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**Master Thesis in English literature/  
Magisterarbeit für das Fach:  
Englische Literatur  
‘Trickster Figures and Discourse’:  
Negotiating the Liminal Space Between  
Cultures in Four Native American Novels**

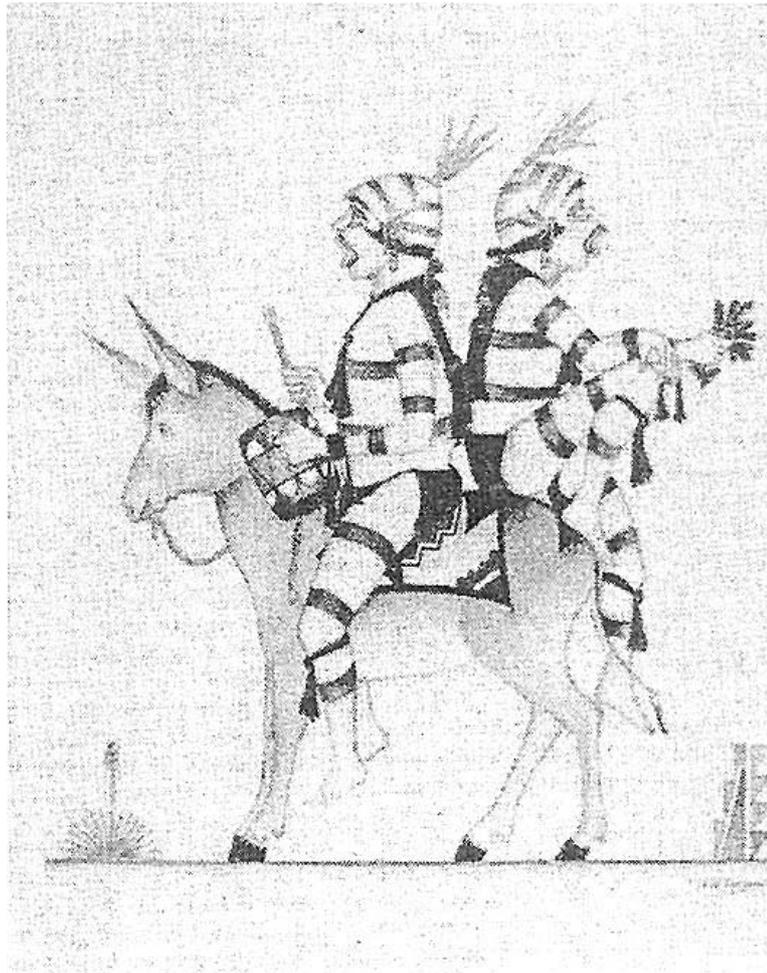
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Englische und Amerikanische  
Literatur

This research is dedicated with gratitude to my sister Mia in Alaska, whose name backwards, spells out my ‘aim’: to remember a shared ceremony of another place, another time – but that’s another story.



*Two Koshare on Burro*  
(Source: Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor*).

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## INTRODUCTION

“Almost, please show your virtual realities,” said Lord.

“Your honor, this is only the second time we have presented our show of shadow realities in public; the first time we started a revolution at a consumer mall,” said Almost.

“A revolution in virtual realities?” asked Lord.

“Our realities are shadows, a trace of the real that simulates sound and the simulation of touch, but our moccasins are better worn than told to show the heart of tribal realities,” said the laser shaman. “The realities that were stolen by cold reason and manifest manners.”<sup>1</sup>

Vizenor’s laser shaman trickster figure, Almost Browne, engages in trickster discourse with a female court judge, Beatrice Lord, who wishes him to visually reveal his inside knowledge and capabilities surrounding shadow manifestations of reality. Almost Browne’s responds that ‘Native American’ realities have been stolen by logical thinking and manners. What he describes is an inevitable loss, a consequence of cultural assimilation inherent in the American belief in ‘Manifest Destiny’. He observes that wearing (worn) moccasins reveal the heart of tribal realities much better than virtual realities, which can only trace the real, merely imitate the sound and touch of literal realities.

Almost Browne response is open to interpretation. It negotiates the liminal space between at least two opposing points of view. While on the surface he apparently complies by giving a proper response, in reality he refuses the Lord’s request by transcending the demand to reveal his capabilities and meaning. This nearly (perhaps not quite) go-between ‘Trickster’ figure’s humor is implicit in his ambiguous response, whether his assertion that “our moccasins are better worn,” underscores an allusion to stereotypical objects that represent ‘Native American’ life via museum artifacts and consumer articles, or whether it reaffirms a continuance of tribal traditions and tribal notions of the trickster himself. Elizabeth McNeil summarizes these trickster features when she claims that:

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<sup>1</sup>Gerald Vizenor, *The Heirs of Columbus*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1991. p. 84 (referred to hereafter as *Heirs*).

The consequences of white encroachment have put a pall over native lives for generation. Though his essential liminality and his comic ability to make the story audiences laugh at itself, the trickster – always on the threshold between worlds, adventures, behaviors, and aspects of personality – reminds [...] Vizenor's readers that life requires choices, even if the only choice is whether to meet impossible situations with fear or resolve.<sup>2</sup>

These liminal figures, as the anthropologist Victor Turner,<sup>3</sup> who specialized in the field of rituals, has pointed out, enjoy a wide presence in world literature, due to their transitional abilities. These periods of transitions were filled with opportunities and dangers, allowing for the deconstruction and reconstruction of previous social roles. These figures seem to dwell on crossroads, uninhibited by social constraint, free to dissolve boundaries and to break taboos. Tricksters, as in many 'Native American' oral tales, appear to heroically ensure survival and teach cultural values. At the same time, they appear to be able to incorporate negative human traits such as selfishness, lewdness, and amorality.

Henry Louis Gates, who traces the African trickster of Esu back to the roots of African (Yoruba) mythology and shows how this liminal God can still be found in the playful signifyin(g) of today's Afro-American speech, describes this trickster as the discursive element, linking God and man by means of interpretation. Gates points to the intermediacy of this interpretation act, the double discourse involved and the tension the trickster evokes between written and oral aspects of language, which all together point to the trickster's self-reflexive functions: "The trickster's relation to destiny, and indeed his priority over destiny, is inscribed in his role as the guiding force for interpretation itself."<sup>4</sup> Thought to be on the margin of Western culture, tricksters occupy center stage in 'Native American' culture.

This figure requires a consciousness of the construction of the 'other' beyond a personal, individual identity, which readers need to understand and to overcome as it

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<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Mc Neil. "The Game Never Ends: Gerald Vizenor's Gamble with Language and Structure in *Summer in the Spring*." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 19 (2), 1995. p. 88.

<sup>3</sup>Victor Turner. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAH Publications, 1986. Turner posited rituals as ways in which mythological themes are performed. For Turner, the Trickster shuffles between categories by means of uncategorizable play among three parts of the brain. Trickster is artist, performer, adventurer, and playful anthropologist at the same time. For an interesting and extended discussion, that links liminal (from the Latin "limen" for "threshold") cultural phenomena to hypnosis research, read the article by Stanley Krippner: "Trance and The Trickster: Hypnosis as a Liminal Phenomenon." Krippner posits the role of imagination to be central to both indigenous rituals and hypnosis. Accessed January 10th, 2005 via [http://www.stanleykrippner.com/papers/trance\\_trickster.htm](http://www.stanleykrippner.com/papers/trance_trickster.htm)

<sup>4</sup>Henry Louis Gates. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. p. 23.

can otherwise interfere with the understanding of cultural definitions.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, a construction of the concept of ‘other’ appears to facilitate the incorporation of perceptions of ‘otherness’ via experience and imagination as part of a ‘personal’ and ‘cultural’ identity, resulting, when incorporated unconsciously, in restrictions of conscious and social/political options regarding the definition of both.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis, which addresses the ‘Native American’ liminal trickster, is meant to abandon the pattern of ‘marvelous possession,’<sup>7</sup> a term the so-called ‘father of new historicism,’ Stephen Greenblatt, has coined in his description of the colonizers claim to ‘newly discovered’ land during the Renaissance period. Instead, the goal is to pursue common denominators and to explore possibilities of spaces in between cultural views, to further possible negotiations in the ongoing discourse. The range of possible meanings of ‘trickster’ figures and discourse involves the reader generally in a search to clarify values and points of view. Therefore, I have drawn upon an equally wide range of sources (as the bibliography shows) in order to contextualize the topic of trickster within the many disciplines or fields (be it anthropology, religion, cultural memory, etc.), that this figure touches upon. Chapter 1 will elaborate the theoretical

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<sup>5</sup>For an elaborate discussion of the problems involved in the inter-disciplinary theoretical concepts of identity, both personal and cultural, read: *Identitäten*, edited by Aleida Assmann and Heidrun Friese. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1998. Peter Wagner, one of the contributors to this volume, points out that there is much confusion around this term, resulting mainly from three discourses. The first connects identity with culture and meaning goes as far back as Herder, implying a type of hegemonial identity to ethnic groups. The second combines the concept of modern society and behavior, a more anthropological assumption, characterizing coherent and continual elements of identity. The third focuses on differences and aspects of the imagined construction of realities, and as A. Assmann points out in the introduction, group identities are now commonly referred to with the term “imagined communities” (p.44-73). For current feminists the term now used is “communities of practice.”

<sup>6</sup>Charles Taylor. *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991. p.38. In Taylor’s thoughts on the politics of recognition, in which he traces the sources of the post-modern identity dilemmas from Rousseau, Herder to Hegelian thinking, concludes that democratic societies must presume other cultures to be of equal worth to satisfy the need for recognition and survival. He says: “Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it [...]. The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized.” This is an unsolved problem to this day, even in *liberal* societies, when a culture, defined as ‘other,’ does not share the values or laws pertaining to a charter of basic human rights for all its members, as it is *within* a liberal society itself, when these rights are not enforced or realized in practice among its own members.

<sup>7</sup>Stephen Greenblatt. *Marvelous Possession: The Wonder of the New World*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. p.79. Here Greenblatt shows how *Mandeville’s Travels* influenced many colonizers of the Renaissance, including Christopher Columbus, who had taken the book unto his journeys across the ocean. By closely reading documents written by Columbus, Greenblatt demonstrates how invested Columbus was, not only in receiving his share of gold for the crown, but how in the 15th century the “marvelous” replaces the “miraculous” in general and plays an important role in European aesthetics, influencing the Christian claim to their newly “discovered” lands and thereby linking writing to power.

framework of the topic and demonstrate my position as one located within two sides of an argument.

Furthermore, as in Chapter 2, it will call for previous definitions of ‘trickster’ figures and some broad considerations, which need to be discussed in order to understand the complexities involved in the concept of trickster discourse. Chapter three will present these, before I examine the four texts: *The Heirs of Columbus*, *Green Grass, Running Water*, *Love Medicine*, and *Ceremony* more closely in the following four chapters.

By focusing in on ‘post-modern’ ‘Native American’ novels in the ensuing chapters and the more widely known authors of Gerald Vizenor, Thomas King, Louise Erdrich, and Leslie. M. Silko, I will explore the concepts, perceptions and self-descriptions in these texts, via the ‘trickster’ figures and the ‘trickster’ discourse put forth, and examine trickster’s function in relation to these ‘Native American’ novels. By looking at the discourses presented in the texts of both male and female authors regarding their constructions of ‘trickster’ figures in relation to gender, I aim to find out whether these constructions are relevant and what this may imply.<sup>8</sup> By examining how gender constructions function and how women are portrayed in these authors’ individual works, I will compare stereotypical notions of women in relationship to notions of their creativity and empowerment. The summary will recapture and stimulate discussion on the important points about trickster’s attributes and function in the literature considered here. The aim is not only to find answers to ‘Native American’ perceptions of the world as they are presented in the texts, but also to recognize similarities and respect any differences found, to give readers a deeper understanding of their own cultural backgrounds as well.

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<sup>8</sup>Sara Trechter’s essay, “A Marked Man: The Context of Gender and Ethnicity” (in Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyrerhoff (eds.), *The Handbook of Language and Gender*. Malden, Oxford, Melbourne, and Berlin: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003. p. 430.) states: “Recognizing that ethnic, community and gender identities are fluid social constructs in practice, which index and draw on semiotic resources while simultaneously creatively constructing new resources through contextual interaction, is difficult to capture. Yet, both historically grounded and performative meanings of community as well as linguistic judgments about such constructions explain why gender and ethnicity are neither static nor singular.”

# 1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## 1.1 New Historicism

The fact that the liminal trickster figure within the discourse of these post-modern novels is capable of transcending borders indicates an affinity to the ‘new historicist’ readings. The new historicist framework is an adequate choice for this research because the new historicism attempts to situate texts in a wider context, taking the political and social aspects of their creation and reception into account. New historicism allows room for a wide diversity in thinking and enables scholars to find “new opportunities to cross boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics,”<sup>9</sup> overcoming a “doctrine of noninterference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics and power, indeed on all matters that deeply affect people’s practical lives.”<sup>10</sup>

New historicists have much to offer to the field of literary research, in spite of the criticism to the contrary that predominantly focuses on their lack of coherent and/or ill-defined theoretical concepts, supposedly springing from mere passion. Some new historicists prefer to altogether avoid the idea of a unifying theory. Critics of new historicism find new historicists to be guilty of the very thing they claim to wish to avoid – falling prey to their own practice. An example of this criticism lies in the fact that they participate avidly in the capitalist economy they aim to expose. It is a criticism worthy of attention. A. Veeseer appropriately sums it up as:

Apolitically tame and quietistic, all four tendencies – subject-positioning, Power/ Knowledge, internal dialogism, and thick description – suggest that NH is bent on neutralizing solidarity, subversion, disruption, and struggle.<sup>11</sup>

In this book, Veeseer also refers to M.A. Abrams 1992 edition of the *Glossary of Literary Terms*, which isolated four characteristics of the new historicism and claimed that: (1) the idea that ideology positions readers as subjects resulted in various groups not speaking for a common humanity, (2) Michael Foucault’s claim that knowledge and power are a base of fusion, which gives individuals intellectual power, while oppress

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<sup>9</sup>Harold Aram Veeseer (ed.). *The New Historicism Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1989. p. xi.

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.* p. xi.

<sup>11</sup>Harold Aram Veeseer (ed.). *The New Historicism*. New York, London: Routledge, 1994. p. 3.

sive institutions withhold it, and results in interfering with subversive desire to promote cultural change (3) the idea of dialogism, while containing the idea that conflict-defined social interaction actually helped unify and stabilize institutions, thereby neutralizing disruptive energies, and (4) new historicism as an alternative to Marxist polemical writing gave new historicists a hermeneutic way of unraveling social texts without discussing class struggle, emergent groups, or macroeconomic change.

## 1.2 Feminist Approaches

These points reflect my own reservations with these readings. In addition, feminist approaches (e.g., the essays written by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese or Judith Newton) have uncovered and attacked aspects of the patriarchal side of these new “poetics of culture” and criticized the practice of new historicism ideological assumption, arguing successfully from a gender perspective, to some extent missing in the early days of the movement. Judith Lowder Newton demonstrates the point in her statement:

Indeed, discussions of “new historicism,” as of “post-modernism,” deconstruction, and the “new history,” are often carried on as if their assumptions and practices had been produced by men (feminist theorists, if they are mentioned at all) are often assumed to be the dependent heir of male intellectual capital), and yet feminine labor had much to do with the development of these literary/historical enterprises.<sup>12</sup>

Her statement recalls the importance of female voices claiming their right to be heard in the discussion, which was the principal reason to include female authors in this research.

## 1.3 Cultural Materialist Approach

Most certainly, if one were to posit dogmatically that everything is mere ‘narrative,’ the world constructed *only* by dialogue, one loses sight of the material world, which, imagined or not, we can physically experience and which influences our lives nonetheless. Considering the more cultural-materialistic side of the argument, K. Ryan statement emphasizes the difference, when he claims:

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<sup>12</sup>H. Aram Veaser (ed.). *The New Historicism Reader*. New York, London: Routledge.1989. p 153.  
Judith L. Newton: *History as Usual? Feminism and the “New Historicism.”*

New historicism and cultural materialism are united by their compulsion to relate literature to history, to treat texts as indivisible from their contexts, and to do so from a politically charged perspective forged in the present. But they are divided by the different routes they take to reach this goal, and by the different conclusions they draw once they have been reached.<sup>13</sup>

Though my research contribution will not focus on the entire context of the author's novels to be examined, the context will, to some extent, form the background of my discussion.

#### 1.4 In Between Two Sides of an Argument

Rather than to be adhering to extremes, I wish to point out the fact, that so far there seems to be no one able to have proved absolutely, or in a generally accepted way, which side of the argument is right. Consequently, we must consider that narrative *and* physical experience together form our perception of the world, be it via complex progressing processes in our brains, or in some unchanging form that is statically cast and that takes place in some form – unrecognized, even over time. This issue touches on unresolved matters of religion<sup>14</sup> and philosophy, and represents a problem broader than the area of science alone, one which the 'trickster' figure helps to illuminate.

In his introduction to *The New Historicism*, A. Veeseer asserts five assumptions that bind its practitioners together independent of his thought to the contrary, that the new historicism has no adequate referent:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes
3. that literary and non-literary 'texts' circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. finally, as emerges powerfully in this volume, that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participates in the economy they describe;<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Kiernan Ryan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader*. London: Arnold, 1996. p. xi. Ryan traces sources of new historicism, including Clifford Geertz, Michael Foucault, Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams, Jacques Derrida, and Walter Benjamin, and gives views of Catherine Gallagher, Alan Sinfield, Catherine Belsey, Lee Patterson, Marjorie Levinson, and S. Greenblatt. The bibliographical soundings on a variety of authors, such as Dickens, Blake or Ezra Pound then support the variety of tensions and differing points of view within the new historicist context.

<sup>14</sup>For further discussion, see Jan Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, Ch. 1, which elaborates on the tensions between the word "religion," which emphasizes the character of responsibility in the transmission of knowledge and 'memory', a term emphasizing the connectiveness and identity construction of knowledge. J. Assmann prefers the (Luckmann defined) term 'invisible religion' and expands on the term 'tradition' by nearly equating the term 'invisible religion', with 'cultural memory'.

<sup>15</sup>Harold Aram Veeseer (ed.), *The New Historicism*. New York: Routledge, 1994. p.2.

If these assumptions are correct, then there is still room enough to combine the imagination with effective actions; one need not see them as mutually exclusive positions in one's life. The essays in *The New Historicism* debate these points and include a wide range of thinking, by Catherine Gallagher, Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose and Joel Fineman, etc. The criticism coming from Frank Lentricchia<sup>16</sup> in his essay titled *Foucault's Legacy: A New Historicism*, in which Lentricchia argues that "New Historicism is another expression of the bitter and well-grounded first world suspicion, that modern history is the betrayal of liberalism."<sup>17</sup> reflects the weaknesses of the new historicism. Lentricchia reminds us that, when associating one's self to its framework, that definitions and words such as 'new historicism,' 'post-colonialism,' 'post-modernism,' and 'Native American' are fragile constructs that imply a 'socially constructed' past already being referred to. In an interview with Harold Veese, Gayatri Spivak similarly finds "the new historicism as a sort of media hype mounted against deconstruction, I find it hard to position myself in its regards."<sup>18</sup>

## 2 CULTURAL CONTACT

### 2.1 Others

What then does the term 'Native American' culture, history, and literature imply? How are these terms constructed to intertwine and to differ from each other? Ethno-historicist James Axtell suggests that students of 'otherness' must at least initially understand those cultures on their own terms. Borrowing the idea from sociologist Charles Cooley, who claims that they must view culture as an interweaving of mental selves, in which nothing is taken for granted. Axtell states:

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<sup>16</sup>Daniel T. O'Hara's essay *On Becoming Oneself in Frank Lentricchia* examines Lentricchia's work and concludes that Lentricchia represents a sublimely particular interpretive gathering of dialectically interrelated temporal moments making up the American mask play (modern, Renaissance, postmodern) whose continued imaginative resonance is generously offered for our edification. Such is the genuinely oppositional culture of self-overcoming identity." in *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*, Doland E. Please (ed), Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994. p. 254.

<sup>17</sup>H. Aram Veese, *The New Historicism Reader*. New York, London: Routledge, 1989. p. 239.

<sup>18</sup>*ibid*, also, cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The New Historicism: Political Commitment and The Post-modern Critic*. p. 280.

[...] culture is a kind of code by which a people live and gives meaning, direction, and order to their lives. The code is an idealized construct, imagined or seen in its entirety and complexity perhaps only by a perceptive and diligent outside observer, because the insiders assume or internalize much of the code during their education or enculturation and because different members of the society are privy only to certain parts of the local code, those most appropriate to their particular class, race, status, gender, age, ancestry, family position, region and so forth.<sup>19</sup>

Aside from posing the problem in terms of the 'insider vs. the outsider' in this passage (a problematic approach that implies, but does not answer the question, "Who defines whom?"), there arises immediately the question of whether one's own cultural terms and those of the perceived 'other' can be translated – a feat the authors of 'Native American' literature (and history as well) may or may not be engaged in, when writing in English (to the exclusion of native tongues). It follows that students of 'native' history, culture, and literature should acquire knowledge and fluency in 'native' languages, and that translators, if they are to be reliable sources of information, be proficient in both.

