And sometimes it shows in spontaneous stories and sometimes it shows on the printed page. In both cases I need someone to hear me or read me to appreciate it. And the darkness I don’t think people want to hear that much. Some people will read it; fewer people will hear it. So I don’t talk much about the darkness, but I do still write about it at times.

-Gerald Vizenor, “Interview with Laura Coltelli”

The postindian antecedes the postmodern condition; the resistance of the tribes to colonial inventions and representations envisioned the ironies of histories, narratives discourse, and cultural diversities. The postindian mien is survivance over dominance; the postmodern is the discourse of histories over metanarratives.

-Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*

True to trickster form, Gerald Vizenor contains multitudes and contradictions.

There is “light in me,” he says, but also “a darkness” (Vizenor, “Interview with Laura Coltelli” 166). In 1978, with the publication of *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, and

then again in 1990 with his re-publication of the novel, now titled *Bearheart*, it became obvious to his reading public what this darkness looked like. It's a scary sort of darkness; a darkness that in trickster fashion shows the extremes of our behavior. And Vizenor is right: "fewer people will hear [darkness]" (166). In a comical (and somewhat troubling) antidote, Louis Owens discusses just how few people listen to Vizenor's darkness in his essay "'Ecstatic Strategies': Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*." After teaching the novel, Owens discovered that a few of his students had complained to the dean about his inclusion of *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*. For the students the novel was too vulgar, full of sexual violence and, "more serious yet, making fun too often of 'Indianness'" (Owens, *Other* 141). But, to be fair to the students, it was not that they were not listening; it was that the students were missing the light in the novel.⁸⁵ The darkness, the extremes that Vizenor is criticizing, can be overpowering. To be blunt, *Bearheart* is haunting. Yet, Vizenor is also very clear on how the darkness is to be read. The opening page of *Bearheart*, for instance, contains six mentions of darkness, most of which link darkness to imagination and what Vizenor calls silence. Darkness, then, is of our own making. One can dwell on the darkness or imagine the light.

And more often than not, Vizenor imagines the light, offering, even in his most extreme novels, the possibility of a better place. One could make a strong case, as Louis Owens does in *Other Destinies*, that *Bearheart* is his most traditional trickster novel (and the one most full of dark and light). Vizenor's balance of light and dark is perhaps

⁸⁵ Later in the section, I will discuss the way the novel utilizes a critical dystopia format that offers a utopic possibility. In this, the novel balances both light and dark.

his most redeeming quality. Even as he is berating the reader by showing readers the extreme consequences of their behavior, he is offering an alternative to the darkness and a chance for readers to imagine a better place. The alternative starts by re-imagining the stories that create the darkness. In doing this, Vizenor is continually reminding the reader that imagination is creating story; story itself is not “fact,” but more like a game of chance where meaning is created arbitrarily. At the heart of this reminder, is Vizenor’s upheaval of historical truth—or what he terms, manifest manners. These terminal creeds are stories that have no movement and trap the American Indian within a stereotypical reality. As Vizenor reminds, terminal creeds are a “simulation of the tragic, [which] has been sustained by the literature of dominance” (Vizenor, *Manifest Manners* 15). Speaking about this entrapment, Kimberly Blaeser writes this “has compelled not merely the [historical] ‘facts,’ but the perspective of the accounts and the methods of representation as well” (Blaeser, “The New Frontier” 38). The American Indian stereotype reinforces historical “facts” that continually write National history as sacred. These Utopic leanings become subject of ridicule in Vizenor’s fiction. In *Bearheart* and *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor uses parody and satire to expose the way these discourses about America rely on specific types of Indians. In these novels, the darkness revolves around the terminal creeds contained within Utopic views of progress and history that are created by multicultural, historical scholars that offer versions of the past that attempt to fix meaning as absolute. Countering this darkness is trickster survivance, which uses imagination to celebrate survival, not dominance. The light is seen in imagination, which allows for trickster play and humor. Using trickster

humor and a combination of satire and parody, Gerald Vizenor makes light of darkness and bravely imagines a (new) New World.

One of Vizenor's more common ways to "dissociate" himself from "Indianness" is through the use of satire and parody. These forms of humor provide Vizenor the means to "[liberate]...the signifier 'Indian' from the entropic myth surrounding it" (Owens, *Other* 226). Similar to Vizenor's autobiography, which used tribal imagination to challenge academic invention, Vizenor commonly employs a mixture of genres to "challenge...both the method and the truth of the historical canon" (Blaeser, *Gerald* 87). In his novels *Bearheart* and *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor not only overturns the Indian image, but unsettles the source of this image: namely, American origin stories that use the image to make history sacred. In these texts, Vizenor makes history un-sacred (and in *Bearheart* downright scary) by parodying American origin stories through trickster discourse. In these parodies, Vizenor returns to his imaginative landscapes, offering, like he did in his other works, a way to re-imagine the American Indian outside historical and anthological discourse.

Satire and parody are perfectly suited for these aims (and Vizenor's writing style more generally) because they rely on audience interaction and interpretation to be effective. In *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature*, Eva Gruber defines satire as open mockery that criticizes culture in order to either reform society or amuse the reader (60). As she states, "by being entertaining, it holds the readers' attention despite addressing controversial issues; it allows for criticism by making it more palatable" (60). In order for the satire to work, the audience has to be able to

recognize the subject of ridicule and agree, at least partially, to the terms of the humor—or at least agree that the subject being ridiculed is worthy of such criticism. And while this is true of humor more generally, since humor asks the reader to engage with a second point of view and judge it against self, satire is more pronounced because it works on what Gruber calls a “metalevel of representation,” (61) which addresses truths (or perceived truths) in order to rethink the truthfulness of it. This, of course, as Gruber concludes, makes satire perfect for exposing the “simulacrum of ‘the Indian’” (61).

Parody, like satire, “mockingly targets a preexisting condition” (63) and in this way is brethren to Satire. Not surprisingly, much of the elements remain the same, most notably the readers’ role in recognizing the subject of ridicule.⁸⁶ However, Gruber notes that there are three major differences: 1) “it concentrates on preformed literary or historical *textual* material; [...] Secondly...it does not necessarily concern itself with the extratextual reality⁸⁷” (63); 3) rather than just criticizing the source, parody transforms the source into a new storyline (63). That does not mean that parody cannot (or does not) expose the ideological construction of things, most notably reality itself. As Gruber argues, “parody in contemporary Native writing depends on and works with the readers’ familiarity with preexisting representations of Nativeness in order to transform these” (63). In this way, parody, like satire, uses the readers’ understanding of

⁸⁶ In this way, both forms of humor run the same risk of alienating the audience, whom, either might not recognize the source of ridicule (thus miss the joke) or might not agree with the criticism being offered. Take for instance, Louis Owens’ experience teaching *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*.

⁸⁷ This, I would argue, is why Vizenor’s use of satire and parody is important since it allows him to address the extratextual while also rewriting the textual.

an idea against the reader by poking fun at his/her perceived knowledge in order to help facilitate, in the reader, a new understanding. Importantly, “parody is thus especially attuned to exposing how discourses in fact determine or constitute their subjects (rather than merely presenting them). It is a potent means of undercutting the authority claims of realistic representation, and—like satire—attacks not only degrading images or ideas as such but also ontology and epistemologies they are based on” (63).

Perhaps his most famous novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, which was later re-named *Bearheart* is, as Louis Owens argues, a “narrative deeply in the trickster tradition, insisting upon values of community versus individuality, upon syncretic and dynamic values versus cultural suicide inherent in stasis, upon the most delicate of harmonies between humanity and the world we inhabit, and upon our ultimate responsibility for that world” (*Other Destinies* 230). Set in the post-apocalyptic near future, *Bearheart* chronicles the collapse of American society following America’s depletion of oil. The novel opens on the White Earth reservation where Proude Cedarfair and his wife Rosina find refuge in a sacred circle of cedar trees. Seeking a solution to the oil depletion, the government enters the reservation and takes ownership of the trees, forcing Proude and Rosina on a pilgrimage across the American wastelands. Along the way, Proude and Rosina are joined by an odd assortment of pilgrims: Benito Saint Plumero, a big footed trickster in love with a bronze statue; Sun Bear Sun, a large man that carries the innocent Little Big Mouse on his back; Belladonna Darwin Winter Catcher, a cross-breed who suffers from a romanticization of the American Indian; and Lilith Mae Farrier, a white reservation teacher who travels

with her two lovers, both dogs. The pilgrims are “on a native journey, a reversal of that western movement [manifest destiny]” (Vizenor, *Postindian* 96) to Chaco Canyon, New Mexico where they will enter the fourth world (or at least the ones who survive).

The pilgrims’ movement West parodies “the westering pattern of American ‘discovery’ and settlement” (*Other Destinies* 229) and reverses the gaze associated with this expansion. In *Bearheart*, the savagery typically associated with Indians is seen, instead, with the Euro-Americans who are driven mad by failed progress. In *Muting White Noise*, James Cox argues that the parody is directed at narratives that “document the ‘heroic’ westward movement of Eurowesterners and the triumph of their ‘civilization’ over Indigenous ‘savagery’” (*Muting* 103). In these narratives, the ignoble savage reinforces the purity of progress by showing that civilization makes the landscape pure. The hero of these narratives overcomes the savagery of the landscape (the Indian palisade) in order to lay the foundation for America, the Indian the natural enemy of progress. Naturally, *Bearheart* celebrates the failure of progress and the destructive nature of expansion; the wasteland that the pilgrims must navigate is a result of the energy crisis and mass pollution. In this, Vizenor makes progress and civilization the culprit for the wasteland and the source of the savagery seen there. The destructive (rather than constructive) nature of progress exposes the original intent of colonialism to dominate the American Indians and “settle” the landscape. The point is further reiterated by Vizenor’s reversal of the gaze where he “shows ‘whitepeople...’ perpetuating violence upon themselves” (115). Using the same logic as the original (the savagery functioned to justify expansion), Vizenor uses the savagery to reinforce the

need for change. By asking the reader to view the savagery through Native terms, he “challenges the validity of the privileged accounts of contact and conflict between Natives and non-Natives” (115).

Perhaps the most horrific chapter of the novel, and one that exposes the novel’s allegorical strategies, is “Hlastic Haces and Scolioma Moths.” In this chapter, the pilgrims are moving west, traveling the thin and broken asphalt roads from Macedonia to Council Bluffs. As they progress down the road, the travelers start to encounter “more cripples and bizarre creatures walking and sitting on the road” (Vizenor, *Bearheart* 145). The cripples are victims of “pesticides, poisoned rains, the horrors of modern technological world” (Owens, *Other* 237). Their mere presence serves as a cautioning on “technological advance,” and challenge the value of progress.

Because the novel depicts the near-future, the qualities that have made the dystopian—in this case, the deformities caused by the nation’s self-inflicted poisoning—are not only common to the reader’s world, but seamlessly, and sometimes unknowingly, implemented into the reader’s daily lives (particularly, the pesticides). Because of this, the cripples suffer from what Louis Owens calls a “national suicide” (*Other* 146). In this way, the nation is responsible for the cripples because they did not respond to the pollution: “first the fish died, the oceans turned sour, and then birds dropped in flight over cities, but it was not until thousands of children were born in distorted shapes of evil animals that the government cautioned the chemical manufacturers. Millions of people had lost parts of their bodies to malignant neoplasms from cosmetics and chemical poisons in the air and food” (Vizenor, *Bearheart* 146).

Despite the signs that the world was being poisoned—the ecological signs of the dried oceans and dead fish—it was not until children were born deformed that the government acted. The destruction of nature was not enough to warrant change. Unfortunately, the deformity of children is not enough to warrant change either, only a cautioning. Thus, the deformed people are victims of stasis, victims of terminal creeds.

Although the deformed characters—particularly the “no faces,” victims of skin cancer caused by poison rain whose plastic masks cannot hide their exposed, skinless faces—that populate the road are troubling, the larger horror of the chapter comes from the brutal murder of Little Big Mouse. Louis Owens attributes Little Big Mouse’s murder to her inability to recognize the horror of the deformed people: “Insisting blindly on identifying the cripples as romantic figures, Little Big Mouse is attacked and torn to pieces by a mob of technology’s victims” (*Other* 237). Little Big Mouse’s flaw is her romanticization or her inability to recognize a real presence. In doing so, she does not see the cripples, only a vision she imposes on them. Because of this romanticization, she is torn apart:

Little Big Mouse was silent but the cripples moaned and drooled like starving mongrels. The lusting cripples slapped their fists, thrust their beaks, pushed their snouts and scratched the perfect flesh with their claws and paws. Then the savage white cripples pulled her flesh apart. Her hair was gone from her crotch and head and armpits. Her fingers were broken and removed. Her face was pulled to pieces, her breasts were twisted, her feet and legs were pulled from her body. The cripples gnawed and pulled at her until nothing remained of Little

Big Mouse. She was carried away by the whitecripples, heart and brain and undigested food. (Vizenor, *Bearheart* 151)

The graphic violence of Little Big Mouse's death highlights two important ideas. First, the act of tearing Little Big Mouse apart and digesting her body correlates to the frenzy Vizenor observed at the gas pumps. Significantly, the cripples wanted to "magically consume parts of her body into their own" (Vizenor, *Postindian* 107). This social devouring is an act of consumption, the need to consume in order to make better. Much like the material consumption that dominates a capitalist society; however, the consumption does not make the cripples complete. By taking her body, the whitecripples are taking ownership; they are claiming her. The act of taking ownership over the body—or digesting it to make it their own—alludes to the societal devouring of the Native American, seen through museum exhibits, anthropology, film, and the word Indian itself.

The second implication Little Big Mouse's murder raises is the reversal of the "savage," which re-imagines the whitecripples—and by extension the government who is at fault for the cripples—as the "savages." In *Gerald Vizenor's Indian Gothic*, Alan R. Velie thinks this reversal re-imagines the "frontier gothic," a novel that takes place in the Western frontier and depicts the American Indian as the "satanic villains" ("Gerald Vizenor's" 75). This appears to be true, in the sense that the pilgrims emerge into a world where they are the ones being attacked. Little Big Mouse's death certainly highlights this idea since the cripples are described as savages: "then the savage white cripples pulled her flesh apart" (Vizenor, *Bearheart* 151). In the reversal of the frontier

gothic, Vizenor is also reversing manifest destiny: “the apocalypse occurred, and the disintegration of civilization as we know it has created a new frontier in which an Indian pilgrimage retraces the historical course of American westward expansion through the ruins of technological civilization” (Mogen 197). The American Indians are the ones moving through a “savage” world and are the ones being attacked as they make this pilgrimage. In this dual re-imagination, Vizenor disrupts the typical Native American role in the frontier—namely, the savage—as well as the Native American’s role in Manifest Destiny, which disrupts the reader’s expectations. This calls into question the problems of American Indian representation by exposing, through exaggeration, the horrors of the representation.

Reversing the gaze relies on a trickster discourse that challenges the readers to re-imagine the world and the way they interact with it. In true trickster fashion, the novel “violates our social and moral taboos with brazen depictions of...violence in a deliberate effort, Vizenor tells us, to arouse reader response” (Blaeser 186). The novel encourages the readers to evaluate the violence against their current (and future) climate. Much of the violence in the novel is a fictional analog for the gas crisis taking place as Vizenor wrote the novel: “I started the novel at a time the country experienced a petroleum shortage and there were long lines and violent encounters at service stations” (Vizenor, *Postindian* 97). In this way, Vizenor says “the violence is allegorical” (*Postindian* 97) and pushes the violence he sees in the newspapers to an extreme, exposing the dystopian possibilities of society. It is important to consider that it is the trickster pose that unsettles the audience’s perception of their place in society:

“the trickster challenges us in profoundly disturbing ways to reimagine moment by moment the world we inhabit. Trickster tests definitions of the self and, concomitantly, the world defined in relation to the self” (Owens, “Afterword” 248). This unsettling is meant to expose “the hypocrisies, false fears and pieties, and [clears] the ground ‘for an absolutely free investigation’ of worldly fact” (Owens, *Other* 226). In this way, the trickster figure undermines the readers’ position and allows them to explore the world from a (de)centered position.

This type of exploration helps prepare the readers’ understanding of the utopian impulse in Vizenor’s work: “it is the utopian impulse that guides Vizenor’s mythic parodies, a quest for liberation from the entropic forces that attempt to deny full realization of human possibilities. Vizenor discovers such utopian potential in American Indian mythologies; and in the trickster—who overturns all laws, governments, social conventions—Vizenor finds his imaginative weapon” (*Other* 227). Owens thinks Vizenor’s closing vision relies on the transformation powers of trickster stories. Vizenor’s “imaginative weapon,” as Owens calls it, disrupts fixation, and in doing so, avoids terminal creeds. The solution Vizenor offers to transcending the dystopian world is through the act of re-imagination and survivance; the need to re-imagination terminal creeds in order to find alternatives. The outcome, James Cox offers, “revises the entire structure of Eurowestern storytelling traditions about emigration so that his readers can imagine emigration as a journey toward transcendence and liberation, not eventual world domination” (*Muting* 125).

Fittingly enough, the utopian vision takes place in the fourth world, “the world of imagination, transformation, and survivance” (Vizenor, *Postindian* 98). The fourth world is the utopian vision of the novel: “In this utopia, Proude and Rosina enter permanently into the realm of myth, a sort of pre-Oedipal Imaginary, when he and his blind disciple [Inawa Biwide] become human bears and she [Rosina] becomes Changing Woman, and generations of the local people tell stories about seeing them in the wilderness” (54). Although Wegmann-Sanchez gets at where this utopia takes place, she simplifies the utopian vision by calling it a “salvation from the evil of the White colonizers” (54). Certainly, the closing vision offers salvation from the “white colonizers,” but it also offers a solution to terminal creeds, a problem society as a whole suffers. The closing vision re-enforces Vizenor’s aim to “force readers to reconsider their own ‘terminal beliefs,’ the inflexible ground rules that color the way we look at the world” (Blaeser, *Gerald* 185). The utopian vision takes place through imagination and story, and stresses the need to change through story. In this way, the “creation [of the fourth world] takes place in the performance of story” (Vizenor, *Postindian* 98).⁸⁸

By entering the fourth world, the pilgrims become part of the stories themselves. The pilgrims’ entry into oral stories is significant because the entry marks the presence of yet another story: Bearheart’s story, the novel, and now the fourth world. More importantly, however, the pilgrims become part of the “ever-changing stories [of] the oral tradition” (Owens, *Other* 240). This creates an authority for the text by placing the

⁸⁸ There are elements of escapism seen in the fourth world—namely, the fourth world is an imaginative space that entertains. However, the fourth world should largely be read as a space of liberation that reclassifies tragedy as survival. Importantly, the fourth world offers a space to undermine the manifest manners—thus the space is about activism.

characters into a spiritual, mythological relevance, which is further established in the last line of the novel: “During the winter the old men laughed and laughed and told stories about changing woman and vision bears” (Vizenor, *Bearheart* 245). Vizenor’s mention of changing woman is important because the mention—much like the entry into the fourth world—adds authority to the vision by aligning the utopian closing with a mythic/spiritual authority. Changing woman is “perhaps the most revered of the Navajo Holy People, the mother of the Hero Twins and one of the creators of humankind. Marked by a somewhat fluid identity and eternal youth, she taught humanity the ceremonial ways to keep natural forces of wind, lightening, storms, and animals in harmony—to balance the world” (Owens, *Other* 240). Similarly, *Bearheart* is concerned with finding a spiritual balance in the world. The novel’s discovery of spiritual balance utilizes survivance stories, stories that change, stories of healing rather than stealing (Krupat, *Turn* 57). Importantly, they are spiritual stories, more specifically creation stories, which are told with laughter. At the closing of the novel the readers find hope for bringing this imagination out of decay, and in doing so, disrupt the terminal creeds that dominate our society. As the reader exits the story through the old men telling stories, the reader exits through stories and laughter, an oral presence that reminds the reader stories have the power to change and heal.

