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Tracking the Trickster Home: The Animal Nature of Words in the Writing of Gerald Vizenor and Barry Lopez

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TRACKING THE TRICKSTER HOME: THE ANIMAL NATURE OF WORDS IN
THE WRITING OF GERALD VIZENOR AND BARRY LOPEZ

By

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Thesis

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Tracking the Trickster Home: The Animal Nature of Words in the Writing of Gerald Vizenor and Barry Lopez.

David L. Moore, thesis committee chair.

This thesis examines tropes of the trickster in two different aspects; as a character in literature, and as an elusive semiotic sign, what Gerald Vizenor has playfully termed a “comic holotrope.” Vizenor’s neologism eschews mere linguistic representation, and relies on the personal and cultural context of both author and reader to connect the individual consciousness to the collectively social; the solitary mind to an animate world of relationships.

Central to this postmodern conception of the trickster is a traditional Native American conception of community, which generously includes all of the elements in a given landscape as those that comprise social relationships. The trickster character’s lewd, comic antics are playful reminders of this landed sense of the communal. In the trickster mythology, the distance between theory and practice is measured by what can be sensually experienced in the landscape. In Vizenor’s holotrope, these direct experiences, what can be seen, heard, or otherwise felt and remembered in the land is that which holds the potential to bring language to life. Vizenor’s writing plays at unraveling the tightly wound fabric of meaning—the intransigent hegemony of text that the postmodern project takes to task—as the continuance of an ancient cultural imperative to maintain and restore communal ties through narrative art.

Barry Lopez’s engagement of the trickster pursues a similar evocation of communal ties to land and culture through language. However, Lopez works from within his own Euramerican cultural context. Establishing ties to the American landscape conjures with it a dark and sometimes violent colonial history. Lopez recasts the purpose and scope of American nature writing to reckon with this past, and begins to shape a foundation for Euramerican residency, as opposed to occupation, in the North American continent.

Juxtaposing the work of these two writers reveals the network of pathways the trickster illuminates between the individual and the community, nature and culture, and landscape and narrative art.

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Tracking The Trickster Home: The Animal Nature of Words in the Writing of Gerald

Vizenor and Barry Lopez

Table of Contents

Introduction:	1
Chapter 1: From Comic Shit to Comic Holotropes: A Natural History of Some Tricksters	16
Chapter 2: Whiteness, Wildness, and Tricksters Black, Brown and Green: Earthdiver Reciprocity in the Clan of the Hairy-Breasted Nut-scratcher.	48
Chapter 3: Dead Voices, Naturally: Haiku Hermeneutics and Textual Tricks in Gerald Vizenor's Urban-Wildland Interface.	87
Chapter 4: Paws for Effect: Trickster Bears, Pronouncement and Silence	130
Coda:	162
Bibliography:	173

Introduction

The land is like poetry: it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to elevate a consideration of human life.

-Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*

The tracking that any text instrumentalizes is an adventure that is always immediate, happening now, registering the dynamics of belief.

-Elaine Jahner, "Trickster Discourse and Postmodern Strategies."

In *The Dispossessed*, Ursula LeGuin writes, "You can go home again, so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been" (157). What does this mean? Not being "at home," implies the condition of always traveling, or worse, perpetually being lost. I think of two senses of the word; of being unable to verify one's location in time and space, and of irretrievably missed opportunity, a hopelessly gone possession, the empty ache of suddenly remembering having left an invaluable something on top of the car after hours on the freeway.

Not too long ago, I got lost in Kyoto, Japan. I had left the hotel there at five in the morning on what I loosely planned as a ten mile run toward Nanzen-Ji, one of the more spectacular Zen monasteries in Kyoto. I wanted to catch the monks chanting morning prayers, and then run on up into the hills above the monastery grounds, where I'd heard Shinto rites were still performed at an old waterfall up a dirt path. All went according to plan, all the way to the waterfall. By sunrise I was at the great hall. The deep hum of monks chanting prayers echoed into the mountains. The hair stood on my neck as I found the stairs leading to the path into the woods. A mile or two up the trail, I found the waterfall, and an old couple lighting candles there

smiled as I bowed and took a drink with a dipper from the cistern at the base of the falls. I rinsed my hands before drinking as I had been taught, but the amused grins on the faces of my hosts made me think I'd gotten something wrong.

Back down the trail—I could follow the voices from the monastery about half-way down—I fell into that rhythmic easy lope runners always hope for, and found myself thinking of resonances between tricksters and what little I know of Zen Buddhism (tales of beggar-monks and Old Man Coyote always traveling; Tripitaka and the Monkey King headed over the mountains) of how some cities, ancient ones lucky enough to have avoided the ravages of modern warfare (Prague, Kyoto) fit neatly into their given landscapes, buildings and people included, and finally, what a finely-honed sense of direction I had developed over the years as a traveler myself. It was about then I realized I was lost.

After a series of comic missteps, I realized the only way I was going to find my way back to the hotel was to return to Nanzen-Ji and try to retrace my steps from there. That was back uphill, and by now, tourists were afoot on the monastery grounds, but no European or American-looking ones. I ran along a canal, trying to pretend I was not extremely thirsty, and that, like a homing pigeon rather than a coyote or monkey, I would find my way back, no questions asked. An old man sitting serenely on a bench overlooking the canal smiled and raised his hand at me, and I took this gesture as an opportunity to speak a dialect of tourist English, loathed by residents of non-English speaking countries and waitstaff at ethnic restaurants everywhere. It consists mainly of speaking more loudly and slowly than one normally would, hoping by some miracle of osmosis or Jesus or praxis of Bakhtinian dialogics that English Will Suddenly Be Understood By Every One. No luck. We smiled and bowed at one another, and I ran to the end of the canal, mustering the will to face my dragons.

I did make it back to the hotel, both kidneys apparently still functioning, and before I could down a single glass of water faced the wrath of family who complained that returning at eight with a train to catch within the hour was cutting things a bit close. There was a plane departure in Tokyo a day later, and after a late night of sushi and sake, we boarded that jet. Somewhere over the Pacific, the plane's climate control system went awry. Unlike the other passengers, who enjoyed the luxury of surplus fluid in their organs and tissues which their sweat glands put to good use, I cooled myself by pressing my face against the tiny television screen on the seatback in front of me, idiotically tuned to the station that charts up-to-the-minute progress across the oceans in the form of a little red dot along a trajectory showing the parabola of efficient flight navigation, but which seemed to me to progress as slowly as a sailing ship traveling an ancient rhumb line.

The dehydration contributed to a wicked case of jet lag, and a mere two weeks back in Missoula, I was nearly rehydrated and sleeping through the night. On one of those sleepless nights, I decided to update the considerable gaps in the travel journal I keep. I drank milk and studied a map of Kyoto. It was only then that I realized where I had spoken gibberish to the serene Kyoto man. It was on the Path of Philosophy, which I had run backwards.

One of the punishments of being lost is the secondary loss inevitably experienced when confronted with what was missed through an obtuse waywardness. Being lost implies losing at least twice. I miss Kyoto, in part because I missed Kyoto. This feeling, I've come to believe, may have historical, cultural, and literary significance.

As scholar of Native American Literature Bill Bevis has noted in "Homing In," an essay I'll discuss in detail a little later, American fiction generally is the story of escape, of leaving home. *Moby Dick*, *Huck Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, *On The Road*, and countless other "classics" of

American fiction prominently feature a lighting out for the territory (582). Only recently has this notion lost some of its mythical nobility and struck some thinkers, Barry Lopez and Gerald Vizenor among them, as more the tale of the solitary buffoon shuffling myopically backward down the garden path, waving at what he believed was the promised land but turned out instead to be a mirage of mom's front porch.

In *Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez notes how Frederick Jackson Turner, more than a century ago with the advent of his Frontier Hypothesis, recognized this distance between concept and fact in the fulfillment of the European westering urge on the North American continent. Lopez comments,

Turner's observation showed at least two things: the narrative direction that a nation's history takes is amenable to revision, and that the landscapes in which history unfolds are both real; that is, profound in their physical effects on mankind, and not real, but mere projections, artifacts of human perception. (229)

Such "artifacts of human perception," a way of seeing, Lopez contends, however acute or perspicacious, are always subjective, incomplete, and often times, as exemplified in the history of white "settlement" of Western lands, obtusely inaccurate. The projections of thought and language onto a given landscape are a means of ordering human reality; corroborating the external evidence in the land to the internal, abstract "spaces" that constitute culture, has always been a tenuous, subjective and dynamic process. Lopez describes it this way:

Over time, small bits of knowledge about a region accumulate among local residents in the form of stories. These are remembered in the community; even what is unusual does not become lost and therefore irrelevant. These narratives comprise for a native an intricate, long-term view of a particular landscape. And

the stories are corroborated daily, even as they are being refined by members of the community traveling between what is truly known and what is only imagined or unsuspected. Outside the region this complex but easily shared “reality” is hard to get across without reducing it to generalities, to misleading or imprecise abstraction.

(245)

Lopez perceives a fluidity, an elasticity or adaptability in the precepts of a long-standing culture to the vagaries of its specific environment. The stories, as Lopez suggests, are in a continual process of re-creation, a way of sharing accrued knowledge as a means of survival: “The perceptions of any people wash over the land like a flood, leaving ideas hung up in the brush, like pieces of damp paper to be collected and deciphered. No one can tell the whole story” (*Ibid.*)

In Gerald Vizenor’s Anishinaabe tradition, perception as a flood, and language and culture as the flotsam that eventually dries in the willows, has a precedent in an archetype of tribal creation myth folklorists have labeled the earthdiver motif. The gist of these stories features a trickster treading water after being inundated by a deluge, who convinces a small contingent of aquatic birds or animals, (muskrat, beaver, grebe, duck) to dive deep for a scrap of silt, sand or mud out of which new ground might be created. Vizenor has taken up the cultural imperative to update his tribe’s specific earthdiver creation myth, not only for the time encompassing vastly altered physical and cultural geography, but for a cultural regime that places its trust above all else in the authority and authenticity of written texts, a hegemony that freezes the storytelling process Lopez describes as vital to the upkeep of any society. Vizenor brings “something different in the land the others did not notice,” by sometimes peeking into

manhole covers with a quick-wit and irreverence bordering on open disdain for any coldly authoritative voice making truth claims from a supposedly objective viewpoint.