At the same time, 'Native American' culture, literature, and history would signify, geographically, those disciplines as they pertain to the North American continent, in combination with a particular ethnic or 'native/tribal' background, to some degree. Currently, it indicates a particular modern citizenship as well, be it Canadian, American, Mexican, etc. In some specific cases, it may include a combination or perhaps dual citizenship, which various 'Native American' individuals and groups have attained over different time periods in history. 'Natives' themselves, in defining who belongs to their particular tribe, often resort to a definition by blood, be it that members need to possess full, half, or at least one quarter blood through their ancestry. This introduces the problem of 'racial' definition, the question of 'mixed bloods,' and the inside/outside dynamics involved in this point of view.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>James Axtell, *Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America*. N.Y. and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 3.

<sup>20</sup>Joy Harjo and Gloria, Bird (eds.), *Reinventing The Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writing of North America*. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997. p. 26. Harjo states: "We believe, as do many, that the tribes reserve the right to define membership. And tribes define differently. The Cherokee enrollment, for instance, is based on Cherokee ancestry. This means that certified Cherokee tribal members can have as little as 1/200th Cherokee blood. For most tribes the cutoff is one-quarter blood. Some have other restrictions; for instance, to be identified as a Hopi tribal member the individual's mother must be Hopi."

## 2.2 Early Acculturation

These aspects complicate the determination of an exact definition of the term ‘Native American literature’. The discussion of whom or what circumstances define the term reflect the ongoing diversity and complex discourse surrounding the issue. Wolfgang Hochbruck suggests this disparity in his claim that:

Some of the earliest literary texts written in European languages by Native American authors were written in the seventeenth century by students at Harvard’s Indian College. The fact that they were written in Latin and Greek, the languages of university education, as well as their limited accessibility probably explains why these pieces have so far received next to no critical attention.<sup>21</sup>

The unnoticed early writing of these students proves how far back the process of acculturation, which natives experienced, goes. In their act of mediation then, they can also be described adequately by the following words:

The ethnic writer’s interrogations of public memory are a reminder that all memories – individual, family, ethnic, or racial – are socially constructed and allow for their reconstruction in narratives in quest of change and new meaning. Narratives recollects its aspiration to a new ‘story,’ a new history.<sup>22</sup>

Narratives therefore are intricately involved in the construction of ‘Native American’ history.

## 2.3 Language and Imagination

Gerald Vizenor points out that ‘Native American’ literature is based on oral stories and memories of ceremonies as well. Vizenor grew up in the city of Minneapolis, and was an enrolled member of the Anishinaabe tribe (sometimes referred to as Qijbway/Chippewa tribe). Though Vizenor was not proficient in his native language, he asserts in his introduction to *Native American Literature* :

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<sup>21</sup>Helen Jaskoski (ed.), *Early American Writing: New Critical Essays* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996; Wolfgang Hochbruck and Beatrix Dudensing-Reichel: *Honoratissimi Benefactores* , p.1.

<sup>22</sup>A. Skerret, J.T. Singh, and R.E. Hogan (eds.), *Memory, Narrative and Identity New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994. p. 1.

Native American Literature embraces the memories of creation stories, the tragic wisdom of native ceremonies, trickster narratives, and the outcome of chance and other occurrences in the most diverse cultures in the world. These distinctive literatures, eminent in both oral performance and the imagination of written narratives, cannot be discovered in reductive social science translations or altogether understood in the historical constructions of culture in one common name.<sup>23</sup>

Aside from rejecting reductions in the field of social science, his statement implies an interconnectivity between diverse cultural criteria via language. Vizenor's use of such words as "tragic wisdom," "memories," and "social science," relate to the specific imaginative process of "chance" in a diverse cultural context, stressed by the words "trickster," "ceremony," or "oral performance." The statement demonstrates a common denominator between language and imagination, as seen by someone representing popular 'Native American' literature. As a professor of literature, dramatist, poet, polemic, critic, and journalist (known as something of a trickster in his interviews himself),<sup>24</sup> Vizenor exercises some influence in the present discussion regarding what constitutes 'Native American' literature.

#### 2.4 Oral Tradition

Furthermore, the 'Native American' sources, the former 'oral' stories and subsequently written and recorded literature are limited.<sup>25</sup> This is due, in part, to the ruthless conquest of the native people, soil, and culture as a result of the European colonization and domination. The fact that, of the 221 or more tribes of the North American continent with their individual dialects mentioned by Axtell in his description of this contact between "natives" and "newcomers," all are *attributed* to have had a predominantly oral tradition complicates the matter further.

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<sup>23</sup>Gerald Vizenor, *Native American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*. NY: Harper Collins, 1995. p. 1. In this anthology, Vizenor presents an encompassing overview of "Native American" literature, beginning with William Apes in 1798, tracing autobiographies, fiction, poetry and drama into post-modern times.

<sup>24</sup>From an interview in Karsten Fitz: *Negotiating History and Culture: Transculturation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*. Peter Lang. Hannover, Diss, 2000. p. 164, footnote 56.

<sup>25</sup>For an interesting discussion on the early writing of the Mayan culture, see: A. Carmen Hoffmann and Peer Schmidt (eds.), *Die Bücher der Maya, Mixteken und Azteken: Die Schrift und ihre Funktion im vorspanischen und kolonialen Codices*. Frankfurt a. M: Vervuert verlag, 1997. Various contributors to this volume have done new research that questions the old assertion that the conquerors were not aware of the written cultures they came in contact with. The research denies the fact that the writings found in those cultures were only of a religious, iconic nature having no social and informational value. They also reevaluate the western notational system as one, not being strictly of alphabetic origin either.

Wolfgang Hochbruck in his book *I Have Spoken*<sup>26</sup> problematizes this belief examining the outcome of this ascription. He chooses to differentiate the complexities surrounding this issue, as it applies to the cultural beliefs about oral traditions and written texts, demonstrating how these have continuously influenced the image of the ‘other’. Hochbruck prefers the term “fingierte Mündlichkeit” (a fabricated/ imagined orality) to stress the literary construct of the term and the ideological problems within, which are pointing to an ongoing ‘colonial’ and perhaps male dominated discourse. Upholding a strict dichotomy between oral/ and written culture would tend to avoid the complexities in the issues involved. The term ‘oral- literature’ may be more appropriate, if one simply wants to stress that the literature is based on previous oral traditions in general or if one wants to underline a strong affiliation to oral aspects contained within a given text, in attempting to overcome or point out the problems involved in the dichotomy.

## 2.5 Fusion of Oral Traditions and Writing

The first tribe said to adapt to the written tradition of the newcomers as a group, while most Americans were still alphabets, and to publish a bi-lingual newspaper in February of 1828 was the Cherokee tribe; during the period of their geographical relocation. Karsten Fitz noted that the degree of literacy in both Cherokee and English was high and [from Tanner’s (Maritole’s brother) perspective:] “Sequoyah had written our spoken language with syllabary. His ‘talking leaves’ made the Cherokee literate. In 1828 some of the New Testament had been translated into Cherokee [...]”<sup>27</sup>

Altogether, these processes involved in transcribing oral stories, translations, and written traditions during a time of nation building, pose the question of significant and/or imagined difference in cultural/ gender code representation, and also refer to

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<sup>26</sup>Wolfgang Hochbruck, *I Have Spoken’: Die Darstellung und ideologische Funktion indianischer Mündlichkeit in der nordamerikanischen Literatur*. Tübingen. Narr Verlag, 1991. pp. 95-99. Hochbruck asserts that the unsuccessful rebellion of Pontiac in 1763, the defeat of the Ohio Confederation of 1794, and Tecumseh’s unsuccessful unification attempt in 1811 contributed to the “Indians” militarily and politically meaningless, and paved the way for them to be used as objects of literary curiosity and exploitation. To Jefferson the “dying Indian” and noble “savage” like chief Logan of the Shawanese could be seen as a hero of American nationalism, influencing works such as Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*. He claims that not until the “captivity narratives” were written, were there any positive echoes from a “white Indian” perspective describing the experience in which “native voices” could be heard.

<sup>27</sup>Karsten Fitz, *Negotiating History and Culture: Transculturation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*. Dissertation. Hannover, Peter Lang. Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften. Frankfurt a. M.; Berlin; Bern; Bruxelles; New York; Oxford: Wien. Lang, 2001 . Zugl. Hannoverische Diss., 2000. p. 70. (hereafter referred to as Fitz:*Negotiating History*)

possible mutual influences as well – a sight of ‘fusion’ worth considering when trying to understand more about ‘Native American’ texts.

## 2.6 Historical Point of View

As far as history is concerned, there are some male ‘Native American’ historicists, but Helen Jaskoski’s discussion regarding the different documentation on the smallpox stories shows that these accounts were also influenced to some degree by Euroamerican male models.<sup>28</sup> In reviewing more than 500 hundred years of contact between European and the initially ‘native’ culture of pre-contact time, one needs to be aware of the fact that the events, which transpired during this time of contact, were to a large extent recorded in writing by the ‘dominant’ culture, reflecting diverse motivations. Much of this knowledge can be traced back to the anthropological collections in the early 20th century by Franz Boas and his students. As A. Krupat describes:

Whereas early attempts at ‘ethnographic salvage’ were made in the name of history, and the Americanizers’ attempts at ethnographic destruction were made, generally in the name of religion, what Boas and his student preserved was in the name of science. The work of Fletcher, Densmore, and Curtis began specifically from an interest in Indian music and coincided with imagism and a movement in poetry to privilege the genre of lyric. But Boas and his students sought knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Krupat’s thoughts stresses how the approach to seeking knowledge may already influence one’s findings and raises the question: whether these findings are accurate descriptions of an unfamiliar culture and its history.

## 2.7 An Asymmetrical Power Relationship

In Axtells account, the ‘newcomers’ initially traded trinkets and beads for ‘native’ furs and other goods, while ‘discovering,’ mapping and renaming the territory of the American continent and their inhabitants, with an ever increasing desire for gold. Kidnapping interpreters or engaging the help and knowledge of the ‘natives,’ the predominantly Spanish, French, and English colonizers proceeded to establish an economic dependency of the local inhabitants by means of trade, dubious treaties, and

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<sup>28</sup>See Helen Jaskoski (ed.), *Early Native American Writing: New Critical Essays*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. pp. 136-158, which re-examines the texts of historicists: Francis Parkman, Andrew J. Blackbird, and William Warren.

<sup>29</sup>Arnold Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin*. Berkley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1989. p. 109.

sheer military force. In short, this contact also involved a history of genocide, or as it is more appropriately now termed: ‘ethnocide’.

Over the first few centuries of contact, the competing European powers exerted pressure on the natives, who resisted or cooperated in accordance with their judgments and chances for survival, differently in different locations. Continuously aiming to increase their wealth, power, and status, the various Christian governments ambivalently looked upon native and ‘Native American’ people as ‘savages’ or as ‘noble savages’ to be converted. Christian colonizers and their Catholic Jesuits and Protestant missionaries attempted to raise these ‘newly discovered heathens’ to the status of ‘Christian human beings,’ though each group by varying means and for different purposes. In his detailed summary of this process in different geographical areas and the reaction of various tribes over the centuries, Axtell states that:

To counter this offensive, the natives resorted to five basic strategies, which were not always sequential or mutually exclusive: initially, they tried to *incorporate* the newcomers; when that failed, they tried at various times to *beat* them, to *join* them, to *copy* enough of their ways to beat them at their own game, and to *avoid* them altogether.<sup>30</sup>

However, the ‘they’ of the counteroffensive action mentioned above were decimated in numbers over the years. Numerous deaths resulted from broken treaties, wars, hunger, and unknown diseases prior to contact, such as smallpox, mumps, measles, etc. Only those remaining can tell the story of how natives became a ‘Native American’ minority in their own land and the land of their ancestors. Axtell’s count illustrates just how many stories are missing; he claims that there was a reduction of 95% in the native population within the older settlements of Virginia, and North and South Carolina, while immigrant competitors proliferated to over 1,3 million.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>James Axtell, *Natives and Newcomers*. N.Y. and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 2. Here Axtell takes great pains to portray the “native people” of North America from their own perspective and not as mere victims of their fate, and can be said to deliver a detailed amount of research differentiating continuously between many tribes, their reactions to the particular colonizing power in their areas and the different means for religious conversion of each, embodying the “Native American” people as empowered agents of their own fates. It is all the more ironic then, that from a materialist cultural point of view, he needs to be criticized for arguing against returning “Native American” museum artifacts, belonging to various tribes and which have religious and cultural meanings to them. Perhaps, he might also have considered including in his research “Native American” literature to question or support his research and expand on his sources, realizing that oral cultural memory can be traced in the intensified repetitions and rituals, as J. Assmann points out in: *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis* p. 129, which may well be traced in texts as well and include the strategy Axtell names above: “to *copy* enough of their ways and beat them at their own game.”

<sup>31</sup>*ibid*, p. 123.

The figures Axtell uses are based on Peter Woods census, which recorded demographical change between 1700 and 1790 and help put the choice of strategies in a counter-offensive in a more specific perspective, one in which the native population becomes situated in an ‘asymmetrical power’ constellation.<sup>32</sup>

The point of this brief summary of ‘Native American’ history as it relates to trickster discourse is that, as readers or listeners of so called ‘Native American’ texts considering the influences of the colonizing forces, we must be especially sensitive to the basic components of discourse: who is talking, when and how they speak, and about what and whom. As readers of ‘Native American’ literature, we are dealing with the imagination of the authors, to some degree surviving descendants of ‘native’ ancestors, whose voices (especially the female ones) were largely missing in a description of ‘Native American’ history. These authors may very well have something to say about the contact between ‘natives’ and ‘newcomers’ in their individual novels. A story that is more than very likely told from an unfamiliar perspective (perhaps by authors employing diverse strategies) who may well express an effort to *beat* the dominating voices at their own game via ‘trickster’ discourse.

### 3 THE FIGURE OF THE TRICKSTER

#### 3.1 Definitions

But what does the word ‘trickster’ imply? What could it signify or represent in the context of narrative and dialogue? Hynes and Doty’s *Mythical Trickster Figures*, expresses the problem thus:

The diversity and complexity of the appearances in the trickster figure raise doubt that it can be encompassed as a single phenomenon. Perhaps just such diversity and complexity help explain why three decades have lapsed since the first comprehensive portrait of the trickster appeared, in Paul Radin’s *The Trickster* (1955).<sup>2</sup> The number of studies of individual tricksters has grown, and a range of trickster phenomena is such that many scholars argue against a generalizing, comparativistic view. Others of us have continued to argue that there are sufficient inherent similarities among these diverse figures and their function that enable us to speak, at least informally, of a generic “trickster figure.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>I owe this term to Eva Gruber, who conducted a seminar on tricksters at the University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany in the winter of 2004/2005 and summarized the imbalanced power relationship between natives and colonizers appropriately as such.

<sup>33</sup>William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (eds.), *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticism*. Tuscaloosa & London: University of Alabama Press, 1993. p. 2.

The above statement brings us to the heart of a trickster problem accompanying the reading of a given 'Native American' text. Can this figure be defined at all? Can it be confined comprehensively or at least sufficiently enough to say something universal, or can it only be only an attempt to draw nearer to an understanding in a specific and limited context? Are trickster figures common in any 'oral -literature'? Are they gender specific? How does one's assumption already influence one's reading?

The reading in the above mentioned texts, and freely admitted by its editors, were premised on the belief that trickster figures *can* be identified across several cultures, and that they contain similar features in each. Methodologically speaking, it would seem to matter, whether one considers the figure of trickster to be a universal Jungian archetype present both in individual and cultural development, or whether one rejects such a global approach to the topic to focusing only on one tribe or national group at a time, as Ellen Basso would assert.<sup>34</sup>

The editors mentioned above maintain that the trickster Gestalt is essentially plural, ambiguous, and full of plurovocity, in short: that it is a mythological figure encompassing many different social positions, utilized by different societies to inculcate various behavior, and exhibiting a manifold appearance even within one culture. The 'kaleidoscope' and metamorphosical nature of this figure, found not only in classical Greek literatures (e.g., Hermes can be seen as a trickster), but also in many diverse ethnic stories of groups around the globe, can be perplexing indeed. A. Velie expands on this notion:

Among the Indians the trickster, under various names and guises, is usually the principal culture hero of the tribe, a figure second in importance only to the supreme god.[...] He is also the butt of tricks, and how often he is the tricker rather than the trickee seems to depend on how the tribe views itself. Some tricksters are unusually successful; others are almost always the victim of tricks. Although the trickster is generally a benefactor – who in some case creates man, brings him fire, and rescues him from enemies – he can also be a menace, because he is generally amoral and has a prodigious appetite for food, sex, and adventure. He is capable of raping women, murdering men, eating children, and slaughtering animals. In fact, the trickster

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<sup>34</sup>Ellen Basso, "The Trickster's Scattered Self," *Anthropological Linguistics*. Vol. 30. Nos. 3/4, 1990 p. 304. Basso argues "that the superficially disorderly scattering of the trickster's self is developed through narrative devices that emphasize the relationship between uncertainty, lack of focus, incohesiveness, and creative experimentation by reminding Kalapalo listeners of the positive aspects of unanticipated consequences and by showing why it was necessary to be emotionally detached from ones goals." Her premise is, that the tricksters self is deliberately scattered and she suggests that this "deconstructed self has a certain value and functional consequences with which storytellers are concerned."

violates all tribal laws with impunity, to the amusement of the listeners of the tales, for whom he acts as a saturnalian surrogate.<sup>35</sup>

Akin to other messenger figures like Hermes or Esu, the trickster is the supreme mediator between God and man via oral and written language, which underlines the discursive element inherent in trickster's qualities and points to his or her cultural and anthropological importance as well. Additionally, tricksters often display cross-gender attributes and an ability to incorporate an ambivalent set of characteristics within a continuous, repetitive, yet changing structure of the narrative framework or oral story, posing a problem to any binary oriented field of research, in which perhaps only a good portion of humor may come to the rescue.

It is as perplexing, as it can be imagined to have been for the natives, in their confrontation with the different speech, clothing, metal gadgets, food, loud and frightening weapons of the God like 'hairy' pale face expeditioners stepping off their large boats; as confounding as the sight of the black robed people who arrived, carrying their books and crosses, and intermittently snatching up relatives and children in order to explore and claim for themselves a land that one has communally shared as long as one can remember.

Louis Owens' description of his own students reaction to the trickster figure in his class rightly claims: 'Trickster challenges definitions of the self and, concomitantly, the world defined in relation to that self'.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.2 The Discursive Aspect of the Trickster

Anne Doueïhi's deconstructive perspective in her article "Inhabiting the Space Between Discourse and Story in Trickster Narratives" argues that most people in Western culture have misread the trickster as "part of Western colonial domination of 'otherness'." She describes the usual names by which trickster also goes by: trickster-fixer, transformer ("Göttlicher Schelm") which subsumes an assortment of mythological personages such as Manabozho, Wakdjunka, Ikkтоми, Spider, the Old One, and Coyote, which are well known to one or the other 'Native American' people. Especially Coyote, who predominates in some of the texts discussed here, enjoys current popularity and—as a continuous shape shifter and perpetual survivor in 'Native Ameri-

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<sup>35</sup>Richard F. Fleck (ed.): *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction*. Washington DC: Three Continents Press, Inc., 1993. p. 159.

<sup>36</sup>*ibid.* p. 146.

can' mythology and creation myths – personifies the continuity of traditional values. In general, Trickster is also described as a scatological and obscene breaker of taboos, an asocial figure and amusing prankster, who, in tricking others often deceives himself.

On the other hand, trickster is also related to the figure of a benefactor who brings language, culture, and social order to mankind and the world. Trickster's inner contradiction and complexity has been an embarrassment to scholars, as Doueihi sees it, because of tricksters *sacredness*.

In her article, Doueihi points to the juxtaposition of the discursive, the signifying aspect of the narrative and the referential, the signified aspect of the text or story; insisting that scholars have focused too much on the face value of a text, treating language as a transparent medium for communication and meaning. Though narrative and meaning taken together referentially opened up a parallel conception of trickster stories as meaningful in relation to history or religion, they still miss the discursive element inherent in the trickster texts. She particularly criticizes Karl Kroeber's failure to distinguish between story and discourse, appropriating 'Native Indian' culture by denying that they have any literary criticism, which he equates with explanation and asserts to be missing in oral tradition. Doueihi goes on to state:

But in fact Native American traditions do give an important place to literary criticism, that is, to the interpretation of authoritative texts, as the article by Tedlock referred to above demonstrates. Quite in accord with deconstructionist criticism, interpretation of stories among American Indians is an endless activity. Divergent readings coexist without being mutually exclusive or contradictory, since interpretation is always local, specific, and personal and does not pretend to present, explain, or solve the problem of the text's final, single meaning.<sup>37</sup>

This is an important point; well worth considering that, in relationship to 'Native American' texts, the trickster figure appears to have an element of imagination, which can not be comprehensively defined. It must instead be negotiated continuously in the present, leaving the meaning open, as in language in general, in an ongoing process of exchange.