If *Bearheart* is the suggestion that we need to change, *Heirs* is what this alternative would look like.⁸⁹ Similar to *Bearheart*, *Heirs* continues Vizenor’s parody of

⁸⁹ In *Other Destinies*, Louis Owens suggests that *The Trickster of Liberty* works as a prequel to *Bearheart* and *Griever* (250). I would argue that *Heirs* continues this discussion and contains many of the same characters and stories as *The Trickster of Liberty*. Similarly, Vizenor often recycles his characters and

American origin stories. But, *Heirs* directs this parody at offering an alternative America (an alternative Utopia), one that flourishes under imagination and stories of survivance. In *Heirs*, Vizenor suggests that America is built around stories of dominance that control the American Indian body in order to perpetuate a national discourse, and he returns to imagination for a solution. In this, Vizenor shows that imagination allows us to re-write the dominance perpetuated through these discourses because imagination allows American Indians to change and grow beyond the bodies on display.

The opening chapter of the novel establishes the parody by using intertextual comparisons that are meant to expose the problems of American origin stories while also offering an alternative to these discourses. Intertextuality is a common tool in Vizenor's work since it provides a means to "break down distinctions between world and story and lure readers in" (Gruber 104). More to the point, the multi-genre text "challenge[s]...both the method and the truth of the historical canon" (Blaeser, *Writing* 87).⁹⁰ Using excerpts from Christopher Columbus' journal, Vizenor establishes the source of the parody while also challenging the truth given to the text. These historic records are integrated into the novel in a way that continues Columbus' text in an openly fictional format. Take for instance the opening line of the novel: "Christopher Columbus saw a blue light in the west, but 'it was such an uncertain thing,' he wrote in

locations. For instance, Almost Browne appears in much of his short fiction. The squirrel story is told several different times and in several different texts. Vizenor's imaginative linking of his texts is a great example of his interior landscapes, the trickster, and his use of survivance.

⁹⁰ In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates argues intertextuality is a trickster method that rewrites the original as same but different.

his journal...’that I did not feel it was adequate proof of land” (*Heirs* 3). Columbus’ journal does not speculate on the source of the light, but Vizenor imagines it for him. In the next line, Vizenor suggests that the light was “a summons to the New World” (3). The original journal becomes a part of the fictional parody and is re-imagined in a process similar to what I discussed with guards in *Interior Landscapes*.

Much of the opening chapter uses this format and establishes the parody while also putting the journal into Native contexts. The opening section uses an exchange type format to create a conversation between the two texts (Vizenor’s novel and Columbus journal). The exchange format allows Vizenor to look at Columbus’ journal without comment; he does not discuss the racial and stereotypical representations of American Indians seen in the text, nor the sense of entitlement that Columbus holds. Instead, Vizenor offers silences where the reader interprets Columbus’ journal through comic revision. So while Columbus might have seen the Indians as “good and skilled servants, for they repeat very quickly whatever we say to them” (4), Vizenor does not directly expose the problems of this representation. Instead, he counters by saying, “[Columbus] misconstrued a tribal pose and traced his soul to the stories in their blood” (4). The line hides much of its criticism, leaving the reader to fill the silences. The text challenges the servant stereotype Columbus presents and rewrites this passive pose as active. Columbus’ folly might have created the stereotype, but it has also led to his inoculation within American Indian stories like this one.⁹¹

⁹¹ The joke works within the larger context of the novel, which asserts that a group of tribal tricksters that found a new American Utopia are the heirs of Columbus. If we are to read this literally it is quite funny; Columbus, the father of the Indian stereotype, is, for all intensive purposes, the father of all Indians.

The exchange between Columbus' journal and Vizenor's novel takes on new shapes around the third page when Vizenor introduces a new source material, a Native trickster story that discusses the origins of the world. This trickster story will later become the basis for the alternative Utopia the novel presents. But, for now it opens up the narrative to multiple sources, which Eva Gruber notes is a common tool of trickster discourse: "trickster discourse on the level of narrative inherently defies the existence of one...authorial voice or one fixed meaning" (103). The Anishinaabe origin story provides a second perspective on creation and is meant to mirror the Euro-American origin stories seen with Columbus a few pages earlier. Although the novel starts with Columbus' blue light, Vizenor notes that Naanabozho "was the first human born in the world" (Vizenor, *Heirs* 5).⁹² Creation then begins with the trickster and Columbus' accounts of the world are balanced within Anishinaabe views. In the comparison, Vizenor shows that Naanabozho's stories are ones of healing and "liberated his mind over his own excrement" (5).⁹³

The Naanabozho reference provides a Native perspective while also identifying the aims of the novel. Following the introduction of Naanabozho, Vizenor writes, "The Heirs of Christopher Columbus created one more New World in their stories and overturned the tribal prophecies that their avian time would end with the arrival of the white man" (5). The novel will present this new world and use it to overturn the victimry of Euro-American discourse. Rather than imagine Euro-American origin

⁹² Later in the novel, Vizenor suggests that the blue light was from the "hand talkers" (36), offering that Columbus saw the stories of healers.

⁹³ A reader familiar with Vizenor's work might remember that Naanabozho creates the anthropologist from his own feces. This becomes a bigger joke in the novel following *Heirs, Dead Voices*.

stories that view the Indian through tragic poses—stories that are created from Columbus’ initial accounts—Vizenor shows that his novel will use trickster survivance. True to parody format, Vizenor uses the same methods as his source material to create the New (new) world; Vizenor appropriates Columbus, the appropriation itself exposes the way Columbus has become a readily made image. In the novel, Columbus is of Mayan descent (9). Vizenor’s appropriation should be read comically.⁹⁴ (And I would even suggest it should be read literally where the joke would be that Columbus is the father of the Indians since he is responsible for creating the Indian image.) Certainly, the joke asks the reader to meditate on the gaze associated with historical accounts of America. In *Muting White Noise*, James Cox suggests, it is “not [meant] to condemn or vilify Columbus but to insert Indigenous people into colonial histories, to mock Eurowestern doctrines of racial purity or pure racial (particularly Anglo-Saxon) ancestry...” (130). The joke is focused on the act of viewing and undermines the racial purity that is necessary for social hierarchy models that justified colonial expansion. Kimberly Blaeser notes that Vizenor reorders the colonial binary between self and other that establishes racial superiority (“The New Frontier” 45). Blaeser continues, making Columbus Mayan “essentially removes Columbus’ ‘otherness’ (and therefore, his inherent cultural status)” (45). By changing Columbus’ nationality, Vizenor asks the reader to acknowledge the way they view the other and breaks down the distinction between self and other. As the reader will discover at the end of the novel, the New

⁹⁴ I think the joke is effective because the absurdity of the joke does not threaten the Euro-Americans’ faith in historical discourse, but still asks them to consider the role Columbus has played in creating the Indian image.

Utopia is built from the redistribution of blood and the dismissal of blood quantum theories that define “Indianness.”

The body and the physicality of these stereotypes is a major concern of the novel, and Vizenor puts his parody in the context anthropological control over the physical remains of the American Indian in order to expose the link between the image and the discourse. Part one of the novel follows the Heirs’ battle over the remains of Pocahontas and Christopher Columbus, each, in their own way, historical figures that reinforce Euro-American colonial dominance.⁹⁵ In this presentation, Vizenor exposes the gaze associated with the physical body and satirizes the discourses created through figures like Pocahontas. In “The New Frontier,” Kimberly Blaeser argues, Vizenor’s satire of the Euro-American literary control over Pocahontas “[exposes] the stereotype and the motivations behind its creation...[in order] to recover the story and identity of Pocahontas, an identity and a story representative, of course, of the larger tribal culture” (41). As Vizenor shows, controlling the remains allows one to control the way the remains are displayed and the stories the remains tell.⁹⁶

The Pocahontas trail settles for the familiar hierarchies where Natives battle Euro-Americans for control over the American Indian body. Framed against this is the Columbus trial, which changes many of the hierarchies associated with these sorts of trials. Kimberly Blaeser argues that Vizenor satirizes the Euro-American control over

⁹⁵ The Pocahontas myth perpetuates the Indian as servant image while bell hooks argues in *Outlaw Culture* that Columbus represents an idealized, Eurocentric male ideal.

⁹⁶ Vizenor will ask rather comically later “how does a book collector end up with her bones anyway?” (95). The question works on two levels: literally and comically. In the literal level, it is asked in the context of the novel; in the comical level, the question is asked to the reader, who identifies the critique of representation being mocked.

the American Indian image and “challenge[s] readers to reconsider the readily accepted treatment of the remains of ‘primitive’ cultures as museum objects and the implied hierarchy that allows or endorses such practices” (40). However, the Columbus trial exposes this gaze by asking the Euro-American audience to reposition themselves outside the normal hierarchy structures.⁹⁷ Columbus is a figure, bell hooks argues, that is deeply engrained in male, Eurocentric ideals as “a call for the patriotic among us to reaffirm a national commitment to imperialism and white supremacy” (232). The reversal of ownership then is not just a satire of the act of viewing, but also a refusal of the commitment to racial hierarchy.

Vizenor imagines these fictional court battles to ask the readers to consider the problems created by colonial discourse. The court battles over the remains of Pocahontas and Columbus suggest that if we are aware of the colonial discourse contained within these images we can begin to imagine new stories that do not attempt to dominate the image/body. The second book of the novel looks at the possibilities of this re-imagination where the Heirs create a new New world from the dismissal of blood quantum. In “‘Stories in the Blood’: Ratio- and Natio- in Gerald Vizenor’s *The Heirs of Columbus*” Arnold Krupat argues the Heirs dismissal of blood identity favors a ratio identity based on cultural value rather than a birth/blood identity (166). The Utopia itself is founded on the goal to “make the world tribal, a universal identity, and return to other values as measures of human worth, such as the dedication to heal rather than steal tribal cultures” (Vizenor, *Heirs* 162). Unlike the Euro-American New World,

⁹⁷ The book as a whole reverses the readers’ expectations about history, particularly Euro-American readers who are asked to relinquish their privileged role in history.

which Vizenor already established attempts to control the American Indian body and image, this new New World is not reduced to being “racist colonies” (162) by blood quantum doctrines that define identity by scientific measure of race. Stone wants to make “a universal identity, and return to other values as measures of human worth, such as dedication to heal rather than steal tribal cultures” (162).

Vizenor suggests that we can heal tribal cultures is by returning to the stories in the blood. The Heirs’ blood contains “the seventeen genes in the signature of survivance” (132) and represent what Chadwick Allen calls in his book *Blood Narrative* the blood/land/memory complex. The blood/land/memory complex makes “explicit the central role that land plays in the specific project of defining indigenous minority personal, familial, and communal identities (blood) and in the larger project of reclaiming and reimagining indigenous minority histories (memory)” (16). Allen argues that focus presents a unified goal to challenge imagined identities, histories, and definitions of control over the body in order to challenge identities imposed on Indians and attempts to seize control of representation. Built from Momaday’s conception of blood memory, which blurs the distinctions between racial identity and narrative identity, Allen argues that contemporary Indian authors use “identities as literary and activist texts” (1). As Allen argues, “blood memory redefines Indian authenticity in terms of imaginative re-collecting and re-membering” (178). Vizenor shows that re-defining identity through stories of survivance (stories that are always subject to change and built from blood memory) one can start to heal the wounds inflicted by Euro-American culture. In what is perhaps the most telling example, the faceless children

wounded by the acid rains in *Bearheart*—their faces symptoms of failed American Utopianism—are healed by the Heirs’ blood transfusion. As Vizenor suggests with the faceless children, if we can re-imagine the stories through survivance (and not dominance) we can start to heal ourselves.

Vizenor is a bit more heavy-handed with his parody in the epilogue where he reiterates the link between Columbus and the stereotype and identifies the way the trickster rewrites this colonial gaze as compassionate. The opening lines of the epilogue read: “Christopher Columbus landed in the New World with a striven western gaze that would be overturned in five centuries by the tribal people he saw as naked servants with no religion” (Vizenor, *Heirs* 184). The opening lines suggest that the people he viewed as servants have overturned Columbus’ gaze. Yet, the epilogue also meditates on the legacy of this gaze. Here, Vizenor returns to intertextuality to create a conversation about Columbus. Using a quote from Mary Campbell, Vizenor identifies Columbus as the “originator of New World ‘descriptions and narration’” (185), and with it, the father of a body of literature that distributes the American Indian stereotype. Following this assertion, Vizenor uses a series of direct quotes from literary texts that have used Columbus’ discourse to write stereotypical depictions of the American Indian and suggests that these texts are perhaps Columbus’ real legacy. By including the direct quotes, Vizenor asks the reader to re-imagine the stereotype created from Columbus’ misrepresentation while also asking the reader to experience the gaze associated with these novels. This act of viewing, in the context of the parody Vizenor has presented, is quite comical (and alarming). Similar to the rest of the novel, the epilogue pokes fun at

the act of gazing, a common trope in American Indian humor. But, it lacks the ambiguity and playfulness of the rest of the novel. Instead, Vizenor is darkly serious and is clear that the novel is meant to parody this literary lineage.

But, the novel is also meant to be seen as a new direction for this lineage. The closing lines of the novel read, “Christopher Columbus, no doubt, would rather be remembered as an obscure healer in the humor of a novel and crossblood stories than the simulated quiver in national politics; he deserves both strategies of survival in a wild consumer culture” (189). This suggests that Vizenor’s parody is meant to be read as a compassionate reversal.⁹⁸ Columbus is not the villain in his novel, but instead a simulation in National politics. Columbus the man, like Pocahontas the woman, is not the problem. Instead it is the stories surrounding these figures that perpetuate a national discourse that controls the way we view the body in order to assert dominance. *Heirs*, like the new New World the Heirs create, heals us by re-imagining these stories; the parody shows that rewriting National discourse through Native, trickster contexts allows us to re-imagine Utopic America through stories that heal.

Both *Bearheart* and *The Heirs of Columbus* end by suggesting that imagination is necessary for overturning the American Indian stereotype. As a whole, both novels link the American Indian stereotype to American, Utopic ideals, both novels, of course, re-imagining these Utopic ideals. Although each novel goes about it differently, both novels are parodying the colonial storylines that enforce such topic ideals. Fittingly, *Heirs* picks up where *Bearheart* leaves off by imagining the Utopia that exists in the

⁹⁸ Vizenor argues the trickster is always compassionate.

fourth world, the place of imagination. The conversation between these two texts, I think, is a symptom of Vizenor's larger concern with trickster humor—in this case parody—to rewrite storylines that distribute and control the American Indian stereotype. *Bearheart* pushes our behavior to the extreme where the pilgrims are (at times) literally torn apart by progress. Like traditional trickster stories, the novel identifies behavior that is out of line. But, it also re-imagines: the world, progress, Manifest Destiny. And in this way, it is closely aligned with *Heirs*. In *Heirs*, Vizenor focuses the trickster humor on reversing colonial domination in order to mediate between the stories that dominant and the ones that heal. Through this, Vizenor imagines the American Indian and the United States outside stories of dominance, providing an example of what is only imagined at the end of *Bearheart*: a new Utopia. Getting, there, though, is never easy.

3.4 (Re) Imagining the Image: Vizenor's Solution to the Indian Stereotype

The American Indian stereotype created by anthropological practices and perpetuated through colonial attempts to “know” Native culture. In Vine Deloria Jr.'s essay “Anthropologists and Other Friends,” he argues anthropologists create abstract, essentialized theories about Indian problems that “[remove] many young Indians from the world in which the problems are solved to the lands of makebelieve” (*Custer* 86). Anthropologists confuse the problems. They invent worlds in order to attempt to understand tribal identity. For Vizenor, the stereotype is built from multi-cultural and historical discourses that fix the Indian into a specific representation. These practices lack humor or imagination. Vizenor's work offers a solution to the problem. By

returning to tribal imagination, and setting this imagination loose onto the material realities of the stereotype, Vizenor shows that (re) imagining the stereotype starts by re-imagining tribal representation around a trickster energy that celebrates movement and multiplicity. If we can celebrate the diversity of stories, we can also start to see that stories are multiple. More importantly, we can start to see that stories are unpredictable and subject to change. Vizenor's literature shows a commitment to change, or what he terms survivance, both in the stories themselves and in the way the stories reach out intertextually. Stories of survivance provide a way to not only imagine one's self anew, but to imagine a better trajectory for American culture. As *Heirs* suggests, rewriting Nationalist discourse through trickster humor allows us to build the Nation around stories that change—ones that does not create dominance—and through change heal those wounded by the violence of our culture.

CHAPTER 4

‘YOU HAVEN’T BEEN READING YOUR HISTORY’: THE COMIC REWRITING OF TEXTUAL AUTHORITY IN SELECTED WORKS OF THOMAS KING

In the end, there is no reason for the Indian to be real. The Indian simply has to exist in our imaginations.
/ But for those of us who are Indians, this disjunction between reality and imagination is akin to life and
death. For to be seen as ‘real,’ for people to ‘imagine’ us as Indians, we must be ‘authentic.’

-Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories*

Cherokee and Greek author Thomas King might have started his writing career as a way to impress his future wife, but he quickly impressed the reading public. His first novel *Medicine River*, published in 1990, was also made into a movie starring Graham Greene. *Medicine River* set the stage for the 90s, which would become a prominent decade in Thomas King’s literary career. During this decade, he published his next two novels, *Green Grass, Running Water* and *Truth & Bright Water*, both more outlandish and bizarre than his first novel, as well as a collection of short stories called, *One Good Story, That One*. King appeared to be everywhere in this decade, publishing two successful children’s picture books and writing the *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*, a radio show that ran for four seasons on CBC radio one. In the 2000’s, he shifted his focus to writing mystery novels under the pen name Hartley Goodweather—a name representative of King’s favorite form of humor, the pun. Although his mystery novels

are more of the potato chip variety,⁹⁹ the novels themselves are written as a counter-discourse to the Tony Hillerman type Indian mystery novels that proliferate mainstream culture (both Hartley Goodweather novels reference Hillerman by name). The 2000's also saw the publication of his life narrative, *The Truth about Stories*. In this narrative, King gives the reader his outlook on stories, stressing, "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (King, *Truth About 2*).

Published on the heels of his novels, short stories, anthologies, movies, and radio programs, King's assessment of stories is a simple way to understand the larger thrust of his work. Where Gerald Vizenor rewrites multi-cultural academic discourse, Thomas King takes a less academic route by rewriting popular culture. His humor incorporates elements of Native life and popular cultural commodities like *Moby-Dick*. For instance, Lionel in *Green Grass, Running Water* accidentally joins a group that spoofs the AIM occupation of Wounded Knee; Moby Dick, the great white whale, ends up being Mary Jane the great black whale. These types of jokes rely heavily on insider knowledge about these cultural references. Contrary to Vizenor, however, who uses academic insider jokes that are very specific to academic audiences, King uses references that are widely recognized cultural commodities. Readers unfamiliar with *Moby-Dick* will recognize the white whale reference, or those unfamiliar with AIM will most likely be familiar with the occupation of Wounded Knee. Because his insider jokes

⁹⁹ In *Green Grass, Running Water*, Eli jokes that reading westerns are like eating potato chips: you know they are bad for you, but you can not stop eating them (181). Here, King jokes about the distinction between low art and high art.

are accessible to both insiders and outsiders, King is able to address a larger audience with his humor.