In his novel *Dead Voices*, Vizenor examines the subterranean environs of the city, finding the narrative currents that keep tribal stories alive still flowing underground:

When the very first trickster was up to his nose in the great flood he asked some animals to dive down and come back with a few bits of sand so she could start a new world. The beaver and the others dove down and one of them came back with enough for the trickster to make a new world. Naanabozho told the new stories of creation in the city.

“The last time we had to dive through shit-shaped anthropologists to find the remains of the tribal world and create a new one,” said the trickster. (109)

Vizenor suggests reinhabiting the ruins of the colonial world to continue the work of a tribal world, a task for which the trickster, as he describes it, is not as a character in literature but a “comic holotrope,” a phenomenon that conjoins the tribal earthdiver metaphor with ideas from postmodern critical thought from Bakhtin to Barthes.

Though both Lopez and Vizenor work with Native American discourses, they are not often saying the same thing. There are obvious reasons for this; Vizenor works from within the discursive space of Native American literature, Lopez from outside it. The two authors differ greatly in experiences. Lopez grew up in California and Manhattan, attending prep school and a private university, dabbling in graduate school and photography, and exploring the American West before settling into work as an essayist and short story writer. Vizenor grew up intermittently orphaned on the streets of Minneapolis. His father was murdered when Gerald was a toddler; his mother proved undependable. He lied about his age at seventeen to join the army,

and later became a journalist, social worker, novelist, poet, critical theorist, university administrator and editor. Vizenor is an enrolled member of the White Earth Reservation.

Lopez's upbringing reflects a strong Jesuit Catholic influence, and a thorough knowledge of Western Native American culture he approaches in the tradition of the naturalist. Lopez often upholds the character sketch of the traditional Indian, the wise tribal hunter and elder who has stayed on the land, and come to know his place intimately. Vizenor frequently rails against such depictions, pointing out that more than half of all Indians now live off reservations and in cities. The traditional native, Vizenor claims, is largely an invention of the dominant culture, as I will explore in Chapter 4. With these differences in mind, what then, might be the point of bringing these two together in the pages that follow? The answer has to do with each writer's trickster-like weaving between the territories of self, culture and nature.

Although Vizenor's experiences have largely been urban (at least those about which he chooses to write) his Anishinaabe worldview reflects a nature never quite separate from self or culture. Vizenor's writing depicts a nature in keeping with the native view Bevis identifies in "Homing In." Bevis' description here applies to James Welch's novel *Winter in the Blood*, but could as easily apply to the visions of nature in any of Vizenor's novels, despite starkly contrasting styles between the two writers:

Nature is not subordinate to humans. Animals have their own rights in life and art [...] When Keats mentions the murmurous haunt of flies on a summer's eve, or Emily Dickinson at death tells of a great blue fly interposed between herself and the light, we scramble to figure out why. The remarks have an effect on us because we are accustomed to using nature, abstracting it, confining it to our purposes [...]

In Welch's work, such interpretive reaction to each natural phenomenon would engender (and has engendered) silly misreadings. The natural world in Welch is strangely (to whites) various, objective, unsymbolic, as if it had not yet been taken over by the human mind. (599-600)

Bevis suggests the human mind in Indian epistemologies works the opposite way; it is inhabited by nature, a "cosmopolitanism" that reverses the Anglo penchant for divisions between urban and wild:

Native American nature is urban. The connotation to us of "urban" suggesting a dense complex of human variety, is closer to Native American "nature" than is our word "natural." The woods, birds, animals and humans are all "downtown," meaning at the center of action and power, in complex and unpredictable and various relationships. You never know whom you'll bump into on the street [...]
(601)

Bevis goes on to describe how Welch's character Yellow Calf hears "the deer grumble like existential philosophers in a Paris café" (604). In Vizenor's fiction, this dialogue is extended to include bears, crows, cranes, squirrels, and fleas whose conversational venues are classrooms, city parks, apartments, laboratories, and municipal sewer systems. Vizenor takes this dialogue a step further: If nature exerts its quiet influence over the city, over every locale, if birds, animals and humans are all "downtown," Vizenor insists these influences "at the center of action and power" must somehow be present on the written page. The trick is in conjuring the means to animate the dead voices in print. Vizenor situates his literary tricksters with animal identities in metropolitan settings as a metaphor for the "urban" boundaries of the page: a tribal "nature" is still at work in such spaces. In tracking down an animate body of narrative wisdom, Vizenor and

other Native American writers are railing against a theft that exceeds the considerable taking of ancestral land, and is well described by Bevis:

So the first assumption of tribalism is that the individual is completed only in relation to others, that man is a political animal (lives through a relationship to a village-state) and the group which must complete his “being” is organized in some meaningful way. That meaning, not just the land, is what has been lost. (587)

Vizenor’s aim in his writing is to track down this communal sense of identity, to breathe new life into old tribal narratives via a trickster who, while disembodied in text, draws attention to the embodiment that the reality of social relationships require.

In contrast to Vizenor, the experiences that comprise Barry Lopez’s literary ambitions, particularly early in his career, are the world’s wilder and relatively unpeopled outposts. Somewhat savvier than the interloper sprinting off from the hotel at dawn in search of mythic or spiritual gratification, Lopez seeks enlightenment in the open spaces of a decidedly “uncivilized” nature. More recently, and in congress with other stalwarts of the nature-writing genre such as Gary Snyder and David Quammen, Lopez has recognized the trouble with wilderness is not with wilderness itself, but with one kind of civilization, which maintains polar divisions between nature and culture. The ecology movement has uncovered a larger problem with its partial success; nature, like heaven, is where to go provided the concrete avenues of civilization have allowed enough time and money to be made and saved to get there. This has led to a negation not only of the wild places within the bounds of civilization, but of environmental discourse itself, as Gary Snyder puts it in *The Practice of the Wild*:

Who can be proud? [...] the real power is in the hands of people who make unimaginably larger sums of money, people impeccably groomed, excellently

educated at the best universities [...] eating fine foods and reading classy literature, while orchestrating the investment and legislation that ruin the world. (119)

Snyder identifies the chasm between an as-yet fictive form of ecological and social justice and the economic reality in which a certain well-heeled demographic representing the consumer of literature resides.

The irony Lopez has toyed with in his fiction is that the nature-writer, and before that, the naturalist has carved out a niche on the shelf of such “classy literatures.” Lopez recognizes the people Snyder here describes as part of his own tribe. In his fiction, Lopez dives into those perceptions in the land that are “mere projections,” part of an ideology with no analog in physical reality, a peculiar tendency of western epistemologies that Vine Deloria Jr. notes in *God is Red* “are demoniac at best” (85). Lopez’s stories feature trickster characters as apparitions of a repressed, guilt-ridden history, and of the riddle of a landscape in which whites, with some notable exceptions, have never truly gotten their bearings.

In his short stories, Lopez engages a trickster-like penchant for role reversals. It is the white banker or lawyer with a limited, idealized view of nature and indigeneity winds up sensing his own alien presence in the land, as an occupier, a tourist at best, rather than a resident. Evoking the sensation of being lost, Lopez gambles on the possibility implicit in losing one’s way, of seeing the world (at least a portion of it) anew, and of taking corrective action. The emotional aftershock Lopez cultivates in his readers is one in which the onus is on them to make meaning. What Euramericans*¹ have recognized as the virtue of nature, Lopez’s tricksters tacitly imply, is only a partial reflection of a larger communal identity yet to be recognized. The

* I’m using this term to denote writers with no tribal affiliation, claimed through familial ties or communal recognition, to indigenous cultures.

trickster job description in this sense becomes quite practical, as scholar of Native American Literature Elaine Jahner writes in her essay “Trickster Discourse and Postmodern Strategies:”

The Trickster role, dramatized for the postcolonial task, draws definite attention to the pragmatic consequences of rhetoric, and is especially effective when forcing people to see the concretely dramatized effects of what people would like to repress. He reveals the operations of desire. (52)

The “operations of desire,” begin with loss, hence Ursula LeGuin’s suggestion of a recovery that might require paying attention to signs neither familiar or obvious, and the recognition that suitable territory may lie beneath one’s feet, just now—or may still lie a long way off. Vizenor and Lopez provide these kinds of ancient yet somehow freshly unfamiliar signs toward their respective directions home. Vizenor “dives” in the tradition of his Anishinaabe ancestors, looking for a way of speaking that holds the possibility, in some literal sense, of creating the world anew. Lopez too delves into a search for a new way of seeing—utilizing the finely tuned senses of the naturalist afield—that distinguishes the artifacts and apparitions of a perception of landscape from the actuality of what the land truthfully contains. In these respective missions, each rejects the Eurocentric tradition of the solitary knower collecting bits of evidence in an objective universe.