Gerald Vizenor would view this as one more move in the language game, one in which the trickster sign implies a communal erotic shimmer in oral traditions, and in which narrative voices indicate a holotrope, in other words: shape shifting signs in

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<sup>37</sup>Anne Doueihi, "Trickster: On Inhabiting the Space between Discourse and Story." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. 67 (3). Fall 1984. pp. 297.

discourse; thereby underlining “the inventiveness of any static or artifactual basis for American Indian identity.”<sup>38</sup> Vizenor adds:

The trickster narrative situates the participant audience, the listeners and readers, in agonistic imagination; there in comic discourse, 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.<sup>39</sup>

To better understand his paradoxical sounding comment about trickster, his nothingness and liberation – the metaphorical loose seam – I will now turn to Gerald Vizenor and his novel.

#### 4 GERALD VIZENOR: *THE HEIRS OF COLUMBUS*

##### 4.1 Biography

Gerald Vizenor’s father, half white and a member of the Anishinaabe tribe, had his throat cut by a mugger when Gerald was only twenty months old. The chief suspect was apprehended, but was released without being prosecuted. His uncle died the same month in a mysterious fall from a railroad bridge. His mother battled poverty in Minneapolis and left him at his grandmother’s at times. When Vizenor was eight years old, his mother married a hard-drinking mill engineer. When he was sixteen, his mother left them both and shortly afterwards, his step-father died in a fall down elevator shaft. Alan Velie notes: “Given his childhood, filled with desertion and violent death, it is not surprising that Vizenor developed a bizarre and bloody view of the universe.”<sup>40</sup>

Vizenor has served as a director of the American Indian Employment Guidance Center in Minneapolis and as an editor of the Minneapolis newspaper, the *Tribune*. He writes both poetry and fiction, including a collection of haiku, resulting from his experiences as a private in the army on the Japanese island of Matsushima. He has published a memoir of his early life entitled *I Know What You Mean, Erdpupps MacChurbbs: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*, which combines Anishinaabe mythology with fantasy and childhood memories. His grandmother and his friends were

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<sup>38</sup>Gerald Vizenor (ed.) *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, 1st ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989. pp. 187, 188.

<sup>39</sup>*ibid.* p. 196.

<sup>40</sup>*cf.* Alan R. Velie’s essay, in Richard Fleck (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction*. Washington DC: Three Continent Press, Inc., 1993. p. 155.

probably the chief source of the stories about demons and little woodland people therein. In 1978, he published a series of sketches titled *Wordarrows*, thought to be a key to understanding his poetry. Vizenor has taught at the University of California in Berkeley and in the English Department of the University of Minnesota. He is also the author of *Saint Louis Bearheart*, *Earthdiver* and *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, as well as numerous other publications including *The Heirs of Columbus*, which was published in 1991.

#### 4.2 Plot Summary

In this novel, the reader is confronted with a “crossblood trickster healer” named Stone Columbus, descendent of the famous explorer. He and other heirs run the Santa Maria Casino, a flagship on the Lake of the Woods, situated on the border between the United States and Canada. Along with the Niña (a restaurant) and the Pinta, which serves as a tax free market, the casino is a flourishing business. The tribal status and the tax free income of this bingo enterprise are the reassurance for tribal sovereignty. Stone’s lover, Felipa Powers, is a “trickster poacher” who repatriates tribal remains and sacred pouches from museums. By way of a live radio talk show aired from the casino, millions of people are informed about what transpires there. Stone has not only inherited a genetic code, the “signature of survivance,” but he also carries genetic information about a ‘universal genetic tribal identity,’ which the heirs want to relay to the world as a message for healing and anti-racism.

While Felipa is on a mission to obtain the bones of Christopher Columbus, she meets with a tribal mixed-blood art dealer named Doric Michéd, a representative of the Brotherhood of American Explorers. Michéd is also frequently compared to the wiindigoo, an evil gambler who threatens existence in the Anishinaabe tribal myth. Felipa hires a shaman to authenticate the bones, who mysteriously disappears during a ceremony – along with the bones. Due to this, a court hearing takes place to determine Felipa’s guilt in the matter. Since nothing can be proven, she is acquitted. Later the remains of the bones are returned to the tribe and buried on the White Earth reservation, their original home.

After Felipa gains information about the bones of Pocahontas and travels to England to obtain them, Doric Michéd kidnaps and kills her. Pocahontas’ bones are stolen. Felipa’s has the same death date and place of death as Pocahontas. Stone con-

tinues her mission and, at the end of the novel, the remains of Pocahontas are also returned to the heirs.

The heirs decide to buy land at Point Roberts in the Strait of Georgia after their ships are sunk in a thunderstorm. This land is located in the state of Washington, between Seattle and Vancouver Island, Canada. It is named Point Assinika and is declared as a sovereign tribal nation on October 12, 1992. Since the new nation is resolved to fight racism and to heal tribal children who suffer from the aftermath of colonialism, the casino profits serve to build a marina, various pavilions, and a new casino barge. After the genome pavilion is established, international scientists begin to work on the possibilities of implanting a genetic code of “survivance.” Stone also demands a payment from the president, desiring the tithes granted to his heirs by the Spanish crown for the five hundred years since ‘discovery’ and threatens to annex the United States of America, if he is refused.

Toward the end of the novel Stone enters a contest with the evil gambler, a wiindigoo trickster called Naanabozho, setting the stage for Anishinaabe mythology and the fight of good and evil forces. The goal of the gambler is to win the moccasin game and beat the good forces, extinguishing all life on earth. The successful heirs must engage in nothing less than survival. Stone, with the use of his powerful war herb, is able to identify the proper moccasin and warns the wiindigoo that only robots will survive, who would mock him forever – but the wiindigoo no longer wishes to finish the game.

#### 4.3 Structure and Themes

The main themes of his novel are already contained within this plot. The first person narrator extends an invitation of discourse about history, culture, and identity. Vizenor’s satire is composed of a mixture of traditional stereotypes on the one hand and his choice of reinventing stereotypes with his use of neologisms such as “survivance” and “manifest manners” into a more complex structure. This cues the reader into awareness of new and different perceptions, in these two examples, of issues surrounding ‘survival’ and the American doctrine of ‘Manifest Destiny’. In his discussion of Andrew Wiget’s writing in *Trickster Discourse* Vizenor claims:

Aesthetic suppositions pare tribal views too close to museum bones, cultural artifacts. Culture, the author must understand, is an invention, not an innate exercise; however, some academic colonists continue to argue over the 'discovery' of tribal cultures and literatures.<sup>41</sup>

This comment, made prior to the publication of his novel, demonstrates that Vizenor, by choosing to recast this topic of bones as cultural artifacts, is interested in inventing a cultural view of natives and non-natives in his novel that is opposed to the common, dominant, and closed binary perception. He is much more inclined to present the reader with the deconstruction of any universal or single meaning, or, as Vizenor claims: "Tribal tricksters are comic holotropes in a narrative, the whole figuration, an invitation to a reader and listener to deconstruct the wisps in a language game."<sup>42</sup>

There are two main parts of the novel: *Blue Moccasin* with five chapters, and *Point Assinika* with its seven chapters are surrounded by two subtexts. One is a quote from Sartre's: *What is Literature?*, which precedes the two parts, and alludes to books being weapons, and to the theater of the absurd, and the second subtext is a longer epilogue, which meticulously lists a number of sources referred to in the novel. Both already underline the comic intertextuality found throughout the novel.<sup>43</sup>

Vizenor's novel is a typical 'post-modern' political satire, reminiscent of Thomas Pynchon in some ways, in his mix of historical facts and fiction or in the comical naming of his characters, e.g., Binn Columbus, Momaday, Gravesend, Judge Lord. Admiral White. Etc. Combined with many science fiction elements, the laser light show trickster, Almost Browne and the talk of robots<sup>44</sup> help form the construction of this pop art or television collage of life in American society. His irony and sarcasm, accompanied by at times trite phrases such as "Carp radio," spares no "crossed blooded heir" of Columbus and seems to target every post-modern reader, as part of the comedy.

Stone Columbus, who is portrayed as a descendant of a Mayan "hand talker" and educated by Shephardic Jews and thereby evokes the themes of ancient culture and of the Diaspora, represents his male 'cultural hero,' enabling Vizenor to posit him

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<sup>41</sup>Gerald Vizenor: "Trickster Discourse." *The Wicazo SA Review* 5 (1): 2-7. Spring 1989. p. 3.

<sup>42</sup>*ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>43</sup>Fitz, *Negotiating History and Culture* p.169. (Fitz's footnote 61 "makes reference to more than sixty books of nonfiction.")

<sup>44</sup>Gerald Vizenor, *The Heirs of Columbus*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1991 (hereafter referred to as *Heirs*). Vizenor writes that Panda the biorobot has "the mind of a man, the heart of a robot and the hands of a woman."

within the contact zone of contemporary discourse of American Indian identity and imaginative tribal trickster stories.

#### 4.4 Trickster Discourse

In one scene, his female character, Judge Beatrice Lord, is engaged in a competition of wit with Lappet Tulip Brown during the court hearing in the chapter titled ‘Bone Courts’ as follows:

“Major Doumet told me that you would be able to enlighten the courts about tribal tricksters, since you came from a family of tricksters, and your grandfather was the Baron of Patronia,” said Judge Lord. “The tribe asked me to be a witness at this hearing and that your honor, does not include my biography,” she said with no humor. Lappet was more severe than her brothers and sisters, some believe, because she was bored, hated men, and had a brilliant mind. She pushed her sleeves back to her elbows and leaned to the side in the witness chair. “Certainly, would you be a witness now?” asked Lord. “Tricksters, the court must strain to understand, are not real people, tricksters are figures in stories, no more than the language games of a rich and wild imagination, and in our tribe the trickster is unleashed with a dash of priapean sexism,” said Lappet.

“Tricksters have no families?” asked Lord.

“No tribes, no presence,” said Lappet.<sup>45</sup>

This passage is a perfect example of trickster discourse and how Vizenor constructs his trickster figures. Vizenor reconstructs the court case ironically, as a hearing that can be seen as a discourse alluding to the new historicist concepts as described by Ann Rigney, who describes the tendencies in new historicism to be more in line with the historian listening into the testimony of someone else, rather than being the judge in a cross-examination with witnesses.<sup>46</sup>

In the hearing Vizenor presents in the text above, eyewitnesses are called on to “enlighten” a female judge named Lord, reversing the dominant sense of seeing to oral sounds and simultaneously making fun of the notion of a male Christian God. The eyewitness, Tulip Browne, a crossed blood (a composite of blue royalty and the red of bloody crime stories, ‘Red Indians’ (or spring flowers) mixed with a dose of rebel-

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<sup>45</sup>*Heirs*. p. 80.

<sup>46</sup>cf. Ann Rigney, “Literature and the Longing for History,” in Jürgen Pieters (ed.), *Critical Self-Fashioning: Stephen Greenblatt and the New Historicism*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang GmbH., 1999. p. 24. Rigney states that “The last development I want to mention briefly here derives directly from this extension of the domain of history and has to do with the role or stance of the historian *vis`a vis* the source-texts. Instead of a “judge” involved in the cross-examination of witnesses, the role of the historian is being reconceived in certain quarters as a “listening” into the testimony of someone else, as a form of dialogue, rather than cross-examination. Indeed, one could argue, that the current blossoming of cultural history is at least in part motivated by the belief that historical writing should attempt, through information and empathy, to get as close as possible to the past as it was *experienced* by contemporaries, particularly those on the margins of society, who did not subsequently get to write the official record.”

lious/anal trickster brown) begins talking as a trickster *without humor* and therefore in contradiction to tricksters academically known attributes.

Tulip notices, that her “biography” has not been asked for, which not only undermines any fixed meaning of the trickster figure, but also points to missing ‘native’ biographies. The narrator then describes her as “severe” and says that some believe her to possess stereotypical ambiguous feminist qualities, described as “hating men” and as having a “brilliant mind.” The words “some believed” suggest that this is mere rumor though. Lappet herself goes on to explain tricksters as mere sexist imagination, reinforcing the above description of her brilliant mind. But the reader may ponder here whether this trickster should be believed?

The judge, without the knowledge of Tulip’s trickster biography, wonders if tricksters have “no families,” and receives the trickster discourse she deserves: “no tribes, no presence.” The meaning is deliberately ambiguous, and evokes at least three interpretations: (1) either she receives no gifts (presence sounding like presents), because she has no tribe, or (2) because she is not member of a tribe, she cannot understand the presence of tricksters, or (3) since she is within the physical presence of a trickster, she simply lacks the tribal knowledge/imagination requisite to understand tricksters. The text continues:

“Stories, then, are at the core of tribal realities, not original sin, for instance, or severe missions,” said the judge. Lord was cautious; at times she pretended not to understand the cultural ideas raised by the witness.

“Stories and imagination, your honor, but of a certain condition that prescinds discoveries and translations,” said Lappet. “Comic situations rather than the tragic conclusions of an individual separated from culture, lost and lonesome in the wilderness.”

“Miss Browne, would you please break some of your ideas down with a few definitions for the court reporter,” said the judge.

“I am no miss, please,” said Lappet.

“Lappet, of course,” said Lord.

“The colonist brought wilderness with them and planted fears in the woodland, and once here their tragic virtues were unloaded with shame, the unnatural consequence of the loss of personal vision in a landscape of primal realities, cruelties of individualism in the church, and the loneliness of civilization,” said Lappet.

“Tragic virtues, indeed” said the judge. Lord watched the spectators as the witness pursued tribal trickster in a tragic world. Some leaned forward on their hands, others were close to sleep; the heirs were tuned to tribal ironies and smiled from time to time. The judge strained to hear the humor in her diction.

“The comic mode is as much an imposed idea as the tragic; the comic is communal nonetheless, and celebrates chance as a condition of experience, over linear provision, but at the same time myths, rituals, and stories must summon a spiritual balance, an imaginative negotiation in a very dangerous natural world,” said Lappet.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>*Heirs*. pp. 80-81.

The narrator makes a point of noting that, because the judge is cautious, she is *pre-tending* not to understand cultural ideas, thereby questioning all the above possibilities again. The ironic humor of this deconstructed discourse is communal, cutting across any category or choice by the imagined laughter. Vizenor places this humor in close proximity to a time *before* colonization via Tulip's account.

When asked to break down this idea, she responds that she is "no miss," which again is broadly ambiguous; it can refer to the fact that she is "not amiss," because everyone talks about tricksters; or it can be viewed as an ironic comment that she, as a presence, is simply missing in current trickster discourse; or her reply can simply be taken verbatim, including the play on words surrounding the feminist concepts of 'Miss, Ms, and Mrs'.

In continuing her description of the colonizers, Tulip reverses the romantic story of colonial 'discovery' and describes civilization as loneliness. The judge ritually echoes this with the words: "tragic virtues, indeed." Already anticipating the reader/listener audience reactions, Vizenor then describes the diverse reaction to the ongoing discourse: some lean forward on their hands, some are nearly asleep, the heirs in tune to tribal ironies smile and the judge needs to strain to see the humor in her (her own or tricksters) "diction."

Vizenor's narrator allows Lappet to say that all meanings, whether tragic or comic are imposed. However, comic experiences are tied to an idea of communal language by stories, myths, or rituals as imaginative negotiations in a real world. This is Vizenor's trickster discourse in distilled form, mouthed by one of the many trickster characters in conversation within the pastiche constructions of the whole novel. Satirically recasting Christopher Columbus's 'historical discovery' Vizenor leaves the meaning open in an ongoing discussion. As Fitz reinstates while discussing Vizenor and his novel:

He vehemently defies closure in favor of radical openness. Thus, new paths of interpreting and positioning the colonial encounter, in this case between Columbus and his crew and the Native people of the "New World" are opened up. To this end, Vizenor does not simply reject binary oppositions as the prevailing dominant strategy of viewing the world. Vizenor uses binary structures in order to demonstrate that they do not work: gender (particularly that of trickster figures) shift frequently; 'real' and trickster characters – or 'the real' as implied in history, and 'the imagined' as implied in fiction – cross boundaries; animals (or animal spirits) assume human features and vice versa.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Karsten Fitz, *Negotiating History and Culture*. pp. 189, 190.

The shapes-shifting characteristics of these boundary crossing figures mentioned above are found in plenitude in Vizenor's 'trickster' figures.

#### 4.5 Composite Trickster Figures

Vizenor's frequent shifts in trickster figures can be demonstrated in his portrayal of Memphis de Panther, whom the narrator describes as never having been in a courtroom before, which amuses the heirs:

[...] The judge heard a woman in the witness chair; the heirs saw a panther.  
"We are animals disguised as humans," said Memphis.  
"Would that be a shaman?" asked the judge.  
"The shaman has no disguise," said the panther.  
"Really, but shamans are feared," said Lord.  
"The animals are feared, not the shamans," said Memphis.  
So, we are all animals in disguises then?" asked the judge.  
"Yes, and the shamans heal the animal with stories in our blood, not the masks we wear as humans, the mask dies, the stories endure," said the panther. She licked her right paw and then stared at the spectators.<sup>49</sup>

In this passage, the narrator introduces two different perceptions of the well known tribal trickster, a woman and a "panther," reminding us of the ambiguity of this figure. Vizenor, via his narrator, also violates all preconceived ideas of the trickster, by allowing the female/animal trickster to speak both logically and imaginatively under the guise and uncertainty of her panther identity. The trickster becomes the second storyteller, talking to the judge and reader, healing with stories "in our blood," a common metaphor throughout the novel's text. The trickster neither denies nor affirms the stories by discourse, which the judge associates with shamanism, because "shamans," claims the panther, have "no disguise." The only thing to fear, claims Memphis, this double voiced female/animal, is animals "in disguises," the "masks" of all human beings. From Memphis' point of view, this could mean being afraid of herself. From an animal point of view, it would make sense if they could talk, but from a trickster cross cultural point of view, the meaning becomes definitely unstable.

However, there is a way out of the dilemma: there is healing promised by the *enduring* stories. (The 'enduring' as opposed to 'not enduring' quality becomes a highlighted comical and serious philosophical question in this conversation, because, by implication, it questions who is empowered to define time concepts of storytelling.) This allows Vizenor to play with more stereotypical beliefs and notions of power. At

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<sup>49</sup>Heirs, pp. 70, 71.

the end of the conversation, the narrator claims that Tulip “licked her right paw” and stared at the spectators, drawing the reader back to the visual, instead of listening to the conversation in the hearing.

This funny enduring/not enduring, wisp of trickster discourse, contained within the context of the entire novel, is continuously pitted against the background of genetic scientific transplants for “survival” and crimes of murder taking place throughout the text. As B. Monsma notes:

Trickster texts, therefore, position readers in relation to the difference of the text by confronting readers with their potential for misunderstanding even while compelling participation in the act of creating meaning from shifting texts.[...] Vizenor explains that in a traditional oral performance where the teller plays not only the leading roles but also the narrator and commentator, listeners get the criticism along with the tale.<sup>50</sup>

This certainly applies to Vizenor’s narration, in which he comments, criticizes, and continuously shifts a particular connotation – especially in the performance of the conversations within the themes of the novel, reminding the reader of the oral tradition in trickster discourse.

#### 4.6 History

However, the serious undertone of a historical account is constructed by the use of direct quotes and dates from letters such as these, which are worked into the text:

On October 13th, 1492, the second day in the New World, he wrote, “After sunrise people from San Salvador again began to come to our ships in boats fashioned in one piece from the trunks of trees.[...] I cannot get over the fact of how docile these people are. They have so little to give but will give it all for whatever we give them, if only pieces of glass and crockery.”<sup>51</sup>

Vizenor is more than likely referring to the letter Christopher Columbus wrote to Louis Santangel, a trustee of his private treasures. In this letter Columbus, after having noticed that the natives were frightened, bribed them with glass beads and pottery fragments, which he claimed they were so delighted about, that he had to put out orders to stop this injustice. Columbus goes on to say he then proceeded to give the natives good things to win their favor and to convert them to Christianity, in the hopes they will learn to love his king and offer their products in return.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Bradley John Monsma, “‘Active Readers...Observe Tricksters’: Trickster Texts and Cross-Cultural Reading.” *Modern Language Studies*. Vol. 26. Fall 1996. pp. 84, 85.

<sup>51</sup>*Heirs*. p. 38.

<sup>52</sup>Emir Rodriguez Monegal (ed.), *Die Neue Welt: Chroniken Lateinamerikas bis zu den Unabhängigkeitskriegen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 1982. p. 71.