His novels address the way American Indians have been visually written in movies and television as well as the way religious, historical, and literary discourse have written the Indian stereotype. This attack on stories at large proves to be both chaotic and funny. But his novels go beyond rewriting literary discourse; his novels rewrite all types of stories in order to show the way stories control American Indian identity.¹⁰⁰ One of the main ways King does this is through humor. In his fiction, King uses humor to criticize the way Western stories control Native identity. Typical of Indi'n humor, King focuses much of his humor on the way we see Indians, and he asks the readers to reflect on their expectations of American Indian representation. Using a mixture of puns, caricature, intertextuality, and trickster discourse, King actively challenges readers' expectations of Nativeness by exposing the authority contained in Euro-American, Western stories. Through puns and trickster stories King successfully replaces Euro-American perspectives about National origin with Native alternatives that question the benevolence of colonial discourse by showing the way stereotypes are used to enforce it. His fiction criticizes the certainty of these stories and offers that a more productive way to view American Indian identity is through an associative approach

¹⁰⁰ The texts "read against the grain," a concept developed by Andrew Wiget in "Reading Against the Grain: Origin Stories and American Literary History." Wiget argues the American literature canon should read Euro-American texts against less mainstream alternatives like American Indian texts. Wiget argues that reading these texts "against the grain," against the different cultural ideas each presents, will allow scholars to address the differences of culture. Although Wiget is talking about pairing texts together, King's fiction asks readers to read against the grain through intertextual connections. King, however, is largely looking at the authority given to Euro-American literary texts and so his intentions are slightly different.

that stresses a Native center.¹⁰¹ King confronts Western literary practices that attempt to classify Native identity by asserting colonial authority over Native representation, and he comically refuses the colonial gaze Western literary texts ask Natives to repeat. In denying these stories authority over representation, King offers that Native identity can emerge from the unusable past that these stories perpetuate.¹⁰²

4.1 The American's American Indian: Popular Culture and the Stereotype in Thomas King's Fiction

After three centuries of trying to eradicate Indians, Europeans suddenly became interested in Indians. [...] And not just any Indian. / Not the Indian who had been assimilated to the plow. Not the Indian who had been crippled by European diseases and vices. Not the Indian who had been buried on reservations and locked up in military prisons. Certainly not the educated Indian who fought American expansion in courts. Rather it was the wild, free, powerful, noble, handsome, philosophical, eloquent, solitary Indian...that Europeans were looking to find. [...] An Indian who could be a cultural treasure, a piece of North American antiquity. A mythic figure who could reflect the strength and freedom of an emerging continent. / A National Indian. / [...] But if North Americans couldn't find him, they could make him up.

-Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*

The funny thing about Thomas King's novels is that they suggest America's Indian is really Italian. Or at the very best, America's Indian is just playing an Indian. This is the joke in *Green Grass, Running Water* where Charlie's father Portland, an actor during the Golden Age of Hollywood westerns, has to wear a fake nose in the movies to make him look more Indian.¹⁰³ The ending to Portland's story is anything but

¹⁰¹ In "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," Thomas King argues critics should resist looking at American Indian literature through post-colonial contexts because it assumes authors are only writing to a Euro-American context. Instead, he argues we should consider the way American Indian literature creates associations between culture, stories, and identity that do not rely on Euro-American contexts.

¹⁰² Understandably, one might argue that King himself uses post-colonial terms and writes in a largely Eurocentric context (and by extension, my study emerges from a largely Euro-centric context). However, King and the other authors are writing from a Native context that explores the difficulty of modern, Native identity. The purpose of the confronting colonial discourse is to create humor and show the confinement of Native identity. Thus, the jokes might address a Euro-American context, but they are intended for a primarily Native audience and offer a Native perspective on Euro-American texts.

¹⁰³ This is a common joke in his fiction and can be seen in other stories like the short story, "A Seat in the Garden."

funny, however. His story ends with heartbreak. He is unable to find acting jobs playing Indian because the Italians have the market cornered. In an attempt to make himself “more Indian” and fill the role Hollywood asks of him, Portland starts to wear a fake nose and changes his name to Iron Eyes Screeching Eagle.¹⁰⁴ Portland’s desire to play Indian and fill the role Hollywood requires is so strong that he is unable to meet his son’s request that they leave Hollywood. In the end, Portland’s son Charlie, and the reader, leave Portland standing on a Hollywood sidewalk unemployed and crying. Portland’s story suggests Hollywood is only interested in a specific type of Indian, one that looks visually Indian: big nose, dark skin, dark eyes.

King jokes that it is these Indians (i.e. the stereotype) that are on display. And there is profit in playing these Indians, even if, as King jokes, actual Indians cannot make this profit. Portland’s story is sad, to be sure, but King’s fiction reminds the reader that stories can change. At the end of the novel Portland reappears, wearing “the same stupid wig. The same stupid headband. The same stupid nose” (King, *Green* 354). But, Portland’s reemergence into the novel has a trickster twist; the Four Elders rewrite the script. This time John Wayne does not kill Portland. This time the Calvary does not arrive to save the day. Instead, the movie shows Native resistance and survival. The revision denies the authority of the original text while also changing the victimry that the original story proposed. Changing the script has dramatic effects for Charlie and Lionel who are both finally able to come to terms with their Blackfoot heritage. The

¹⁰⁴ The name satirizes Iron Eyes Cody, the famous Italian actor known best for his role as the crying Indian. Cody was so dedicated to his role that he died believing he was an Indian. See the movie *Reel Injun*.

comic revision shows that changing the way we view (and are asked to play) Indians alters the way Native people view their heritage.¹⁰⁵

The comic revision of the John Wayne movie in *Green Grass, Running Water* is representative of King's larger fiction, which uses humor to rewrite the authority held in Euro-American, colonial stories about the West and the Indian stereotype colonialism uses to create the authority. In King's novels, stories are reality and the truth about them is "that that's all we are" (King, *Truth About 2*). Problematically, however, Euro-American culture has created stories that control the American Indian image—stories like Westerns that display savageness, tragedy, and "authentic" Indianness. Much of King's criticism is aimed at the fictional and historical representations of Indians. In *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King argues that history and fiction have created a "rather lopsided and ethnocentric view of Indians..." (102). King offers James Fenimore Cooper's novel, *Deerslayer* as an example.¹⁰⁶ King argues Cooper's novel uses simplistic characterizations that perpetuate basic divisions between Indians and Whites (104). White people have reason, Indians have instinct (105). This simplistic characterization "isn't arguing for equality. [It's] arguing for separation. [...] Indians aren't necessarily inferior. They just have different gifts. The skin colour isn't the problem. It's their natures" (104). The logic Cooper uses can be seen in institutions like the boarding school, which uses an either/or model of identity: one is either Indian or

¹⁰⁵ The ending the Elders rewrite also suggests that the victim stereotype is created to celebrate Euro-American heroism.

¹⁰⁶ In a moment, I will discuss King's rewrite of *Deerslayer* in his novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. King's revision of Cooper's novel (and several others) exposes the way these texts view and control Indianness and denies the authority of these representations.

American.¹⁰⁷ For King, this logic is the same logic America used to segregate African Americans, the British used in India, and the Nazis used in Germany (104-05). The stereotype Cooper offers does not just create a specific, damaging way to view the American Indian, but also perpetuates a colonial viewpoint that justifies the degradation of American Indian tribes. These treatments of American Indians are continually told in literature and movies and have damaging effects on Native identity.¹⁰⁸

Coinciding with his criticism of fiction, King is critical of the way American history uses stereotypes of the American Indian to justify expansion and undermine violence. In *The Truth About Stories*, King argues that Natives were typically seen as “impediments to progress and affronts to faith” (74).¹⁰⁹ The American Indian stereotype provided a way to purify history and faith. The Puritans, for instance, used the stereotype to justify expansion: “Indians were seen as a threat both to the war effort and the acquisition of land, and the Puritans set about creating stories that were needed to carry the day” (75). Contrary to the early, Utopic depictions of the Indian, King offers that the Puritan historians focused on their savagery and “imagined Native people as dangerous” (75). But, King suggests it is not just that Native people were dangerous; instead, they were downright cannibal. History during this time focused on the ignoble Indian as a way to reiterate that Indians had nothing to offer Euro-Americans (and were therefore expendable) (78). The historical value of the Indian shifted during the American Revolution when the Indian became a valuable asset in defining Euro-

¹⁰⁷ See *Learning to Write Indian* by Amelia Katanski.

¹⁰⁸ In King’s fiction, rewriting these stories allows Native communities to heal. *Green Grass, Running Water* is the most forward about this process.

¹⁰⁹ I discuss this process in Chapter One.

American identity. This is what King calls the National Indian—the one that could stand for the whole (79). The “semi-historic Indian...was a friend to the white man” (82) and represented the assimilation of a dying culture. The figure showed, after all, that cultural evolution was possible and that the savage, wild Indian would do well accepting American benevolence. The stereotype allows historians to recount history in a way that keeps American origins pure and sacred. Indians vanished because they could not assimilate to civilization, not because a mass genocide took place. King’s exploration of these different stereotypes suggests that American’s relationship to the American Indian is subject to change and the representations fill the need of the moment. History here is no better than fiction; it only offers a “truer” account.

King’s fiction is critical of the way Euro-American stories trap American Indians within an unusable past that relies on a specific type of Indian that does not exist outside of Euro-American discourse.¹¹⁰ In his narrative, *The Truth About Stories*, King argues Euro-American discourse relies on the historical Indian and perpetuates stories that lack any kind of future:

North American past, the one that had been created in novels and histories, the one that had been heard on radio and seen on theatre screens and on television, the one that had been part of every school curriculum for the last two hundred years, that past was unusable, for it only trapped Native people in a time warp; it

¹¹⁰ This type of past, of course, is very usable for Euro-American history since it helps perpetuate sacred storylines. In this way, the unusable past references the historical accounts of American Indians that trap them in tragic, stereotypical storylines. This is a past that is unusable for Native communities. See quote below.

also insisted that our past was all we had. / No present. / No future. (King, *Truth About Stories* 106)

In King's fiction, he often asks the reader to reflect on this type of historical entrapment by looking at the discrepancy between the types of stories American Indians tell and the type of stories Euro-Americans expect them to tell.

For instance, in *Medicine River* King pokes fun at the types of stories foreigners want to hear about Natives. Midway through the novel Will meets Lionel, a "world famous Indian" (King, *Medicine River* 174) who has traveled the world telling stories. Harley has introduced Will to Lionel to help Lionel get a credit card so he can "...be a modern Indian" (171). Lionel's belief that a credit card will make him a modern Indian is funny and provides a comic overtone to the conversation between Will, Harley, and Lionel. The context of becoming a modern Indian provides a way to view the joke King offers about representation. Lionel tells a story about his experiences abroad, and his amazement at the types of stories foreigners want to hear. Lionel is fascinated that he receives a standing ovation for his Old Man and Old Woman story, one that everyone on the reservation knows (173).¹¹¹ The ovation itself should be read comically since the story is mundane, at least to Native audiences. But, Lionel's amazement also shows King's criticism of the stories foreigners want to hear. As Lionel says, "those people in Germany and Japan and France and Ottawa...want to hear stories about how Indians used to be. I got some real good stories, funny ones, about how things are now, but

¹¹¹ Very cleverly, King also shows that outsiders are often oblivious to their own role in the joke. In this case, the Japanese audience is the joke: their desire for old stories, their refusal for new ones, and their absurd reaction to Lionel's story.

those people say, no, tell us about the olden days. So I do” (173). The overlay of the credit card makes this criticism funnier because it draws out the absurdity of the foreigners’ request by coupling it with Lionel’s absurd request to get a credit card so he can be a “modern Indian.” Their desire to hear these stories exposes their cultural ignorance (just as Lionel’s request exposes his), while also criticizing the type of Indian people want to see—a representation that is out of date with the current stories.¹¹²

Unlike Lionel, the stories King tells are the funny ones about how Indians are now. His stories rewrite the unusable past by “returning to the buffalo,” a method that suggests Native continuance and survival. In “Return of the Buffalo,” David L. Moore argues that Native writers use the buffalo to “make visible a possibility of Native cultural survival. Not only do these writers give those representations back to their peoples, but they construct a way of seeing the buffalo and the American land that details representational myopia of centuries of polarized history” (75). Moore suggests that rewriting the buffalo allows writers to rewrite Native representation by reclaiming “representational property” (75). Moore looks at the similarities between the buffalo and the Indian, arguing that both are viewed only in the past and through “dualistic ‘frontier’ metaphors” (57). By suggesting the buffalo exists in the present, and by extension the Indian, Moore thinks Native writers are rewriting historical representations of the Indian by “convey[ing] complexities of survival” (57).

¹¹² Throughout *Medicine River*, King criticizes Euro-Americans expectations of Indianness and the difficulty Natives have filling this need; the characters continually weigh their reality against television. In Chapter four, for instance, Jack commits suicide and the reservation speculates about his suicide note. Harlen asks, “Why’d he write a [really long letter]. You know, those suicide notes you see on television just say ‘I can’t go on, please forgive me,’ you know, like that...short” (47).

As I will discuss throughout this chapter, King rewrites historical representation by changing the terms used to control the representations of Indians. For instance, in Thomas King's coming of age novel, *Truth & Bright Water*, he uses the buffalo to rewrite American historical representations of the American Indian. The story opens when Tecumseh and his cousin Lum discover a strange lady jumping off a bridge. Part detective novel, part coming of age story, King's novel looks at the difficulty of contemporary Native representation and the mystery that opens the novel becomes analogous with Tecumseh's own search for identity. Perhaps the most influential figure in Tecumseh's search is Monroe Swimmer, an eccentric artist who has moved back to Truth to live in the old, abandoned church. After landing a part time job with Monroe, Tecumseh helps him repaint the landscape, starting with the disappearance of the church (probably more camouflage than disappearance) and ending with the return of the Buffalo. By repainting the landscape, King takes control of the "representational property" (Moore 75) that relegates the American Indian to the past. The return of the buffalo at the end of *Truth & Bright Water* suggests that Natives are still alive and actively resisting Euro-American representation. The church, which dominates Euro-American visions of the past (and the frontier itself), is painted out of the landscape by Monroe and with it the historical dominance of Euro-American occupation. Painted back in its place is the Buffalo, a figure that has been used by Euro-Americans to perpetuate vanishing Indian motifs. By repainting the landscape, King shows readers we can change the story and the way it controls Native identity. Although it is not always as obvious how King is rewriting the landscape, his fiction continually uses this idea to

stress continuation and survival by changing the terms of literary and historical representation.

4.2 No, Pun Intended: Wordplay and Puns in King's Fiction

Native writers employ puns and wordplay as humorous 'stumbling blocks' that trigger surprise laughter, deft habitual and unreflected interpretations, and force readers to establish new connections. [...] By definition, puns and wordplay thus defy restrictive one-dimensional representations and liberate Nativeness towards more complexity.

-Eva Gruber, *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature*

For Thomas King, the pun is always intended. And the pun is always present.¹¹³

This is because his fiction celebrates the multiplicity of meaning and replaces colonial perspectives with Native alternatives—rewriting the terms of historical representation.

In King's fiction, puns and wordplay are more than just funny; they continue King's criticisms of stories by suggesting the stories are open to multiple interpretations.

Wordplay uses the fluidity of language to create humor. By replacing the original meaning with a new one, wordplay alters the readers' understanding of the terms. Eva Gruber theorizes that puns and wordplay ask readers to "creatively imagine various interpretations" (68). Wordplay utilizes one of the most basic functions of humor: the unexpected. And in King's fiction wordplay and the unexpected are common bedfellows. *Green Grass, Running Water* ends with a Nissan, a Pinto, and a Karmann Ghia crashing into the edge of damn, a comic revision of Columbus' crash into the edge of the world (i.e. America).¹¹⁴ The joke challenges the readers to evaluate the terms of Columbus' discovery against the new terms King offers, which allows King to create

¹¹³ A lot of his puns and wordplay ask for an oral interpretation since they only work orally. For instance, his pen name Hartley Goodweather.

¹¹⁴ In a moment, I will discuss the way events like this retell American discovery through trickster discourse.

alternate versions of history for the readers. Wordplay opens up the possibilities of language and offers counter-perspectives. The reader is required to evaluate and reflect on the alteration in order to understand the joke. In this, wordplay and puns can be very subversive¹¹⁵ and allow King to substitute Western perspective with a Native alternative while still using the same language as the original.¹¹⁶

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King uses several puns and wordplay directed at the terms of white/Indian relations in order to ask the readers to evaluate cross-cultural relationships.¹¹⁷ The title of the novel immediately establishes this by mocking the language used in treaty documents, which promised Native tribes land rights as long as the grass is green, and the rivers run (Flick 158). Making the joke more poignant is the construction of the dam at the edge of the reservation that has stopped the water from flowing and has killed the grass. Taken in the context of the title, the dam suggests that Euro-Americans have absolved themselves of their obligations to Native rights by manipulating the landscape—the dam itself is a clear violation of the treaty promise.

In the novel, King shows that changing the terms of these treaty documents starts by changing the conditions of American discovery—the origin of white/Indian relations. The closing of the novel rewrites Native/White relations by altering the terms

¹¹⁵ They can also run the risk of going unnoticed if the reader does not recognize the pun. For instance, there are so many puns in *Green Grass, Running Water* that Jane Flick has published reading notes that document all the jokes. Because there are so many puns, there is no way that a reader will catch all of King's references.

¹¹⁶ The practice is reminiscent of Henry Louise Gates's signify(n)g practice. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates posits that African American writing uses what he terms, signify(n)g, to create a second meaning that speaks back to white discourse. The process is aware of the language component of meaning—that we create meaning through associations—and celebrates the interchangeability of interpretation; the practice does not attempt to find meaning, but instead, reflects on the way language creates rhetorical outcomes.

¹¹⁷ As Kenneth Lincoln argues, focusing on cross-cultural relations is common in Indi'n humor.

of Euro-American authority. It is not Columbus and his three ships that arrive at the edge of the world, but instead trickster and three cars. The pun echoes Columbus' arrival, but shows a different outcome for Native tribes. The dam is destroyed and with it the Euro-American control over Native land/identity.¹¹⁸ King changes the passive/active roles by placing discovery in the hands of the trickster. By changing the way the reader views American Indians within discovery, King alters the fatalistic outcomes that are often perpetuated through historical accounts of Euro-American arrival. Changing the terms of discovery has drastic effects on Native healing and the way Native people view themselves. Euro-American authority is engrained in discovery and changing the way we view this discovery changes the influence it has over the characters' identity.

King also uses puns and wordplay in *Green Grass, Running Water* to rewrite the way the audience views Western literature by offering an alternative way to read Euro-American literature. King's revision of *Moby-Dick* in section two of the novel "critiques the discourses of patriarchy, race, and empire that Melville explores in *Moby-Dick*" (Cox, *Muting* 86). King alters the way the readers view the text by changing Moby Dick the great white whale to Moby Jane the black lesbian whale. Cox argues the alteration "[exposes] some of the cultural assumptions regarding race and gender upon which Melville structures his narrative" (88). Changing the name changes the way the readers associate with the text, especially the whale hunt. Cox points out that King's revision the whale hunt becomes a "metaphorical representation of patriarchal, puritanical

¹¹⁸ See Mark Pearson "Subverting the Landscape," for a discussion over the relationship between Native identity and controlling the water.

oppression. [...] The prey of the *Pequod's* crew are the 'whalelesbians,' who are doubly marginalized by gender and sexual alliance" (*Muting* 87). The pun presents an alternative that mocks the "patriarchal and racial oppression" (88) of Western literary discourse, replacing Melville's original exploration of colonial oppression with a more explicit critique of these practices. Importantly, the pun also allows King to ensure that the text does not reinforce tragic history; Moby Jane and Changing Woman survive and avoid the fatalistic outcome of *Moby-Dick*.¹¹⁹

In *Truth and Bright Water*, King again focuses his wordplay at cross-cultural relations, this time criticizing Euro-American historical treatment of the Native American.¹²⁰ The novel offers Truth, both an American border town and a truthful representation of the historical treatment of American Indians. The setting of the novel exposes much of his criticism, as do the names of the two towns. There is Truth, the overly Utopian sounding name that mocks U.S. sacred history, and Bright Water, the overly Indian sounding reservation town on the Canadian side. The two towns are connected by a half-completed bridge that "looks complete...but if you walk down into the coulees and stand in the shadows of the deserted columns...you can look up...and see the sky" (King, *Truth & Bright* 1). The bridge was supposed to offer Bright Water the hopes of prosperity and a steady stream of tourists (38). However, one day the

¹¹⁹ Cox points out that *Moby-Dick* is a common source of critique in American Indian literature because it is one of the best examples of the "way privileged literary tradition assures its audience of the eventual absence of Native Americans" (*Muting* 83). I would also add that *Moby-Dick* is a common source of humor because it is easily recognized in pan-tribal communities (partly for the reasons mentioned by Cox).