It’s important however, to emphasize here the differences in these respective journeys. Some pan-cultural harmonic convergence between Native American and white Americans, ecologically educated or not, seems as unlikely as finding the blue-eyed Welsh Indians Lewis and Clark were told to watch for on their trip West. (They too got lost.) If Vizenor and other Native writers have been “homing in” on a displaced narrative tradition that maintains a vibrant, sacred communal order, then on what figurative territory are Lopez and other nature writers

homing in? Nature writing on the North American continent, it seems to me, has been the process of reckoning with our culture-wide catastrophe of loss, an endeavor that in many ways remains incomplete. Lopez has recognized that, through a well-trained set of eyes, what the land engenders, among countless other gifts, is a place for the extended communal relationships Native Americans have always maintained, and seem to have already set about repairing and restoring through their art and literature. Observing ecosystems and cultures as they unravel can highlight the urgent need for such restoration work in Euramerican circles. The loss that nature writers, from Aldo Leopold to Barry Lopez to Rebecca Solnit are grappling with at its heart is a moral and therefore cultural cataclysm. In this sense, nature writers have been approaching the violent failures of our culture through the back door, perhaps exploring this path in reverse, and Native Americans have always been perhaps more straightforwardly writing about their “nature,” more along the lines that Bevis describes.

Though disappointingly tardy, a dramatic gestalt may be gained (though obviously the original destination is lost) in running backwards. “The things of this world can be truly perceived only by looking at them backward,” serves as the epigraph to Barbara Babcock’s *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*. After considering this platitude, I wondered if anything could be gained by reading Lopez and Vizenor backward, that is, Lopez through the lens of certain Indian and African cultural critics, and Vizenor as a nature writer. That perhaps perverse notion has evolved into the thesis before you.

The first chapter, “Making Metaphor Happen: Space, Time and Trickster Sign,” examines the coprophilic episodes in trickster myth, the relationship of landscape and metaphor in Native American epistemologies as well as in the tradition of the naturalist, and introduces the work of the two writers here in question.

Chapter 2, “Whiteness, Wildness and Trickster Black, Red and Green: Earthdiver Reciprocity in the Clan of the Hairy-Breasted Nut-Scratcher,” renders some of Lopez’s short stories, including some somewhat controversial translation work, through critiques gleaned from Leslie Silko, Toni Morrison, and Phil Deloria. Also addressed is the troublesome ethical territory of cultural property and the reproduction of Native stories.

Chapter 3, “Dead Voices, Naturally: Haiku Hermeneutics and Textual Tricks in Gerald Vizenor’s Urban-Wildland Interface,” examines both Anishinaabe and Oriental influences on the Vizenor’s treatment of the “nature” of textuality.

The last chapter, “Paws for effect: Trickster Bears, ‘Pronouncement’ and Silence” juxtaposes appearances of bears in Lopez and Vizenor’s writing. Bears are a sacred figure in Anishinaabe belief, and the speeches Vizenor’s bears deliver often serve as an initiation to coax the reader into a heightened state of awareness, a precursor to an invocation of sacred rites. Such rites often serve to cross boundaries, between past and present, the individual and the community; the adolescent and the adult. Vizenor’s purpose is nothing less than an invocation of the same border crossings to occur in text.

Lopez’s bear in his short story “The Bear in the Road” contrasts Vizenor’s tropes of the ursine. This bear is silent, and its appearance to the protagonist of the story becomes a metaphor for coming to terms with the limits of individual consciousness. Such limits seem to run up against the edge of the bear’s dark presence.

Throughout this thesis, I’ve attempted to show how trickster tropes old and new have influenced the work of Lopez and Vizenor. Lopez’s trickster works to reckon with transgressions of a colonial past without condemning history, leaving room for a fuller recognition of possibility in a European residency on the continent. Vizenor’s trickster begins in territory

occupied by colonial interests, and travels toward some revolutionary ideas on tribal sovereignty influenced by ideas both traditional and postmodern. Each author creates a trickster discourse that plays on constructed boundaries between nature and culture, self and community, wild and civilized. The task both writers share is the hope of a language that fosters ties between and within cultures, and the larger community that includes nonhuman inhabitants as well as the land itself.

How is it that a trickster might lead anyone home? The trickster answer, of course, is that she might not: those tracks may lead off a cliff, into a raging torrent, or around in an erratic circle. The trick is in the tracking, the way in which scrutinizing the signs, due to their ephemeral nature in a world of ceaseless change, catalyzes dialogue among interpreters, comparing what has been observed and speculating on what might be known based on the available evidence. Anything stated with an unreasonable degree of certainty is bound to be flipped upon the fulcrum where the trickster balances such utterances, exposing its foolishness, hubris, and impetuosity.

Spokane Indian novelist and poet Sherman Alexie tells a story about standing on a street corner in downtown Seattle where he makes his home. Some Anglo-Saxon hicks in a pickup truck rumbled past, one shouting: "Fucking go home!" Alexie shouted after them down the boulevard: "You first!" In light of the topic here, Alexie's deferral seems like a koan, a trickster riddle: sly, generous, comic, complex in spite of apparent simplicity, and upon meditation, a bump on the head to coax the mind out of its weary habits. Trickster discourse, if nothing else, takes up Alexie's invitation, pushing toward a direction home.

Whether or not anyone gets there soon, Lopez and Vizenor, among others, have been busy creating narratives that might some day soon gather enough discursive momentum to justify a descriptor with a destination in mind, no longer bound to the ambiguity of trial separation

implied by the prefix “post.” In bookstores of the future, perhaps there will be a shelf for “You first!” stories. Vizenor and Lopez, each in his own way, contribute to these enticing possibilities, homage to the rediscovery of a world where much has been lost, yet much remains.

Making Metaphor Happen: Space, Time and Trickster Sign

In trickster's case, how did mental fakery come to replace incarnate fakery?

It is one thing for trypanosomes to change their skins; another for Raven to become a leaf floating in spring water; another still for storytellers to have imagined Raven in the first place, or for one of us to reimagine him. Before picking these strands apart, however, we should remember that the mythology itself asks us to confuse them. Coyote stories point to coyotes teaching about the mind, the stories themselves look to predator-prey relationships for the birth of cunning. These myths suggest that blending natural history and mental phenomena is not an unthinkable conflation, but on the contrary, an accurate description of the way things are. To learn about intelligence from Coyote the meat thief is to know that we are embodied thinkers. If the brain has cunning, it has it as a consequence of appetite; the blood that lights the mind gets its sugars from the gut.

-Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*.

Comic shit is a smooth sign and shit floats in trickster narratives.

-Gerald Vizenor, "Trickster Discourse"

Native American trickster stories have come to possess a remarkable, irresistible draw for contemporary literary scholars, artists, and anthropologists. Scholars tend to couch their interest in trickster in the vernacular of the cultural critic or social scientist, but the attraction also lies partly in the opportunity to discuss trickster's absurdist antics, which broach subjects rarely touched upon in Western literature. Trickster's appetites—sexual, gastrointestinal, and otherwise, tend to defy comprehension through the lens of any particular Western mode of critical thought. The trickster is creator and culture hero to be sure, yet his simultaneous existence as dupe, hideous pervert, and clown seem to draw more attention. Coprophilic, phallic, and even transgendered adventure permeate much of Native American trickster lore. In Paul

Radin's *The Trickster*, an ethnographic study of Winnebago myth, parts of Wakdjukanga's penis are hacked off, which become edible plants where they hit the ground. In the same myth cycle, the trickster disguises himself as a woman, fashioning portions of the female anatomy out of leftover elk parts.

While trickster's sexual antics have been widely examined and interpreted, trickster crap seems to baffle social scientists and literature critics alike. In his essay "Trickster Discourse," Gerald Vizenor notes with derision some anthropological theories that attempt to explain trickster's coprophilia, from Freudian anal-stage speculations to the guess that "primitive" peoples evacuated their bowels in the great out-of-doors, where they could get closer to their stool and examine it under the full light of day (197-99). The number of coprophilic episodes in North American trickster lore might indicate the presence of something more than a joke—but then again it might not. Crap can be called upon in a pinch by the Nez Perce Coyote, for example, as a comic sounding board for ideas. It is always the turd that gives him the right advice, which Coyote affirms by saying, "That is what I thought already, and by the way, you might hop back inside, for you have already delayed me" (Phinney 69).

Modern readers can only speculate what the original intention behind such episodes. The tribal punch line to many trickster jokes remains, as it should be, encoded in the native tongue. An analysis of shit anyway probably cannot be accurately construed from text alone. Until recently, and still for most creatures, scat is an outdoor phenomenon. As the father of a one-year-old, and as a hunter, hiker and embodied thinker, my own encounters with excreta on a daily basis seem to rival in number those with text, though the task of processing the latter fills more hours. While the opportunities for speculation in the field on this matter seem endless, they are rarely taken; at the risk of negating my own work here, perhaps this is for the best. In the absence of such reckoning,

trickster's scat remains a joke, but also a sign, in both the bear-shit-on-the-trail and semiotic sense. Perhaps the more pertinent question concerns why scatological episodes remain a nearly universal source of humor as well as a common motif in the artful riddles of trickster work.

The operations of the bowels are a sign, initially and perhaps best understood in a comic manner. Every parent has had the experience of lamely trying to convince a child that a toot at an inopportune moment should be greeted solemnly. Individual digestive traces, from the huckleberry pancake appearance of a bear's leavings to the alien-pod casing of an owl pellet, can be fascinating, even comic, upon close observation. The audible and olfactory effects of the workings of the gut whose sugars "light the mind," as Lewis Hyde writes, also provide the butt of a long-standing wordless joke. Anyone who has sat around a fire, just as the night gets quiet and thoughts turn inward, only to have some philistine in attendance change the tenor of the evening by making "a trumpet of his ass" as Dante wrote in his *Divine Comedy*, "gets" this, perhaps the first answer to an absurd gustatory riddle. The role of laughter in getting an audience to think with less regard to convention being well established, it's no mystery why tricksters, whose very niche in storytelling shares the same concern, frequently resort to this old standard.