Akin to a manner of C. Geertz' 'thick descriptions' for the reader, Vizenor then problematizes the truth or meaning to be gained from historical documents further by alluding to an intimate letter that Columbus was worried about, and that new historicists actually still puzzle over today. The narrator says:

Columbus was worried to his death that his letter would be found at sea, and that he would be tried to defend his sanity over the stories of the storm puppets and the hand talker with the golden thighs. "I sealed the parchment in a waxed cloth, tied it very securely, took a large wooden barrel, and placed the parchment in the barrel, without anyone knowing what it was...and had it thrown into the sea," he wrote in his journal.<sup>53</sup>

In *New World Encounters*, in which Greenblatt presents writers who oppose Samuel Morison's traditional position of "the vision of the victors," Margarita Zamora, discusses the missing letter to the sovereigns, mentioned in the text above, in relation to their authenticity. In August 1991, another version of the voyage report, from March 4th, 1493, was published, making a new source available to scholars. After analyzing and comparing the two versions, Zamora suggests that the missing letters show them to contain a target of suppression, which form a pattern and correspond to certain categories. Christopher Columbus' *Letters to the Sovereigns* downplays the importance of the event, taking the position that the target of suppression suggest a pattern corresponding to one or more of several categories, which serve merely to add a bureaucratic "blandness" or "flatness."<sup>54</sup>

It is entirely possible that Zamora, who planned to publish a more complete version in Berkeley at that time, and who quotes and translates directly from the new document with reference to the barrel Columbus supposedly sealed his letter in, delivers Vizenor, who also taught in Berkeley, material for extending his novel's themes.

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<sup>53</sup>*Heirs*, p. 44.

<sup>54</sup>The categories suggested in this passage are: (1) information that could serve competitors, such as elaborate discussion on the advantages of the caravel over the large *nao* for voyages of discovery; (2) comments that could put the expedition in a bad light or suggest discord among the various parties involved – for example, the grounding of the *Santa Maria*, the insubordination of Martin Alonso Pinzan (captain of the *Pinta*, or the ridicule to which Columbus was subjected in Spain before the first voyage; (3) petitions that the Crown privileges and favors to Columbus in recompense for his services; (4) plans that link the enterprise of discovery to a projected reconquest of the Holy Land, rendering the liberation of Jerusalem its ultimate goal. From Stephen Greenblatt (ed.): *New World Encounters*. 1. print. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993; : Margarita Zamora, *Christopher Columbus's "Letters to the Sovereigns": Announcing the Discovery* p. 1-12.

#### 4.7 Trickster as Liberator: Political Satire

Vizenor's trickster 'liberator' figure is also embodied in the satirical description of the Statue of Liberty, when Stone commissions the crossblood sculptor Bartholdito to erect a giant copper statue, as a sign for the heirs sovereignty:

The trickster of Liberty faced west on the point and would be higher than the Statue of Liberty. The trickster embraced the humor of the tribal world with his head in the clouds. The inscription on the statue promised to "heal the tribes and huddled masses yearning to breathe free."<sup>55</sup>

The bitter humor the narrator puts forth by his literal description of a 'sacred' American statue often covered by clouds in the sky, recasting it simultaneously as an image of arrogance, absentmindedness, and stupidity, allows Vizenor to satirize the American government and American history. By repeating parts of the literal inscription at the foot of the statue, the legendary symbol of freedom for the mass of immigrants, who entered the country at the native's expense, he makes it clear that American society and freedom as such is founded on nothing but an illusionary story, ultimately based on crime and theft, and is simply another story being told. His narrator can incorporate this story into an Anishinaabe tribal myth as follows:

The Anishinaabe, the woodland tribe that founded the obscure tavern, the oldest in the New World, remember the Naanabozho, the compassionate tribal trickster who created the earth, had a brother who was a stone, a human stone, a shaman stone, a stone, a stone, a stone. Naanabozho was the first human born in the world, and the second born, his brother, was a stone. The trickster created the new earth and the wet sand. He stood on his toes as high as he could imagine, but the water rose closer to his nose and mouth. He could dream without a mouth or nose, but he would never leave the to the evil gambler and his dark water. The demons in the water caused him to defecate.[...]Naanabozho was at the highest point on earth and could not move, so he invented mediation with trickster stories and liberated the mind over his own excrement. The trickster created this New World with the sand a muskrat held in her paws. The Heirs of Christopher Columbus created one more New World in their stories and overturned tribal prophecies that their avian time would end with the arrival of the white man.<sup>56</sup>

In this passage, the narrator makes it clear which story came first. By retelling the remembered creation myth of the Anishinaabe tribe and incorporating the story of Columbus as an attempt to overturn the original prophecies therein, the fight between the evil gambler and Naanabozho creation becomes a continuous story and is portrayed most vividly by the poetic sounds of a trickster, when set in opposition to Moses tablets of stone, and thereby Western cultural memory.

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<sup>55</sup>*Heirs*. p. 122.

<sup>56</sup>*Heirs*. p. 5.

The trickster is described as a figure caught between his own physical being and the twin aspects of Naanabozho's creation: a material and an immaterial world, in which he is being mediated. The wiindigoo trickster figure of Anishinaabe myths, from that angle, would be less evil and more representative of an inescapable fate of creation – and for Vizenor's narrator, represent another creation story remembered and left to the imagination.

This indeed is how Vizenor, via the narrator, humorously describes the gambling wiindigoo of the moccasin game when he writes:

“The game never ends,” said the wiindigo. He paused over the blue moccasins, raised his hand, and then moved back into the shadows. The mere mention of the soldier weed caused the cannibal to reconsider his choice of moccasins. The wiindigo had no interest in planets or the morning star, but he was pleased with the robots, the laser dancers in the night sky, and the soldier weed games at Point Annika.<sup>57</sup>

In that sense, the wiindigoo only distances himself from the violence and killer weed, associated earlier in the text with Black Elks visions by the heirs, leaving their struggle for “survivance” behind for now. It is not clear who the cannibal reconsidering his choice is, since Stone Columbus also plays the game. The figure of the wiindigoo, as Vizenor construct it, is not clearly definable. The wiindigoo's pleasure in his post-modern view, which can be interpreted as another ‘native’ struggle with the trickster figure Stone, or a post-modern struggle with the comprehension of ‘native’ tricksters, shows, as Mark Shackleton points out, the revealing quality of Vizenor's work:

how such familiar concepts of resistance, appropriation, cultural survival, dispossession and marginality are re-interrogated in the light of post modern discourse that draws upon oral traditions and yet is thoroughly prospective.<sup>58</sup>

Whether it is really “prospective” depends on one's interpretation; however it is made clear that they are interrogated in light of the postmodern discourse in relationship to cultural memory.

#### 4.8 Criticism

Vizenor's novel appears to be both an expression of assimilation, where the author asserts his right to be an equal part of the post-modern current American society by writing in the hopes of profiting from its book market, and an expression that with-

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<sup>57</sup>Heirs. p. 182.

<sup>58</sup>Mark Shackleton, “Native North American Writing and Postcolonialism.” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*. 7.2, 2001. p. 1.

holds any definable information about ‘native’ Americans altogether, thereby satirically mirroring current ‘American native’ myths instead. In his refusal of final knowledge about ‘Native American’ tribes, he constructs a text similar to what R. Barthes would recognize as a withdrawal from the war of constructed fictions and social effects, destroying its own discursive categories; offering the imaginative chance at communal laughter, which can instead be shared via the trickster in diverse cultural views.<sup>59</sup>

In line with Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, and Jacques Lacan, Vizenor asserts that the dialogic or intertextual dimension of a post-modern text renders translations of tribal texts nearly impossible, thus giving way to “pleasurable misreadings”<sup>60</sup> and (as I would suggest) silence. The liberating moment thus becomes associated with the right to remain silent about ‘Native American’ reality. While all this appropriating discourse is going on, Vizenor chooses to reveal nothing but the readers own imagination.

A critical voice that deals with this silence or omission in the text, comes from Stuart Christie, who in a discussion of his novel, points out:

The omission of any mention in *Heirs* of the local, Lummi trickster tradition in the Coastal Salish region of Washington, called Chelh-ten-em (a.k.a. Point Roberts) golf course development controversy in which multinational corporate interests in the northern Puget Sound continue to endanger traditional Lummi Indian salmon fishing practices, threatens to confuse Vizenor’s liberatory, trickster signifying practices with the global master narratives of New World discovery he is trying to contest<sup>61</sup>

In his careful research on the then current political dilemmas concerning the region, he convincingly describes the historical, political, social, and cultural implications accompanying such new establishments, when they tangate sovereign tribal territory and tribal decision-making. His criticism regarding Vizenor supports my own when he concludes that:

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<sup>59</sup>Roland Barthes, *Die Lust am Text*. Frankfurt am Main 7. Auflage: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992. pp. 47, Barthes states “Sich eine Ästhetik ausdenken (wenn das Wort nicht zu sehr entwertet ist), die restlos (vollständig, radikal, in jeder Hinsicht) *auf der Lust des Konsumenten* beruhte, wer er auch sei, welcher Klasse, welcher Gruppe er auch angehörte, ohne Ansehen der Kulturen oder Sprachen: die Folgen wären enorm.”

<sup>60</sup>Gerald Vizenor (ed.), *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989 pp. 76, 77.

<sup>61</sup>Stuart Christie, “Trickster Gone Golfing: Vizenor’s *Heirs of Columbus* and the Chelh-ten-em Development Controversy.” *American Indian Quarterly*. 21 (3): 359-83. Summer 1997. p. 359.

Without a more rigorous politics of place trickster remains *merely* ironic and egocentric, the story written over all other tribal stories, one which trivializes the stakes of the political game before traveling onto the next theater of representation. The opacity of Vizenor's trickster discourse in the instance of Lummi trickster tradition prompts more general misgivings about the suitability of the *postmodern* trickster as a figure for collective tribal liberation: shimmering such that it can't be seen, its exceptionality merely semiotic flash in the poststructuralist pan.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, it can be said that the author Vizenor refuses any stable meaning at all. He simply plays a language game, trivializing the political aspects of 'Native American' concerns.

#### 4.9 Gender Aspects

This criticism also applies to Vizenor's gender constructions within the text. The female and male figures are ambiguous, portrayed more as cartoon characters. It is difficult to take the gender descriptions in his novel seriously. However, the reader may note that Vizenor does choose a male as the focal point of his text, in which the lover of his cultural hero, Felipa, begins the work of reclaiming the artifacts, but is killed and eliminated in the process. The female judge, empowered with an office, is unable to collect any evidence worthy of trial. Samana is reduced to being an erotic "hand talker" with thighs worth of remark. One trickster becomes half animal and half assertive feminist in a hearing farce. Two female manicurists, Harmonia and Teets are afraid to touch a mute child. Teets has been abused as a child and is described as crying over the memories and these mark the only tears in the text, which can be also interpreted as alluding to the stereotypical discourse of child abuse often attributed to 'Native American' culture. There are barely any realistic motherly descriptions of women, much less an in depth or emotional portrayal of any female figures.

#### 4.10 Gender Discourse: Double Discourse

In re-writing American history, Vizenor does not shy away from the many clichés attributed to modern and post-modern thinking. Describing his female characters in ambivalent terms, often seemingly reduced to their visual affects and attire as in the following lines:

Felipa posed in a dark brown wool dress with golden braids in a floral pattern at the neck and sleeves; she wore bright orange stockings and blue beaded moccasins puckered at her toes, and carried a purple duffel bag on her shoulder.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>*ibid.* p. 379.

<sup>63</sup>*Heirs.* p. 46

He consistently juxtaposes them with ‘slippery’ trickster images as already shown with the figure of Tulip thereby keeping the meaning in a liminal space of negotiation between opposing points of view.

Vizenor shapes his cultural hero Stone Columbus as an antidote to male hero myths and legends as well. By tracing Christopher Columbus’ letters and log book, Vizenor rearranges these documents within an intertextual setting and additionally closely associates the man’s painful sexual deficiencies expressed in his writing with his conquests, as shown in the following passage:

Columbus was pained by persistent erections; his enormous clubbed penis curved to the right; a disease of fibrous contracture during an erection. He was born with a burdensome penis that once was presented as comic in ancient dramas. The smaller penis was a prick of endearment in some coteries; his was a torturous penis, a curse that turned the mere thought of sexual pleasure to sudden pain. That his radiance was misunderstood as sexual heat did not ease his torments and agonies, a cruel burden that slackened nowhere but at sea.<sup>64</sup>

Vizenor’s double discourse posits Western Christian civilization and its written culture as arising from sexual “pain” and lack of “pleasure,” reminding his readers of Freud’s theories, who posited that cultural development is created at the cost of suppressing the desires of the subconscious, the *Id*.

At the same time, he associates the play on words to a small and large penis to the biological/gender discourses in which the clitoris is thought to be a smaller penis, (or in which women’s identities are associated with the lack of one), which – depending on whether one takes the female or male the point of view – makes Columbus’s apparatus rather “burdensome.”

Simultaneously, the narrative voice evokes ‘Native American’ myths and stories around the trickster, which feature Coyote or other tricksters figures as being endowed with an oversized penis and unabashed sexual desire now thwarted in the Western cultural hero. Esu,<sup>65</sup> the African trickster mentioned earlier, is also endowed with a similar vital and insatiable sexuality.

Only his lover and ancient (sign language) “hand talker” Samana (who may remind readers of Donna Marina, the translator for the well known conqueror Hernán Cortéz), can ease these deficiencies with her “golden thighs,” healing him with the sense of touch in the process. His ridicule works on many different levels.

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<sup>64</sup>*Heirs*. p. 31.

<sup>65</sup>See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Though the text mentions a cross dresser, a female engineer, a female robot and female ancestors, the surface focus in the text is predominantly on Stone Columbus and Doric Michéd, whose actions dominate the plot. Considering Vizenor's reference via Sartre's text to books as weapons in the beginning, the reader may wonder if this is only a reflection of Vizenor's satirical description of post-modern society, reflecting polemic discourse in the parody of Sartre's existentialism and Western literature – while even in its mirror function, his particular gender constructions serve to reinforce the issue of male dominance in a Pan-American global consumer society. Vizenor may simply be linking heroic cultural myths and profit, as H. Schünemann describes, when he notices that, in order for a book to be bought, the author cannot deviate too far from the stereotypical identification mechanisms within the reader's cultural identity scope.<sup>66</sup>

At best then, as K. Fitz is convinced, writers like Gerald Vizenor and Thomas King adopt elements of the mainstream culture, "its present trickster discourse, ideas or literary conventions, in order to decode or re-encode them in their individual cultural and artistic perspectives."<sup>67</sup> To see if this view applies to other authors as well, I will now turn to Thomas King and his novel.

## 5 THOMAS KING: GREEN GRASS, RUNNING WATER

### 5.1 Biography

Thomas King was born in Sacramento, California in 1943. His father was a Cherokee and his mother of German and Greek origin. He worked as a photojournalist in Australia and New Zealand, studied in Chico, California, where he received his M.A. degree in English in 1972 from the California State University. In 1986, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Utah for his dissertation: *Inventing the American: White*

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<sup>66</sup>Hinrik Schünemann. *Mythos und Profit: Zur vermittlung sozialer Interaktionsmodelle über fiktionalle Informationsdienstleistungen am Beispiel des amerikanischen Bestseller Romans*. Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann GmbH, 2000. p. 53. Schünemann examines more closely the elements in the construction of "heroes" in American novels and how their function is tied to the reader's perception and commercial success. He says: "Für den am kommerziellen Erfolg orientierten Autor ist es somit von entscheidender Bedeutung, dass die Information im Verlauf seines Romans zur Figurenvorstellung des Lesers als Inkarnation seines *frame of reference* in einem affirmativen und nicht in einem kontrastiven Verhältnis stehen, wobei jedoch auch in diesem Zusammenhang gilt, dass periphere Elemente, sofern sie überhaupt als inkonsistent perzipiert werden, grundsätzlich substituierbar sind."

<sup>67</sup>Karsten Fitz, *Negotiating History and Culture*, p. 126.

*Images, Native Oral Traditions, and Contemporary Native Writers*. He has taught at several U.S. and Canadian universities and now lives in Guelph, Ontario.

King's has published short stories in various magazines and has edited several magazines. His first novel, *Medicine River*, was adapted into a CBS television movie. He wrote a children's book, *A Columbus Coyote Story*, and several film scripts for the popular Canadian TV show *North of 60*.<sup>68</sup> His most recent novel, *Truth & Bright Water*, was published in 1999. *Green Grass and Running Water*, was his second novel and published in 1993.

## 5.2 Plot Summary and Structure

The complex plot consists of several strands of stories, united by the allusion to the creation story told by the four elders. One strand of the story is concerned with a love triangle that develops between the characters Charlie and Lionel, in competition for the love of Alberta – a woman with two lovers, who wants a child, but no husband. Over time, they come to appreciate their own culture with the assistance of the “four Indians.” The other strand traces the character Ely Stands Alone, a retired English professor, in his ten year lawsuit and struggle against a power company, which owns the dam that ultimately breaks and kills him in the ensuing flood. The third strand centers around the four mysterious (also intertextual tricksters) aboriginal elders named the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye, who, having escaped from a mental hospital, are on their way to Blossom, Southern Alberta to fix up the world. Pursued by Dr. Hovaugh and the African-American janitor Babo of the same institution, they eventually meet on the adjoining reservation, where the Sun Dance ceremony takes place.

The novel is divided into four chapters. As Dee Horne has pointed to in her research, this not only indicates the affirmation and importance of balance with nature, but also reflects “the four directions and the four seasons: part one is East, Red; part two is south; White; part three is West, Black; part four is North, Blue.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>More details on his life are found in: Isabel Schneider, *We Have a Commonality and a Common Dream: The Indigenous North American Novel in the 1990s*. Peter Lang GmbH, Frankfurt am Main: Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1998. (European university studies:ser 14, Anglo-Saxon Language and Literature, Vol. 343, Diss. University of Giessen 1997).

<sup>69</sup>Dee Horne, *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1999, p.27.

Each chapter has a Cherokee heading, which remains untranslated throughout the novel and conveys a distance to the reader unfamiliar with the language, forcing the reader to find a way to notice and react to the perceived alienation. At the same time, each of these chapters starts a new creation story, told in bits and pieces and completed at the end, giving the story within the larger framework a circular form.

### 5.3 Betrayal of Native Americans

The title of the novel, as Patricia Linton notices, already reflects the betrayal natives experienced in regards to the treaties made with the dominating powers. By compounding the theme to the point of predictability, it becomes a code, which the different characters can express in diverse manner. In quoting from King's text, she states:

The title of the novel is itself a metonymic allusion to the bad faith that separates Native and European Americans. It is a coded reminder of a history of appropriation and the instability of European intentions." As long as the grass is green and the waters run. It was a nice phrase all right. But it didn't mean anything. It was a metaphor. Eli knew that. Every Indian on the reserve knew that. They were contracts, and no one signed a contract for eternity."<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, the novel introduces a number of mythical and realistic characters and presents contemporary indigenous life as well as 'Native American' and non-native myths.

### 5.4 Introducing Coyote into the Discourse

One is the most prominent 'Native American' mythological trickster figure of Coyote, who is known in oral traditions to set the stage for things to happen when he comes along. Jay Cox reinstates Coyote's popularity when she states:

Coyote is going along, dancing on the rim of the world, truckin' down the highway, ambling through the desert, the forest, the prairie. Whether the trickster is rabbit, raven, old man or coyote, he/she has a popularity that runs deeper than cartoons, T-shirts, or postcards.<sup>71</sup>

Though more predominantly thought of as male, female coyotes are not unknown in either traditional or contemporary 'Native American' literature. Coyote's previous characterization as predominantly male and thought to be endowed with an exaggerated

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<sup>70</sup>Patricia Linton, "'And Here's How It Happened': Trickster Discourse in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*. 45 (1): Spring 1999, p. 218.

<sup>71</sup>Jay Cox, "Dangerous Definitions: Female Tricksters in Contemporary Native American Literature." *Papers Presented at the 24th Annual Meeting of Western Literature Association, Hosted by NIC* (Northern Idaho College) October 11th-14th. in Couer d'Alene, Idaho, p. 17.

phallus, may be due to the bias of male anthropological research i.e., to the previous collection and interpretation of trickster tales, as J. Cox has pointed out. Shane Phelan, who attempts to think through the way in which Coyote stories can illuminate lesbian or feminist politics, appears to understand this figure when she posits that Coyote stories challenge ideas of identity, since they can represent a being, able to shape-shift and embody aspects of other beings, while still remaining “itself.”<sup>72</sup>

This shape-shifting element in relation to Coyote and a creation story, is introduced by King’s opening words of the novel:

SO

In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water.

Coyote was there, but Coyote was asleep. That Coyote was asleep and that Coyote was dreaming. When that Coyote dreams, anything can happen.

I can tell you that.

So, that Coyote is dreaming and pretty soon, one of those dreams gets loose and runs around. Makes a lot of noise

Hooray, says that silly dream, Coyote dream. I’m in charge of the world. And then that dream sees all that water.[...]

“Who is making all that noise and waking me up?” says Coyote.<sup>73</sup>

With the opening lines, the reader is presented with an omniscient narrator, who paradoxically seems to equate “nothing” and “water” and signals that he is having a conversation from the first word onward by using the word “SO,” a word interjected and often used to bridge pauses in a flow of a story being told. In print, the word is left to stand apart from the next line and indicates a break or silence. The narrator then describes the sleeping and dreaming trickster figure, initially placing Coyote is on the same level as the water and nothing. Reassuring his readers/listeners with the words “I can tell you that,” the narrator sets the stage for things to happen around the figure of the sleeping/dreaming Coyote.