¹²⁰ His use of wordplay makes history unsacred by showing how it manipulates our understanding of Nativeness.

construction stopped and the workers vanished. All that was left was an incomplete bridge and three angry dogs Tecumseh calls the cousins. The rapid departure of Truth's residents mocks Euro-Americans' failed relations with American Indians. The incomplete bridge is also a failed promise: to bring prosperity to the reservation and to connect Euro-Americans and Native Americans. The appearance of the completion is also critical of the role of reservations and the promise of assimilation. In Truth, the reservation segregates the Indians from the white, prosperous town—but offers the appearance of connection.

The defining feature of Truth is its church, which can be seen from anywhere in town: “When the Methodists built the church, they built it on the highest point of land they could find, so no matter where you stood, on either side of the river, you could always see it” (42).¹²¹ The omnipresence of the church mocks religion's role in the frontier, and its steadfast presence in the West. Truth's church is permanent, and fixed into the landscape by a steeple that makes it look as if “a thick spike has been driven through the church itself and hammered into the prairies” (1). Unfortunately, the residents of the church are not and the Christian owners vacated after the bridge was not completed. The legacy of the church is left to three angry dogs named the cousins, King's pun of the father, the son, and the Holy Ghost.¹²² The description of the church

¹²¹ King jokes that now that Truth is a modern town the church is hidden behind the “Chinook Motel, the Farmer's Bank, and the Continental Oil tower” (*Truth & Bright* 42). The references are meant to make fun of the way modern culture turns the Frontier into a commodity and effectively erases the presence of the truth (i.e. the religious occupation of the West).

¹²² The cousins are puns on God. They look like priests and Lum figures they were “the missionaries brought them to keep the Indians in line” (King, *T&B* 38). Funny enough, everyone forgets they are there and most suspect they were eaten by coyotes (39). Nonetheless, they are permanent fixtures at the church.

criticizes religions' role in the occupation of the frontier. Like the bridge, the permanence the church promised is only partly realized.

The setting of the town helps the reader interpret King's larger criticism of the way colonial benevolence relies on American Indian absence from the frontier.¹²³ In the novel, King names the local theatre, Frontier, a pun that mocks the Hollywood creation of the West. Like the church, the frontier is omnipresent and can be seen from most places. King uses the names to pun Native exclusion from the frontier. Early in the novel, the reader learns that Monroe Swimmer used to sneak into the frontier.¹²⁴ The joke takes on larger meaning as the novel unfurls and Monroe starts repainting the landscape to undermine Western historical representation of the Native American that relies on their absence from the landscape. Initially, however, the pun helps set up the criticism of American Indian exclusion from modern depictions of the frontier/West.

The exclusion of American Indians from Euro-American Nationalist stories is also the source of humor in King's short story, "A Seat in the Garden." The story mocks the relationship between the Indian stereotype and American utopianism by punning the word "Garden."¹²⁵ In the story, Joe Hovaugh, a name that puns Jehovah, discovers an Indian in his Garden. The central joke of the story asks the readers to view the Garden as a pun on American Utopic origin stories that viewed America as the second Garden of Eden. Joe's control over the Garden is reminiscent of the historical control over

¹²³ King's return of the buffalo ultimately undermines this absence, but the puns are used to help expose the need for the buffalo.

¹²⁴ The narrator tells us that Monroe Swimmer used to sneak into the Frontier (King, *T&B* 25). King develops this idea with more depth with Monroe's repainting of the church and prairie.

¹²⁵ King uses this same joke in *Green Grass, Running Water*.

American Indians' place in history. The central problem of the story is the belief, "'you can't let them [Indians] go standing in your garden whenever they feel like it'" (King, *One Good* 86). The need to find a place for the Indian—one that does not trample the corn—puns the American reservation system. And the type of Indian seen in the Garden criticizes the stereotype. Like the historical representations of Indians, Hovaugh's Indian is largely fictional and can only be seen by the white characters. The characters are continually evaluating the Indian against Hollywood actors made famous for their roles as Indians like Jewish actor, Jeff Chandler.

The story focuses on the way Western culture views Indians¹²⁶ and the three American Indian characters are identified through stereotypical roles. In attempts to eradicate Indians from his garden, Joe seeks out an "authentic" medicine man after his friend recommends that he saw it in a movie once. Unfortunately, all Joe can find are "three winos" (89). The reader is introduced to these characters through several stereotypes: Joe's false claim that they are drunk (drunken Indian), the fact they are picking up litter (the Crying Indian), and the hope they can translate for Joe (the primitive Indian). Joe's treatment of the three characters mocks Western culture's inability to look past the stereotypes and the impact the stereotype has on viewing Indians.

The three "winos" in "A Seat in the Garden" offer an example for readers on how language can be used to undermine power. Despite the fact they cannot see the

¹²⁶ In a funny use of word play, Joe Hovaugh tells his friend Red, "'Wasn't a movie, Red, damn it! It was a real Indian'" (King, *One Good* 86). Read without the commas, King is making a joke on the common slang term used to describe the Indian (Red).

Indian in the Garden, they suggest to Joe that the Indian wants a seat. The suggestion makes use of Joe's expectations that Indians can talk to Indians and uses these expectations to subvert Joe's control over the Garden. In this, the three characters offer what Joe wants (an answer) but without fulfilling his desire for an answer. The three "winos" are a good example of the way(s) King uses puns and wordplay in his fiction. Through puns King is able to expose the way Euro-Americans create and perpetuate the American Indian stereotype. He asks his readers to reflect on these meanings by offering Native alternatives. The puns and wordplay use the same language—even sometimes using the stereotype—to focus the reader on the gaze and the way language creates this gaze. But, instead of re-iterating Western desires for this image, King offers a second alternative that reinforces a Native perspective.

4.3 Revising American Origin Stories Through the Trickster

Personally, I'd want to hear a creation story, a story that recounts how the world was formed, how things came to be, for contained within creation stories are relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist.

-Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*

As the reader learns in *Green Grass, Running Water*, "fixing the world is hard work" (King, *Green* 428). Just as some parts get fixed, other parts get messed up (467). And it does not help when Coyote is running around since in King's fiction anything is possible when Coyote enters the story.¹²⁷ Earthquakes occur. Dreams create Gods. A Big Mistake gets set loose on the world. It is not that Coyote means to do these things; it is just that Coyote is Coyote, and he does not know how to fix things. He is a creator

¹²⁷ Coyote commonly follows the creator/destroyer model of trickster.

and a destroyer and what he sets loose on the world alters the way we view it for better or worse. In King's fiction, he uses this trickster discourse to rewrite Euro-American origin stories and Native stereotypes by suggesting that origin does not begin with Columbus and God, but with trickster. Take for instance the opening of *Green Grass, Running Water* where Coyote dreams God into existence. In typical King fashion, the dream does more damage than good and creates all the stories the elders are trying to rewrite. But, putting the Judeo-Christian origin stories in Native contexts asks the readers to "laugh at their own accustomed perspective" (Gruber 72), an action that "destabilizes and unhinges customary worldviews and induces readers to reimagine other options" (72). The opening of the novel sets the tone by reminding the reader that the world was not created by God, but by imagination, by stories and by the trickster. This process of reimagination occurs in several of King's stories and offers a way to reimagine American origin stories (and by extension, Native stereotypes).

In the short story, "The One About Coyote Going West," King creates a contrast between the types of stories that tell how Euro-Americans discover Indians and the type of stories that show Native tribes already existed. The story starts out with Coyote heading west to "see my friends...tell those stories. Fix up this world" (King, *One Good* 69). It is quickly apparent, however, that the stories Coyote plans to tell are ones from history books (70). These are stories about Columbus and the Vikings, "whiteman stories," (70) the narrator says. Opening the story his way frames it within the historical accounts King rewrites. By suggesting that history tells all about who discovered Indians, King criticizes the origin stories that start with Euro-American discovery and

fail to consider Native perspective. The story the narrator offers is the story about how Coyote discovered the Indians. The story the narrator tells Coyote starts like King's story did and immediately alerts the reader that the narrator's story will revise the story Coyote has already started—the one that retells Euro-American origins.¹²⁸

Right away, Coyote makes a mistake. A Big Mistake, actually. And this Big Mistake steals Coyote's mouth and starts to create the world. The big mistake creates things like straight, smooth rivers that “run both ways” (76) and round mountains. Merchandise like snow tires and television. The Big Mistake fills the west with these items and puts them in a big catalog. The events surrounding the Big Mistake satirize Western expansion. The theft of Coyote's voice criticizes the theft of Native representation over Euro-American creation.¹²⁹ The flattening of mountains and the straightening of rivers criticizes Western control over the landscape coinciding with expansion. And filling the landscape with items that nobody needs mocks Western culture's production based needs. The retelling is funny because it uses readers' expectations regarding expansion and exposes the problems of the Euro-American origins. The fact that the Big Mistake is creating these things for Indians, even though Indians do not exist yet, mocks the way the Indian stereotype is created after progress.

King's parody of Western expansion uses the details of the story to criticize Western origins: the characters move west, steal Coyote (or Native tribal) voice, manipulate the landscape, and create unnecessary things to fill it. In this, King is

¹²⁸ This is similar to the process I discussed in Vizenor's fiction. However, King uses layers of stories (stories within stories) while Vizenor relies on intertextual links and metafictional awareness.

¹²⁹ Coyote uses his anus to communicate following this theft, which shows Native resistance to white control.

rewriting the authority of Euro-American creation stories by denying Western discovery—a key component of the origin story. Coyote creates the Big Mistake and the Indians, not Columbus. The revision of Euro-origin stories changes the relationship between Euro-Americans and Natives—namely the way we view Indians. King’s story views Indians through a Native context that confronts Euro-American authority over the stereotype (and National origin).¹³⁰

King’s illustrated children’s book *A Coyote Columbus Story* might be more playful than his short story, but it follows the same trend. The children’s picture book looks at history from a Native perspective, using the terms of history that are excluded to rewrite the purity of Euro-American discovery. In doing this, King rewrites these origin stories through a trickster discourse. Like “The One About Coyote Going West” the story revolves around Coyote traveling, which is a common way to start trickster stories. This time, however, Coyote is looking for someone to play baseball with him. Unable to persuade the Indians, Coyote creates Columbus. With this creation, King changes the terms of American discovery.¹³¹ Columbus does not discover America, but instead, is beckoned to America—playing on his accidental discovery by suggesting it was arranged by Coyote. Similarly, the accounts of Columbus’ arrival take on a different tone. Rather than celebrating his arrival, King focuses on Columbus’ enslavement of the Native people, and his desire to make capital from both the land and

¹³⁰ As he suggested in *Green Grass, Running Water*, changing these stories changes Native identity. As the world is discovered again—this time with a Nissan, a Pinto, and a Karmann Ghia—it has a positive effect.

¹³¹ Vizenor does the same thing in *Heirs*.

people.¹³² By changing the focus of the historical events, King replaces Euro-American history with an alternative that changes the way readers view Euro-American origins and by extension the way the reader views Native identity. Here, the story suggests America and the Indians were “never lost” and are “still here today” (King, *One Good* 129).¹³³

Putting American origin stories in a trickster context allows King to rewrite the relationship between discovery, America, Indian, control, and the stereotype. By dislodging the source of the stereotype (Euro-American origin stories), King ultimately dislodges the stereotype itself. His fiction mocks the way American origin stories celebrate the discovery of America and Indians by reminding his readers that American Indians were always here (and have not left). And Coyote’s active role in creating this mess suggests that American Indians have always been rewriting these discourses.¹³⁴ Unfortunately, Coyote just keeps getting the story wrong. And this can sometimes be disruptive (as seen in *Green Grass, Running Water*) since fixing the world is hard work. But King’s fiction celebrates the chaos that is possible with trickster stories. As the narrator of “The One About Coyote Going West” states, “when that Coyote’s wandering around looking to fix things, nobody in this world is safe” (King, *One Good* 82).

¹³² The same story is told in King’s “A Coyote Columbus Story.”

¹³³ Like Vizenor, King often returns to the same stories and offers different variations of them in order to uphold what Vizenor terms, survivance.

¹³⁴ American origin stories typically view the Indian as victims and so King’s active revision of the stories undermines this victimry.

4.4 Revealing the Lone Ranger's True Identity... Spoiler, It's Tonto

What if the creation story in Genesis had featured a flawed deity who was understanding and sympathetic rather than autocratic and rigid? Someone who, in the process of creation, found herself lost from time to time and in need of advice, someone who was willing to accept a little help with the more difficult decisions?

-Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*

Green Grass, Running Water opens with the start of creation. But it is not the creation story the reader might expect. Instead, the novel opens with a Coyote dream that gets everything backward. This dream, which names itself God, wants to be in charge of the world. And shortly into the novel, he sets about asserting his authority. The details of the Christian creation story remain largely intact. There is Adam (or Ahdamn), the Garden, and the Animals. There is expulsion and naming. There is even the sacred apple. Yet, something strange happens in the telling. The authority given to God and Man is absent. God does not banish Ahdamn and First Woman from the Garden. Instead, they choose to leave. Similarly, Ahdamn does not name the animals; they had already named themselves.¹³⁵ The novel comically re-imagines Genesis in a way that openly mocks the authority held in the texts. God and Ahdamn are not just ineffective; their attempts to assert their authority are absurd.

The absurdity of Western textual authority becomes a running joke in the novel, and King directs much of his humor at the gaze created from Western literary and biblical discourse. The novel is separated into four sections that each start with the purpose of getting the story right—and the reader later discovers that getting it “right”

¹³⁵ In the latter case, Dee Horne suggests the animals' refusal of Ahdamn's names “comically satirizes and undercuts Ahdamn's authority” (par. 28). Similarly, James Cox argues the reversal of authority exposes “the cultural value that promotes the exploitation and domination of the environment” (Cox, “All This Water” par. 19).

means telling the story without asserting Western authority over Native identity. In each section, either Thought Woman, First Woman, Old Woman, or Changing Woman (four traditional American Indian creation figures) encounter a biblical story that tries to assert rules over them and a literary text that attempts to define them. These stories provide a frame for the novel, where each of the four sections addresses one or more of these stories, re-writes these stories, and re-creates the image from a Native perspective. The humor in the novel is directed at the gaze and satirizes the way these texts “name” the Indian as other.¹³⁶ King uses this humor to expose the hidden authority seen in these Western narratives that create Indianness as a means to assert White authority (and justify white conquest), and he actively engages in the re-imagination process by reversing the role of authorship—or who gets to write these texts. The four elders’ refusal of their imposed, “buddy Indian” names and subsequent adoption of a Western, colonial name both put them in the privileged role of “author” and provide authority of definition.¹³⁷ By exposing the way these stories ask Indians to perform Indianness, King is able to rewrite the colonial storylines hidden in the image of the Indian around a Native perspective of survival.

¹³⁶ Naming refers to Stuart Hall’s theory on articulation that I discussed in the first chapter. King satirizes the way these texts ask Natives to speak (or perform) Indianness.

¹³⁷ Most critics that talk about authority in *Green Grass, Running Water* do not discuss the names or do so in a peripheral or truncated manner. For instance, in “All this Water Imagery Must Mean Something” James Cox focuses on the way the novel revises Western literary traditions in order to confront Western, literary dominance (par. 9), but does not discuss the way the revision centers on the refusal of Western Indian names (also see Cox’s *Muting White Noise*, Mark Pearson, and C. Smith). In “To Know the Difference,” Dee Horne identifies the names as a way King unsettles frontier culture, but fails to discuss the importance of the textual refusal of names. In “Trickster of the Trade,” John Purdy argues that the names draw attention to the division between master and servant (115), but fails to look at the intricacies of this idea.

At the start of each section, one of the four elders encounters a Western literary text that names them after a literary character. The names King picks are meant to be funny—Tonto, Friday, Queequeg, Chingachgook—and poke fun at the common representation of Indianness (or the common figures that represent “other”). More importantly, the names King uses are literary sidekicks, figures that appear in texts in order to support their white leaders. By choosing these “sidekicks,” King is mocking the way Western discourse views otherness as subordinate to white, Western dominance.¹³⁸ The fact that the literary texts are imposing these names on the elders suggests that Western literary discourse has no way to view otherness outside of subservience.

For instance, in Thought Woman’s story King mocks Western literature’s refusal to listen to Native input. In the initial exchange between Thought Woman and Robinson Crusoe, King asks the readers to reflect on the act of naming by satirizing one’s ability to know the other: “Thank God! Says Robinson Crusoe. It’s Friday! / No, says Thought Woman, It’s Wednesday. / Now that you’re here, Friday, says Robinson Crusoe, you can help me with my lists. Here we go” (King, *GGRW* 325). The exchange is initially funny because of King’s play on words. However, as the conversation transpires, King shifts his humor to the dialogue and the inability of Western discourse to listen to Native discourse. Thought Woman’s suggestion that it is Wednesday is unheard, like much of the discussion between Thought Woman and Crusoe. The dialogue functions more like a monologue where Crusoe is dictating his lists to Thought Woman almost like a secretary. Crusoe’s dictations assert authority over Thought

¹³⁸ In American Indian terms, this is the Pocahontas effect. See S. Elizabeth Bird “Introduction” to *Dressing in Feathers*, 2 and John Purdy “Tricksters of the Trade,” 114-16

Woman by denying her input. Her name, where she is headed, and her inquiry into Crusoe's purpose making the lists are unheard, and, as Eva Gruber notes, are meant to mock Crusoe's inability to view Thought Woman "as anything but his sidekick Friday" (83).

By addressing the way Western, literary texts refuse to view Indianness outside of subservience (i.e. as anything but Friday), King is able to laugh at the patronization of white discourse. Thought Woman's value to Crusoe is in her otherness, namely her color. As Crusoe states, "as a civilized man, it has been difficult not having someone of color around whom I could educate and protect" (King, *GGRW* 325). Naming Thought Woman Friday classifies her as "someone of color"—and thus, other. The name itself embodies the authority of Western discourse and the way it creates divisions between master/servant in order to educate the other into Western discourse.

The terms of the name, Friday becomes the central joke in the exchange between Thought Woman and Crusoe, and provides King a way to rewrite the textual authority held in *Robinson Crusoe*. After explaining the terms of the name Friday, Crusoe asks Thought Woman if she has "got it straight." Her response suggests that what she understands is the colonial terms of the name: "Sure...I'll be Robinson Crusoe. You can be Friday" (326). The response asks the readers to evaluate the terms as well since the joke relies on King's criticism of Western, textual authority.¹³⁹ Eva Gruber notes that the interaction between Thought Woman and Robinson Crusoe reconfigures the

¹³⁹ In "All This Water Imagery Must Mean Something," James Cox argues these types of revisions invite the readers to revisit the original text with a new meaning (par. 29). His analysis of Ishmael (Changing Woman) suggests that changing the names changes the role of Changing Woman to narrator—thus making her capable of authoring texts (par. 42). I apply this idea to the larger purposes of the rejections.