Yet the simplistic, reliable laugh evoked by a well-timed fart or a well-deserved slip of the heel on a horse turd does not adequately represent the more extensive role of shit in Native American trickster tales, henceforth referred to as a "coprotrope." (Credit for this term goes to my thesis advisor, David Moore.) An alternate rendering of the coprotrope construes shit as the site of the grotesque, the filthy, and therefore repressed aspects of human existence. Tricksters, especially those from Native American myth, and their peregrinations from this dung heap to the altar and many points between, have held the gaze of western scholars, from Carl Jung to Gary Snyder, in part because of the notable absence of such a character in Western literature. For the

occident-prone, a trickster coprotrope might aid in negotiating past a paralysis of Cartesian proportion, in which the veracity of any form of representation must be weighed against its necessary corollary, “the negative.” In her book *The Reversible World*, Trickster scholar Barbara Babcock-Abrams, borrowing liberal from literary critic and foremost skeptic of symbols Kenneth Burke, describes the consequences of metaphor in a Western paradigm of language:

The study of culture is predicated upon the distinctive trait of man that he is a creator and user of symbols [...] As Kenneth Burke reminds us, however, the study of man as the specifically word using animal requires special attention to this distinctive marvel, “the negative.” Not only is “this ingenious addition to the universe solely a product of human symbol systems, but symbol-using itself “demands a feeling for the negative Beginning in the [...] admonition that the word for the thing is *not* the thing.” A specifically symbol using animal will necessarily introduce a symbolic ingredient into every experience [...] Hence, every experience will be imbued with negativity.

And since metaphor itself is a special kind of negation—“One uses metaphor without madness insofar as one spontaneously knows that the literal implication of the figure is not true”—it is profoundly ironic that studies of the social uses of metaphor have but rarely examined this “distinctive marvel.” Studies of symbolic processes, whether by social scientists, philosophers, or literary critics, tend rather to obscure the centrality of negation to the systems of signification by which we live [...] (13).

Central to the Western understanding of metaphor, Babcock argues, is that it is a lie; to construe metaphor otherwise would be to court insanity. And if language is considered in an all too-

typical fashion, in the traditionally de-contextualized* framework of the social scientist, Western philosopher or literary critic, one would be inclined to concede her point: every metaphor does contain a lie, all experience is imbued with negativity, and negation is a quagmire from which the subject may never fully emerge. However, when language is placed in a specific context of a particular landscape and culture, Babcock's description of negation seems to place some rather narrow strictures on the fullest possibilities inherent in myth and metaphor, provoking a dangerous insanity of its own.

In the tradition of the Navajo, according to folklorist Barre Toelken in his essay "Life and Death in Navajo Coyote Tales," the unheeded lesson couched in metaphor can lead to madness, to a real-world unraveling of ecosystems somehow at once delicate and ephemeral as desert grass, but elusive enough to escape human control. In one Coyote episode Toelken recounts, the songdog wishes for rain to flood a prairie dog colony so that he might easily kill and eat the prairie dogs. The story is alluded to "in the Rainmaking segments of several rituals" (355), according to Toelken. In the 1950's, when government agents proposed exterminating prairie dogs to protect the roots of fragile desert grasses, the Navajos advised against the experiment. Toelken explains:

[...] prairie dogs are thought to embody the same forces underground as those which are represented above ground by rain. Prairie dogs are said to "cry for rain."

A Navajo belief relating rain to burrowing animals was inadvertently "collected"

* I intend this term to mean not merely taken out of a context, but out of *any* context that might catalyze signification to a discursive community. De-contextualizing discourse in this way obliterates the possibility that language might be mediative and iterative, not merely representational and repetitive, and performative rather than only rational, descriptive or substantive.

Beyond the question of symbol systems or metaphors invoking some form of truth, the question of context involves issues surrounding appropriation and translation, which I deal with in later chapters.

by government officials in the 1950's, when they proposed to get rid of prairie dogs on some parts of the reservation in order to protect the roots of the sparse desert grass and thereby maintain at least marginal grazing for sheep. Navajos objected strongly, insisting, "If you kill off all the prairie dogs, there will be no one to cry for the rain." Of course they were assured by the amused government men that there was no conceivable connection between rain and prairie dogs, a fact that could be proven easily by a simple scientific experiment: a specific area would be set aside and all the burrowing animals there would be exterminated. The experiment was carried out, over the continued objections of the Navajos, and its outcome was surprising only to the white scientists.

Today, the area [...] has become a virtual wasteland with very little grass. Apparently, without the ground-turning processes of the little burrowing animals, the sand in the area becomes solidly packed, causing a fierce runoff whenever it rains. (391)

Toelken tracks an instance where the absence of contexts—in this circumstance, under the pretense of objectivity in scientific discourse—played no small part in courting ecological ruin, and the further marginalization of a people dependent on that ecosystem. Toelken notes the Navajo predisposition toward certain responsibilities in discourse evident in their worldview:

It would be incautious to suggest in this instance that the Navajos were possessed of a clear, conscious objective theory about water retention and absorption in packed sand. On the other hand, it would be difficult to ignore the fact that the Navajo myth system, which insists on delicate reciprocal responsibilities among

elements of nature, dramatized more accurately than our science the results of an imbalance between principals in the rain process. (*Ibid.*)

Toelken's observation of a Navajo insistence upon delicate reciprocal responsibilities maintained through narrative discourse seems indicative of a role for language profoundly different than the one described by Babcock. Many tribal epistemologies adhere to the belief that the world is rendered intelligible—in some ways created—by the spoken word. But the tribal view differs from a similar premise in certain strains of postmodern thought in that the word constitutes a sacred kinship between the self and community, which frequently include features in the land as well as its inhabitants. While postmodern and post-structuralist theories tend to adhere to a long-standing Western tradition of delving deeply into the layers of individual consciousness to complicate the ways in which words mean, the American Indian worldview seems to construe the individual as possessing greatly diminished potential for meaning outside the context of an extended community, for which the land itself has always provided a powerful metaphor. Keith Basso, who spent decades among the Western Apache as an anthropologist, writes in *Wisdom Sits In Places*:

Whenever Apaches describe the land—or, as happens more frequently, whenever they tell stories about incidents that have occurred at specific points upon it—they take steps to constitute it in relation to themselves. Which is simply to observe that in acts of speech, mundane and otherwise, Apaches fashion images and understandings of the land that are accepted as credible accounts of what it actually is, why it is significant, and how it impinges on the daily lives of men and women. In short, portions of a worldview are constructed and made available, and a Western Apache version of the landscape is deepened, amplified, and tacitly

affirmed. With words, a massive physical presence is fashioned into a meaningful human universe. (40)

Words, in the milieu Basso describes, do not fashion a self out of the depths of an abstract or disembodied mind, ego, id or (m)other, as is the case with certain postmodern ideas, but out of the weave of self, family, clan, culture and landscape. While telling about events that occurred in a specific place can produce the uncanny ecological wisdom Toelken recounts in the Navajo prairie dog stories, the more reliable process occurring in Navajo, Western Apache, Nez Perce, Anishinaabe, and countless other tribal myths seems more along the lines that Basso here relates. The vitality of this kind of storytelling does not lie in its accuracy or correctness. Especially where trickster characters are involved, the stories instead offer cautionary tales on the unique joys and inescapable tragedies of humankind's considerable intelligence and cunning. Tricksters can play the culture hero or creator, but just as often, and frequently in the same episode, they lampoon the desires produced by hungers of various kinds, reminding listeners that these wants are not the same as what the world requires of its living subjects. When the trickster acts in Native American lore, what is negated, repressed, subjugated, unmentionable, or unacknowledged in symbol systems, including metaphor and myth, is often featured in tandem with the elegant, poignant and beautiful. With the sacred and the profane operating under the rule of equal air time, a premise of trickster storytelling, from the most ancient campfire variety to the contemporary novels, poems and critical essays of Native American authors is to invoke humor, contingency and chance to "unfix," as Arnold Krupat suggests in his essay "Post-Structuralism and Oral Literature," any fixed renditions of a particular discourse:

What all this implies for Native American Literatures is that we must read the texts we have, from Henry Schoolcraft to the present moment, as in need of unfixing, a

process by which we acknowledge that any meanings which appear to be present are never fully present; meaning, to return to Eagleton's phrase, "is a matter of what the sign is *not*," as well as what the sign seems to be. (124)

The "unfixing" which Krupat advocates here applies to the various ways in which a colonial hegemony historically has exercised control, and in some ways continues to influence Native American Literatures. It might apply as well to the "fixed"—as in chained or bound—paralysis inherent in the seemingly unavoidable phenomenon of negation in symbol systems described by Babcock.

Returning with these ideas to the befuddling examination of a trickster coprotope, if what the sign is "not," what is excluded from discourse, can be construed as a kind of figurative shit, it might be said that one aim of trickster discourse is to catalyze the unpredictable phenomena alluded to in the bumper-sticker colloquialism "shit happens." On one level, this ability to make shit happen occurs in through trickster's aforementioned ability to unite the sacred and profane, where "shit" is the negative in symbol systems, the lie in a metaphor. On another level, the meaning of shit would concern the occurrence of a series of improbable events leading to revelation, a gestalt moment or epiphany often gained through misfortune or surprise. For if symbol systems are automatically prone to negation, and metaphors are predisposed to lie under the de-contextualized linguistic conditions Babcock describes, the aim of trickster discourse is to return language to the myriad contexts from which its meanings were derived, leaving it to the discretion of the discursive community whether the words in question evoke anything resembling the truth.

In this introductory chapter, I want to examine trickster's ability to catalyze these figurative scatological occurrences in two sections. The first "Spatial Considerations in Trickster

Discourse” will examine the role that spatial representation plays in certain tribal epistemologies, as well as in trickster discourse. Trickster’s corporeality in a physical world plays an important role in “seeing,” as well as in the indeterminacy and contingency that might work to unfix textuality. Here I’ll examine a few coprophilic episodes in trickster myth, as well as the relationship of landscape and metaphor in Native American epistemologies as well as the tradition of the naturalist.