This dream however, this bit of imagination, “gets loose” and makes noise (oral sounds) which disturbs Coyote. Because the dream starts talking: “Hooray, says that silly dream, Coyote dream,” though the word “Hooray” is not put within quotation marks and underlines the uncertainty, Coyote awakes and wonders aloud, who is

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<sup>72</sup>Shane Phelan, “Coyote Politics: Trickster Tales and Feminist Futures.” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. 11 (3): 130-49. Summer 1996. p. 131.

<sup>73</sup>Thomas King, *Green Grass, Running Water*. Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993, hereafter referred to as “GG.”

making all that noise. The next sentence is placed ambiguously by King: “I am in charge of the world,” leaving it wide open as to who is claiming this,— who is making noise – the narrator, Coyote the dreamer, or the dream itself ?; and pointing to an on-going discourse around this topic. Immediately after this assertion, the narrator describes that the dream can *see* “all that water”! The reader can no longer be sure of whose dream this is or what a dream reveals by its pictures or sounds, or what capabilities a dream has.

After the dream makes *sad* noises Coyote awakes and begins to talk as well. In King’s ensuing text, the discussion of who is in charge of the world continues. The dream is then appointed by Coyote to be a dog, but the dream, preferring to be God, desires to know where all the water comes from. Coyote, who thinks the dog (and spells “God” backwards) has “no manners” instructs the dream “to not panic, to relax and watch some television,” (GG, p. 2) admitting that there really is water everywhere. Upon this, the narrator begins a story with: “And here is how it happened,” (GG, p. 2) underlining the play between imaginative storytelling and the concept of any perceived reality or origin.

King then introduces Lionel and his mother Norma talking realistically about a blue carpet, immediately followed by the narrator introducing the Lone Ranger and his versions of a story beginning with “Once Upon a time,” (GG, p. 7) a long time ago in a faraway land ...” (GG, p. 8) “many moons comechucka ... hahahahahahahahaha-haha.”, “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth (GG, p. 10) and finally “Gha!” said the Lone Ranger. “Higayv:lige:i.” (GG, p. 11) this unfamiliar sounding language is met with the approval from the other trickster figures: Hawkeye, Robinson Crusoe, and Ishmael. By using these cultural hero figures such as Ishmael of *Moby Dick*, who are familiar to the readers of Western literature, he can reframe this perspective by offering many versions of how to begin a story, finally including ‘Native American’ words and sounds. Using these elements to either distance the reader or to pull the reader into closer proximity via diverse elements of identification, which the reader is may or may not be familiar with, enables King, as author, to exercise utmost control of his ‘audience’ i.e., readers.

Within these frameworks, King places multi layered imaginative discourse, in which the different trickster figures tell their stories from their perspectives, but these

perspectives are again changed in the closing of the novel where Coyote, having listened, now thinks he has understood the story/stories and says:

“Okay, okay, here goes,” says Coyote. “In the beginning, there was nothing.”  
“Nothing?”  
“That’s right,” says Coyote. “Nothing.”  
“No,” I says, “ In.” the beginning there was just the water.  
“Water?” says Coyote.  
“Yes,” I says, “ Water.”  
“Hmmm,” says Coyote. “Are you sure?”  
“Yes,” I says, “I’m sure.”  
“Okay,” says Coyote, if you say so.” But where did all the water come from?”  
“Sit down,” I says to Coyote.  
“But there is water everywhere,” says Coyote.  
“That’s true,” I says. “And here is how it happened.”<sup>74</sup>

The humoristic ending, allows King to demonstrate that Coyote is not able to transcend the original paradoxical approximation of nothingness and water stated in the opening of the novel/story, because he is limited in his thinking and in need of more stories. This enables King to repeat his original point: only if one thinks linear or in a binary set of oppositions, does one think there was a beginning from a time perspective, that did not start with a story cycle or an imagined point of view, indicated by the first word in the novel: “SO.” Missing the cue, one would verbatim, as Coyote does, have registered only the words: “In the beginning there was nothing,” and forgotten the next sentence “Just the water.” If the reader identifies with Coyote’s characteristics too much, he/she, will have difficulty understanding what King via his narrator is trying to convey: a traditional ‘native’ American perspective and creation story, in which the water was already there, when Coyote was dreaming. More importantly, he/she might miss King’s demonstration of how the telling and interpretation of a particular story is related to the storyteller and the listener(s) imagined cultural perception of reality.

As Linton notices, the narrator and Coyote speaks in the present tense throughout the novel, though concepts of a past and future possibilities are intricately woven into the story being told. Commenting on the tricksters, she claims:

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<sup>74</sup>GG. p 360.

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, the narrative “I” is the voice of a trickster, the companion or alter ego of Coyote[...]Interspersed are conversations about six transcendent characters, who are both attempting to tell a proper story.[...] These transcendent figures include four Native elders(masquerading as Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye, but actually avatars of First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman)<sup>75</sup>

Linton observes that not all the figures act in the same space/ time context in the first half of the novel. Yet, even though they do not yet appear to be in dialogue, and the reader cannot be sure if they are within visual sight of each other, the different strands of the stories non the less indicate a shared consciousness among them. Their conversations often end with textual echoes such as “What else would you like to know?”(GG p. 41) establishing correlations among them. These correlations can also be noted in the following:

Have you got it straight? says Robinson Crusoe.  
Sure, says Thought Woman, I’ll be Robinson Crusoe. You can be Friday.  
But I don’t want to be Friday, says Robinson Crusoe.  
No point in being Robinson Crusoe all your life, says Thought Woman. It couldn’t be much fun.  
It would be a lot more fun if you would stop being stubborn, says Robinson Crusoe.  
All things considered, says Thought Woman. I’d rather be floating.  
And she dives into the ocean to float away.

“This is beginning to be boring” says Coyote. “How long is Thought Woman going to float around this time?”  
“Who knows?” I says.  
“I have to go back,” says Coyote. “How about I call you from the store to see what’s happening? How about I call you Friday? Hee-hee, hee-hee.”  
“Better call sooner than that,” I says. “By Friday, this story will be done.”<sup>76</sup>

In the above passage, King satirizes the figures familiar to the readers of Western civilization. Intertextually referring to Defoe’s text *Robinson Crusoe*, which has long been able to represent the canon of Western literature and has only recently been much criticized in its portrayal of the relationship between Robinson Crusoe and Friday as one typical of representing the colonizers attitude toward the ‘other,’ enables King, via his narrator and figure, to ridicule this thinking by pronouncing that this story will be over (by Friday) eliminating the need for this type of story, as it can be “done” with.

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<sup>75</sup>Patricia Linton, “‘And Here’s How It Happened’: Trickster Discourse in Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*.” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*. 45 (1): Spring 1999, p. 219.

<sup>76</sup>GG. p. 246.

Instead, he chooses to introduce a familiar 'Native American' figure, "Thought Woman." However, she remains resistant to the mere switching of cultural codes in the process of being renamed. Visually again set apart, indicating a break or silence, she insists on floating away, unbound by time and judgments made by Robinson Crusoe regarding her personality traits, and her imagined and perceived being. She speaks without the quotation marks, setting her being apart from ordinary conversation. Yet, very concretely she is described as diving into the water, indicating her real presence. With her own sense of humor she suggests Robinson may as well be Friday and tries to convince him there is no point in retaining his identity, as it "couldn't be much fun" anyway, which suggests she is aware of both cultural identities.

Coyote, concerned about himself, and wittingly attempting to call the narrator "Friday" now makes a joke, because he is bored. The narrator, in response, jokes back, by saying that the story will be finished in two days, which is funny, considering that Thought Woman has prior to the conversation articulated the fact, that it is Wednesday. This sort of imaginative intercultural play is typical in the novel.

### 5.5 Subversive Mimicry and the Privileged Point Of View

Dee Horne, who views King's discourse as a subversive mode of mimicry<sup>77</sup> observes:

While this might seem to be parodic inversion, it soon becomes apparent that King's strategy is neither simplistic reversal in which one set of colonial stereotypes is replaced by others nor merely a counter-discourse in which American Indians are now foregrounded and settlers constructed as others. Instead of engaging in colonial binary oppositions, King creates "contrapuntal" (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 51, 66-67) stories in which all things (even colonizers) are interconnected.<sup>78</sup>

Horne focuses more on the hybrid elements in the text, the academic play which King offers to his non native readers as bait, which is reinforced in the following responses to the puddle of water discovered on the road, when Norma, after humming a round dance song, stops the car:

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<sup>77</sup>Dee Horne, *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1999. p. 4.

<sup>78</sup>*ibid.* p. 29.

“WHERE DID THE WATER COME FROM?” said Alberta.

“Where did the water come from?” said Patrolman Delano.

“Where did the water come from?” said Sergeant Cerano.

“Where did the water come from?” said Lionel.<sup>79</sup>

(Note that the double space once more indicates silence or breaks in the story.) At first glance, the four questions seem to reflect a balance and mere repetition, mouthed by two natives and two non native police force members. However, Alberta’s question, the only female voice, is placed first and capitalized, indicating a different *tone of real concern* and setting her reaction to the puddle of water apart from the males, thereby revealing King’s satirical and hidden ‘trickster’ discourse, which mocks such simplistic views of balance and indicating the cross gender element in trickster figures and discourse.

## 5.6 Parody

King not only parodies linear Eurocentric grand narratives such as the Bible, but re-contextualizes them in a ‘Native American’ context. Again it is a woman, First Woman, who creates the garden and lives with “Ahdamn,” a man whose origins are unknown. After God lands in her garden and makes up Christian rules, claiming to own everything, refusing to share the food, the narrator relates the following to Coyote:

What a stingy person, says First Woman, and that one packs her bags. Lots of nice places to live, she says to Ahdamn. No point in having a grouchy G O D for a neighbor.

And first Woman and Ahdamn leave the garden.[...]

You can’t leave my garden, that G O D says to First Woman. You can’t leave because I am kicking you out.

But First Woman doesn’t hear him. She and Ahdamn move west.<sup>80</sup>

In his parody of Genesis, King can simultaneously tell his readers about the historical and geographical displacement of native tribes. He reconstructs the passivity into an active choice to move west, because they refuse to be intimidated by a selfish neighbor. The fact that First Woman is named first, stresses her importance. The fact, that she does not hear God (present tense) is stressed by the silence indicated by the double space and would serve as a reminder to ‘Native Americans’ that she was there

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<sup>79</sup>*ibid.* p. 81.

<sup>80</sup>*ibid.* p. 57.

first and still is, so how could she respond to Gods commands anyway? These commands obviously came/come from selfish Christian newcomers/ neighbors, who refuse to share the communal property. The 'You' in the fifth line, is set apart from the next line, indicating an entirely different conversation, as if someone else is saying: "can't leave, because I am kicking you out."

Further on in the text, upon discovering many dead rangers in the canyon, a reminiscence of Custer's army perhaps, First Woman then has to transform herself into the Lone Ranger to save her own life, reducing Ahdamn to the comical cartoon figure of Tonto, the Lone Ranger's side kick, reminding 'Native American' readers/listeners of their mythological strength derived from their own traditional stories and not American cartoons or historical and biblical myths.

### 5.7 Transcultural Aspects

The elements of the text constructed in such a manner probably prompt K. Fitz to see tricksters more as a strategy of cultural reconstruction taking place in a tale of transculturation on an intertextual level. He states:

King's comic transformations are fabricated from within a contemporary intellectual tribal perspective. They take place among different pre-texts and manifest themselves in the interaction between diverse literary characters and situations; those that are found, for instance, in Melville's *Moby Dick*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, or Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, on the one hand, and native tribal mythological characters, such as First Woman (Navajo, Abenaki), Changing Woman (Navajo), Thought Woman (Laguna, Pueblo, Keres Pueblo), and Old Woman (Blackfeet) on the other. It is essential to note, however, that these pretexts are not opposed to each other as part of a binary structure. Rather they interact with one another and form something new each time they are told.<sup>81</sup>

In his extensive research on the transculturation aspects of contemporary 'Native American' fiction, Fitz has undoubtedly discovered the deconstructed and transformed complexities within Kings intercultural play within the text, however he seems to have overlooked one important point : King does privilege a 'Native American' perspective. P. Linton has not overlooked this fact, when she writes:

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<sup>81</sup>Karsten Fitz, *Negotiating History and Culture*, p. 132

In the discourse of the contemporary literati scholar, there is a similar element of display with an ideological edge. In Thomas King's *Green Grass and Running Water* (1993), as in much contemporary American fiction in which alterity is an issue, the narrator demonstrates an insider's knowledge of two cultures: the heritage that defines a discrete cultural or ethnic community and the dominant culture's Euro-American tradition. Moreover, the narrator of *Green Grass and Running Water* commands not only a broad spectrum of general culture but also the high culture of literacy and other artistic production.<sup>82</sup>

Though King, via his narrator, makes use of all the strategies available in the "subversive mimicry" and polyphone discourses echoed in the text, as Dee Horne has already pointed out, he is essentially re-telling a creation story, accompanied by the range of familiar mythological trickster figures. The silences or pauses in a continuous story signaled by the word "SO," from the beginning of the text, establishes the storyteller's deep involvement with the figure of Coyote.

From an insider point of view, Coyote could be an imagined/ physical presence and would reinforce the confrontation with a traditional story being told. Read this way, the figure of Coyote, can serve as a signal for the audience to use their imagination in a way that Coyote repeatedly fails at, because of all the limitations he experiences, in spite of his powers. Coyote can be imagined to be acting like a reader of Western culture and at the same time, be a representative of the fluidity of imagination per se, within the entire range of human and religious and 'Native American' ambiguity, bringing any listener/reader of the story, via his mediating act, into contact with the four elders, their real or imagined presence in relation to their traditional and transformational qualities.

The four trickster figures, the elders, cannot change the world either, but must keep on trying to find solutions in the here and now to fix up the world. None need an explanation of how it all began (as Coyote does), nor need they know if creation should be called "nothing" or "water," since the beginning in a linear time concept simply does not matter from a native cosmological order. What does matter, is the imagination, as the confrontation with Coyote shows, and social relationships and tribal traditions, which may be changed or reaffirmed in any present situation, according to the perceived or imagined needs of the individual and the storytelling process within the group's perceptions.

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<sup>82</sup>Patricia Linton, 'And Here's How It Happened': Trickster Discourse in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*. *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*. 45 (1), 1999 Spring. p. 215.

King's play with the English language represents a surface accommodation to the dominating culture, exposing its now popular intercultural transformation dialogue and discourses to a point of absurdity; all the while revealing its unwillingness to negotiate around polyphone cultural views. He does not deconstruct language as much as he reasserts 'Native American' mythology, cosmic views, and innate strengths of transformation in traditional 'Native American' trickster figures, withholding information which might accommodate outsiders at the expense of 'Native Americans'. This is supported by his statement, "I really don't care about the white audience. They don't have an understanding of the intricacies in Native life, and I don't think they're much interested in it, quite frankly."<sup>83</sup> and by Isabel Schneider, who comes to the conclusion:

In all of his writing, King is careful not to 'tell too much' about the respective Native community. His goal is to convey its way of life and particular atmosphere indirectly and to give us a basic understanding of the social dynamics and cultural values by describing what he conceives as being the "parts of Native cultures that are more 'general consumption.'<sup>84</sup>

Therefore, the reader's insight is limited. The lives of his characters: Eli, Alberta, or Charly, who live in the city, are never extensively elaborated on. The reader does not learn what Norma is doing when she does not counsel Lionel, nor what Lionel's parents do. The fictional community in Blossom is never fully described and there are only a few flashbacks to give some more insight into the emotional lives of his main characters.

### 5.8 Trickster Humor

Glimpses of romantic notions, the type tourists might gain, are transmitted via Karen, Eli's wife, around the event of the Sun Dance, reflecting King's trickster discourse humor, as the following passage shows:

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<sup>83</sup>Robert A. Lee, "The Only Good Indian Is a Postindian? Controversialist Vizenor and Manifest Manners," in *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald Vizenor*. Bowling Green, OH: Popular, 2000. p. 174.

<sup>84</sup>King, unpublished conversation, in Schneider, Isabel: *We Have a Commonality and a Common Dream: The Indigenous North American Novel in the 1990s*. Peter Lang GmbH. Frankfurt am Main: Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1998. (European university studies: ser 14, Anglo-Saxon Language and Literature, Vol. 343, Diss. University of Giessen 1997). p. 167.

At first Karen was silent, content to listen, as Eli's mother ran through the families. The babies who had been born, the young people who had gone away or come back, the elders who had died or were sick. Each one was a story, and Eli's mother told them slowly, repeating parts as she went on, resting at points so that nothing was lost or confused. And then she would go on.<sup>85</sup>

Here the white person, Karen, becomes the 'silent Indian' personification, while the entire ancestry is reflected in the stories told by Eli's 'native' mother. Much like King, Eli's mother relies on stories and repetition to "go on," in other words: to tell more stories, resting at points (silences) to insure continuation.

At the same time, within a different frame of reference, the passage picks up the belief of survival being dependent on these stories and that confusion could be reduced by the "resting at points," the silences or omissions, in other words: when the approbation process stops. It is especially funny, because in the context of their visit, Eli, in response to Karen's romantic enjoyment of their visit, which she thinks he will equally miss, Eli appears to not be able to wait to leave the reservation.

Eli drove the car through the gravel and the ruts and the wash boards until he caught up with the main road to Calgary. And all the way across the prairies, he never looked back.  
Chapter twenty-six<sup>86</sup>

"All the way across the prairies, he never looked back," gives the scene another meaning altogether, depending on the perspective and what one looks back at might change the point of view. Yet King makes it clear, that this is only another fictitious story with his reminder of "Chapter twenty-six" which he then connects to "channel twenty six" on TV at the beginning of the next chapter and page, humorously reinforcing indigenous storytelling traditions by mimicking preconceived rules and notions of Euro-centric traditional written literature to the point of ridicule. Naturally, the reader has to look back to catch the humoristic trickster discourse.

## 5.9 Gender Aspects

King, much more than Vizenor, also empowers his women characters, of which the strongest are: First woman, who resists God and patriarchal dictates, Changing Woman who resists Noah and Ahab's rules, and Thought Woman who resists A.A. Gabriel and Robinson Crusoe. Throughout the text, the women are validated to be transmitters of culture and they have an ability to transform others. Norma, for in-

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<sup>85</sup>GG, p. 170.

stance, frequently gives advice to her nephew and encourages him to come home to the Sun Dance. Alberta is assertive, and sexually and emotionally independent, consciously wishing to choose the father of her child, yet ultimately she becomes pregnant after the ceremony at the Sun Dance, which indicates both parody of virgin birth and the Navajo myth of Changing Woman, who is believed to get pregnant from a ray of the sun and whose sister gets pregnant from a rain cloud.

King does not reduce women to being procreators or as submissive to men's wishes. When Noah, for example tells Changing Women that it is time for procreating, but she refuses to comply, Gabriel refuses to acknowledge her refusal:

So, says, A. A. Gabriel, you really mean yes, right?  
No, says Thought Woman.  
But that's the wrong answer, says A. A. Gabriel. Let's try this again.  
Let's not, says Thought Woman, and that one gets back in the water.<sup>87</sup>

She slips back into the "water," the element of creation and her "let's not," additionally emphasized by the spacing in the text, affirms her free choice of speech and movement therein. A.A. Gabriel's story, indicated by the "So" and his interpretation of her is pointless and rejected by Thought Woman. The four male/female Indian tricksters, along with Norma, Latisha, Alberta, and Babo are also able to transform the "mimic men" and as Dee Horne points out about King's female characters:

They teach the men to value who they are and to reject colonial mimicry. Eli returns to his mother's log cabin and resists the dam project. Eli's name eludes to Eli in the Bible who stands alone and ignores the prophesy about the downfall of the house. Eli's name and his injunctions which impede progress on the dam also recall Elijah Harper and the role he played in the Meech Lake Accord in 1987.<sup>88</sup>

This way, King can restage, question – and offer an alternative to – the dominating patriarchal and capitalist discourse in American society. In the end it is Norma who points to a new future, yet building the cabin in the same place where Eli died and reassuring continuation of the native ancestry and communal roots, which are tied up with the land and the creation story i.e., the water.

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<sup>86</sup>GG, p. 171.

<sup>87</sup>GG, p. 227.

<sup>88</sup>Dee Horne, *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1999. pp. 46, 47.

### 5.10 The Author's Political Criticism

With his many diverse techniques, King seems to suggest that there is a need to re-write American history and reposition myths surrounding the history of 'Native Americans'. For instance Old Woman, another mythic trickster figure, is arrested and deported to Fort Marion, Florida. The only way she can save her life is by assuming another identity (GG, p. 330). She is able to save herself from being shot by the soldiers, who cannot find her name in the book, by assuming the identity of Hawkeye. Ironically she is ultimately arrested for trying to impersonate a white man.