“original passive subject of White description” (83) and “comically liberates [the reader] from the colonial tale by being encouraged to identify with Thought Woman’s stubborn resistance and self-determination rather than Crusoe’s patronizing arrogance” (83). The readers are encouraged to look at the text differently and evaluate whom they really want to identify with. In doing this, the novel denies the textual authority given to Crusoe, and his ability to control Native representation.

Much of King’s humor in the novel is meant to rewrite the authority seen in these Western texts (both biblical and literary). The characters in the novel continually base their decisions and assert their authority from the presence of the book. The central authority of the texts in the novel is meant to criticize the way “Euro-American culture is defined by its own surrender to the authority of the book, the law, and the narrative as written, and [it insists] that other cultures surrender as well” (Linton 228). In *Green Grass, Running Water*, the elders are continually asked to perform their role as “other.” Thought Woman was asked to play Friday. Just as Old Woman is asked to play Chingachgook. Both events use the same approach to humor: Old Woman is identified as other, named as servant, and asked to fill a role that supports white, frontier heroism. In both cases, the Western narratives refuse to listen to the characters’ reminder they are not that character. And, similar to Robinson Crusoe, Old Woman is named because she is Indian: “I can tell an Indian when I see one. Chingachgook is an Indian. You’re an Indian. Case closed” (*GGRW* 433). Being Indian is enough for Nasty to name Old Woman Chingachgook. This is because the novel Nasty is using to name Old Woman essentializes Nativeness, making it interchangeable. All Indians possess specific

character traits, or what Nasty calls “Indian gifts” (434). The end result of this, as Old Woman points out, is to show “whites are superior, and Indians inferior” (435).

King’s criticism of Western textual authority takes on a new direction when he mocks the way the text refuses to accommodate Native identity that does not fit the textual role. It is only after Old Woman refuses the name Nasty gives her that he decides to kill her: “If you’re not my friend Chingachgook, then I should go ahead and shoot you and get it out of my system” (436). Up to this point, Nasty has refused to acknowledge Old Woman’s denial of the name. His acknowledgement then suggests that Western literary texts view Indianness as a convenience. And this fits King’s general criticism of Euro-American policies where he argues political discourse acknowledge Indianness when it is convenient.¹⁴⁰ But, the example also offers that Western literary texts view Indians as servants (friends) or enemies—the latter are met with extermination. Old Woman’s refusal of the name defines her role in the text; she does not support the story and so she is expendable. Here, King criticizes the discourse practices that use Indianness to support the larger story of servitude and American conquest. Native people that do not fill the role of servant are relegated to the role of enemy, a play on the noble/ignoble divide.

The Old Woman section criticizes Western literary discourse, and its control over the ways Westerners view identity. King continually mocks the way textual authority polices Native identity, and pokes fun at the way identity is checked against the book. Nasty renames Old Woman after his attempted murder backfires, and Nasty

¹⁴⁰ See Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*.

ends up shooting himself by accident. Nasty blames Old Woman and decides that she needs “a better killer name” (436). King has already joked that a “white gift” is being a good killer and so Nasty’s renaming of Old Woman follows the same pattern as the earlier events: the textual authority dictates the possible ways to see identity. Old Woman’s new name is picked from the text; Nasty “takes a book out of his pack” (437) and names Old Woman, Hawkeye. King returns to the joke moments later; Fort Marion guards are policing the frontier to make sure that everyone is in the book. This satire of literary discourse plays on many of the same jokes that King has already established. The text does not have Old Woman, and Chingachgook is already taken. Because there is only one name for Indians in this text, Old Woman is left with Hawkeye, and imprisoned for “trying to impersonate a white man” (439). The name Hawkeye is forced on Old Woman, and she is unprepared to play the role literary discourse requires. Her imprisonment shows that literary discourse punishes those that do not fill the roles asked of them.

King is critical of the requirements placed on Native identity and the entrapment created from colonial roles. Each elder is imprisoned for refusing to perform the names assigned to them: Old Woman is arrested for impersonating a white person and Thought Woman is arrested for being Indian. But, also each Elder is arrested because there is little option outside of these texts. King shows that Western literary discourse results in a figurative imprisonment that contains American Indians within specific, colonial storylines that lack continuation (i.e. the Fort Marion prison). These texts offer little options for Indians outside of performing Whiteness, something that is hard to do

considering Indians are physically different. First Woman, aka Lone Ranger, avoids escape by making herself as the Lone Ranger—thus, masking herself in whiteness. It is only after she takes off the mask that she is arrested for “being Indian” (77). The First Woman example criticizes the Euro-American treatment of Indians, and the pressure placed on Native identity to adhere to white models.¹⁴¹

King, however, shows that adapting to these expectations in order to change the terms of the names and the colonial authority they perpetuate provides a way to escape these figurative imprisonments. Using the same names that imprisoned the elders the elders are able to walk out of Fort Marion. Dee Horne argues, “Throughout the text, King retells and re-presents the settler history of Fort Marion and the imprisonment of the Plains tribe because [the four elders] transform themselves respectively into the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye to escape, leaving Fort Marion and settler oppression behind” (par. 50). King shows that openly performing these white names provides a way to escape imprisonment since it avoids fulfilling subservient, stereotypical roles.¹⁴² The Elders are able to escape because they can adapt to Euro-American expectations. Through this, the Elders are able to rewrite historical confinement as continuation and through their names are able to author their own texts.

Importantly, the Elders perform these roles with a difference and show the way hybridity can be used to undermine colonial authority. Despite performing whiteness, the Elders still retain their names suggesting that the performance of these identities is

¹⁴¹ This idea exposes the either/or mentality of boarding school and stresses the multiplicity of identity. In *Learning to Write Indian*, Amelia Katanski argues this is the basis of much of contemporary American Indian fiction.

¹⁴² Ahdamn for instance stays in Fort Marion largely because does not dismiss his servant name.

for the expectations of Euro-American culture. These performances then refuse the authority of naming that controls these identities. By renaming themselves and performing the required identities, the Elders become the author of the text—and thus hold the authority over representation. And they also alter the terms of this representation by donning Western, Euro-American names commonly reserved for the “master.” Tonto becomes the Lone Ranger. Friday becomes Robinson Crusoe. The humor of this reversal focuses on the gaze and mocks the authority held in the textual definitions of identity. The Elders openly play these roles and change the terms of the original identities as well as their place in these stories. This betrayal of expectations uses humor to ask readers to evaluate their view of American Indians and the way the texts have influenced this view.

These encounters and reversals are largely funny because they use caricature to ask the readers to consider the way stereotype is created and performed. In the novel, King rewrites white as “other,” decentering white privilege and undermining the way these literary stories ask readers to view identity. According to Eva Gruber, “caricature concentrates on particular objectionable qualities and describes or portrays an individual or group exclusively in those terms, exaggerating them out of proportion” (67). The texts the Elders encountered attempted to name them through these qualities. And the texts themselves are funny largely due to caricature. The literary figures like Nasty are exaggerations of Western “egoism...and obsession with (authoritative) rules” (67). The characters themselves are indicative of White, Western dominance, and are meant to mock the way these literary stories attempt to control identity. Caricaturing the Western

literary figures allows King to ask readers to consider the way stereotypes are created and the absurdity of these essentialized creations.

Focusing his humor on the gaze allows King to openly criticize the way the Western discourse creates and perpetuates stereotypes. The linking between imprisonment and escape suggests that if Native people change the terms of the naming—i.e. who gets to name—then the imprisonment that these stories create will no longer exist. The Elders' refusal to fill the role Western literary discourse requires denies the Western gaze authority over representation. Their agency in naming themselves and performing identity shows the power of self-definition. And it also shows the fallacy of such essentialized identity models. Identities that are built from specific characteristics are destructive to society because they confine individuals into character molds. Fixing identity assumes one Indian is all Indians and King's mockery of literary discourse unhinges the power of these stereotypes. The readers are asked to consider the way these stereotypes are created within systems of authority and rethink the terms of the original names. Rethinking the terms of the names means rethinking the historical outlook they support: namely, the historical confinement of Native identity, culture, and servitude to Western expansion.

4.5 The Indian in the Garden: King's Solution to the Indian Stereotype

The humor in King's fiction addresses the way Euro-American culture has gotten the story wrong about Indians. As he suggests in *Green Grass*, fixing the world starts by fixing the stories. And it is not just any story King rewrites; it is the popular Hollywood depictions of the frontier. These stories enforce Euro-American colonial

discourse that depict the American Indian through fixed identities and reiterate a sacred history that ignores Native continuance. King's solution to the stereotype is not much different than Vizenor or Alexie. All three rely on imagination and humor to rewrite Native representation; all three suggest that the reader should celebrate the multiplicity of stories and identity. But, of the three authors, King is perhaps the most dedicated to mocking the way these Hollywood stereotypes ask Native people to "play Indian." In the end, the solution King offers is simple: we need to rewrite the way these stories influence Native identity. Getting there, though, is tricky since it involves rewriting the origins of the stereotype (and by extension American identity). By reminding the readers that Coyote existed before Columbus—and thus Native culture was here before Euro-American arrival—King frames his fiction within a Native, cultural center. The Hollywood Indian (and the historical Indian) are manifestations, Indians in the Garden, that are meant to undermine Native presence. Focusing on the present, on stories about Native identity today, King is able to rewrite the stereotype and the stories that create it.

CHAPTER FIVE

'500 YEARS OF THE SAME SCREAMING SONG, TRANSLATED FROM AMERICAN'

You throw in a couple of birds and four directions and corn pollen and it's Native American literature, when it has nothing to do with the day-to-day lives of Indians. I want my literature to concern the daily lives of Indians. I think most Native American literature is so obsessed with nature that I don't think it has any useful purpose. It has more to do with the lyric tradition of European Americans than it does with indigenous cultures. So when an Indian writes a poem about a tree, I think: 'It's already been done!' And those white guys are going to do it better than you. Nobody can write about a tree like a white guy.

-Sherman Alexie, From "An Interview with Sherman Alexie"

Most of our Indian literature is written by people whose lives are nothing like the Indians they're writing about. There's a lot of people pretending to be "traditional," all these academic professors living in university towns, who rarely spend any time on a reservation, writing all these "traditional" books. Momaday—he's not a traditional man. And there's nothing wrong with that, I'm not either, but this adherence to the expected idea, the bear and all this imagery. I think it is dangerous and detrimental.

-Sherman Alexie, From "Interview with John Purdy"

Throughout Sherman Alexie's fiction he questions readers' perceptions about Native American literature. His character Jack Wilson from *Indian Killer*, for instance, is a fictional reminder that viewing Native American literature too narrowly allows outsiders like Wilson to easily adapt the expectations and conditions of traditional Native literature. Critical of the Euro-American control over "traditional" literature, Alexie breaks with much of the mold created by his predecessors Silko, Momaday, and even Vizenor.¹⁴³ As Alexie jokes in his interview above, there are no bears in his

¹⁴³ However, King and Alexie would not be able as successful without Vizenor.

fiction—although there are several salmon.¹⁴⁴ And when referencing issues similar to those seen in Silko’s *Ceremony* (alcoholism created from disconnection from community), he does not re-imagine them through traditional stories, nor is he as sensitive to the issues as Silko. Alexie’s is a fiction that more commonly turns to basketball than traditional stories; that more commonly uses humor to tease individuals out of line with tribal values.¹⁴⁵ Naturally, his fiction is also a brand that more commonly receives criticism, intensified by his use of irony and satire as well as insider jokes (what he calls “Indian trap doors”), which are all forms of humor easily misinterpreted or alienating. To make matters more difficult, Alexie is not afraid to challenge or anger his audience. It is no surprise that a lot of the criticism surrounding Alexie appears because the audience misses the joke—certainly one of the potential problems of humor more generally.

The intention of this chapter is to find the joke in Alexie’s fiction. Or more specifically, I intend to find the value of humor in Alexie’s fiction by looking at the seriousness of his laughing—something I feel many scholars fail to address. By taking his humor seriously, we can start to explore the ways he uses humor to re-enforce tribal values, a traditional function of humor in tribal communities and something I discussed in chapter 2. Through his combination of humor and pain, Alexie fulfills a common

¹⁴⁴ The Spokane tribe is traditionally a fishing tribe so the Salmon is an important figure in Spokane art and culture. Alexie references to Salmon to reinforce tradition as well as suggest renewal and connection (see end of *Smoke Signals*).

¹⁴⁵ It is not that Alexie does not appreciate traditional stories like Silko’s. His introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *Ceremony* shows how influential the book is for him. Instead, Alexie is pointing out that Native writers like Momaday are living lives that “are nothing like the Indians they’re writing about” (Alexie, “Interview with John Purdy” 138). Alexie is critical of the expectations regarding Native writers and traditional stories. See the Purdy interview 136-38.

trope in American Indian humor: laughing at pain to survive. I think this makes his humor familiar to Native audiences, and his continued use of figures like Crazy Horse, Buffalo Bill, Custer—which Deloria Jr. notes is a common way to create bonds in Indian humor—unites pan-tribal communities around a shared perspective. More importantly, his work reinforces community, and fulfills one of the most important purposes of Native American literature. In Jace Weaver’s foundational book *That the People Might Live*, Weaver makes the case that “American Indian writers help Native readers imagine and re-imagine themselves as Indian from the inside rather than as defined by the dominant society” (3). Although Alexie continually explores the problems of the colonization of Native communities, his fiction asks his readers to imagine identity from community values and not from external pressures like the stereotype. His humor commonly mocks the ways we view Indians (for both Native and non-Native audiences), stressing the need to re-imagine community and personal identities.

A common figure in Alexie’s fiction is the reservation, an area he uses to address the problems of the community such as poverty and alcoholism as well as to stress the need to re-imagine the reservation. Thus, the reservation in his fiction is both a positive place that stresses survival and also a negative space that embodies many of the problems of tribal communities. The reservation should be read as an imagined space—a fictional account of many of Alexie’s own experiences, but always a work of fiction. Sherman Alexie states that his stories “are the vision of one individual looking at the lives of his family and his entire tribe, so these stories are necessarily biased,

incomplete, exaggerated, deluded, and often just plain wrong. But in trying to make them true and real, I am writing what might be called reservation realism” (Alexie, *Lone Ranger* xxi).¹⁴⁶ As a fictional representation of the real, the reservation becomes a place for Alexie to voice his concerns.¹⁴⁷ It is a space of identity creation as well as loss, and the stories taking place around the reservation should be read critically.

In this chapter, I will argue Alexie uses satire, irony, and sarcasm—three forms of humor that are confrontational—to challenge his audience’s perception of stereotypes, the reservation, and American Indian identity. Alexie’s humor confronts the darkest parts of Native experience (alcoholism, poverty, suicide, self-destruction) in order to show both the role Euro-American colonial discourse has played in creating this behavior and the problems seen in Native communities’ internalization of these stereotypes. Through satire, Alexie undermines the benevolence of national origin by showing the violence colonialism asserted physically during boarding school practices and continues to assert metaphorically with the Indian stereotype. Alexie offers that figures like the Cowboy make it extremely difficult for Native people to have a positive self-image since the Cowboy celebrates the violent destruction of American Indian tribes, usually using the savage Indian to justify the violence. His humor asks Euro-American and Native audiences to confront the problems seen on the reservation—problems ignored by colonial benevolence—while also suggesting Native communities

¹⁴⁶ Sean Teuton offers a similar concept in his book, *Red Land, Red Power*. Teuton’s “tribal realism” stresses that Native literature creates knowledge from communal awareness of Indian identity, and situates this knowledge in explorations of the colonial world.

¹⁴⁷ For instance, Alcoholism has become a much less noticeable figure in his most recent collections, and Alexie credits his distance from his own struggles with alcoholism as the reason. See “Interview with John Purdy” (142). This suggests that the role of alcohol in his stories is also a personal one.

need to imagine the reservation outside of the self-destructive attitudes the stereotypes enforce.

In the chapter, I have tried to use a diverse selection of texts from Alexie's fiction to show the prominence of these ideas throughout his work. I will use selections from three of his poetry collections in the first and the third sections: *One Stick Song*, *The First Indian on the Moon*, and *The Business of Fancydancing*. These texts provide good examples of the way Alexie uses the reservation in his fiction. His first collection, *The Business of Fancydancing*, is especially useful for talking about the way Alexie uses humor and the reservation to tease Indian/White relations. In order to see how these concerns change in an Urban setting, I will discuss *Indian Killer* and *The Toughest Indian in the World*. These texts are especially important for considering the way Alexie uses violence to create satirical humor meant to rattle audience expectations. These two texts are also good examples of the way Alexie's humor is easily missed or potentially alienating. I will also use stories from maybe Alexie's most famous collection, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. This collection is helpful for considering the function of humor and the way it undermines the stereotype. I will also look at this idea in *Smoke Signals*, focusing mostly on Thomas and Victor's 49 song,¹⁴⁸ "John Wayne's Teeth." Although I have tried to pick an array of different texts to discuss these issues, I have also omitted several important works—most notably his most recent publications *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* and *War Dances*. It is my intention to look at the way his early fiction sets the foundation for

¹⁴⁸ 49 songs are traditionally sung at Pow Wows.

evaluating the humor in his most recent collections. For instance, understanding his satires regarding boarding school and assimilation practices in *Indian Killer* provides a unique understanding of the struggles presented in his more accessible young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*.

5.1 Defending Sherman Alexie: Humor and Alienation in Works by Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie has certainly found success writing. Since his first publication in 1991 (*The Business of Fancydancing*), Sherman Alexie has written twenty-four works of fiction, including two successful screenplays (*Smoke Signals* and *The Business of Fancydancing*), one of which he directed. Alexie has received several accolades, highlighted by two PEN/Faulkner awards and one National Book award. But Alexie has also received his fair amount of criticism, typically stemming from his brash humor and sensitive subject matter such as poverty and alcoholism. These critics raise important concerns about Alexie's work such as the value of re-presenting Euro-American stereotypes like the drunken Indian (even if Alexie is rewriting it). If readers misinterpret the joke or miss the humor altogether then Alexie runs the risk of reinforcing damaging stereotypes. This is why I think it is important to evaluate the seriousness of Alexie's humor. By considering the ways Alexie himself anticipates this problem and presents for the reader a map for interpreting his humor, we as critics can start to understand the way Alexie uses stereotypes to force the reader to confront misrepresentations.

A large pocket of the criticism surrounding Alexie's work questions the value of his fiction for reinforcing tribal values and healing Native communities. Louis Owens is

especially critical of Alexie's use of alcoholism and poverty, which Owens feels "too often simply reinforces all of the stereotypes desired by white readers: his bleakly absurd and aimless Indians are imploding in a passion of self-destructiveness and self-loathing" (Owens, *Mixedblood* 79). Owens argues that Alexie's fiction too readily fulfills Euro-American audiences' desire for "bloodthirsty savagery" (80). Elizabeth Cook-Lynn builds on this criticism, arguing that Alexie too readily ignores social problems and fails to reinforce the positive aspects of the reservations: "[Alexie's fiction] offers little or no defense of treaty-protected land bases as homelands to the indigenes, nor do they suggest a responsibility of art as an ethical endeavor or the artist as responsible social critic (68).¹⁴⁹ This type of criticism is also seen in Gloria Bird whom argues Alexie does not measure up to traditionalists like Momaday and Silko ("Exaggeration" 50).¹⁵⁰ She faults Alexie for his use of popular culture, which she believes "becomes problematic...when this is the only exposure to native literature to which mainstream readers are exposed" ("Exaggeration" 48).