With this background in mind, the next segment, “Mapping the Interior Landscape” will introduce some of the writing of Gerald Vizenor and Barry Lopez, the two writers with whom this thesis is primarily concerned. Much of Vizenor’s work is predicated on achieving the variety of “unfixing” Arnold Krupat identifies; that is, loosening the colonial grip on the fixed meaning of Native American texts. Trickster’s comic coprotrope plays a vital role in the ecology of text described in Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor’s term, “comic holotrope,” in which the trickster is not a character but a kind of tribal semiotic sign whose function, as Vizenor notes in the epigram to this chapter, is to signify the chance to energize newly discovered pathways in the complex circuitry of narrative discourse, a gamble Vizenor contends has always existed in tribal stories. Central to this mission is Vizenor’s recasting of the Anishinaabe earthdiver creation myth. The reciprocal, communal responsibilities that Toelken saw among the Navajo has its analog in his tribe’s creation story, as well as a dark side of trickster work perhaps too-seldomly examined critical perspectives on tricksters.

Meanwhile, Lopez engages his own version of this postmodern/tribal narrative adventure. For Lopez, a former photographer whose long fascination with the light and space of the American West lends a keen eye for the shape and texture of open landscapes, the land becomes nearly synonymous with an as-yet unrealized potential for a rootedness, a kinship and community

without precedent in the European experience on the North American continent. Lopez describes a way into this communal relationship, through another kind of reciprocity between what he deems “interior and exterior landscapes. Vizenor employs these same terms; in dialogue with one another, a clearer picture of what Vizenor intends with his notion of a holotrope can be gained.

In Vizenor’s philosophy of the holotrope, meaning and shit can both displace enough of the fluid medium of existence to float, a condition Vizenor contends as *a priori* in the Anishinaabe worldview, and as postmodern only because, as Lopez hints, the dominant culture has made a Herculean effort to avoid it. Shit then, as a trickster sign, and as a metaphor, would in many respects work like any other metaphor understood in the vernacular of the postmodern: floating, detached from any signifier, and open to a multitude of interpretations. This indeterminate meaning in trickster discourse depends on seeing in all four dimensions as much as it does language itself.

I. Spatial Considerations in Trickster Discourse

Of vital importance in trickster’s action is the appearance of things, and the way in which these things often become the catalyst for his ideas. This may help explain why tricksters are always traveling, the possibilities seen on the horizon materializing in his midst by “going there.” This “just now” appearance of a given circumstance is a necessary condition to the antics of any trickster. The always-traveling trickster moves his embodied self through the world at large, reckoning with the ontological freedoms and limitations presented the spatial bounds of the physical world. Seeing, however imperfectly, becomes a prominent feature of trickster activity. Vizenor’s tricksters are frequently enticing a kind of full sensual awareness codified as “seeing.” One of Vizenor's oft-repeated maxims, found in his essays as well as his fiction, “the oral

tradition is a visual event,” implies the perception of space—the raw material, along with speech, of culture—as a precursor to any ensuing discourse. Moreover, the accoutrements of these spaces in their fullest dimension cannot be perceived without some synthesis of sight and sound. When discourse emerges, Vizenor implies it is the aural sense that should “see.” “My stories are heard in the ear not the eye,” (6) claims Bagese, the trickster from Vizenor's novel *Dead Voices*. The appeal to the senses and the awareness of spatial representations are hinted in the term holotrope itself. The term resonates with hologram, the laser-produced image that gives the illusion of three-dimensional depth and movement dependent upon the perspective of the viewer. (In the another Vizenor novel, *The Heirs of Columbus*, a trickster projects giant laser holograms into the sky over Minneapolis and Washington D.C.)

Elaine Jahner describes trickster as the practical application of a theory found Jean Baudrillard's *The Perfect Crime*, which begins “Were it not for appearances, the world would be a perfect crime, that is, a crime without a criminal, without a victim and without a motive” (1). Jahner comments,

Trickster's enactments are concrete, visual reminders of the margin of error which is always part of the human condition. Trickster reminds people that there is “no perfect crime,” no absolute conjunction between knowing and seeing and presence. Trickster's avatars all know why Baudrillard proclaims that the impossibility of the “perfect crime” is the happy ontological fault, the necessary condition of human experience. Like Baudrillard, Trickster's avatars believe that the closer we come to collapsing the human spaces of perception (and declaring them objective is one form of collapse) the closer we come to ending the human adventure. The perfect crime is also the totalizing terrorist act. (55)

Tricksters play in the gaps and disjunctures of human perception, thought, and communication, and work to remind us that this process is always one step behind things as they occur. This “margin of error,” can be understood as nothing less than indeterminacy and contingency that participants in a communal trickster discourse would recognize as the force that brings text to life. Jahner, too recognizes the death of symbol systems inherent in de-contextualized rendering of texts. “Collapsing the spaces of human perception” through a declaration of objectivity may initially seem like hyperbole on the part of Jahner, yet in comparing tribal epistemologies with that of the dominant culture, the danger becomes more readily apparent.

In *God is Red*, Vine Deloria Jr., in a chapter titled “Thinking in Time and Space,” describes how Native American vision, as the chapter title suggests, adds a dimension that draws energy away from the buzz of electricity produced by sharply polarized particles in Western dualistic thought. Deloria suggests that considerations of physical geography are what contextualize the artifacts of cultural geography. Symbols have meaning in accordance with time and place; by removing from consideration the latter dimension, the only way symbols can continue to “mean” is through hegemonic control, the “fixing” of meaning that postmodern thought calls into question. In Deloria’s view, the absence of spatial considerations also helps explain the chasm between belief and action in the Western world:

There appears to be a peculiar relationship between thinking in temporal and spatial terms. We are inevitably involved whether we like it or not, with time, but when attempting to explain the nature of our experiences, we are often not necessarily involved with spatial considerations, once we have taken time seriously. The whole nature of the subject of ethics appears to validate this peculiarity. Ethical systems are notorious for having the ability to relate concepts

and doctrines to every consideration, except the practical considerations with which we become involved. Ideology unleashed without being limited to the real world proves demoniac at best. Once could project therefore, that space must in a certain sense precede time as a consideration for thought. If time becomes our primary consideration, we never seem to arrive at the reality of our existence in places but instead are always directed to experiential interpretations rather than to the experiences themselves. (85)

Deloria here surveys the chasm between belief, experience and practice in Western epistemologies. The “peculiar relationship” Deloria identifies between the spatial and temporal requires privileging time. One way to accomplish the latter task, as Jahner notes, is to engage a Cartesian precedent and declare such spaces objective. But the result is always a mess: The comedy inherent in the absence of physical geography, in a “real world” milieu, can be gleaned in tribal trickster coprotropes. In indigenous cultures, the absurdity of attempting to operate as a solitary knower in an objective universe along a neatly plumb timeline seems to be a source of humor. The happenstance of the Nez Perce Coyote’s habit of seeking wise counsel from his nether region, for instance, often coincides with one of his bungled ideas. Coyote attempts to defer his arrival at the spatial reality of his existence by assigning the power of thought to his own shit, as if the physical evidence of his passage through the world emerged entirely in a domain of his own creation. The delusional wisdom received (Coyote “hears” nothing but approval for his schemes) illustrates the perils of human perspicacity as Deloria describes it. The primacy of the individual progressing by thought through time, as Coyote’s scatological advisors farcically allude, is not the shit, and as a corollary, much of the thinking that takes place in solitary abstraction turns to shit when it seeks a ground-truthing in the world outside. Nonetheless, as a

well-established facet of human nature, the vainglorious search for this variety of truth continues unabated, the smoking mounds of evidence to the contrary frequently greeted with some analog to Coyote's oft-repeated mantra: "That is what I thought already, and by the way, you might hop back inside, for you have already delayed me." Moreover, such delusions of grandeur are a kind of prerequisite to the "totalizing terrorist act" Jahner warns against. Though portrayed with humor, the metaphor of holding court with one's own shit would seem, ironically, to offer a warning against the famous conclusion Descartes finally drew. Finding nothing meaningful except the synaptic whirl of his own hefty cranium, all else in a Cartesian universe is resigned to significance within the realm of individual consciousness, which requires a kind of hegemonic, totalizing control to maintain. Everything outside such a regime is subjugated, repressed; negated. Coyote's shit, metaphorically speaking, is the necessary lie in the metaphor of a decontextualized discourse.

Such an absurd conversation, along with Coyote's impulsiveness, foolishness, and impudence are the prompts for a dialogue among community members, who might on occasion reach some consensus out of some ambiguous signs about which direction to go into the future, but more often will be discussing how to patch things up after some trickster has left another chaotic mess. Deloria's observation that "ideology unleashed without being limited to the real world proves demoniac at best," and Jahner's contention that "Trickster's avatars all know why Baudrillard proclaims that the impossibility of the 'perfect crime' is the happy ontological fault, the necessary condition of human experience" are signposts pointing toward the realization that trickster discourse, far from being a literary indulgence, aesthetic whim, or humorous but ultimately impractical bit of cultural nostalgia, has some quite pragmatic applications in the real world. The discursive space of trickster discourse is an actual place, one where things have

animate meaning according to the wind, weather, sunlight, plants, neighbors, homes and other inhabitants. A trickster wanders in, catalyzing the events that make things mean, throwing a wrench in the works of the daily routine, casting those familiar things and meanings in a new light. By comparison, a merely figurative discursive space is the netherworld of another discussion where, as Deloria describes it, “time becomes our primary consideration, we never seem to arrive at the reality of our existence in places but instead are always directed to experiential interpretations rather than to the experiences themselves.” Without direct experience as a guide, the spaces in which such first-hand knowledge occur are abstracted, moral and ethical obligations to place are abdicated, and quite literally, given the technological prowess of our species, “ending the human adventure,” as Jahner describes it, becomes a frightening possibility. Trickster discourse begins with the premise that in space and time, shit does happen, and that imperfect though they may be, seeing, speaking and knowing in relation to others is still the best way to avoid stepping into the mess.