With this incident, King can allude to the 1874 U.S. Army campaign against the Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche, and Arapaho tribes, who were forced onto the reservations. The leaders who refused, and those who had been in raids, were imprisoned in Fort Marion, which served as a military prison for many years and which held Geronimo, the famous leader of the Chiricahua Apaches in 1886.<sup>89</sup>

### 5.11 The Western Movie Hero

Another repositioning of mainstream thinking takes place in the trickster discourse around the Hollywood movie industry, which has portrayed 'Indians' either as noble or ignoble savages for so long. *Eli Stands Alone*, for example, reads dime store novels and Westerns, helping to establish this theme and the underlying fictions involved. King's character, Portland, goes to Hollywood in the 1950's and takes part in several B rated Westerns. He has to wear a rubber nose and a wig to comply with the image ascribed to the Indians. These Indians are "a tight community of Mexicans, Italians, Greeks, along with a few Indians, some Asians and whites" (GG p. 153).

By changing his name from Portland Looking Bear to Iron Eyes Screeching Eagle, he can move from "a few roles as an extra in crowd scenes" (GG p. 127). Portland is portrayed as a tragic figure, who is transformed by the help of the four ancient Indians, who fix the Western in which he plays. A highly comic scene takes place on Lionel's fortieth birthday in Bill Bursum's Home Entertainment Barn.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>Karsten Fitz, *Negotiating History and Culture*, p. 152.

<sup>90</sup>Karsten Fitz, *Negotiating History and Culture*, p. 152, 154. "The Bursum Bill (1921) was a legal attack on the Pueblos in New Mexico, whose culture and social structures were largely untouched by American influences. The bill dealt with a claim by a few squatters who had settled on Pueblo land between 1876 and 1912, and provided that the Pueblos had to prove their legal title to the land. The name also reminds American audiences of the famous circus Barnum and Bailey, which often toured America.

Bill Bursum shows “the best Western of them all” (GG, p. 157) starring Richard Widmark and John Wayne on “The Map,” which is a huge television screen modeled after the map of the United States and Canada and can be interpreted as the newcomers appropriation of the empty space called America. Suddenly however, at the peak of the movie, the four elder’s sing a ceremonial song and the movie turns from black and white to color, the cavalry disappears and “none of the Indians fell” (GG, p. 267, 268).

John Wayne looked down and stared stupidly at the arrow in his thigh, shaking his head in amazement and disbelief as two bullets ripped through his chest and out the back of his jacket. Richard Widmark collapsed facedown in the sand, his hands clutching at an arrow buried in his throat.<sup>91</sup>

By rewriting the image of the Western heroes, King can reverse the victim and victor position, mock the genre and the cultural self-perception of the American public and undermine its notion of superiority, control, and progress – its false iconization and historical myths. Simultaneously, King can point to the fictitious wish (after all it is only a movie and entertainment), that this reversal strategy could solve a problem in the every day lives of his protagonists. It seems that the imaginative act involved in the tricksters ceremonial song is more important than any acts performed, because even Bursum’s fiddling about with the remote control prior to the fixing up of the movie does nothing more than turn up the volume of a sound (p. 266). King plays with the themes of absence and otherness and their relationship to cultural identity, so notorious in American Western movies. In Armando Prats’ *Invisible Natives*, in which numerous movies are discussed in relation to these themes, Prats concludes:

The native forever confronts the fragility of his culture because he constantly faces the overwhelming power of the conqueror’s own, most imposingly, perhaps, in the images that do mythology’s work of national self-identification. To be sure, the Myth of conquest can hardly change its spots. Its hero will forever be the one on whose ability to become Other the Same pinned in its millennial hopes, and mythology will long continue to cast America as a nation that had to appropriate – and by appropriating destroy – another culture in order to acquire its own identity. The Western performs the curiously ambivalent role of reminding the nation of its encounter with the Indian even as it endeavors to present the resolution of that conflict as the origin of the nation.<sup>92</sup>

This shows how closely these movies are linked to the colonial conquest and in turn to the appropriation of mythological identities constructed around ‘Native Americans’.

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<sup>91</sup>GG, p. 268.

<sup>92</sup>Armando Jose Prats, *Invisible Natives: Myth & Identity in the American Western*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. p. 287.

The American struggle with this topic of identity and nationhood is recast in King's novel as a type of entertainment, which needs to be changed and healed by four tricksters singing and changing the ending of the movie in such a way, that Western readers are confronted with the image of two well known male actors as dumbfounded and dying heroes, not at all in control of their surroundings.

Altogether and in line with post-modern genre boundary breaking, King's trickster discourse "subverts master narratives, plots, identities, stereotypes, the status quo, and dominant forms"<sup>93</sup> and reflects the strong oral tradition of Native trickster tales, which for King appear to be more significant to 'Native American' identity.

## 6 LOUISE ERDRICH: LOVE MEDICINE

### 6.1 Biography

Born in Little Falls, Minnesota on July 6th, 1954 and growing up in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where her parents taught at the Bureau of Indian Affairs School, Louise was encouraged to write from an early age onward. She was one of the first woman admitted to Dartmouth College in 1972, where she majored in English. In 1979, she earned her Masters of Arts in writing at the John Hopkins University and began her first novel titled *Tracks*. Afterwards she worked at *The Circle*, the Boston Indian Council newspaper. In 1981 she married Michael Dorris, who became her collaborator and agent. Together, under the name of Milou North, they began writing to earn extra money. A collection of travel essays *The Crown of Columbus* and *Route Two*, were two works that contained both their names. Dorris encouraged her to publish a collection of poems titled *Jacklight*, which she had written for her master's thesis. He also convinced her to compete for the \$5,000 Nelson Algren Fiction Award with "The World's Greatest Fisherman." This story later became the opening chapter of the novel *Love Medicine*.

Together with Dorris, who had already adopted three children, the couple had three more children, of which the oldest was killed in a car crash in 1991. After fifteen years and a strained marriage, the two separated. Dorris, who had battled depression

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<sup>93</sup>Shackleton, Mark, "Native North American Writing and Postcolonialism." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*. 7:2, 2001. p. 77.

for some time, committed suicide in 1997. Erdrich returned to Minneapolis, a few hours away from her parents in North Dakota.

Erdrich's mother is of Chippewa ancestry. Her father is German-American. Her novels reflect both her heritage and her life experiences. She has written many novels including *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, *The Bingo Palace*, *Tales of Burning Love* and *The Antelope Wife*; together they feature a whole array of trickster figures, which tend to transgress trickster traditions.

*Love Medicine* however, is Erdrich's first and most acclaimed novel. Originally published in 1984, it was republished in 1993 in expanded form, indicating that tricksters cannot be contained even in a single story.

## 6.2 Plot Structure and Themes

The novel does not contain a plot in the conventional sense. Spanning the time between 1934 and 1984, Erdrich presents the mysterious disappearance of her character, June Kashpaw, into a snowy field. The rest of the novel is concerned with how those who knew or are still influenced by her, come to grips with her physical absence and her imagined ongoing presence. The cast of characters Erdrich presents (for example, June's niece, her aunts, her lover, her husband and her sons, etc.) are all part of the Kashpaw and Nanapush/Pillager clan and interconnect the entire community.

A main theme in the plot focuses on June's son, Lipsha Morrissey, who feels abandoned by his mother and is unaware that June is his biological mother. Raised by Marie Kashpaw, June's aunt, whom he considers his grandmother, his search for identity is described from several different angles. Ultimately, his choice to believe in the heritage, revealed to him by his newly discovered biological grandmother, Lulu Lamartine, gives him a different sense of belonging within this extended and interwoven family.

Erdrich writes a multiphonic story—in which the author switches literary points of view—about June's trickster-like (liminal) paradox of absence and presence. In this story the figure of June, and the diverse narrators, help create and bind the characters in the novel together, in spite of the fact that June never tells the reader her own story. Each of the fourteen chapters, told by these various characters/ narrators, reflect a unique point of view on June's disappearance, her life and her death, and how

this relates to June's past and to her present burial place, which however, is never visited and only talked about as an intentional visit (LM p. 26.)

### 6.3 Storytelling and Identity

Consequently, these points of view portray the ongoing and imaginative relationship, the personal involvement with this figure and her past, present, and future. In switching back and forth between first and third person narrator and different non-linear and non-chronologically ordered time periods, Erdrich can underline the instability of any truth told or perceived. At the same time, it allows Erdrich to focus on how rumor, imagination, and conversation can collectively and repeatedly form a truth about a perceived event, thereby underlying the consensual storytelling element in reported historical accounts or facts. In doing so, Erdrich, like Vizenor and King, challenges the reader to reflect upon this process and to question any attempt at a finite or solitary logical interpretation of discourse or of trickster figures therein.

Additionally, because June's son, Lipsha, does not come to discover his identity until the end of the novel, Erdrich can closely link the quest for personal identity to this process of storytelling and stress the link to the shaping of a cultural identity: pointing to the collective performance/ play and oral tradition in 'Native American' perception as well. This in turn underlines the perpetual fluidity of any definition and discourse, transgresses the liminal space between fixed cultural borders.

### 6.4 Fleur, A Mythological Female Trickster

From the start, the figure of June points the reader to another important figure named Fleur Pillager, possibly Lipsha's great-grandmother. As Caroline Rosenthal describes in her discussion of Erdrich's tetralogy:

In *Love Medicine* Fleur works like a subtext. Fleur Pillager is first introduced to the readers by rumors as omnipresent absence. Although she makes no appearance in *Love Medicine*, the reader's curiosity is piqued as we participate in the gossip and speculation about her. In almost every chapter, a character refers to her uncanny powers and her unusual way of living. Rumor has it that Fleur can work magic, that she is favored by the water monster, Missheppeshu, and that she owns that land by the lake Matchimanito.<sup>94</sup>

Rosenthal's observation of Fleur's trickster presence, as a 'leitmotif' throughout the novel, shows how the figure of June cannot be understood comprehensively by non-

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<sup>94</sup>Rosenthal, Caroline: *Native Deconstructions of Gender in Works of Audrey Thomas, Daphne Marlatt, and Louise Erdrich*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003. p. 128.

native readers in its multi layered construction without at least possessing some familiarity with the 'Native American' mythological context, which surrounds this figure. June, I would suggest, is the current version of the older mythological Chippewa figure named Fleur, who features in most of Erdrich's other novels as well, and can only be accessed by the reader familiar with 'Native American' myths. From the opening lines, Erdrich makes it clear that the novel is concerned not only with bringing June home, but also points to her liminal qualities.

The morning before Easter Sunday, June Kashpaw was walking down the clogged main street of oil boomtown Williston, North Dakota, killing time before the noon bus arrived that would take her home. She was a long-legged Chippewa woman, aged hard in every way except how she moved. Probably it was the way she moved, easy as a young girl on slim hard legs, that caught the eye of the man who rapped at her from inside the window of the Rigger Bar. He looked familiar, like a lot of people looked familiar to her. She had seen many come and go.<sup>95</sup>

The narrator guesses as to the seemingly stereotypical reason the man is prompted to notice her, supposing it to be her 'movement,' but leaving the interpretation open. It may well be her ambiguous quality, this enduring agility, instead, which catches the "eye" of the man, who is enclosed behind the window of a bar, having to make sounds to be noticed. After his "rapping" on the window, thereby being heard, he appears to look visually familiar to June but only "like a lot of people" look to her, indicating an erasure of his individuality. This allows Erdrich to play and reverse the stereotyping of oral 'Native American' and, predominant in the age of enlightenment, visual cultural attributes.

Erdrich, via her narrator places June outside, moving freely about, while the man is contained inside the bar. The narrator seems to be informed about June's past, indicated by the past tense in "she had seen" and describes June as having the ability to have seen "many" in this group of men come and go. Whether these men belong to the larger group of "people" is not clearly defined.

In the quoted passage, "aged hard" indicates how old this figure is, in spite of her youthful agility alluded to as "easy as a young girl on slim hard legs." Together they make the ambiguity of June's characteristics clear to the reader. Additionally, "slim" evokes fragility and hunger and is put in opposition with "hard," which indicates unyielding strength and durability, and can be seen as alluding to familiar

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<sup>95</sup>Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. p. 1 (hereafter referred to as LM).

themes in 'Native American' tribal history, such as the long periods of starvation, which had to be endured by the tribes during the European colonization.

June's visual perception underlines her current female experiences with men's arrivals and departures, placing her as well as the man in the context of being mere object and evoking stereotypical gender images such as the "Indian squaw." However, the words "come and go" in the above passage, when taken in a more metaphorical sense, underline her powerful experiences with births and deaths. This enables Erdrich, via the narrator, to link the figure of June Kashpaw to the older mythological trickster and oral tribal figure of Fleur, a medicine woman, who is capable of surviving drowning by forcing others to take her place, and whose descendents reflect an aura of uncertainty as far as their true ancestry is concerned.<sup>96</sup>

Erdrich also places June in close association to a Christian religious context, but prior to Jesus' ascent to heaven. The lines: "The morning before Easter Sunday" already indicates the oppositional play and discourse throughout the novel between 'Native American' mythology and Christian myths. "Killing time" before the "noon bus" comes to take June home, can also be understood as a rejection of chronological or linear time and intertextually point to popular and stereotypical movie Westerns such as *High Noon*.

### 6.5 Male Tricksters

Erdrich's plentitude of tricksters, sometimes with opposing qualities as in the case of Lipsha and his father Gerry Nanapush, help form the shape shifting element of trickster figures, allowing trickster's identity to remain in perpetual motion. Lipsha is based on the traditional origin myth in which Nanabozho, an emissary of Kitche Manitou, the Great Spirit, learns from his grandmother Nookomis that his mother has been stolen by a powerful wind spirit at his birth. Nanabozho sets out on a journey to find her and finally meets the gambler, with whom he has to gamble over the destiny of his people. Nanabozho beats the gambler through trickery and triumphantly returns to his people.

Similarly, Lipsha Morissey, whose mother has disappeared into the snow, learns about his parents from his grandmother, Lulu Lamartine. His quest for identity

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<sup>96</sup>A more detailed account of Fleur is found in: Beidler, G. Peter, and Gay Barton: *A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1999. p. 97.

ends with his triumphant poker game in which he, his dad and his father's traitor, Lipsha's half brother, King Kashpaw, gamble over the car, which aids Lipsha's father's trickster like escape across the Canadian border toward the end of the novel. (LM 262) Lipsha's perception of the poker game is described in the following passage:

Gerry shoved the deck across the table at me and nodded that it was my deal. His face was cool and serene, like the pictures of those Chinese Gods. So I shuffled carefully. I saw the pattern of it happen in my mind. I dealt the patterns out with perfect ease, keeping strictly to Lulu's form.  
I dealt a pair to King.  
Gerry got a straight.  
And myself? I dealt myself a perfect family. A royal flush.<sup>97</sup>

Gerry, his trickster father, passes on the cards (the ability to gamble) to Lipsha to win, which he does by cheating in trickster like fashion and symbolizes continuation. By previously crimping the cards, therefore cheating as his grandmother taught him, he is able to see 'the pattern' and beat everyone in the game, bringing him home to the family.

However, Erdrich's trickster figure, Lipsha Morrisey, also functions as the trickster, who gets tricked himself. As Claudia Gutwirth<sup>98</sup> notes in her discussion of tricksters variation in Erdrich's novels, Lipsha undergoes a variety of "seriocomic trials." He not only succeeds in helping his father escape, but bungles his gift of "the touch" (LM p. 190) which he is told by his grandfather: "I been chosen for it." (LM p. 190). In addition, Lipsha makes a wrongheaded decision to join the army. Lipsha's significance relates to how he plays with language as well. His verbal retropings, which include his expression of perplexity "I was in a laundry then" (LM p. 192) or in describing his brothers anger with "his frequent leaves of sense" (LM p. 249) shows that Erdrich can use this figure to describe the metaphorical operation of language and points out that the word metaphor derives from the Greek word meaning "to cross over," "to carry across."<sup>99</sup> Describing his experience with love medicine, Lipsha says:

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<sup>97</sup>LM pp. 263-264.

<sup>98</sup>Claudia Gutwirth, "Stop Making Sense: Tricksters Variation in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," in Jeanne Campell Reesman, *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2001. p. 160.

<sup>99</sup>*ibid.* p.153. Gutwirth also points out that the word metaphor derives from the Greek word meaning to cross over, to carry across.

But love medicine is not for the layman to handle. You don't just go out and get one without paying for it. Before you get one, even, you should go through a lot of mental condensation. You got to think it over. Choose the right one.<sup>100</sup>

Gutwirth appropriately recognizes the significance of this trope of “mental condensation,” which she asserts, is not to be mistaken for mental concentration, but is a trope of condensation, “– that is metaphor for a metaphor, a figure for language itself.” In addition to Lipsha’s conclusion about the way he botched up his concoction of the love medicine, which ends up with Nector choking to death, the trope of mental condensation can certainly apply to Erdrich’s discourse itself. Mental condensation points to how meaning is formed. By placing the traditional trickster, Lipsha, in storytelling interrelations, Erdrich defies closure and points to the process of creating meaning communally.

Lipsha’s father, Gerry Nanapush, on the other hand, does not experience a homecoming like his son. Erdrich portrays this trickster more as a comic healer and liberator, who is attempting to purge Anishinaabe /Chippewa culture from destructive stereotypical beliefs. Originally he is imprisoned for being involved in a bar fight with a cowboy, who claims that his testicles have been permanently damaged from this event. Though he is political hero, who has worked for A.I.M., the American Indian Movement and has smoked many kinnikinnik pipes in radical groups, Erdrich has Lyman Lamartine say: “Gerry’s problem, you see, was he believed in justice, not laws.” (LM p. 161) This can be interpreted as an allusion to the many injustices experienced by ‘Native Americans’ under government laws, for example the Dawes Act in 1887<sup>101</sup> or the forced placement of children into boarding schools.<sup>102</sup>

Gerry is also physically huge and very tall, reminding the reader of Indian stereotypes, which have been portrayed in films like: *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*, in which a “big, silent Indian” heroically escapes from the insane asylum.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>LM, p. 199.

<sup>101</sup>Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.): *Contemporary American Women Writers: Gender, Class Ethnicity*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited Inc., 1998. p. 181 Zamora gives a more detailed account of the various policies leading to the loss of tribal grounds. The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 codified a turn in government policy, disrupting trivial ways of life by establishing reservations, confining tribes so that white settlers could claim more territory.

<sup>102</sup>James Axtell, *Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Chapter 7, “Dr. Wheelock’s Little Red School,” traces the founding and development of the first school for natives by Elezor Wheelock in 1765 in Lebanon, Connecticut.

<sup>103</sup>*One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*, Los Angeles, California: United Artists, 1975.

More than anything, Gerry too appears as the perfect trickster escape artist as the following passage shows:

He was mainly in the penitentiary for breaking out of it, anyway, since for his crime of assault and battery he had received three years and time off for good behavior. He just never managed to serve those three years or behave well. He broke out time after time, and was caught each time he did it, regularly as clockwork.

Gerry was talented at getting out, that's a fact. He boasted that no steel or concrete shitbarn could hold a Chippewa, and he had eel-like properties in spite of his enormous size. Greased with lard once, he squirmed into a six-foot-thick prison wall and vanished.<sup>104</sup>

Erdrich's humorous description, mouthed by Lyman, captures most of trickster's attributes only to have them vanish again. Erdrich, via her character, metaphorically describes the essence of trickster's qualities to her audience.

The first sentence can be interpreted as giving the only reason people, especially western academics, to whom the trickster is an unfamiliar challenge, attempt to pin trickster figures down: because of the fascination with the impossibility of this undertaking. The break in the flow of the words is indicated by the word 'anyway,' after the first statement. It can be read/heard as belonging to the next sentence as well: thereby changing the meaning to a reasoning for this trickster's misbehavior and conduct. Since for this type of assault on the trickster figure, he is imprisoned and only gets "time off for good behavior," which is not enough and quite impossible, considering the more well known negative trickster traits of cheating, lying, gluttony, etc., it is only logical that he must escape this prison. For all those times, a trickster does not behave well, he is noticed and confined again, which really works like repetitive clockwork. Of course, a 'Native American' would know all the other ambiguous, humorous and not definable qualities of the trickster and realize his talent of being able to transgress this limited view, prison, and progressive clock time.

Gerry's "eel-like qualities, in spite of his enormous size" can evoke the sexual connotations often attributed to Coyote for instance, who as already mentioned, is repeatedly associated with the image of possessing a large penis and an insatiable sexual appetite. Here Erdrich refers less to the size than the slippery motions of the male/female apparatus, thereby cross gendering the trickster in Lyman's narration by the approximation of the description of sexual organs of both genders.

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<sup>104</sup>LM, p. 160.

The meaning of “Greased with lard” in the last two sentence also works several ways: “lard” or fat can be associated with food or even the lack of it, or refer to sexual pleasure gained by the help of oils and the like. The sexual talk is then put in opposition to the “six foot thick” prison wall, which evokes connotations of a grave or coffin, and plays with the romantic idea of the “vanishing and dying Indian” already indicated by June’s disappearance; allowing diverse play of different discourses.