Although these critics raise important concerns about Alexie's fiction, I think they also largely fail to consider the function of humor in his fiction. Several critics have defended Alexie using the humor defense, each, in their own way, addressing the

¹⁴⁹ Alexie is very aware of these types of criticism and mocks Cook-Lynn by name in *War Dances*, calling her and other scholars nostalgic (36-37).

¹⁵⁰ Part of my argument is that these types of comparisons set Alexie up for failure and assume that there is only one way to write Native American literature. Alexie does not compare to Silko and Momaday because he takes a different approach—as do several authors. Fittingly, Alexie is critical of the way scholars essentialize Native literature, often mocking the way this leads to non-Native's ability to "write" traditional Native fiction: see Jack Wilson in *Indian Killer* for a good example.

way Alexie's dark humor—especially irony and satire—is easily misrepresented.¹⁵¹

Similarly, I will use the humor defense to suggest that scholars are just missing the point; Alexie's humor is confrontational and it is meant to be confrontational:

I've come to the realization that many people have been reading literary fiction for the same reason they read mainstream fiction... For entertainment and a form of escape. I don't want to write books that provide people with that. I want books that challenge, anger, and possibly offend. (Alexie qtd. in Cline 197)

To challenge readers, Alexie commonly uses irony and satire, two forms of humor that are easily missed: "some readers might not notice particular ironies or might be offended by them" (Gruber 56). Despite the potential pitfalls, irony and satire require readers to evaluate surface meaning, which makes them good tools for evaluating stereotypes (56).

"The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me" from *One Stick Song* offers a good example of the way Alexie uses sarcasm—a form of irony—in his fiction. The passage below requires the reader to evaluate the surface meaning of the joke (what is being offered) to find the catalyst of the humor (what makes it funny). There are two versions, the surface and the critique, and the reader must find the alternative to understand the meaning the joke. The question that the passage offers to the reader at the end of the paragraph hinges on the reader's ability to understand the alternate meanings presented. Alexie writes,

¹⁵¹ See "The Approximate Size of His Favorite Humor" by Joseph L. Coulombe and "Open Containers: Sherman Alexie's Drunken Indian" by Stephen F. Evans.

So many people claim to be Indian, speaking of an Indian grandmother, a warrior grandfather. Suppose the United States government announced that all Indians had to return to their reservation. How many of these people would not shove the Indian ancestry back in the closet? (24)

Alexie's sarcastic question at the end of the passage offers the punch line and directly confronts the audience with an invitation to answer. The sarcasm also requires alternate readings. First, readers must evaluate the basis of the joke—Americans desire to play Indian—which requires the reader to reflect on the way Nationalist identity creates a longing to “play Indian.” Through this, the reader must consider the elements that are funny, specifically Alexie's use of stereotypical figures like the warrior or the old grandmother (both ignoble and noble poses). The passage then offers a turn that asks readers to consider this context through the reservation and the question that concludes the passage requires the readers to consider the problems of the reservation in order to answer the question.

The question at the end of the passage requires Euro-American audiences to evaluate their relationship to Native communities. Alexie's humor commonly asks the readers to compare their lifestyles to the reservation and forces the readers consider the social and cultural problems stemming from Native poverty and Euro-American colonial pressures.¹⁵² Joseph Coulombe argues Alexie uses humor to “negotiate...the difference between Indian communities and mainstream American society, while simultaneously instigating crucial dialogue about social and moral issues especially

¹⁵² This is not to insinuate that his fiction exists simply to react to Euro-American culture. Instead, he writes about everyday Native culture and the problems that exist on the reservation.

important to Indian communities” (95). Alexie antagonizes readers into evaluating the way they view Native identity. His humor challenges the roles Natives play (and are asked to play) and the history that has created these expectations. And he uses anger and extreme satire to tease forward these criticisms, fulfilling his reoccurring phrase that “poetry=anger x imagination” (*One Stick*, 20). It is this anger that allows Alexie to dismantle the readers’ expectations of Indianness since it does not allow the readers to settle for simplistic or stereotypical representations. The confrontational humor is meant to create reflection, “and much like the Trickster...Alexie’s use of humor encourages readers to think anew by creating a space of shared inquiry and reciprocal empathy” (Coulombe 95).¹⁵³

Alexie’s use of the stereotype helps facilitate this reflection by undermining and exposing the colonial creation of these images while also stressing the Native internalization of these roles. His humor invites readers to consider the damage being done to Native communities, and hopes to facilitate change. In “The Native American Broadcasting System” from *First Indian on the Moon*, Alexie asks the readers to consider the misrepresentation created through centuries of anthological debate and scholarship. In the poem, he is critical of the way anthropological practices too readily view and discuss American Indians through stereotypes.¹⁵⁴ The poem requires readers

¹⁵³ Alexie’s humor, like the trickster, exists at the crossroads between things. Although there are trickster-like figures in his work—Big Momma, Lester, Crazy Horse—it is more common that the trickster appears in a loose manner as a way to undermine authority and re-imagine spaces. Because of this, I will not directly discuss the trickster; instead, it should be assumed that Alexie’s humor fulfills the contemporary poses of the trickster.

¹⁵⁴ Admittedly, there are problems with Vizenor and Alexie’s use of the anthropologist—namely, they run the risk of creating stereotypes. However, anthropologists are common sources of humor in “Indian

to consider the damage being done by these mis-representations. The poem opens five hundred years in the future with the discovery of “a bowling ball buried beside the body of an Indian chief” (*First Indian* 83). Alexie imagines the reaction to this discovery, joking that academic scholars perpetuate and sustain ridiculous interpretations of history. He writes, “research papers will be published in the academic journals prov— / ing the existence of a large fifteen-pound globe-like organ / in a majority of late twentieth century Native Americans” (83). The ridiculous account of the bowling ball mocks the historical accounts of tribal identity, but also questions the potential of such exercises, suggesting that these types of misinformation lead to historical justification and presentation of the stereotype: “Although the organ itself was petrified,” states an expert, / “We are able to ascertain that its purpose was to absorb excess / quantities of fluids, most likely alcoholic in nature” (83). The humor requires the reader to evaluate historical accounts of Native identity by mocking the way history readily reinforces stereotypical representations.

In the poem, Alexie uses the drunken Indian to evaluate the relationship between the image and colonial discourse practices. Stephen Evans argues that Alexie’s use of the stereotype allows him to collaborate with his readers in the process of making meaning, and “function as ‘open containers’ (pun intended) to house or decant realistic valences of meaning for modern reservation life and people” (“Open” 54). Evans argues that the drunken Indian in Alexie’s fiction does not function like the normal stereotype, which is simply meant to reinforce simplistic representations (54). Instead, Alexie’s

humor” much like Custer, Sitting Bull, and Buffalo Bill. Although overly simplistic at times, the jokes are meant to critique and undermine the authority of anthropology over Native experience.

characters “achieve and convey for readers vital resonances of realism when he uses them to express the recursive, historical patterns of defeat and exploitations of Indian people by white civilization” (54). Evans notes that Alexie presents “Indians destructively encoding his own body with cheesy, almost profane, images that themselves reflect prejudicial white stereotypes of his own culture and heritage” (53).

Alexie does not limit his criticism to just Euro-American audiences; Native audiences are expected to evaluate the internalization of the drunken Indian stereotype and the absurdity of such roles—just as the Euro-American audience is expected to consider the racial prejudices these roles fulfill. In many cases, Alexie uses the drunken Indian stereotype to condemn the self-destructive internalization of the stereotype and the absurdity of filling such roles. In these cases, the humor is directed at the role itself, not the characters filling it, and the readers are asked to evaluate the un-realistic nature of these expectations.¹⁵⁵

For instance, in the poem “A Twelve-Step Treatment Program,” Alexie uses alcoholism to criticize self-destructive behavior that not only reinforces poor behavior, but also creates poor living conditions on the reservation. The poem itself reverses the readers understanding of treatment by reframing recovery as relapse—each treatment is ironically imagined through a form of relapse, most commonly created because of the poor living conditions on the reservations and the Euro-American’s unwillingness to acknowledge these conditions. “Educate,” for instance, criticizes Euro-Americans’ misinterpretation of Indian alcoholism as “cultural baggage” (Alexie, *First* 33) that a

¹⁵⁵ I will discuss this idea again in the third section with my analysis of “No Drugs or Alcohol Allowed.”

person can easily discard. However, Alexie's re-imagination of the treatment program asks readers to evaluate this type of understanding against reservation conditions that perpetuate problems of self-defeat. The continued relapses then are not meant to reinforce drunken stereotypes, but are ironic evaluations of reservation conditions that leave no place to "educate," "instill self-esteem," "to establish rules," and so on.

I think critics too readily write off Alexie's humor as an insensitive attempt to discuss serious issues. Critics like Owens see Alexie making jokes about the drunken Indian and immediately write his evaluation off as not funny, denying Alexie's invitation to make meaning. Throughout Alexie's work, he offers examples of how to read his humor and explains the reasons he laughs at pain. In the short story "The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor" from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie explores both the healing potential and the alienation that can occur with humor. The story opens with Norma leaving her husband because he cannot stop making jokes about his cancer, but also ends with her returning for the same reason.

Jimmy's form of humor—like Alexie's—follows Vine Deloria Jr.'s assessment of Indian humor, which argues that Indian humor laughs at shared pain. For Deloria, like Jimmy, "the more desperate the problem, the more humor is directed to describe it" (*Custer* 147). Therefore, Alexie offers that humor should be read seriously and that many of the gaps created by humor in the story are the result of failing to consider the potential value of humor to re-imagine pain. In the story, the narrator Jimmy Many Horses uses humor to deflect pain, and his decision to joke about dying has created a wedge between his wife Norma and himself. But it is not cancer itself that Jimmy

mocks, but the act of dying. As he suggests, “‘Ain’t joking about the cancer” (Alexie, *Lone Ranger* 157). This makes it clear that Jimmy is able to separate the cause (cancer) from the result (dying), suggesting that the humor provides Jimmy a means to re-imagine dying.

It is this re-imaginative process that Alexie finds valuable because it allows Jimmy to rethink tragedy. Throughout the story, Jimmy is able to redefine the terms of his dying by imagining his cancer as productive and not reductive. His jokes continually suggest that the tumors that are killing him are actually immortalizing him in one way or another. For instance, Jimmy jokes that his radiation treatments will make him Superman (162). This provides Jimmy a way to laugh at the possibility that he is indestructible. The irony of the joke is that Jimmy knows he will die, but prefers to consider that his illness will somehow make him immortal. Superman is never a real option or possibility for Jimmy. Yet, it allows him to remake the situation.

Alexie shows that humor is an important way to redefine tragedy and create bonds around laughter. The story shows the seriousness of humor and that Jimmy, well aware of his impending death, uses humor to re-imagine tragedy. During a doctor’s visit—a moment that makes a person hyper-aware of dying—Jimmy views laughter as a way to create bonds. He notes, “we laughed, you know, because sometimes that’s all two people have in common” (162). Jimmy avoids dwelling on his illness, despite the fact it is the most immediate common ground between the Doctor and him. Instead, Jimmy uses humor to address his illness without dwelling on the tragedy, allowing him to avoid the emotional pain of dying through laughter. He states, “we laughed, you

know, because sometimes you'd rather cry" (162). His decision to laugh rather than cry does not undermine the seriousness of the moment. It is clear that Jimmy is well aware of the tragedy of his illness. Instead, Jimmy chooses to address his illness through laughter, a choice that addresses the sickness in order to deflect emotional pain.

Alexie uses Norma to offer the problems that occur when one focuses too much on tragedy—namely, self-defeatist attitudes. Prior to the ending of the story, Norma is unable to confront death because she cannot move past the tragic. Alexie mocks this type of behavior by twice describing Norma as stoic, connecting her inability to laugh to “generations of television Indians” (155). Alexie suggests that failing to find the humor in tragedy reinforces the stoic stereotype that exists in colonial discourse such as American Westerns. These types of stories deny American Indian communities a future, and in Norma’s outlook there are elements of this self-defeat. In talking about the Elders and dying, Norma notes that dying takes away a piece of the past, and is concerning because she is uncertain of “how much future we have” (167).

The closing of the story shows the power of humor to unite people around survival, not tragedy. Jimmy’s jokes can create alienation, but Alexie reminds the reader “you have to realize that laughter saved Norma and me from pain, too” (164). And this is the real value of humor in the story—something Norma realizes at the closing of the story. Norma returns to Jimmy because the man she was staying with was “so fucking serious about everything” (170). It is humor that brings Norma back, just as it is humor that pushes her away. Her ability to joke about Jimmy’s death at the close of the novel shows a different outlook from the stoic Norma at the start. Her stoic face

here is used as a device to create humor, offering her “beautiful Tonto face” (170) to manipulate Jimmy’s expectations. Norma uses the stereotype to create humor, just as Alexie does. The closing suggests that laughter creates bonds and allows communities to move past tragedy. People might not be able to change the cause of pain (genocide, poverty, tradition), but they can change the way to view the pain. Some areas might be off limits, and this will certainly alienate Alexie from some people. But, like Norma, people need this type of humor in order to re-imagine tragedy and rewrite stereotypes.

Norma and Jimmy show that humor rewrites the tragedy by offering an alternative to self-defeatist attitudes. The humor re-imagines tragedy through survival, as seen in Alexie’s larger presentation of the dying Indian motif. Alexie uses Jimmy’s cancer to ironically re-imagine the dying Indian stereotype, critiquing American consumption of the tragic Indian. Alexie places Jimmy’s tumor in the context of American culture by describing the tumor as a baseball-sized tumor. The description places his dying in the realm of American past time, ironically suggesting that dying Indians are part of American sport. His jest that he will end up in the Baseball Hall of Fame as a permanent display (157) further critiques the American consumption of the tragic Indian stereotype. Joseph Coulombe argues this criticizes the long history of the way “Indians have long been used...by white America to symbolize what is quintessentially American” (100).¹⁵⁶ More importantly, Alexie exposes the way the *stereotype* has been used to symbolize what is American, justifying the need for humor

¹⁵⁶ Coulombe makes the important point that Jimmy’s humor shows a self-awareness about his own role in the consumption and stresses “cultural awareness, self-knowledge, and personal strength, even while it reveals an irreverence (shared by Alexie) toward normally sacrosanct topics” (101). This reinforces my earlier claim that it is the content that makes the joke dangerous.

to overturn these representations. Understanding the irony of Alexie's (re) presentation of the dying Indian allows us to consider the way Alexie invites the reader to re-imagine an alternative.

5.2 The Soldier in a Small Shirt

I dreamed about war on the night before the war began, and though nobody officially called it a war until years later, I woke that next morning with the sure knowledge that the war, or whatever they wanted to call it, was about to begin and that I would be a soldier in a small shirt.

-Sherman Alexie from "Sin Eaters"

It is common in Alexie's fiction to be confronted with moments of extreme anger. After all, Alexie is known for his equation "Poetry = Anger X Imagination" (*One Stick* 20). But, it is less common to consider the humor of such confrontations. In this section, I will look at the way Alexie uses humor to force his readers to evaluate this anger. Humor has almost no limits in Alexie's work, and he asks his readers to share his ability to laugh at sensitive issues: "Homophobia? Funny! Genocide? Hilarious! Political assassination? Side-splitting! Love? Ha, ha, ha!" (Alexie, *Toughest* 144). Genocide becomes a way to evaluate assimilation. Homosexuality becomes a way to disrupt the overly masculine Indian warrior stereotype.¹⁵⁷ Humor in these cases forces us to laugh at expectations and re-imagine new possibilities. Anger can be funny, and in Alexie it commonly is. It is antagonistic imagination, a mind at war with the readers' complacency. For Alexie extreme satire, combined with hyperbole and farce, are an effective outlet for his anger, and his evaluation of the historical creation of the American Indian stereotype. Such forms of humor "exposes the false ideologies and

¹⁵⁷ See Stephen Evans, "Indigenous Liasons: Sex/Gender Variability, Indianness, and Intimacy in Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World*."

empty promises of the dominant culture as it opens up a dialogue with the readers about difficult issues and stereotypes” (Heldrich 25). Alexie’s use of extreme satire is commonly directed at the assimilation process and evaluates the intentions behind the boarding school process. By changing the terms of savagery—Euro-Americans becomes savage or create savagery in the characters—Alexie challenges his readers to reconsider the purity of assimilation and questions the colonial aims behind assimilation. Violence appears in his novels as a way to criticize the severe alienation that is created from the internalization of the stereotype that occurs when Native Americans are no longer connected to tribal communities—a symptom of what James refers to as the “reservation state of mind.”

In *The Toughest Indian in the World*, Alexie directs his humor at the assimilation practices that have left Native people disconnected from tribal communities. The opening story “Assimilation” establishes Alexie’s concern with assimilation practices by looking at the identity crisis that stems from prolonged disconnection from the reservation. The story questions Mary Lynn’s ability to understand her Coeur d’Alene identity in a Euro-American culture that essentializes race in order to experience ethnicity. Highly dissatisfied in her marriage to a white man, Mary decides to have an affair with an Indian, “only because he was Indian” (Alexie, *Toughest* 1). Philip Heldrich argues that Mary feels “as if sleeping with an Indian can help her recover her cultural self, which has been steadily eroding all her life, and more so in the years since she moved off the reservation” (Heldrich 33). And certainly Mary hopes to recover her heritage through the sexual act. However, it is her fascination with

racial markers—that she “wanted to find the darkest Indian in Seattle...and get naked with him in a cheap motel” (Alexie, *Toughest* 3)—that is important because it makes her affair a way to experience racial otherness.

Mary’s affair becomes likened to the couple’s attempts to find food at various ethnic restaurants, and this allows the reader to view Mary’s sexual act as an internalization of Euro-American consumption of otherness. Following her affair, Mary meets her husband at Tan Tan, “a pan-Asian restaurant whose ownership and chefs—head, sauce, and line—were white, though most of the wait staff appeared to be one form of Asian or another” (10). The patrons are able to view their meal as an experience in Asian cuisine because of the outwardly ethnic nature of their experience. On the surface, everything is clearly marked as authentic. The name sounds Asian. The wait staff looks Asian. And the food tastes Asian. Yet, Alexie ironically jests that behind these displays are a kitchen full of white people running the show. This ironic suggesting criticizes Euro-American consumption of the ethnicity, which essentializes racial identity in order to make it palpable for Euro-American culture. Experiencing ethnicity becomes as easy as eating Asian food.

The story is critical of the availability of engaging with Native identity outside of the reductive models created in an assimilated world. Mary’s distance from her community does not afford her productive ways to engage with her Coeur d’Alene identity outside of the model provided by Euro-American consumption. Because of this, her sexual act does not provide the reconciliation she desires, and “it becomes clear

that Mary Lynn will always be plagued by questions prompted by her assimilation” (Heldrich 34).

In the story “Class,” Alexie similarly evaluates the difficulty of understanding tribal identity in a culture of assimilation. Again, Alexie returns to the topic of inter-racial marriage, and again he uses many of the same storylines. The wife Sara is cheating on her husband, Eagle Runner—the Spokane protagonist of the story. Eagle Runner wants to have sex with an Indian. And as in “Assimilation,” the central conflict of the story emerges from Eagle Runner’s inability to engage with his culture. But in this story, Alexie is more transparent about the way assimilation leads to cultural alienation. Part of Eagle Runner’s alienation from his culture is self-imposed, and he describes himself in ways that fulfill white culture’s desire for exoticism:

I’d told a number of white women that I was part Aztec and I’d told a few that I was completely Aztec. That gave me some mystery, some ethnic weight, a history of glorious color and mass executions. Strangely enough, there were aphrodisiacal benefits to claiming to be descended from ritual cannibals. In any event, pretending to be an Aztec warrior was a lot more impressive than revealing I was just some bright kid who’d fought his way off the Spokane Indian Reservation... (40)

Eagle Runner’s self-omission forces readers to evaluate the process of identity making, asking them to consider the reasons behind Eagle Runner’s preference to be Aztec. Initially, and as Philip Heldrich argues, Eagle Runner’s lie “articulates [his] conflicted feelings of racial pride and his struggles to make it off the reservation” (35). But, these

conflictions manifest themselves in racial presentation. Eagle Runner's preference to be Aztec is indicative of a culture that desires exoticness. Claiming to be Aztec is more impressive racially because it fulfills the needs of white women better. Not only is it more exotic, but it also allows Eagle Runner to fill the stereotype of Indian warrior.