II. Mapping the interior landscape

Tricksters, however, are not mere agents or symbols of cultural risk management. Even if we grant the trickster efficacy in his efforts to make us “see” in space as well as time, and to reckon with the “not,” the negative in any discourse, we have not escaped the essential necessity of language to human experience. As such, trickster’s aim, congruent with not stepping into a mess, is enticing the steps into metaphor.* Metaphors often, in the age of textual representation, rely upon an elusive sense of reading between the lines. As much as trickster embodiment is a

* I owe this turn of phrase to the title of Travis Burdick’s *Stepping Through the Metaphor*, his 2003 M.A. thesis from the University of Montana.

vital aspect of the mythology he creates, his work in metaphor might require a transformational disembodiment into the between-spaces on the page. Gerald Vizenor seems to have identified this disembodied trickster. For Vizenor, “floating” possible meanings in-between the lines in text infers a trickster who exists as a sign rather than a character in literature. “The trickster is comic nature in a language game, not a real person or ‘being’ in the ontological sense,” as Vizenor describes him in the introduction to *Trickster of Liberty*. He goes on: “The tribal trickster is a comic holotrope, the whole figuration, an unbroken interior landscape that beams carious points of view in temporal reveries” (x). Vizenor often uses the phrase “interior landscape” in the process of attempting to describe the somewhat elusive concept of a holotrope. A holotrope, “the whole figuration the ties the unconscious to social experience,” suggests a relationship in which landscape and mind would be mutually informing. “Unbroken” suggests a well-worn path or inroad between the two worlds. The medium in which this relationship is nurtured is language.

In an essay titled “Landscape and Narrative,” Barry Lopez explains in careful and concise terms the particulars of this relationship, which might shed additional light on Vizenor’s holotrope:

I think of two landscapes, one outside the self, the other within. The external landscape is the one we see, not only the line and color of the land and its shading at different times of the day, but also its plants and animals in season, its weather, its geology, the record of its climate and evolution [...] These are all elements of the land, and what makes the landscape comprehensible are the relationships between them. One learns a landscape finally not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it, like that between the

sparrow and the twig. The difference between the relationships and the elements is the same as that between written history and a catalog of events. (64)

Lopez here defines landscape as a complex web of various beings and events. Discovering the relationships rather than the litany of names within the web is what brings the land to life. This ecological viewpoint has profound implications for the relationship between world and mind, which Lopez describes:

The second landscape I think of is an interior one, a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape. Relationships in the exterior landscape include those that are named and discernible, such as the nitrogen cycle, or a vertical sequence of Ordovician limestone, and others that are uncodified or ineffable, such as winter light falling on a particular kind of granite, or the effect of humidity on the frequency of a blackpoll warbler's burst of song. That these relationships have purpose and order, however inscrutable they may seem to us, is a tenet of evolution. Similarly, the speculations, intuitions, and formal ideas we refer to as "mind" are a set of relationships in the interior landscape with purpose and order; some of these are obvious, many impenetrably subtle. The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes. (*Ibid.*)

Lopez suggests mediation between interior and exterior landscapes. This phenomenon mimics the "wild," in the exterior landscape, in that it can be influenced by forces human and otherwise, but ultimately arises on some level beyond complete human control. In this sense, the relationship between world and mind, like the ineffable relationships in an ecosystem, can be seen as evincing

a kind of holism. Language, like mycorrhizal fungus*, may well mediate between the basic elements of sunlight, water, soil and air in a symbiotic relationship to the human community. The resonances with Vizenor's holotrope can begin to be heard. Lopez's interior landscape is a "projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape," which rings off Vizenor's disembodied trickster, who projects an "unbroken interior landscape that beams carious points of view in temporal reveries." Pairing these sentences together requires some visualization, (giving the words some space) as well as perhaps a dictionary. On the latter point, with respect to Vizenor, "carious" means decay, especially in reference to tooth or bone (teeth, perhaps significantly in Vizenor's choice of words, being essential component of word formation). A reverie is a daydream. Vizenor, then, suggests a trickster whose unbroken interior landscape is able to reify decaying words by entering into a kind of time-warped daydream, where, among other word-nurturing attributes, space is no longer subordinate to the demands of time.*

One source of the metaphysical provisions of this elevated state of consciousness, "an inexplicable renewal of enthusiasm after storytelling"(*Crossing* 63) as Lopez describes it, is located, Lopez suggests, in the life of the land itself. The cultivation of this holistic interior landscape relies on a projection of the order inherent in the web of relationships in the land. Achieving this kind of balance, Lopez notes, is not only an attribute of effective storytelling, but

* In Daniel Matthews book, *Cascade Olympic Natural History*, the vital role of mycorrhizae in the formation of nearly all vascular plants is aptly described in layman's terms. "Mycorrhizal fungi are a literal embodiment of 'the web of life' the natural community is sometimes called" (265), writes Matthews. Mycorrhizae forms an essential link between the root systems of plants and the soil, transferring water, minerals, and nitrogen, and apparently protecting the roots from some forms of bacterial infection, in exchange for carbohydrate energy from the root. Matthews notes there is still much to be learned about "the mycorrhizosphere" as he calls it. The girth and height of many of the West's conifer trees may well depend on these fungi.

* On several occasions in his fiction, Vizenor invokes this alternate state of consciousness, what he calls "flying through sacred time," as a precursor to the kind of reading that might incite trickster discourse. In chapter four I describe this phenomenon in greater detail.

also the inspiration behind many rituals in indigenous cultures. Lopez describes a clear example of this ritual in Navajo Beautyway ceremony:

In the Navajo view, the elements of one's interior life—one's psychological makeup and moral bearing—are subject to a persistent principle of disarray. Beautyway is, in part, a spiritual invocation of the order of the exterior universe [...] The purpose of this invocation is to recreate in the individual who is the subject of the Beautyway ceremony that same order, to make the individual again a reflection of the myriad enduring relationships of the landscape. (67)

Beautyway, offers Lopez, provides a formalized, religious entry into the process of balancing interior and exterior landscapes. Perhaps this is why Lopez's self-consciousness, a solemn, respectful tone here is nearly palpable, as he skirts the edge of an appropriative gaze into a sacred Navajo rite. Lopez's point, however, is not so much to take anything from the Navajo, but to establish a precedent in an ancient religion for what he believes is universally available through narrative:

I believe story functions in a similar way. A story draws on relationships in the exterior landscape and projects them onto the interior landscape. The purpose of storytelling is to achieve harmony between the two landscapes, to use all the elements of story—syntax, mood, figures of speech—in a harmonious way to reproduce the harmony of the land in the individual's interior. Inherent in a story is the power to reorder a state of psychological confusion through contact with the pervasive truth of those relationships we call “the land.” (68)

The land, in other words, can restore a holistic sense of self, but this integral self will rely on relationships in the land, presumably including relationships between other people. An ecology

between world, mind, and words emerges. Lopez: A story contextualized in the land has the power to reorder human life. Vizenor: Human lives contextualized in the stories of the land have the power to animate dead words. Words brought back to life become stories that, contextualized in the land, become the potent force behind reordering human life. This loosely enclosed loop begins to look like “the whole figuration that ties the unconscious to social experience,” or a holotrope.

If a holotrope features some ecologic characteristics, where is the trickster’s niche in this ecosystem? Lopez’s commentary on interior landscapes is especially useful in addressing this question, because it provides some evidence for an answer to yet another perplexing problem regarding trickster mythology. From where does trickster derive his powers? Returning for a moment to Lopez’s idea that that an interior landscape is “a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape,” if we consider trickster’s penchant for reversing the order of things, such power may well derive from his turning this arrangement inside out: a trickster is a kind of projection within an exterior landscape of a part of a person. That is, the trickster on occasion embodies some aspect of web of ecology itself, sometimes as a singular animal, on other occasions as a force as grand as the sun or the atmosphere. He becomes what Lopez describes in the “exterior landscape [...] those [things] that are uncodified or ineffable, such as winter light falling on a particular kind of granite, or the effect of humidity on the frequency of a blackpoll warbler’s burst of song.” The projection of a person into the land here allows these phenomena, particularly the portion of them that are “uncodified or ineffable,” a voice, a means of contact with the order of things that under everyday conditions are beyond human reckoning. This may help explain why tricksters so often appear in animal form, though a trickster’s powers are not confined to what is embodied in a single animal. Trickster is at times creator of the known

universe and elsewhere destroyer of a considerable portion of his creation. His influential being extends to the entire world of phenomena. David Abrams in *The Spell of the Sensuous* cites an example in the trickster mythbody of such an instance when the earth itself possessed a voice, only to have it stolen by a trickster:

According to Ogotemeli, an elder of the Dogon tribe of Mali, spoken language was originally a swirling garment of breath worn by the enveloping earth itself. Later, this undulating garment was stolen by the jackal, an animal whose movements ever since have disclosed the prophetic speech of the world to seers and diviners. (87)

The trickster here possesses the power of speech the planet once held in its very air. The jackal “speaks” for the earth; in turn, the Dogon, in sharing what the jackal has revealed, convey that the jackal speaks for them as well. The trickster metaphor in this sense works as a mediator between realms of nature and culture, a task ably described by trickster scholar Barbara Babcock in her essay “A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster and his Tales Reconsidered”

myth [...] is preoccupied with those areas between categories, between what is animal and what is human, what is natural and what is cultural. Trickster and his tales exemplify this preoccupation, for at the center of his antinomian existence is the power derived from his ability to live interstitially, to confuse and escape the structures of society and the order of cultural things.