Gerry Nanapush, who has previously managed to create another child with Dot, while being under the surveillance of the prison guards and who turns out to be June’s first lover, vanishes only to show up at Dot’s, his pregnant girlfriend’s, place shortly afterwards, attesting to his continuous trickster vitality!

This trickster figure works on many levels throughout the novel as Ruppert<sup>105</sup> notes. On a sociological level, he is a political hero. On a psychological level he is presented as a loving husband and father, who is motivated by personal passion. His communal identity is closely linked to being the son of Old Man Pillager<sup>106</sup> and Lulu Lamartine. In post-modern America he is the ancient warrior rebelling against the institutions. On the mythological plane, he comes to represent Nanabozho as well. Both figures allow Erdrich to combine diverse narrative trickster identities.

#### 6.6 Other Female Trickster Figures

By presenting such a wide variety of tricksters and interweaving them into a larger collective perception, Erdrich is able to escape a universal meaning of the tricksters in her text, enabling her to negotiate across the diverse cultures and to create a new discourse. This is underlined by the way two rival female figures, Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine, who both love the same man, Nector Kashpaw, are envisioned to resolve their long standing conflict and feelings of jealousy. Nector, who has a five year affair with Lulu, while married to Marie chokes to death while being fed Lipsha’s love medicine of frozen turkey hearts by Marie. The finality of his death is questioned by Lulu with lines like “Nector Kashpaw did not die by drowning, but he wandered for awhile.” (LM p. 234) and her claim that she was visited by him from “the other side” (.LM p. 234). Marie also sees Nector’s presence in her room after his death.

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<sup>105</sup>James Ruppert, *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. p. 147.

<sup>106</sup>Moses Pillager, “Crossing the Water,” in G. Peter Beidler and Gay Barton, *A Reader’s Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1999. p. 183.

Together in the old age home called Senior Citizens, Erdrich places Lulu's reminiscences in the year 1983 and let's her describe the resolution of her antagonism with Marie, who is assisting her with her eye drops, in the following passage:

"You were always too busy taking children in," I told her.  
Then there was something I had to get off my chest.  
"I appreciate you coming here to help me get back my vision," I said. "But the truth is, I have no regrets."  
"That's all right." "She was almost impersonal in her kindness.  
Her voice had lightened. "There's a pattern of three lines in the woods."  
I didn't understand, so she put it another way.  
"Somebody had to put the tears back into your eyes."  
We fell to hearing the music again.  
She did not mention Nector's funeral. We did not talk about Nector. He was already there. Too much might start the floodgates flowing and our moment would be lost. It was enough just to sit there without words. We mourned him the same way together. That was the point. It was enough. For the first time I saw exactly how another woman felt, and it gave me deep comfort, surprising. It gave me the deep knowledge that whatever happened the night before, and in the past, would finally be over once my bandages came off.<sup>107</sup>

Erdrich's poetic passage is an excellent piece of trickster discourse. The two women are portrayed as overcoming their competitive boundaries. Yet, the reader needs to remember that Lulu, the one who teaches Lipsha to cheat at cards, is a trickster herself, posing the question of whether she can be believed in her account of women's solidarity? Or is this mere possibility, a vision the author relays to the reader instead? Erdrich links this possibility to Lulu's ability to have visions, jokingly placed in the real context of "bandages" over her eyes and needing assistance from Marie for the needed eye drops. The tears, not the words, seem to reinforce the possibility of the dissolution of their old feud, now that Nector has physically, but not spiritually, left the women. Above all, "the music" and the silence seems to connect the two women in the here and now of their conversation as well. The ritual of mutual mourning without Nector's physical presence "is the point" and stressed by the repetition of "it was enough."

Unlike Vizenor and King, Erdrich emphasizes the emotional side of female tricksters much more throughout her novel, yet she remains consistently within an unstable post-modern, and cross gendering discourse of the trickster figure. In turn, this forces the reader into an active participation in need of sorting out the multivocal trickster discourses and realities presented.

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<sup>107</sup>LM, pp. 235, 236.

## 6.7 Transgendered Tricksters

As Rosenthal has noted, Erdrich “practices what could be called transgenderation” (Rosenthal claims, “Only those characters who draw on feminine as well as masculine gender codes and incorporate one code into the other, survive in the novels.”)<sup>108</sup> Aside from his female name, Beverly’s characteristics are described differently by different people. Marie Kashpaw sees him as “a make-good, shifty type who would hang Lulu for a dollar.” (LM p. 102). However, Lulu, who marries Beverly in her third marriage, describes him as appearing “out of nowhere” (LM p. 222) and as someone who seems to be “lost and dazed,” “as if he had been sleepwalking.” She claims: “I had a fond spot in my heart for Beverly. He was a smooth, mild man and I thought he wouldn’t give me any trouble once I had him.” (LM p. 222). The narrator’s voice sums the cross gendered aspects up, when describing Lulu’s passionate reacquaintance with Beverly:

He was not man or woman. None of that mattered. Yet he was more of a man than he’s ever been. The grief of loss for the beloved made their tiny flames of life so sad so precious it hardly mattered who was what. The flesh was only given so that the flame could touch in a union however less than perfect.<sup>109</sup>

In the above passage, Erdrich is obviously playing with the gender attributes of the trickster figure as they relate to the concept of identity. Neither solely male or female, yet a man in Lulu’s perception, Erdrich can stress the unimportance of a reductive gendered view. Like most of Erdrich’s characters, characters like Beverly reappear in her other novels and thereby repeatedly connect the community at large. As Jeanne Smith has pointed out, these transformational qualities are a way of tying the self to a transpersonal, communal, and mythological identity, in which “bodies become boundaries, outer layers that limit and define individuals,”<sup>110</sup> helping preserve the cultural survival of the Anishinaabe/Chippewa/ people.

## 6.8 Dissolving Boundaries

The strongest identities are portrayed by those characters, which are able to dissolve their own physical boundaries. Albertine Johnson, for instance, whose voice is re-

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<sup>108</sup>Caroline Rosenthal, *Native Deconstructions of Gender in Works of Audrey Thomas, Daphne Marlatt, and Loise Erdrich*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003. p. 110.

<sup>109</sup>LM. p. 87.

<sup>110</sup>Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Literature*. Berkely, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997. p. 74.

flected in more than one chapter, experiences a mystical merging with the northern lights as she lies in a field with Lipsha, her cousin.

Northern lights. Something in the cold, wet atmosphere brought them out. I grabbed Lipsha's arm. We floated into the field and sank down, crushing green wheat ... Everything seemed to be one piece. The air, our faces, all cool, moist, and dark, and the ghostly sky [...] At times the whole sky was ringed in shooting points and puckers of light gathering and falling, pulsing, fading, and rhythmical as breathing. All of a piece. As if the sky were a pattern of nerves and out thought and memories traveled across it. As if the sky were one gigantic memory for us all. Or a dancehall. And all the world's wandering souls were dancing there. I thought of June. She would be dancing if there was a dance hall in space. She would be dancing a two-step for wandering souls. Her long legs lifting and falling. Her laugh an ace [...] Her amusement at both the bad and the good.<sup>111</sup>

In the above passage, Albertine's vision, underlined by the repetition, which evokes oral elements, of "all of a piece" seems to transgress time and space, interrelating everything both physically and mentally. The sky becomes the metaphor for memory in which the trickster figure of Fleur, as represented by June and her "amusement" over simple dichotomies such as "good and bad," can unite the dead in the afterworld by joyfully dancing. Akin to Anishinaabe/Chippewa myth and a less exclusionary image of heaven, because almost all of the tribe members were admitted there, it stresses the opposition to the Western image of heaven. June, as representative of Fleur, can create the northern lights and can be linked to the trickster and mythological gambler with her "ace." With Albertine's open to interpretation vision, indicated by the metaphor and choice of: "or a dance hall," Albertine can overcome a sense of loneliness and alienation and reestablish her sense of connection to her family.

Erdrich's trickster figures then, are infinite, intertwined and highly ambiguous. Western discourse and native myths are criss-crossed and open imaginative spaces for the reader. She employs a number of narrative strategies which disrupt the gender stereotypes, deconstructing stories and specific frames, all the while questioning the familiar role models and images. Her female figures deconstruct the typical stereotypes and imagine women as incorporating a rich variety of characteristics, ranging from mere victims, caretakers, to powerful avengers. Her male figures are portrayed as emotional beings, often unafraid to shed tears or to show their feelings. Reflecting concepts like ethnicity, gender, and sex, she offers the reader a different set of possibilities from the ones they are accustomed to.

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<sup>111</sup>LM. pp. 34-35.

## 6.9 Criticism

However, with her shift of perspectives, she also confuses the reader unable to understand her reassertion and mixture of tribal traditions and myths. By deconstructing mental stereotypes as to hinder the reduction of complexities, there is a lurking danger of diminishing historical and political foregrounding. Though one can not claim that her novel to be apolitical, it certainly only makes subtle reference to the historical events which have transpired and effected the “Native Americans.” This indicates that Erdrich’s novel reflects the crisis in American historicism of which she seems well aware of. She does not seem to be part of an ontological reduction of historical events in Linda Hutcheson’s sense of definition,<sup>112</sup> but can be considered to be emphasizing history’s connection to narrative and oral dialogue, reflective of new historicist insights. In Erdrich’s novel, past events are given *meaning* more than *existence* and Leslie Silko, who finds the lack of politics and history intruding in her second novel *Beet Queen*, written in 1986 and after *Love Medicine*, has criticized Erdrich for “the self-referential writing” she practices. In Silko’s view Erdrich novel lack authentic political and historical commitment. To see if Silko herself propagates this, I shall turn to Silko and her novel *Ceremony*.<sup>113</sup>

## 7 LESLIE MARMON SILKO: CEREMONY

### 7.1 Biography

Leslie Silko was born in 1948 in Albuquerque, New Mexico and grew up on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation. She is of mixed Laguna, Mexican, and white ancestry. After receiving her degree in 1969, she began law school and participated in creative writing classes. In 1971, she gave up studying law in order to teach and write. She has taught in Alaska and holds academic appointments in both The University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and at the Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona.

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<sup>112</sup>Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.): *Contemporary American Women Writers: Gender, Class Ethnicity*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited Inc., 1998. p. 177. Hutcheson in the *Politics of Post-modernism* argues that postmodern culture does not renounce history, but points out that it can only be known through its textual traces.

<sup>113</sup>Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*. New York: Penguin Books, 1978. Referred to hereafter as *Ceremony*.

Her first short story was published in 1969 and her first book, a collection of poems titled *Laguna Women Poems* was released in 1974. Her writings include *Western Stories* (1980), *Storyteller* (1981), *Delicacy and Strength of Lace* (1986), *Almanac of the Dead: A Novel* (1991), *Yellow Women* and *A Beauty of the Spirit Essays* (1996), *Love Poem* and *Slim Man Canyon* (1999), and *Garden in the Dunes* (1999). Her first major novel *Ceremony* was published in 1977 and received wide critical acclaim. Considered to be a star of the 'Native American Renaissance,' she is also a political activist<sup>114</sup> and believes storytelling to be a ritual ceremony, linking indigenous people<sup>115</sup> to the mystical elements in nature.

## 7.2 Plot

In this novel, Tayo, a young man of mixed decent, son of a 'Native American' prostitute and a white father, experiences an identity crisis. Tayo, who has been raised in the household of his Christian aunt, her son "Rocky," his uncle Josiah, and his grandmother flees this new environment with Rocky, who enlists in the United States Army. While sent abroad during World War II, he shows signs of a post traumatic stress disorder, prompted by his envisioning of his uncle Josiah in a dead Japanese soldier.

After the war, he is put in a psychiatric hospital, but released uncured to return to his Laguna reservation. Back home, he is unable to adjust socially and blames himself for the drought afflicting the region. The traditional ritual of the "Scalp Ceremony," in which warriors are symbolically purified, is incapable of healing him, making it necessary to engage the help of Betonie, a medicine man, whose power consists of changing and transforming old rituals into new meaningful contexts.

By telling Tayo the story of ancient witchery, and through use of chants, mythical figures, and a sandpainting (which reveals Tayo's script), Betonie induces Tayo to act and understand things differently, Tayo's supposed 'maladjustment' to the dominating white culture is cured via this ceremony.

By meeting the mysterious Ts'eh Montano, reminiscent of an old Laguan deity, who assists him in finding the mixed breed "spotted cattle" his dead uncle Josiah

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<sup>114</sup>cf. Thomas Irmer, *An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko*, accessed January 10, 2005, though URL: <http://www.altx.com/int2/silko.html>

<sup>115</sup>*ibid.* In one of her rare interviews, Silko defines indigenous people as all people who are linked to their lands for a thousand or more years.

had always dreamt about raising and breeding, Tayo discovers how much he is loved by and loves this woman. This prompts him to transcend feelings of revenge for his co-veteran cohorts, who think Tayo to be crazy all along and try to return him to the psychiatric ward in the last part of the novel. Since they cannot find Tayo, because he has retreated to the caves on the mesa, they capture his friend Harley instead and bring him near the site of a uranium mine. Trying to escape his followers, Tayo becomes witness to Harley's torture and death there. In a dramatic scene in which he must decide how to react, Tayo establishes a new ethic for himself and is consequently cured, returning to the Laguna community at the end of the novel.

### 7.3 Structure

The novel's unconventional structure reflect a series of episodes, interrupted by poetic descriptions of the landscape, translated chants, and mythological allusions taken from several different traditional tribal contexts, which subvert the dominant Anglo-American culture. Recasting the oral elements into written form, without marking the changeovers, Silko renegotiates the Eurocentric conventions into a more hybrid form. The novel is not divided by chapters, but is instead broken up into non-linear time and text elements without headings (with the single exception of the heading titled 'Ceremony' (C. p. 2), which emphasizes the importance of the novel's title by repetition.

A repetitive or cyclic time frame is indicated by the storyteller's word 'sunrise' on p. 4 (written as one word on the entire page) and the sunrise prayer, which completes the novel at the end: "Sunrise, accept this offering, Sunrise." (C. p. 262)

### 7.4 Trickster Discourse

From the opening lines, Silko's trickster discourse, stressed by the variation in her indentations, becomes apparent when she writes:

Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought- Woman,  
is sitting in her room  
and whatever she thinks about  
appears.

She thought of her sisters,  
Nau'ts'ity's and I'tcts'ity'i,  
and together they created the Universe

this world  
and the four worlds below.

Thought- Woman, the spider,  
named things and  
as she named them  
they appeared.

She is sitting in her room  
thinking of a story now

I'm telling you the story  
she is thinking. <sup>116</sup>

Not unlike Thomas King, Silko begins her novel with a first person omniscient narrator, who claims to be 'telling' Thought women's 'thinking' to the reader (or listener) in the present tense, in relating a creation story. However, in this passage, it is unclear, who is talking, due to the suggestion of Thought Women's power to create things by naming them. This merges the differences between the figure of 'Thought Women, the spider,' who in Pueblo culture, is an independent being who creates the universe, and the narrator, i.e., storyteller. This sequence points to the connection between author and Thought Women as well, and – as Linda Danielson has noticed – by placing the figure of the spider first, “Silko suggests that these stories and these women's voices have mattered to her and to the survival of the culture,”<sup>117</sup> obviously reflecting the predominantly matriarchal structures of the Southwestern tribes.

“This world” in the second stanza of the opening lines, indicates the creation of the earth and its living inhabitants as they are linked to “the four worlds below,” which, in Pueblo culture, refers to the place where the spirits of the dead are located,<sup>118</sup> thereby crossing the boundary drawn in Western Christian culture between the living and the dead.

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<sup>116</sup>*Ceremony*. p. 1.

<sup>117</sup>Linda Danielson, “The Storytellers.” in *Storyteller*. in: *Yellow Women*. Leslie Marmon Silko (ed.): with an intro by Melody Graulich. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1993. p. 203.

<sup>118</sup>cf. Suzanne M. Austgen: *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony and the Effects of White Contact on Pueblo Myth and Ritual*, p. 1-2. accessed January 9, 2005, through URL: <http://history.hanover.edu/hhr/hhr93/hhr93-2html>

This poem, which sets the framework for the entire story, is ceremonially set apart by the heading 'Ceremony' (C. p. 2) and the male voice within, who claims that stories can fight off illness and death, brought on by tampering with witchery. He claims that: "You don't have anything if you don't have the stories." (C. p. 2) Silko juxtaposes the male voice to a responding female voice, who immediately afterwards says: "The only good cure I know is a good ceremony." (C. p. 3) This conversation between male and female ceremonial storyteller about the concept of how witchery has produced evil and the falling away from "Corn Women" (p. 2) stresses not only their separation, but reasserts the need for female wholeness, created by a ceremony, celebrated in the novel by storytelling.

Though the main theme of the identity quest is obvious, Silko's narration becomes, as James Ruppert reflects in his discussion of *Ceremony*, a mediating act between native and non-native culture. Ruppert refers to other major themes in *Ceremony* as well, noting that: "the centrality of environmental integrity and the pacifism that is its necessary partner, common motifs in American literature in the last quarter of the twentieth century."<sup>119</sup>

### 7.5 Healing Ceremony

Silko, through the use of her spider-like narrator, ties together a variety of Navajo and Laguna tribal myths, oral chants, and other 'Native American' mythological figures, and combines them with post-modern discourse about ecological threats, atomic bomb destruction, and veteran war experiences. Presenting the reader with a variety of subplots and themes, she draws on these contemporary discourses and is able to integrate them into more traditional tribal points of view and ceremonies, as the following passage underlines:

So Tayo had to sweat through these nights when thoughts became entangled; he had to sweat to think of something that wasn't unraveled or tied in knots to the past – something that existed by itself, standing alone like a deer. And if he could hold that image of the deer in his mind long enough, his stomach might shiver less and let him sleep for awhile.<sup>120</sup>

In the above text, Silko's narrator foreshadows the cure to Tayo's illness, which is indicated by the opposition of his "entangled thoughts" to Thought Women's weaving

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<sup>119</sup>James Ruppert, *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. p. 76.

<sup>120</sup>*Ceremony*. p. 7.

of a spider web. From the 'Native American' perspective, the text can be read and heard as an oral transmission relating a series of visions, memories, and future revelations; all embedded in the physical and psychological experience of a "sweat lodge" initiation ceremonial. This is indicated and stressed by the repeated reference to Tayo's sweating and vomiting throughout the novel, which is reminiscent of shamanistic rituals, in which vomiting is induced by fasting or by agents such as peyote, which is known to produce visions or trance like states of consciousness. Holding the "image of the deer," which from a 'Native American' perspective would really exist by itself, could cure his illness and his inability to sleep, thereby restoring his prior to this "invisible" identity, narrated in the conversation with the doctor in the hospital in the first part of the novel,<sup>121</sup> to a communal and socially acceptable one.

The fact that Tayo travels through different time zones and across great distances helps convey the impression that this novel, though written in a recognizable story form, is also meant to describe a traditional native ceremony, the details of which can only be experienced individually within the larger 'Native American' community, much like the reader's experience and interpretation of the story itself.

#### 7.6 Trickster Figure in a Discourse of Healing

Betonie, the medicine man, who lives "in the foothills north of the Ceremonial Grounds" (C. p. 116) "next to the river and their dump" (C. p. 117) seems to possess the entire overview of the city of Gallup below and is therefore able to "track" Tayo's situation. Jay Cox's observation (which Silko demonstrates through the figure of Betonie) that "trickster's ability as accomplished scavenger and bricoleur to use beneficially what appears to be the waste of human cultural experience."<sup>122</sup> seems accurate.

Betonie not only possesses the traditional paraphernalia of herbs, bones, and pouches, but also collects telephone books and calendars: "The leftover things the whites didn't want" (C. p. 127). Much like the reader might at this point, Tayo begins to question Betonie's capabilities. "What kind of healing power was in this?" (C. p. 127)

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<sup>121</sup>The voice was saying, "He can't talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound." *Ceremony*. p. 16.

<sup>122</sup>Jay Cox, *Dangerous Definitions: Female Tricksters in Contemporary Native American Literature*. Paper presented at the "24th annual meeting of the Western Literature Association in Couer d' Arlene, Idaho." Oct. 11-14, 1989. p. 18.

When Tayo asks this Navajo medicine man what ceremonies can do against “the sickness coming from their wars, their bombs, their lies?” (C. p. 132) Betonie claims that Tayo’s point of view has something to do with trickery.

“That is the trickery of the witchcraft,” he said. “They want us to believe all evil resides with white people [...] But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I can tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place.

Long time ago  
in the beginning  
there was no white people in this world  
there was nothing European.  
And this world might have gone on like that  
except for one thing:  
witchery.<sup>123</sup>

In this excerpt from his longer explanation, Betonie not only initiates and helps cure Tayo, but also can be thought to be the trickster, initiating the reader with his story of how witchcraft works and how one can resist its makings, by changing the perspective from a binary ‘black and white’ one into a more complex point of view, making it necessary, to now take the ‘Native American’ perspective into account. Positing that competitive witchcraft is the cause of this evil, Betonie’s story, which is located in the middle of the novel and covers six entire pages, highlights the transition in thinking and the (storytelling) ceremony taking place in Silko’s novel. Though this transition appears unmarked in the conventional sense, flowing easily from conversation to mythological story without a new heading, it is nonetheless the longest (therefore very important) story told with the novel’s unconventional elements.