A little later in the story Alexie flips the gaze and this time looks at the way Euro-American culture exploits and stereotypes ethnicity for sexual consumption. After discovering his wife is having an affair, Eagle Runner hires an Indian prostitute named Tawny Feather. Similar to Mary, Eagle Runner connects sex with Indian embodiment. But in "Class," the sexual act is more slap-stick and Tawny Feather turns out to be a "white woman wearing a black wig over her short blond hair" (*Toughest* 45). Tawny Feather has all the stereotypical visual markings of an Indian: "Dream catcher earrings, turquoise rings, stainless-steel eagle pinned to her lapel" (44-45). Alexie is asking the reader to laugh at the visual nature of performing Indian. These simple and stereotypical markers are supposed to make Tawny Feather authentic, and like Eagle Runner, she uses these to make her more desirable sexually (i.e. more exotic). The events mock Eagle Runner's previous justification for ignoring his Spokane heritage, and ask the readers to consider Eagle Runner's omission against the absurdity of Tawny Feathers.

Throughout the story, Alexie is critical of the social gap created by the stereotype, which is exacerbated by the extended disconnection from Native communities created by assimilation. Eagle Runner's disconnection from his tribal identity denies him the opportunity to come to terms with his identity crisis. At the end of the story, Eagle Runner attempts to "be with [his] people" (55) and shows up at a

Spokane Reservation bar. The setting should be read sarcastically as Alexie's jest that real Indians can be found in bars. Alexie's decision to omit alcohol from this scene (Junior drinks Diet Pepsi and Eagle Runner drinks water) denies the validity of such stereotypical assumptions and mocks the readers' expectations regarding the drunken stereotype.

Thematically, the setting establishes the obvious disconnection between Eagle Runner and his Spokane heritage created from both his stereotypical assumptions and his obvious disregard of Native poverty. Eagle Runner's wealth and job distinguish him from Junior and Sissy the Bartender; his wealth versus their poverty openly displays Eagle Runner's distance from his community. Although Eagle Runner is Spokane, Sissy the bartender reminds Eagle Runner that he is not part of their world: "Yeah, we're Indians. You, me, Junior. But we live in this world and you live in your world" (55). The reminder asks the readers to consider the difference between the Urban and the reservation, a point that is further illuminated by Sissy's criticism of Eagle Runner's sadness: "What do you have to worry about? That you're lonely? That you have a mortgage? That your wife doesn't love you? Fuck you. Fuck you. *I have to worry about having enough to eat*" (56). The question mocks Eagle Runner's insensitivity to the problems of the reservation while also requiring the audience to consider the types of problems that exist on the reservation.

In the longest story of the collection "Sin Eaters," Alexie becomes more condemning of assimilation practices, aligning them with violent kidnapping that harks on holocaust imagery and goes as far to suggest that the boarding school raped and

killed Native people. “Sin Eaters” is much darker than “Assimilation” and “Class,” using extreme satire¹⁵⁸ to criticize the boarding school practices. The story takes place sometime between the Holocaust and the JFK assassination, putting it most likely in the early 60s and before the Child Welfare Act in 1978 that required the child’s tribe be notified before adoption.¹⁵⁹ Jonah dreams there is a war coming, and despite his attempts to warn his family nobody believes him until heavily armed soldiers arrive on the reservation to take Jonah and the rest of the children away. Alexie re-imagines the benevolence of boarding school experience that took thousands of Native children away from the reservation through military occupation: “Rifle shots in the distance. The earth trembled because somebody beautiful was running. Then more rifle shots. The wind shrieked because somebody beautiful was falling. Then more rifle shots” (83). The re-imagination forces readers to confront the violence that is commonly ignored in colonial accounts of American Indian assimilation practices.

One of the strongest components of Alexie’s satire appears in his use of holocaust-like imagery to equate boarding school practices with racial genocide. There are several moments in the story that align the violent relocation of the children with German relocations of Jewish families. For instance, early in the story Jonah begs his mom to hide him like Anne Frank. Also, the children are transported off the reservation

¹⁵⁸ I am referring to satire as a form of humor that exposes evil in order to critique a previous understanding. Gruber notes that satire should entertain (61), but it is arguable whether or not Alexie’s satire entertains. I would respond to this by saying that Alexie uses extreme satire, meaning he pushes behavior to its most absurd, extreme limits. Although troubling at times, it is often also sarcastic and allegorical. The problem that often occurs with Alexie’s satire (and humor generally) is that he does not always identify the source of the ridicule.

¹⁵⁹ *Indian Killer* takes place during the same time period, and Daniel Grassian makes the argument in *Understanding Sherman Alexie* that this is meant to reference the “a time (1960s) in which Indians were sometimes coerced into adoption” (105-6).

through heavily armed buses that allude to the trains used in Germany. Most notable is Alexie's re-imagination of the boarding school through familiar illusions to concentration camps. Here are the narrator's accounts of their arrival:

Were forced into cattle chutes and led from station to station. [...] At the first station, we were shaved bald...At the next station, we were stripped of our clothes. [...] At the third station, doctors and nurses huddled over our bodies and thrust tools and fingers into our mouths, noses, vaginas, penises, and anuses. Sickly people were led away, through another door, and into what I was sure were ovens (96).

The first station references Zitkala-Sa's famous retelling of her arrival at boarding school, but puts this in the context of German treatment of Jewish families. The closing suggestion that the sick are burned in furnaces further reinforces Alexie's Holocaust illusions and asks readers to evaluate the similarities between the two practices.

Much of the satire of the story mocks the Euro-American control over Native identity seen notably in the mass consumption of the American Indian by Euro-American culture (i.e. mascots, American identity). In the story, the children are taken because they contain Indian blood, which the Euro-American scientists use to resurrect the bodies of dead white people. Alexie criticizes the way assimilation practices created a climate of cultural theft, and aligns the theft of the blood with the theft of Native culture: "I felt the needle bite into me, heard the impossibly loud hiss of the hypodermic syringe as it sucked out my soul, sucked out my antibodies, sucked out pieces of all my stories, sucked out marrow, and sucked out pieces of my vocabulary. I

knew that certain words were being taken from me” (115). The scientist tells Jonah that his “willingness” to give blood is “saving the world” (115), which is Alexie’s sarcastic criticism of the benevolent attitudes that justified such practices.

“Sin Eaters” forces the readers to evaluate the historical accounts of American Indian assimilation practices, while also asking the readers to confront their expectations of savagery. Alexie’s use of violence challenges the readers’ expectations of savagery and rewrites centuries of stereotypes that uses savagery to justify boarding school practices—most importantly the phrase, “save the man, kill the savage.” The satire asks the readers to evaluate the historical representation of assimilation and forces them to confront the violence that was perpetuated against tribal communities. Alexie suggests that these practices were a means of genocide, and his violent retelling of these events alters the historical accounts by changing the way readers view savagery. In this, Alexie challenges the likelihood of the Savage Indian stereotype by suggesting it was a means to justify such violent ends.

Alexie returns to this extreme violence and satire in his novel *Indian Killer*, which like “Sin Eaters” places assimilation in the context of cultural warfare. Similar to “Sin Eaters,” the novel takes place during the 1960s and satirizes the relocation practices that alienated Native children from their tribal communities. In the opening chapter, John Smith, the protagonist of the novel, imagines his birth. Having been taken from his mother at a young age, Smith does not know the details of his past. He imagines his mother as “sometimes Navajo. Other times she is Lakota. Often, she is from the same tribe as the last Indian woman he has seen on television” (Alexie, *Indian*

4). Smith imagines his birth and Native identity through what he knows: stereotypical representations. Unaware of both his tribal origins, and his reservation, his imagination lacks specificity. His birth takes place “on this reservation or that reservation. Any reservation, a particular reservation” (Alexie, *Indian 3*), and his mother is potentially Spokane or Apache or Lakota (4). It is this vagueness that not only stresses the severe alienation that is created by his relocation from the reservation, but also suggests the way these practices took place on several reservations and for several tribes.

In the opening, Alexie satirizes assimilation practices that took Native children away from the reservation under falsely benevolent terms prior to the Child Welfare Act of 1978. Alexie shows that these practices were not only damaging for the psyche of the Indian children (Smith’s eventual schizophrenia), but that they were practices in military occupation and colonial eradication. Smith imagines his birth as a military kidnapping, and despite his mother’s pleas to see her child (5), Smith is whisked away in a chopper where, “suddenly this is war. [...] The helicopter gunman locks and loads, strafes the reservation with explosive shells” (6). The war imagery changes the terms of the assimilation process by exposing the violence of such practices and the role they served in the military occupation of Native communities.

Alexie stresses that John Smith’s adoption is part of the cultural warfare taking place over Native representation that has left many Native people unable to connect with their tribal identity. John Smith’s schizophrenia is a representation of the illness created by denying Native people their communities and the damaging effect this has in an individual’s self-definition. In the novel, Smith is Indian because of his blood. But, it

is community that heals the characters; his identity will never be complete until he finds his community. In *Winged Words*, Laura Coltelli argues that many Native authors use half-breed characters to stress the need to reconnect with land to develop identity (4). Alexie is a little more pessimistic of the simplicity of such reconnections. Although he stresses Smith needs to connect with his community, Alexie questions the possibility of such reconciliations in a culture driven by misinformation about Native people.

Throughout the novel, Alexie satirizes the damage done to American Indian identity by Euro-American distribution of American Indian stereotypes. John Smith recreates his Native identity through various types of colonial presentations of the Indian stereotype, and Alexie uses this to criticize the problems of the stereotype for Native identity. John's parents Olivia and Daniel are well-intentioned, albeit oblivious to these pressures and try to educate John about his Indian heritage through books and various Indian functions. The information the parents gather is pieced together from Western movies, documentaries, books (Alexie, *Indian* 12). Oblivious to the stereotypical information contained in these books, the parents reinforce John's distance from his culture by presenting identity models that are based on non-native ways of viewing tribal communities. Because these books are written by non-native writers like Jack Wilson, they are models that reinforce stereotypical representations like Noble Savage ideal—which has led John to believe that all Indians are happy.

Indian Killer satirizes the assimilation process, and asks the readers to consider the damage that is done by the non-native control of Native culture.¹⁶⁰ In an interview with Joelle Fraser, Alexie argues that the majority of people writing about Native experience are non-native writers and that this type of behavior reinforces colonial attitudes:¹⁶¹

But what I really want to say is that we should be talking about these books, written about Indians by non-Indians... I mean, they're outsider books. They're colonial books. [...] So I think this illusion of democracy in the country...allows artists to believe that it isn't a colony. When it still is. (Alexie, "An Interview")

Indian Killer looks at the violent possibilities of such practices for Native identity. The novel asks the readers to consider the way these representations continue to encourage colonial violence against Native representation. Daniel and Olivia's decision to name their Indian child John Smith, for instance, is Alexie's sarcastic reminder of the distance between Euro-American outlooks and Native American realities regarding the stereotype.

In these stories, Alexie uses extreme satire and violence to aggressively criticize the validity of assimilation practices in a colonial country that distributes the Indian through stereotypical, essentialized ways. His texts ask the readers to consider the way the stereotype makes it difficult for assimilated Native people to reconnect with their communities since the stereotype ignores the issues that exist for Native communities

¹⁶⁰ The novel mocks the way Indian identity has been essentialized so much that people like Jack Wilson can "play" Indian and appear traditional.

¹⁶¹ In "The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me," Alexie mocks this practice, suggesting that Non-Natives will always sell better than Natives writers.

today. Time and again, Alexie's characters are insensitive to Native problems, and part of this stems from the distribution of Native identity. Alexie re-imagines this distribution through images of warfare, forcing the reader to consider the colonial violence involved in such control. In doing this, Alexie asks the readers to consider the way these practices themselves have created the need for the stereotype; that in order for the illusion of democracy to exist, American culture has to control and distribute the Indian image.

5.3 'God Probably Looks like John Wayne'

My heroes have never been Cowboys; my heroes carry guns in their minds.

-Sherman Alexie, "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys"

Throughout Alexie's work he derives humor from the interactions between whites and Indians. The title of his first collection of stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, makes light of these tensions, and the stories in the collection explore these interactions. As the title of his collection suggests, one of the major sources of humor is the way Native communities engage with historical and fictional stereotypes. In typical Alexie fashion, he both laughs at these misrepresentations while also showing the lasting impact they have for Native communities. The figure of the Cowboy is important for understanding Alexie's larger criticism of Euro-American violence. His ironic evaluations of the Cowboy expose the violence that these figures celebrate by presenting the figure through Native contexts. His presentation of the Cowboy continually asks the readers to consider the difference between real and fiction, and Alexie shows that separating the image from the reality provides a way to move

past the violence the Cowboy and Indian stereotypes perpetuate. Moving past these stereotypes starts by re-imagining American Indian identity outside of these tragic outlooks and redefining the reservation as a space for the reeducation of Native identity.

In “My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys” from *First Indian on the Moon*, Alexie criticizes the Cowboy in order to reveal the violent hero-worship that surrounds the figure. The title of the poem puns the famous country and western song, “My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys.” But, rather than offer another song about Cowboys, Alexie offers a song about the damage the Cowboy does for Native identity. In the poem, music becomes a metaphor for the distribution of the Indian stereotype. Alexie writes, “*Win their hearts and minds and we win the war. Can you hear that song across history? If you give the Indian a cup of coffee with six cubes of sugar, he’ll be your servant*” (102). The question asks the reader to consider the types of songs playing on the radio, and the colonial attitudes these songs enforce: “every song remains the same here in America, this country of Big Sky and Manifest Destiny, this country of John Wayne and broken treaties” (104). Alexie shows his readers that these songs are intended for a Euro-American audience and that for Native people “it’s 500 years of the same screaming song, translated from American” (103). Alexie’s closing lines, “Extras...we’re all extras” (104), asks the readers to consider the audience of the music, and the Native role in telling this history.

The poem creates humor by revealing the absurdity of Western representations of the West, and the narrator invites the readers to consider the problems of these representations. The narrator comically suggests, “Indians never lost their West, so how

come I walk into the supermarket and find a dozen cowboy books telling me *How The West Was Won?*” (Alexie, *First Indian* 102). The narrator offers that these types of books are misleading and imply tragic outlooks for Native people. Alexie refuses this identification by punning the word lost. Instead of conquest, Alexie imagines how one would misplace the West. This leads the narrator to the Sears lost and found where “the clerk tells me I can find it in the Sears Home Entertainment Department, blasting on fifty televisions” (102). The final joke turns the West into image and critiques the way Hollywood has created the West.

The fabrication of the West is a continued joke in the poem, and Alexie makes it clear that the Hollywood Cowboy and his West are largely fictional. These movies are unrealistic and are based on unfair advantages since the “cowboys have fifty bullets in his six-shooter” (102). The poem directs the readers to the imaginative aspects of the Cowboy in order to confront them with the extreme violence that appears in these fictional accounts:

I’m watching some western on TBS... Three Cowboys string telegraph wire across plains until they are confronted by the entire Sioux nation. [...] After a dozen or so have hold of the wire, the cowboys crank the portable generator and electrocute some of the Indian with a European flame and chase the rest of them away, bareback and burned. (103)

Alexie presents the movie outside of the emotional arc that Hollywood uses to justify this type of violence (usually a kidnapped woman or murdered kid), and he asks the

readers to consider the purpose of such violence. The poem views the movie through a Native perspective, offering the problems of this violence for Native identity.

In “Dear John Wayne” from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie again challenges the Cowboy image by reversing the gaze of the movie stereotype. The story asks readers to consider the way Indians and Cowboys are stereotyped in the movies. In the story, Spencer Cox, a cultural anthropologist, is interviewing Etta Joseph for his thesis on traditional powwow dancing. Alexie’s choice to tell the story through an interview format immediately confronts the issue of knowing where it becomes obvious that the anthropologist, the “leading authority in the field” (Alexie, *LRT* 194), is misinformed about Native culture. Etta Joseph reminds Spencer that she is well read in Euro-American literature and ultimately she knows “so much more about you than you know about me” (194). Etta has an advantage over Spencer because she has access to literature written by (and about) Euro-American people, while Spencer only has access to texts written about Indians by white people. Because of this, he has no idea who Indians are.

The format serves as a mirror backdrop to Alexie’s evaluation of the Cowboy image, which he continually reminds the reader is based on fictional assumptions. The story comically challenges the stereotype by re-imagining the Cowboy through terms traditionally reserved for Indian stereotypes. Eva Gruber argues that Alexie reverses many of the traditional western conventions that demonize the American Indian and celebrate the Cowboy: “Instead of the animalistic redskins lusting after and abducting innocent White women, it is John Wayne who chases and deflowers the Native virgin

Etta. Instead of the imperative premature death of the Native partner in interracial love relationships, it is Wayne who eventually dies” (Gruber 148). Changing the gaze in this way exposes the bias held in these accounts while also undermining readers’ expectations of Westerns.

Alexie is clear throughout the story that there is a large gap between truth and fiction, and the humor derives from the denial of the readers’ expectations of John Wayne. The larger irony of the story is that John Wayne was not much of a Cowboy (or at least the real John Wayne was not). Etta reveals to Spencer that she had a continued affair with John Wayne, an ironic suggestion that John Wayne really loved Indians. As it turns out, John Wayne was also really afraid of horses, despite his on-air Cowboy persona. The division between image (hates Indians/loves horses) and reality (hates horses/loves Indians) jests that these fictional accounts are created through performance and are not representative of the real man, a point that is driven home further with Etta’s continued use of John Wayne’s real name Marion Morrison.

Alexie reminds the reader that the Cowboy image is created to fulfill the needs of a country. John Wayne reminded the audience that American progress was good because it overcame savagery. Westerns used the savage Indian to reinforce American progress. And Alexie’s revision of John Wayne asks the readers to consider this idea. John Wayne states, “I’m going back to Hollywood...My country needs me. They need me to be John Wayne” (Alexie, *Toughest* 204-5). In this suggestion, Alexie shows the way Hollywood relies on these types of figures to fulfill the needs of audiences. In this

context, the Cowboy becomes a way to reinforce the Utopic ideals of America, and Alexie subverts the validity of such classifications.

Many of the same concerns are seen in Alexie's treatment of John Wayne in the movie *Smoke Signals*. Like "Dear John Wayne," the movie questions the division between real and imagined, criticizing the inability to live up to the overly masculine images of Hollywood. The movie couples the evaluation of John Wayne with the evaluation of the Warrior image. Victor explains to Thomas that he has to act more stoic: "white people will run all over you if you don't look mean. You got to look like a warrior" (Alexie, *Smoke Signals* 62). Victor gets the opportunity to show the reality of this statement a few minutes later when "two white cowboys" (Alexie, *SS* 64) steal Victor and Thomas' seat. Despite Victor's warrior look, the Cowboys refuse to leave and Thomas ironically points out, "Jeez, Victor, I guess your warrior look doesn't work every time" (65). The joke asks the viewers to consider the real life application of the stereotype. James Cox points out that the refusal of the warrior look shows the futility of applying such stereotypical performances; these performances have no real life application (Cox, "This is What" 82). The warrior image is out of date with real life battles and does not provide a way to navigate cultural tensions.