More importantly, trickster expresses the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of power so derived. While trickster’s power endows his group with vitality and other boons, it also carries with it the threat and possibility of chaos. (155)

Babcock observes the specialized kind of messenger or mediator role in which tricksters tend to appear. But in granting a voice to the inscrutable elements of the world itself, tricksters are not so much simple messengers of the gods as harbingers of apocalypse, in the sense of that word that denotes a revealing or revelation, but also its association with impending chaos and destruction. Thus the trickster insistence upon bringing forth both the dark and light remains in play.

A pertinent example in which trickster brings chaos and revelation can be found in the Anishinaabe earthdiver creation story, featuring the harrowing adventures of Wenebojo, the Anishinaabe trickster. In the introduction to his book titled *Earthdivers*, Vizenor recounts this story, which also happens to feature an equally pertinent copro trope. Vizenor jumps in at the middle of things, and his editing and translation here is notable for what is leaves out. In longer versions of the story, we learn that the flood is ultimately Wenebojo's fault: the Anishinaabe trickster has connived to eat better by cutting a deal with the wolves. The hunting gets a little too good; the prey animals don't much care for the arrangement between Wenebojo and the wolves. They convince Michibizhii, a monster residing in what's now referred to as the Great Lakes, to put a stop to it. He does so, killing one of the wolfpack. Wenebojo becomes angry, (not so much remorseful at the loss of a hunting partner as the chance at easy pickings) and seeks his revenge on Michibizhii. He destroys the monster, but the thrashing unleashes the epic flood that sends the trickster up his tree, where Wenebojo, perhaps out of equal parts fear and relief, has just let his bowels go. In Vizenor's *Earthdivers*, this is where he picks up the story:

Wenebojo was standing on the top of a tree [...] and the water was up to his mouth. Pretty soon Wenebojo felt that he wanted to defecate. He couldn't hold it. The shit floated up to the top of the water and floated around his mouth. (xxxii-iii)

The creative intelligence Wenebojo has displayed is at once his doing and very nearly his undoing. Letting his bowels go is an involuntary, yet somehow incongruous gesture, perhaps a rebellion against his predicament and a sign: he is not “scared shitless” but continues to survive, for the moment: he has hunted cleverly and eaten well. But he’s also loosed an epic apocalyptic world-destroying flood, one that kills a few of his fellow creatures as they frantically patch together the means for a new earth. The scat ominously bobbing toward Wenebojo’s mouth symbolizes the ecological conditions dictated by the dark paradox of appetite, and of human intelligence. Up to his neck in flood, the turd in question here well represents the manner in which Wenebojo’s own appetite nearly ends him. Threatened with the prospect of eating his own feces—the end of appetite reversed to greet its beginnings—Wenebojo turns to the earth divers

Wenebojo noticed that there was an animal in the water [...] The he saw several animals—beaver muskrat and otter. Wenebojo spoke to the otter first. “Brother,” he said, “ could you go down and get some earth? If you do that, I will make an earth for you and me to live on.” (*Ibid.*)

Wenebojo implores each of these animals to dive for the grains of sand out of which a new earth might be created. Otter and beaver each dive and the effort costs them their lives, but Wenebojo revives them just as he does muskrat, who returns with five grains of sand. Wenebojo produces a little island out of these grains, which grows exponentially to evolve into the new earth:

They went onto the little island—Wenebojo, got more earth on the island and threw it all around. The island got bigger. It got larger every time Wenebojo threw out another hand full of dirt. Then the animals at the bottom of the water, whoever was there, all come up to the top of the water and went to the island where Wenebojo was. They were tired of being in the water all that time, and when they

heard about the earth Wenebojo had made, they all wanted to stay there. Wenebojo kept on throwing the earth around. (*Ibid.*)

Wenebojo's actions here are doubly apocalyptic: he's destroyed creation; then plays a central role in creating the world anew. The revelation he precipitates, however, differs from the standard one issued by prophets and seers in that it comes not through divinely-inspired words, but through the actions of the earthdivers. (Here the first lesson of trickster discourse shows up in the mythology: community action in cleaning up after his antics will be required.) Wenebojo's ability to create a new earth relies on them. While he possesses god-like powers, the implementation of his vision relies on a dialogue with the others, and their engagement with the trickster in his latest scheme. In this way, trickster's considerable sphere of influence extends to the practical considerations of cultural maintenance and survival. The earthdiver myth can be read as a creation metaphor that is undergoing a continual process of unfolding, a possibility Vizenor himself has explored. Vizenor offers this translation of the earthdiver creation story as metaphor for an emerging group of Native American writers who he sees as creating new tribal worlds in the aftermath of cultural destruction. He is not alone in this interpretation. Lawrence W. Grossman, an Anishinaabe scholar, in his essay "Cultural Sovereignty and Native American Hermeneutics in the Interpretation of Sacred Stories of the Anishinaabe," writes that these and other stories of the Anishinaabe are continually revised in the telling, most recently to address among the young a case of what Grossman terms PASS—post apocalyptic stress disorder, the realization, according to the author, that certain elements of existence in a tribal world have ended. The point of this never-ending and informal editing of tribal stories is to ensure what Grossman terms "bimaadiziwin," an Anishinaabe term which loosely translates as 'the good

life.” One facet of this good life is a hermeneutical ethos that accepts differing versions of stories, as long as the well being of the community is taken to heart:

Anishinaabe hermeneutics points to the manner in which the interpretive process can be an ongoing interplay between the community and its leaders, especially its religious leaders. The community is willing to accept variant interpretations of myths with the proviso that the interpretation be based on community values and be directed toward the good of the community. (128)

It is with this generosity in mind that Vizenor’s version of Wenebojo’s adventures might be accepted in spite of the omission of Wenebojo’s transgression. Yet there is a dark side to trickster’s antics that Vizenor perhaps ignores, an exclusion that might work to the detriment of his case for the compassionate and comic tribal trickster. The earthdiver myth demonstrates that Wenebojo and his avatars are as capable of destruction as they are creation. Killing is a routine event in trickster mythology, and at times this task is undertaken not only without remorse, but with a sense of abject cruelty. If the earthdivers in Vizenor’s metaphor are Native American poets and writers creating new tribal territories, does it follow that it was a trickster consort who wreaked havoc on the old tribal world? Evidence from other Native American writers suggests an affirmative answer to that troublesome possibility. In Leslie Silko’s novel *Ceremony*, for example, Betonie, the trickster shaman that nurtures the protagonist Tayo back to health, claims that whites are the mere tools of witchery:

But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I 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. (132)

The “witchery” that Betonie describes is perhaps a more accurate depiction of the sort of trickster I described on page 35 as leaving chaos or disaster in his wake. Whether witch or trickster, Betonie implies that regardless of outcomes, the well-being of a community depends on the care available among its members. With this in mind the wisdom behind the very flexible hermeneutical ideal described by Grossman becomes clearer. While there is abundant laughter in Wenebojo’s predicament, there is also comedy as the alternative ending to tragedy. An Anishinaabe reading of trickster myth, (if I am reading well enough) seems to call for a dialogic approach that always leaves oxygen for the earthdivers after the flood. Tragic finalities of the sort with which Wenebojo flirts are to be avoided at all costs. The bag of tricks from which humans choose to make a living may be more voluminous than a raven’s or a reptile’s, but humans are included in the menagerie of creatures whose performances are survival gestures on a stage where life has always been tenuous, requiring attention and care. The relationship between that larger world and the gift of human speech, along with the responsibilities such a gift might entail appear in *Ceremony*:

“But you know, Grandson, the world is fragile.”

The word he chose to express “fragile” was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web. It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. That was the responsibility that went with being human, old Ku’oosh said, the story behind each word must be

told so that there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; this demanded great patience and love. (35-6)

Silko's description of the operations of the Laguna language suggests a symbiosis between words and the ethical imperative toward taking care in a "fragile" world. An orientation toward a spatial reckoning with reality, as Silko's Ku'oosh describes it, as "an intricate, fragile, yet somehow powerful web connecting sunlight and sand, soil and rain, people to other people and animals," adds the physical dimension to the flood of contingencies on which language floats. This spatial medium provides another context in which the meaning of any utterance is subject to constant change, but also provides a literal ground for meaning. Along these lines, one possible source of the contemporary literary critical fascination with the Native American trickster might be his uncanny migration between the territories of self and the world at large, the manner in which tricksters play at a recognition of relationship between the individual and the community, including its nonhuman inhabitants. With the actual dimensions of these territories in mind, trickster appears to embody yet another paradox. She affirms an ultimate duality into which humans are stuck, (Coyote talking to his scat: in obvious and important ways, self is not the other, does not encompass the whole world) yet through narrative performance (shape-shifting into various animal, linguistic, and narrative forms) simultaneously acknowledges the dialogic mutability of language that grants the possibility of at least a mediated access to the world outside the self (Wenebojo relying on the earth divers to create the world anew.)

The modern trick of discourse that both Vizenor and Lopez take up lies in the imperative to dredge the unspoken, silent inertia of the English printed page—the not in discourse—to evoke something of the vital, world-creating primacy of the spoken word in Anishinaabe, Western Apache, and other tribal cultures. The hope here is to create breathing room, much in the same

way photosynthesizing trees take in the waste of human respiration to make oxygen. Vizenor suggests in *Earthdivers* that there is fresh air in the best-chosen words:

Holding forth at the spacious treelines with the bears and the crows, the best tellers in the tribes peel, peel, peel their words like oranges, down to the last navel.