Throughout the novel, these transitions break up more familiar realistic descriptions of the geographical area, and give way to memory flashbacks. This process yields to Tayo’s, as well as the reader’s expanded consciousness and possible future visions, predominating in the last half of the text. All of these features, Silko’s combination of prose and poetry, are continuously interwoven, as Silko’s spider metaphor indicates in the beginning, with conversations remembered and simultaneously taking place in the present tense. Tayo’s ‘visions’ and conversations, his confrontation with people on the reservation, as well as imagined or real psyche presences enable the

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<sup>123</sup>*Ceremony*. p. 133.

narrator to tie all the strands together for the reader, forming a broader cultural and oral perspective, yet allowing familiar Western elements to be incorporated into a traditional 'Native American' perspective and its mythological context.

### 7.7 Another Coyote Trickster

Immediately following Betonie's story, Betonie is described as "the old man" (C. p. 138) reminiscent of Old Man Coyote, a familiar trickster figure among the Southern tribes of the United States. Even Tayo himself can be seen as functioning as a wondering Coyote in Silko's text. As he and Betonie ride on horseback through the foothills together, arriving at "the edge of the rimrock" of the Chuska mountains on the second night, both overlook the canyons and plateaus. Silko makes it clear that this geographical location and pinpointing of time on their mutual journey is not the most vital element in the narration in the following:

This was the highest point on the earth: he could feel it. It had nothing to do with measurements or height. It was a special place. He was smiling. He felt strong. He had to touch his own hand to remember what year it was: thick welted scars from the shattered bottle glass.

His mother -in-law suspected something  
She smelled coyote piss one morning.  
She told her daughter.  
She figured Coyote was doing this.  
She knew her son-in-law was missing.

There was no telling what Coyote had done to him.<sup>124</sup>

Strengthened by his experience of the dissolution of time and space, Tayo needs to look at the mark of pain on his hand from the bar fight, to locate himself in the more chronologically measured and mapped Western cultural reality he has left behind. But immediately afterwards, the story of the lost son-in-law brings Tayo and the storyteller into close association with the traditional figure of Coyote.

Coyote's most remarkable feature appears to be his ability to move freely from the margin to the center of community. Silko demonstrates this in her novel by placing Coyote at the point of transition and at the height of the ceremonial drama, positioning

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<sup>124</sup>*Ceremony*. p. 139.

this figure as a go-between who links two cultural realities: the female storyteller, Thought Women, and the main character, Tayo, attempting to heal his broken identity.

As the coyote story continues, the lost “grandchild” is found, making sounds like a coyote: “A coyote whine was the only sound he made.”(C. p. 140) After asking what can be done to save him, the four old bear people, located at the summit of the Dark Mountain, are engaged “to restore the mind. Time and again it has been done.” (C. p. 141) and a sandpainting ceremony is prepared, upon their advice. As Tayo sits in the “center of the white corn sand painting,” Betonie comes forward and performs the Scalp Ceremony.

The old man came forward and cut Tayo across the top of his head; it happened suddenly. He hadn't expected it, but the dark flint was sharp and the cut was short.[...]

Tayo could feel the blood ooze along his scalp; he could feel rivulets in his hair. It moved down his head slowly, unto his face and neck as he stooped through each hoop.<sup>125</sup>

The above text can be read either symbolically, as a description of Tayo's vision or realistically, as a performed act in a ceremony, since the interpretation would depend on one's knowledge or experience of initiation rites, trickster discourse and on the truth contained within an imagined story being told. Betonie can be viewed as the shape shifting figure, a mediator between the old myths and the present experience, who aids Tayo in the process of having to decipher the cryptic message by performing the “ceremony” on his head, and with his blood, thereby allowing Tayo to return to his people by “restoring” his mind.

## 7.8 Trickster Humor

Though there is a predominant sense of a serious undertone throughout the novel, the narration presents the reader with plenty of humorous trickster episodes. K. Lincoln's statement: “There is always hurt in humor, and vice versa, because it is the way things are. It's the way one learns about truth”<sup>126</sup> applies to *Ceremony* as well. When Emo; Harley, and Leroy are bragging about veteran experiences in the company of Tayo, while drinking, Silko sets Emo's words apart unconventionally to indicate the mythological content of his story:

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<sup>125</sup>*Ceremony*. p. 143.

<sup>126</sup>Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. p. 86.

We went into this bar on 4th Ave., see  
 me and O'shay, this crazy Irishman.  
 We had a few drinks, then I saw  
 these two white women  
 sitting all alone.  
 One was kind of fat  
 She had dark hair.  
 But this other one, man,  
 she had big tits and  
 real blond hair.  
 I said to him  
 "Hey buddy, that's the one I want.  
 Over there."  
 He said, "Go get 'em, Chief"  
 He was my best drinking buddy, that guy  
 He'd watch me  
 see how good I'd score with each one.<sup>127</sup>

The above passage reveals a nostalgic fantasy. Emo ends up bragging that he slept with both girls, not just one, which in turn can be seen as an allusion to colonial attributes about Indian sexuality (since, in the eyes of the colonists, Indians were often thought to be promiscuous). The reversal of modern conversational content into the traditional structure reveals the distortion of the witchery in humorous fashion, though the obvious pain in the recognition of what it has caused in "Native American men" is explicitly described. According to Silko, the endangered life on the Laguna Reservation needs to be transformed, by using new forms within the older structure and trickster humor.

### 7.9 Criticism

Oddly enough, the weakest parts of the novel appear to be Silko's blatant political accusations, which clearly divide and points out responsibilities. Even Betonie accuses the white people as a group, when he says: "They were never the same after that: they had seen what the white people had made from the stolen land." (C. p. 168). Other instances throughout the book, where a type of didactic political fault finding takes place, are too simplistic, perhaps undercutting Silko's honorable intentions of wanting to change things. The assertion that the U.S. government, U.S. army, and the whites are too clearly lumped as one major enemy who needs to be healed by a ceremony of storytelling, appears on the whole, naive. Though extremely poetic, sentences like "He followed her inside and pulled the gate closed behind them" (C. p. 211) leave much to be desired and little to the imagination.

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<sup>127</sup>*Ceremony*. pp. 57, 58.

By allowing her publisher to convert her collection of short stories to the form of a novel (she claims *Ceremony* was originally conceived as a series of short stories), Silko seems to be trying to serve both native and non native audiences, walking the thin line between “selling and selling out.”<sup>128</sup>

Haselstein, in her extensive and critical analysis of *Ceremony*, discusses the text in relation to modernism, markets, and orality. She notes that the staged orality and timelessness of myths invoked by the text reflect ancient romantic notions of ‘Indian’ cultural identity and help bind the stereotypical internal otherness of the national American identity. For her, this romantic nostalgia, in union with the ethnological archives, marks the historical moment of the invention of a cultural authenticity; a reaction to the destruction of traditional conventions of modernism. Haselstein has a good point here.

Considering that Silko does not speak the Laguna language and relied on archived materials for writing her book, the reader may wonder whether *Ceremony* ultimately reflects still further buying into the assimilation process within a multi-cultural post-modern society, or whether the novel should be viewed as the author’s politically motivated resistance move, reflecting the insistence of new and hybrid ethnic discourses into the dominant mainstream one.

The answer may depend on one’s reading and response to the different frame of references Silko presents and whether one believes that author’s possess enough political power to change things via their works in the present publishing and consumer oriented market. It may be influenced by one’s belief that her story is returning to ‘primitive’ notions of Indianness or to one’s belief that these notions of identity are older and legitimate definitions of a different ethnic culture.

## 8 SUMMARY

Posited on the threshold of differing cultural perspectives, trickster figures are able to negotiate the space in between borders, transcending cultural limitations by evoking oral traditions of performance within the presented discourse of each novel. In addition, by anticipating the reader’s interpretive act, all four of the ‘Native American’

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<sup>128</sup>Ulla Haselstein, *Mündlichkeit, Moderne, Markt als Faktoren literarischer Interkulturalität: Leslie Marmon Silko’s “Ceremony.”* Berlin: John F. Kennedy Institut für Amerikastudien, 1998. p. 18.

authors presented here, play with the ambiguous features inherent in the trickster figure, without presenting a closed or universal meaning of 'trickster' *per se*.

Allowing the meaning to be negotiated through the device of storytelling and imagination, each author, to a various degree however, reasserts a traditional 'Native American' perception and humorously plays with the more prevalent binary approach familiar to Western thinking, thereby subverting the restrictions inherent in this apparently politically and historically perceived dominant discourse. Rejecting the limiting chronological, progressive concepts by engaging the reader in 'Native American' myths and trickster discourse, the novels present many transcultural elements and aims to reject any ascribed assimilation of a 'Native American' person.

The figure of the trickster seems especially adept to describe and point to such processes because in the past, the dimension of the discursive aspect of this figure has been neglected by the Western canon. In its ability to shift shapes and incorporate oppositions and by its multifaceted characteristics, the fluidity of the trickster can be demonstrated in its indeterminacy of meaning via storytelling, i.e., the narrator in general, textual conversations, different structure and the interweaving of themes in particular, which allow for a double discourse or multiphonic points of view.

G. Vizenor, who embodies trickster's image most poignantly, appears to deconstruct any preconceived notion of this figure altogether, and demonstrates with his postmodern trickster discourse that tricksters cannot ever be defined except in a momentary imaginative act of laughter, rising above pain. Though political implication can be found in *The Heirs of Columbus*, the novel refuses conveying a sense of political commitment and final meaning, preferring to parody American society instead, and not to the exclusion of 'Native American' readers (or women). By this narrator's seemingly self chosen 'assimilation' into a postmodern American society, Vizenor can leave the reader wondering if this too is only trickster's escape from being claimed by universal meaning or not and if the 'sexism' in the discourse reflects any hidden truth.

Thomas King, on the other hand, seems to be more strongly politically committed to the 'Native American' past. Humorously playing with painful historical events, the darker side of capitalism, the Hollywood movie industry and any limiting gender perceptions, he recreates an alternative approach to Western dominance, by undercutting it and reasserting traditional 'Native American' values. His portrayal of characters in *Green Grass, Running Water* is relayed with images of their every day

life, exposing the romantic myths and attributions of the 'Indian' image of the past to the point of laughter, always questioning the construction of those realities on a deeper level. King's construction of the female characters empowers this gender in a refreshing and original manner and reflects a high degree of the oral tradition in the trickster discourse within the novel. Simultaneously he privileges the inside knowledge of 'Native American' experiences and perceptions in his 'Coyote creation' story, expanding the consciousness of both 'Native American' and Western readers beyond the border of their own cultural concepts.

Louise Erdrich selectively incorporates traditional trickster elements, combining them in such a way that new constructions are formed, all the while evoking traditional mythical figures and 'Native American' myths. Paradoxically, her trickster figures and characters are communally tied together by making the reader aware of the different points of view each individual has to an absent, but in the imagination still present relative. Her novel *Love Medicine* subtly alludes to 'Native American' history. Suppressing overt didactical elements in her novel, she appears to be less politically committed; however, through the use of her communal dialogue and her strong and more in depth male and female trickster portrayal, as well as her explicit transgendered figure of Beverly, Erdrich is able to combine both cultures to a high artistic degree (firmly rooted in both cultures) paving the way for something entirely new, which nonetheless fits into a 'Native American' tradition. Her trickster discourse is original, philosophical, and less blatantly offensive, than Vizenor's for example.<sup>129</sup>

Though sometimes her sentence construction is fairly simplistic and the different perspectives can be confusing to the reader, Erdrich negotiates trickster's position through her variety of tricksters to a higher degree than the other authors.

Silko's *Ceremony* celebrates the act of healing through storytelling, which is so deeply embedded in the Southwestern tribes of America, especially the Laguna or Navajo tribes. In this novel, as in *Love Medicine*, Silko spins the thread of a quest for identity, which predominates the theme and is underlined by the traditional myths, which retold and changed, are able to incorporate post-modern threats. The trickster discourse reaches its climax with her trickster figure Betonie, who explains to the

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<sup>129</sup>LM. p.272. Erdrich simply states the point of her Christian parody when she allows June alias Fleur to be reintegrated into the Native American point of view "A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home."

main character (as well as to the American native and non native reader) that the competition of 'witchery' is the cause of all evil. Healing can only be found in the discovery of the interpretation and new application of 'Native American' traditional myth and creation stories.

The act of telling a story over generations, a tale passed on from grandmother to daughter to grandchild in a matriarchal society, and embedded within the 'creation' of the spider's web, becomes the focal point of keeping the tribal traditions of storytelling or of religious ceremonies and communal 'sweat lodge' gatherings alive, while renewing them constantly. Through the poetic and prose elements in her text, and by continuously changing their forms, Silko undercuts the reader's expectations, drawing him or her into a liminal space between the cultures, in order to transcend experienced borders. Through the presentation of conversations, prayers and chants, the oral traditions are kept alive throughout the text, as are the rituals and ceremonies inherent in 'Native American' culture. The realistic setting in a post war American context invites the reader to confront his or her previous perceptions of the 'Native American' as well. Silko is situated in between both, trying to escape acculturation and assimilation by storytelling. Though her cultural hero is a 'half breed' male, she reasserts the importance of the tribal matriarchal tradition from the beginning, when she tells what Thought Women is thinking, thereby not limiting the trickster figure to either gender.

The cross gendered aspect of the trickster is therefore a most important element in this figure, able to embody not only dualistic aspects of discourse or gender per se, but move beyond the binary and point to that which can incorporate both: a whole that signifies more than its parts, a religious and philosophical realm, calling for more interdisciplinary study of the trickster in future research.

Crossing cultural borders and imagined divisions, this figure prompts further critical and humorous exploration from many cultural views and one should not shy away from its inherent contradictions. Trickster's qualities seem ideal for highlighting those unmarked and undefinable features of language predominant for instance in issues of translation, which, while in perpetual flow not only construct new and creative meaning, but also remind us of this figure's ancient cross cultural function as mediator between man and God. In trickster's discursive element, trickster paves the way towards the process of imagination and communication emphasizing his/her perpetual curiosity about nature, life, death, and the unknown.

Considering the trickster's popularity within the present academic discourse and the global marketing strategies surrounding popular novels, this 'trickster fascination' may reflect a need for a more encompassing cultural identity across national boundaries, as well as an attempt to acculturate traditionally 'marginalized' groups and their histories. Future research may wish to examine trickster discourse in the author's novels discussed here in relation to the development of their writing, i.e., to see how each author's individual academic experiences, the publishing industry in general, and the ongoing legal battles related to the issue of 'native sovereignty' in the United States, Canada, and other nations, are able to influence trickster images and discourse in their individual publications over the course of their lifetimes.<sup>130</sup>

## 9 ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Diese Magisterarbeit befasst sich mit der Figur des Tricksters, welche nicht nur heute in der Literatur wieder populär ist, sondern auch traditionell eine übergreifende kulturelle Tradition besitzt, und als Vermittler zwischen den Welten der Götter und dem Diesseits der Menschen eine interpretative Funktion enthält. Diese Magisterarbeit vertritt die These, dass die "Native American" Autoren der hier untersuchten post-modernen Romane der nordamerikanischen Literatur den "liminalen" Raum der Vostellungswelten zwischen den unterschiedlich geprägten Kulturen mit Hilfe der Figur des Tricksters und des Trickster-Diskurses auf kreative Weise und in einer Art doppelt geführten Diskurs neu bestimmen und aushandeln.

Aus der theoretischen Perspektive des Neuen Historizismus, welcher die übergreifenden Kontexte der jeweiligen Texte berücksichtigt und kritisch bezüglich ihrer Positionierung der Machtkonstellationen und "Gender"-Konstruktionen hinterfragt, wird die Figur, samt ihrer Ambivalenzen und Definitionsproblematik vorgestellt. Anschliessend analysiere ich die einzelnen Texte von Gerald Vizenor, Thomas King, Louise Erdrich und Leslie M. Silko ausführlicher bezüglich der

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<sup>130</sup>Thomas Biolski, "Contemporary 'Native American' Struggles," in Susser, Ida, Patterson, and Thomas C. (eds.), *Cultural Diversity in the United States*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. pp. 175-190. Biolski's essay describes the current legal issues between the U.S. government as they pertain to the issues of 'territorial' sovereignty and the complexities involved in determining who, of the over two million estimated Native Americans living in the U.S. today, is able to define *whose* rights within or without the 'Native American' Indian territory.

Funktion der Tricksterfigur und welche Rolle diese, samt all ihren Ambiguitäten, in den jeweiligen Texten dieser Autoren spielt.

Im Text *The Heirs of Columbus* von Gerald Vizenor komme ich zu der Ansicht, dass der Autor jegliche Eindeutigkeit verweigert und stattdessen seinen Text als historische und gegenwärtige Satire auf die amerikanische Gesellschaft sowie das weibliche Geschlecht insbesondere gestaltet und sich dem Versuch des Lesers, die Figur des Tricksters bezüglich einer Eindeutigkeit zu erfassen, gänzlich entzieht. Vizenor führt den Leser stattdessen in die Welt des Humors, welche als verbindendes Element zwischen den Kulturen und ihren unterschiedlichen sprachlich konstruierten Vorstellungen fungieren soll und eher dem narrativen Zufall überlassen wird.

Im Text *Green Grass, Running Water* von Thomas King hingegen wird deutlich, dass die traditionelle mündliche Erzählstruktur der unterschiedlichsten Indianerstämme, besonders bei den grenzüberschreitenden Blackfoot, eine zentrale Position einnimmt. Die Figur des Coyote, ein Trickster par excellence, versinnbildlicht in seiner vermittelnden Erzählfunktion den hybriden Trickster-Diskurs. Gleichzeitig unterstreichen die mannigfaltig dargestellten Tricksterfiguren die Mythen der nordamerikanischen Stämme und privilegieren ihren Standpunkt im Hinblick auf die moderne westliche Kultur. Thomas King spielt mit dem Leser durch diverse Distanzierungs- und Identifikationsverfahren, erweitert somit den bewussten Kontext des Lesers mit Humor und ohne Zynismus. King distanziert sich von klischeehaften Geschlechtervorstellungen und zeigt eher Möglichkeiten auf, wie beide Geschlechter, insbesondere die Frau, etwas verändern können, ohne Konflikte zu scheuen und ohne ihre Traditionen endgültig zu brechen.

Im Text *Love Medicine* von Louise Erdrich spielt die Tricksterfigur eine noch hervorragendere Rolle anhand nicht nur der doppelte Diskurs unterschiedlicher Kulturen wahrgenommen werden kann, sondern mit dieser Textanalyse wird ebenso deutlich, dass wechselnde Geschlechtermerkmale dieser Figur eine zentrale Rolle zum Verständnis der Aufschlüsselung jeglicher Bedeutung dieser Figur einnehmen. Zudem impliziert die Figur des Tricksters und der Diskurs hierüber einen identitätsformenden Aspekt des individuellen und kulturellen Selbstbildes.

Erdrich, indem sie die Erzählinstanzen aus verschiedenen Perspektiven auf die Problematik der An- und Abwesenheit eines Verwandten innerhalb des Ashinaabe Stammes, zugleich eine mythischen Figur dessen, anspielen lässt, führt den Leser an

die Traditionen dieses Stammes heran und kritisiert die stereotypen christlich vorgeprägten Denkstrukturen. Darüber hinaus weisen die Tricksterfiguren in ihrem Text auf Möglichkeiten der Geschlechterrollen, welche nicht nur Klischeevorstellungen überwinden, sondern auch wegweisend wirken.

Im Text *Ceremony* von Leslie M. Silko stehen die identitätssuchenden Elemente eines traumatisierten Veteranen im Vordergrund, welcher zu seinem Stamm zurückkehren muss, um neue Zeremonien als Heilungsritual zu erfahren. Betonie, ein post-moderner Trickster, wird zur Schlüsselfigur dieses Prozesses, doch ebenso die traditionelle Erzählinstanz der Spinne, eine mythische Figur der Indianerstämme im Süden Amerikas. In diesem Text wird die Erzählkunst an sich zum heilenden Ritual, um die Kluft zwischen den Kulturkreisen zu überbrücken und neu zu gestalten.

Allen vier Texten ist gemeinsam, dass die Trickstefigur und der Trickster-Diskurs in ihnen eine herausragende Rolle spielt und dass diese sich einer eindeutigen und binär bestimmenden Funktion entziehen. Alle vier Autoren lehnen einfache Zuschreibungen ihrer kulturellen Identität ab und bemühen sich mehr oder minder um eine Neuorientierung ihrer traditionell "missverstanden" Kultur. Sie distanzieren sich von dem romantisch geprägten Bild des "edlen," sowie des " wilden" Indianers der Vergangenheit. Jeder besprochene Text handelt somit den transzendentalen und liminalen Zwischenraum der verschiedenen Kulturen für sich neu aus und positioniert diesen Diskurs als Trickster-Diskurs der post-modernen amerikanischen Literatur.

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