Alexie stresses that navigating these small battles starts by using humor to remake the conflict in Native terms. The contest between the Cowboys and Indians in *Smoke Signals* reshapes national perception of the Cowboy by changing the terms of the battle. Alexie relies on comic revision to undermine the authority of the Cowboy image by writing John Wayne into a "49" song. The lyrics read: "Oh, John Wayne's teeth,

John Wayne's teeth, hey, hey, hey, hey, ye! Oh, John Wayne's teeth, John Wayne's teeth, hey, hey, hey, hey hey, ye! Are they false, are they real? Are they plastic, are they steel? Hey, hey, hey, hey yeeeeee!" (Alexie, *SS* 66). The revision has several important outcomes. Initially, the song imagines John Wayne through Native contexts and uses a form of Native storytelling to present the Cowboy. Secondly, the song "belittles John Wayne by reducing his identity to a single physical characteristic while [also questioning] of the 'reality' of John Wayne..." (Cox, "This is What" 82). In doing this, Alexie forces readers to imagine John Wayne in ways usually reserved for viewing Indians—i.e. through dehumanizes gazes. Importantly, the 49 song provides Victor and Thomas a way to "defeat the Cowboys with humor and reclaim the bus as an Indian cultural space" (82). Through humor, Alexie shows an alternative to Thomas' claim that "the cowboys *always* win" (Alexie, *SS* 66), and he rewrites the Hollywood storyline of conquest.

The Cowboy/Indian divide embodies many of the social and racial problems seen in the reservation, and in Alexie's fiction the Cowboy and the reservation commonly working together to suggest that American culture uses the stereotype to ignore the continued violence of colonial genocide. In *The Business of Fancydancing*, for instance, Alexie asks the readers to consider the lasting impact of colonization on Native communities, and undermines the Noble Savage stereotype that assumes everything is fine. In the poem "Distances," for instance, Alexie sarcastically jokes that cleaning one's plate has different connotations for Native children. Whereas American children are asked to clean their plate because "there are people in India starving"

(Alexie, *Business* 18), Indian children living in America are asked to clean their plates “or your sister will get it” (18). Alexie’s play on India jokes that Americans have the wrong Indians again.

The reservation in this collection is used to suggest that Native communities need to evolve past self-destructive behavior that has emerged since Euro-American occupation. The poem “Evolution” satirizes Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West Show” for creating and perpetuating the Cowboy/Indian stereotype. In the poem, the Native people sell their body parts to Buffalo Bill who uses them to redistribute Native identity: “THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES / charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter” (48). The satire mocks the way Buffalo Bill uses Native bodies to create and display the stereotype. But, Alexie is also critical of Native communities for giving themselves so cheaply to Buffalo Bill. A similar idea is seen in “Special Delivery.” Thomas Builds a Fire, the town storyteller, continually tells the same story, and his “static routine mirrors the static monotony of the reservation, where other Indians engage in their own unimaginative routines of drinking and watching the automatic door of the trading post open and close” (Graisson 19). In this story, Alexie criticizes the lack of imagination on the reservation, and stresses the need to evolve past the same old, monotonous stories. Once Thomas is able to image the “idea of a gun” (Alexie, *Business* 45) he discovers that “imagination can be as important or powerful as ‘reality’”(Graisson 20).

The act of re-imagining Native communities starts by re-imagining identity outside of self-destructive, stereotypical ways. The poem “No Drugs or Alcohol

Allowed” criticizes the self-destructive tendencies of Seymour, who smuggles alcohol into the “Spokane Tribal Centennial Celebration” (Alexie, *Business* 67). Seymour’s success smuggling in the alcohol is met with reserve: “I guess / you could say / we won again but it was only Indians versus Indians and no one / is developing a movie script” (67). Alexie makes it clear that this type of imagination only hurts the community. The suggestion that Hollywood is not interested in the script is an ironic assessment of the fact Hollywood only cares about showing the Cowboy and Indian rivalry—stories that reinforce the Savage Indian ideal. The fact that the media appears a few lines later when Seymour reinstates the “rivalry / between whites and reds” (67) is a sarcastic reminder of the types of battles seen on TV. The poem suggests that the media is not interested in the daily battles taking place on the reservation, only the ones that reinstate the conflict between whites and Indians.

Although Alexie is critical of the types of Indians that the media desires, he also stresses that the re-education of Native community starts by re-imagining the television image of the Indian. The closing lines of the poem read: “...white people don’t real- / ize he [Crazy Horse] came / back to life / and started his own cable television channel and began the / reeducation /of all of use who spent so many years / skinless, driving our cars straight off cliffs directly into / the beginning of nowhere” (68). The poem suggests that Native people have lost touch with their skins or cultural heritage, and that this has led to self-destructive tendencies. Crazy Horse, a revolutionary figure,¹⁶² starts

¹⁶² This is not to ignore the additional roles Crazy Horse serves in Alexie’s fiction. Daniel Graisson says Alexie also uses Crazy Horse in this collection “as a person who has lost his cultural and ethnic pride as

the re-education process by taking control of the TV image. The closing stresses the need for revolutionary change that imagines identity through community and outside of the colonial stereotype.

5.4 The Reservation State of Mind

That's how I do this life sometimes by making the ordinary just like magic and just like a card trick and just like a mirror and just like the disappearing. Every Indian learns how to be a magician and learns how to misdirect attention and the dark hand is always quicker than the white eye and no matter how close you get to my heart you will never find out my secrets and I'll never tell you and I'll never show you the same trick twice.

-Sherman Alexie, "Jesus Christ's Hal-Brother is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation"
from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

The humor in Sherman Alexie's fiction asks the readers to imagine new possibilities. After all, Alexie writes, "Poetry= Anger X Imagination" (Alexie, *One Stick* 20). But, he also writes "Survival= Anger X Imagination" (Alexie, *Lone* 150), and this assumes that poetry is the same as survival. Poetry provides an outlet for Alexie's anger; it provides him a way to imagine change. Similar to Vizenor, imagination is key to Alexie's work. Both share the belief that Native people need to imagine themselves outside of the destructive tendencies of the stereotype. Both seem to suggest that imagination is the solution. But, the types of imagination each offers could not be more different. And Alexie is critical of the inaccessibility of Vizenor's highbrow literature that commonly references figures like Bakhtin and Deleuze.¹⁶³ Whereas Vizenor uses humor to ask readers to consider the multiplicity of stories—that they are subject to change—Alexie uses humor to ask readers to consider the therapeutic quality of

well as his revolutionary fervor. He does this to show how the spirit of Crazy Horse has vanished for most contemporary Indians, whom, he suggests have grown complacent" (27).

¹⁶³ See "Interview with John Purdy" 137.

imagination. Humor and imagination provide productive ways to filter anger, and Alexie makes it clear that Native communities need this value. His fiction uses what Meredith James calls “the reservation state of mind,” an understanding that the reservation system is an imposed worldview that affects Native people both physically and mentally (James 1-2). Alexie stresses the need to re-imagine the reservation in positive ways (2), and his use of humor asks readers to consider the self-destructive internalization of the “reservation state of mind.”

Throughout Alexie’s fiction he shows Native communities surviving through humor, and it is clear that Alexie views humor like Vine Deloria Jr.—as a binding force that laughs off pain and rewrites tragic stereotypes around survival. Using an array of approaches that often border on extreme, Alexie does not let his readers become complacent in their outlooks. This is especially the case when Alexie uses the stereotype in his fiction. These moments focus the humor on the gaze and the absurdity of these creations. Alexie breaks down the stereotype by showing the way colonial storylines have created these poses and by criticizing the internalization of this behavior. This form of teasing stresses that self-destructive behavior and tragic outlooks lack imagination. At the heart of Alexie’s fiction then is a concern for community values, and his fiction offers that Native communities can start to heal (and survive) through humor since humor provides a way to re-imagine the same song playing for 500 years.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

That ‘great narrative of entropy and loss’ which is the Euramerican version of Native American history since the fifteenth century is being revised and rewritten in contemporary Indian literature from an Indian perspective. The consciousness shared in all these works is that of the individual attempting to reimagine an identity, to articulate self within a Native American context.

-Louis Owens, *Other Destinies*

Before I read Gerald Vizenor or Thomas King or Sherman Alexie, I read Louis Owens’s *Other Destinies*. His book was my first introduction to American Indian scholarship and nearly my first introduction to American Indian anything. At the time, I was simply a first year graduate student writing a very misguided seminar paper about Louise Erdrich. I picked up the book hoping it would help me understand some of Erdrich’s narrative strategies—and it did. However, I also discovered a world larger than Erdrich’s. I discovered writers like Vizenor and King and Silko and Welch and Momaday. I discovered the hunter, his arrow, and the power of his language. I discovered a narrator with a wounded knee. I discovered biting humor and trickster imagination. And I discovered Louis Owens’s critical evaluation of American Indian literature, which would several years later become the backbone of my dissertation.

My project builds from Louis Owens’ argument in *Other Destinies* and applies these concerns to various areas of scholarship in American Indian literature. In this way, I add to many of the conversations taking place. My main goal (and hope) was to explore what Louis Owens calls “other destinies,” the stories Native authors write that

undermine or re-imagine destructive Euro-centric historical and literary accounts of Native identity (18). And I wanted to explore these stories through issues surrounding identity and community. Owens argues that at the center of American Indian literature is an attempt to re-imagine identity through place and community (3), and throughout my dissertation I explored the relationship between identity and community. My dissertation built around theories such as Jace Weaver's communitism¹⁶⁴ from *That the People Might Live* that explores the function of community in identity practices. I considered the way the authors use what Amelia V. Katanaski calls a "repertoire of identity" in *Learning to Write Indian* to rewrite identity around community. I was especially interested in Katanaski's assertion that the "repertoire of identity" challenged the either/or thinking of boarding school practices (i.e. one is either Indian or American). In addressing these concerns, I paid close attention to audience, and one can see traces of James Ruppert's *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction* in my analysis of the mediation practices surrounding humor.

I also wanted to add to these types of conversations by considering them in the context of other related issues like humor, nationalism, American Indian stereotypes, and trickster. Several studies have addressed one or more of these concerns, but few have examined all these concerns together. For instance, Eva Gruber in *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Fiction* analyzes the role of Native humor in rewriting the stereotype. Kenneth Lincoln similarly provides a theoretical understanding of humor in American Indian fiction in his book *Indi'n Humor*. Benedict Anderson in

¹⁶⁴ The term combines community and activism to suggest that native fiction defines community and identity and therefore should be used to heal communities.

Imagined Communities explores the way nationalism creates an imagined sense of community. Philip Deloria in *Playing Indian* and Shari Huhndorf in *Going Native* apply Anderson's concepts to the Indian stereotype, arguing that American identity is built from these imagined relationships. James Cox in *Muting White Noise* addresses the way Vizenor, King, and Alexie (among others) expose the link between colonial storylines and colonial dominance.¹⁶⁵

These individual studies on the subjects helped inform my exploration of Native humor, the trickster, and stereotypes. However, it is my conviction that my study adds to the conversation started by scholars like Gruber and Lincoln. Few studies have addressed the relationship between humor, nationalism, trickster, and the stereotype, making this project a contribution that helps us to understand the way these authors are not just re-imagining the American Indian stereotype, but also re-imagining American identity and colonial benevolence. By discussing these concerns together, my project has explored the way the stereotype emerges from an American nationalist identity that continually desires to create a "sacred" history that dehumanizes and misrepresents American Indians. Within this context, I have addressed the way these authors use humor to unmake this "sacred" history, effectively rewriting both the American Indian stereotype and the American nationalist identity created from the stereotype.

Approaching the stereotype in this way (both the origin and the stereotype) is important for understanding the way the authors' are unmasking authority surrounding these images. These authors then are not just re-imagining the American Indian stereotype

¹⁶⁵ Cox shares many of my same concerns (historical storylines, stereotypes, the authors), but does not directly address nationalism's role in these stories or humor in general.

and Native identity at large, but imagining new ways to see Nationalist origins—ways that do not quietly celebrate violence against Native communities. Humor unlinks the American Indian image and the Nationalist distribution of this image, providing Native communities with a space to imagine identity outside Euro-American colonial authority.

My pairing of Alexie, King, and Vizenor further fills a (frighteningly) large gap in American Indian scholarship since few scholars have addressed perhaps the three most important American Indian humorists (James Cox offers the only book-length study). Scholars are missing out on an opportunity to explore, not just three important humorists together, but also the dexterity of humor in American Indian fiction. And my dissertation offers the value of looking at the diverse methods of humor seen in American Indian literature. All three authors approach humor in similar ways. Each author uses various insider jokes to create bonds with their intended audience. Each author uses traditional forms of teasing to reprimand behavior out of line with tribal values. Each author uses the trickster to celebrate the multiplicity of identity and re-imagine authority. Vizenor, King, and Alexie commonly focus their humor toward white/Indian relations—especially the act of viewing—in order to ask readers to consider their role in reinforcing stereotypes. And through the laughing, each author emphasizes survivance by using humor to rewrite identity, undermine tragedy, and re-imagine terminal creeds.

The different ways each author explores these approaches reveals the diverse range of audiences seen in American Indian fiction as well as the different variations that exist in humor. For instance, consider the different ways each author “teases” the

audience. Vizenor teases his audience through dystopian stories that push destructive practices to extremes. Alexie teases through anger and bitterness, antagonizing his audience to consider their behavior. King teases through caricature and intertextual revisions, asking readers to consider the way they view Indians. Similarly, each author uses the trickster to various degrees. Vizenor uses the trickster to reinforce community values and celebrate the imaginative possibilities of the figure. King uses the pan-tribal Coyote to re-imagine origin stories through trickster contexts. Alexie applies the basis of contemporary trickster humor (subversion and navigation) to his texts, often presenting himself as trickster.¹⁶⁶

Additionally, each author uses insider jokes, but incorporates different content to make the jokes. Vizenor uses mostly academic and literary insider jokes. King uses an array of insider jokes stemming from academic, literary, and popular culture. Alexie uses the reservation and popular culture as his content, and the jokes themselves as a way to identify insiders and outsiders—the jokes he calls “Indian trap doors.” These differences help us consider the function of audience and culture in humor, and the extent to which these concerns align to dictate the approaches authors take to create humor.

The individual author’s use of insider jokes provides interesting insight into the intended audience of their fiction and helps illuminate an important question in American Indian literature: who should be the intended audience? Although my study does not offer an answer to this question, it does provide a way to discuss the concerns

¹⁶⁶ See Kenneth Lincoln’s “Futuristic Hip Indian: Alexie” from *Sing with the Heart of a Bear*.

of audience and helps us identify the intended audience each author addresses. Alexie for instance feels Native fiction should be accessible for young, reservation children,¹⁶⁷ and his insider jokes are commonly directed at this audience. His humor infuses pan-tribal figures like Custer and Crazy Horse with tribally specific references like Salmon and popular culture references like basketball. The diversity of sources he uses to create humor allows him to reach larger audiences, and it is no surprise that Alexie is widely read by both Native and non-Native audiences. His continued antagonism of Euro-American culture suggests that he intends to reach these non-Native audiences. Yet, the way he uses insider jokes to create distinctions between insiders and outsiders also suggest that Alexie wants to keep non-Native audiences at a distance. It is clear in his “Rez humor” (humor created from reservation living)¹⁶⁸ that his initial audience is reservation Indians, and these readers will understand most of his jokes.

Similar to Alexie, King uses insider jokes that reference popular culture and pan-tribal culture. However, King does not rely on reservation living to create his humor, showing that his intended audience is slightly different than Alexie. His humor addresses concerns for urban and reservation communities, commonly looking at the problems that exist for Natives in reconnecting with their heritage. King’s humor requires one to be familiar with literary and movie references, but also uses familiar enough texts that readers unfamiliar with the novels can still understand the joke. In this way, his insider jokes address a larger, general audience: both Native and Non-Native

¹⁶⁷ See John Purdy Interview.

¹⁶⁸ KREZ radio in *Smoke Signals* is a good example of Rez Humor, which creates humor from shared reservation experience.

audiences. He rarely uses humor that requires insider knowledge of tribal communities, as seen in the use of Coyote, a trickster figure that is familiar for most pan-tribal and Euro-American audiences.

The insider jokes used by Vizenor demand a greater pre-knowledge than Alexie and King, and suggest that his primary audience are educated Urban Indians and knowledgeable non-Indians—people familiar enough with academic figures like Bakhtin and Kroeber. His jokes require the reader to be familiar with Anishinaabe culture as well as understand the traditional functions of the trickster.¹⁶⁹ Native and non-Native readers unfamiliar with traditional trickster roles will be unable to navigate much of the humor seen in novels like *Bearheart* or *The Heirs of Columbus*. There are jokes in Vizenor's texts that larger audiences will understand such as his use of Pocahontas in *Heirs*. However, as seen in *Heirs* the context of these jokes often necessitate a familiarity with the legal procedures surrounding American Indian bodies.

A more specific analysis over the types of humor the authors use such as satire and intertextuality allows us to consider the way that pairing these authors together illuminates some of the major problems each author faces regarding his humor. Alexie and Vizenor both use satire throughout their fiction, yet Alexie's satire is markedly bitterer than Vizenor's graphic allegories partly because Vizenor provides frames for his readers to view the satire. If Alexie were to use frames readers would probably have less problem identifying his ironies. At the very least, Vizenor's optimism at the end of

¹⁶⁹ I think this is one of the reasons Vizenor goes to such great lengths to frame his texts. The frame helps make his humor and stories more accessible at times, but cannot overcome the insider jokes that reference figures/ideas most readers will not recognize.

Bearheart or *Heirs* could cancel out some of Alexie's pessimistic outlooks.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, King and Vizenor both commonly use intertextuality, yet each functions in different ways. Vizenor uses intertextuality to reference tribal stories and postmodern theories that reinforce his trickster survivance and postindian poses; King uses it to expose and rewrite the way Euro-American literary and movie texts create stereotypes. Each can benefit from the other in this case: King could help make Vizenor more approachable for non-academic audiences, and Vizenor could help provide King with ways to reach a tribally specific audience.

My project is just the start of the possible studies scholars can create by juxtaposing these authors. One of the most fruitful areas of potential research is the way the authors' humor changes depending on the mediums each author: i.e. film, radio, or haiku. This type of genre study could yield interesting results such as the way visual mediums enhance humor directed at the way audiences view Indians. Further, the study would continue to be relevant as each author publishes more and more in diverse mediums. Similarly, a scholar could address the way these authors break down genre classifications and re-imagine Western narrative through Native contexts. In this type of study, one could identify the way these authors write outside of Western narrative conventions in order to recreate the structure of the novel to suite Native storytelling techniques. Another potential area of study is the way the authors use sports such as basketball (Alexie/King), baseball (King), and hunting (Vizenor) to ask readers to

¹⁷⁰ This is not to assume Alexie is not optimistic. Like Vizenor, he couples violence and hope, using imagination to show the possibility for survival and re-imagination. Instead, I am saying that Alexie could benefit from Vizenor's presentation of hope (i.e. *Heirs*) to curb some of his bitterness.

reflect on tensions between Euro-American and Native communities. Additional scholarship can be gathered by coupling the authors. A scholar could examine Alexie and King's coming of age stories to consider the way their approaches change for Young Adult audiences. Or, a scholar could analyze the way Alexie and Vizenor use violence directed at the body to expose the Indian stereotype. The potential scholarship created from discussing these authors in tandem reinforces the need for American Indian scholars to continue to explore not just humor, but these authors together. It is my hope that I have helped to start the conversation.

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