Mimicked in written forms over winter now, transposed in mythic metaphors, the interior glories from oral traditions burst in conversations and from old footprints on the trail. (165)

Mimicked mythic metaphors in the silence of the written word, suggests Vizenor, can be brought back to life in dialogue. A myth or metaphor resurrected this way can appear as something more than a sign imbued with negativity in a symbol system. They might be transformed into words as real as a spider's web. Recall Lewis Hyde, quoted as an epigram to this chapter: "These myths suggest that blending natural history and mental phenomena is not an unthinkable conflation, but on the contrary, an accurate description of the way things are" (57). Conjoining interior and exterior landscapes via trickster's performative mediation is one way of showing "the way things are," and that within this generous sense of reality, metaphor happens. In the absence of such generosity, the potential truth in metaphor might turn to a lie, turning tricksters to delve into a darker realm where a decontextualized, totalizing, hegemonic control over language relegates words to a mere representation, an objective description of the myriad ways shit happens.

Lopez plays with this contrast between hegemony and wholeness in a very short story titled "Conversation," from *Desert Notes*. The premise here is an impatient younger man, come to talk an older man out of leaving his open spaces behind. The younger man peppers his older friend with questions on matters from the practical to the philosophical, but the old man won't budge. The two men hold, respectively, to the differing conceptions of metaphor I've tried to lay

out in this chapter. The old man makes his case for staying put out of the closely observed process of a spider making its web:

“Once you have all the string laid out, once you have repaired the worn pieces, you will establish certain points. Between these points you will line out the string until you have made a web, very strong, very taut. The impact of a breeze at one edge will be felt at another. Sunlight will bounce when it hits, as though it were a trampoline. The sunlight will turn somersaults and you will know you have made the thing well...”

“I must tell you this. I think this is bullshit.”

“It’s bullshit because you are afraid your string will be too short. You are afraid it is too frayed, that you will be making knots all the time, that your web will be small and ridiculous.”

“I don’t trust metaphors.”

“I am not talking metaphors. I am telling you the truth.” (40)

Here Lopez pulls a trickster reversal: the necessary lie contained in metaphor is only necessary if one is in a hurry to leave the place—the context—where the metaphor was born. The old man in this story works in diametric opposition to metaphor’s “bullshit” or negative aspect, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, in which metaphors rendered literally would quickly lead to insanity. Trickster-like, Lopez reverses the inherent negative to suggest a context in which such comparisons contain an element of truth.

Both Lopez and Vizenor insist that delicate reciprocal responsibilities, a balance between interior and exterior landscapes mediate between the collectively social and the inclusively ecological through narrative. Each invokes an aspect of trickster’s weavings of the gossamer

thread between natural processes—the world outside the self and largely beyond human control—and the schemes of the mind that produce the cunning tricks that feed the belly and fuel the mind toward more narratives. As Lopez concludes in “Landscape and Narrative:”

Beyond this—that the interior landscape is a metaphorical representation of the exterior landscape, that the truth reveals itself most fully not in dogma but in the paradox, irony and contradictions that distinguish compelling narratives—beyond this there are only failures of the imagination: reductionism in science, fundamentalism in religion, fascism in politics. (71)

The illuminating power of a working metaphor to move beyond these “failures of imagination,” is the modus operandi of trickster discourse. Trickster in darkness makes a trumpet of his ass, leaves his mess on the lawn, unleashes the flood behind the dam, and may even disguise himself among hordes of European invaders. But in the light of day, he negotiates a bargain: dive deep for the smallest communal offering, a grain of sand or a vocalized thought, and his considerable creative powers will be put to work.

The endless possibilities under the light of the sun and the space of the earth can then be renewed. The community can take a well-deserved rest.

And the trickster is off toward that next possibility on the edge of the horizon.

Whiteness, Wildness, and Tricksters Black, Red and Green: Earthdiver Reciprocity in the Clan of the Hairy-Breasted Nut Scratcher

*Jonathan Evan Maslow went off to Guatemala essentially as a bird watcher to see the resplendent quetzal, and he ended up seeing body dumps and the evidence of the massacre of Mayan Indians by the army and that whole situation—you know, Central America in the `80s. And he wrote, essentially, a travel book called *Bird of Life, Bird of Death*, which started out to be a nature book and ended up to be a political travel critique. Because of that, Graeme Gibson whimsically came up with the phrase "political ornithology" for this—you know, whether you are writing about Salvadoran refugees crossing the Sonoran desert or whatever it is—that involves a certain amount of landscape, a certain amount of nature observation, but also politics, opinion, outrage [...] all sort of mixed together.*
-David Sumner, "A Literature of Place"

While nature writing isn't a new thing, it seems to have grown and diversified in direct proportion to the scope and number of ecological disasters unfolding at the beginning of the 21st century. The more contemporary genre, built on the work of Thoreau, Emerson, Mary Austin, and others, spawned as much by Rachel Carson's muckraking classic *Silent Spring* as Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, has developed its own pantheon of best-selling eco-scribes. Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez have become nearly household names to most anyone sneaking a book into a rucksack on a jaunt into the hills. In spite of this success, or perhaps because of it, nature writing is also in the throes of growing pains. One positive reaction to this scrutiny has been for writers within the genre to consider anew the purpose and scope of their work. Barry Lopez, among others, now eschews the label of nature-writer. Lopez himself makes a case for the genre formerly known as nature writing as a form of resistance to colonialism:

The real topic of nature writing, I think, is not nature but the evolving structure of communities from which nature has been removed, often as a consequence of modern economic development. It is writing concerned, further, with the biological and spiritual fate of those communities. It also assumes that the fate of humanity and nature are inseparable. Nature writing in the United States merges here, I believe, with other sorts of postcolonial writing, particularly in Commonwealth countries. In numerous essays it addresses the problem of spiritual collapse in the West and, like those literatures, it is in search of a modern human identity that lies beyond nationalism and material wealth. (45)

Nature writing, claims Lopez, is not strictly so much about the birds, bees and beasts as it is about community, finding and discussing ways of diversifying the prospects for human survival. But if the postcolonial nature writer is becoming a “political ornithologist,” borrowing Graeme Gibson’s glib concept for the new role of the nature writer, the feathers placed in his naturalist cap have not all been plucked from nests in the woods, lakes, rivers, fields and meadows. If the naturalist, as Lopez asserted, is intimately involved in coming to terms with the European presence on the North American continent, with finding some source of identity “beyond materialism and national wealth,” this search creates some rather harrowing ethical and cultural traps. Like scouring in an Arkansas bog for confirmation of the ghostly reappearance of the ivory-billed woodpecker, the naturalist with his eyes to the trees for the rare bird of authentic cultural residency may instead quickly be sinking neck-deep in a murky, brackish swamp—the

backwaters of a colonial past that until very recently, went largely unrecognized in the ecological discursive community.*

The American search for a native identity was dominated until very recently by only one kind of bird, the ubiquitous hairy-breasted nut-scratcher, the white male sounding his mighty yawp from the rooftops. The baritone call of this species has in common with the mocking bird and brown-headed cowbird a tendency to appropriate the song, dress, habit and home of others to suit his own insatiable needs. Carving out a niche in the vast ecologies of the American landscape has thus far entailed carving up the erstwhile territories of others. In all forms of American literature including nature writing, writers have tended to identify who they are by who they are not, providing the opportunity for the very kind of case study in negation Barbara Babcock calls for back at the beginning of the last chapter. The “not” in this discourse can be gleaned as African and Native American characters and caricatures, ranging from Twain’s Jim to degrading Vaudevillian blackface comedy, from Longfellow’s “Song of Hiawatha” to The Lone Ranger’s Tonto.

Novelist and critic Toni Morrison tapped into this relatively unexplored niche of the American literary mindspace in her short, insightful, book *Playing In The Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Here Morrison makes clear how the various definitions, and even the very presence, of American identities have always depended on an absence, a subversion of black identity she terms “Africanism” (6). Morrison contends that while not all American

* The tension in ecocritical circles to better address the ways in which the fate of people and land are connected is well-described by University of Nevada-Reno professor Michael P. Cohen in his essay “Blues in the Greens: Ecocriticism Under Critique,” published in the January 2004 issue of *Environmental History*.

The controversy in the environmental advocacy community remains heated, with issues ranging from minority hiring within large non-profits to the displacement of indigenous people in the name of wildlife preservation.

literature is racist, it is nearly without exception racial, defining itself in juxtaposition to a seldom-acknowledged “black” presence:

Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence, one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness (*Ibid.*).

What Morrison describes here is a process by which a Euramerican identity in North America is borrowed, which means that if the American naturalist is up to the task of finding a native identity, it will be an identity with almost no precedent in American literature, a new species in American letters.

The historic pitfalls of this undertaking have been well described by Phil Deloria in *Playing Indian*. Here, Deloria outlines the theatrics traceable in American history, from the Boston Tea Party to the Boy Scouts, of whites “dressed” as Indians, often as a means to myriad cultural, social and political goals, not excluding ecological virtue. His assessment resonates with Morrison’s findings:

Playing Indian, then, reflects one final paradox. The self-defining pairing of American truth with American freedom rests on the ability to wield power against Indians--social, military, economic, and political—while simultaneously drawing power from them [...]

And so while Indian people have lived out a collection of historical nightmares in the material world, they have also haunted a long night of American dreams. As many native people have observed, to be American is to be unfinished.

And although that state is powerful and creative, it carries with it nightmares all its own. (191)

Deloria charts the often bizarre, frequently racist proclivity of Anglo-Americans to outwardly appropriate Indian dress, rites, names, and places, to further political and social agendas, while the Morrison critique charts the psychological, metaphysical struggle of the American writer to come to terms with an American identity. Morrison in particular points out how North American authors inexorably arrive at the unspoken shadow of African identity. As she writes

[...] As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this. (17)

Morrison suggests an inevitable collision between the American writer and history. Her study examines how a few American novelists have emerged from this wreckage. The way in which this confrontation plays in the discourse of the naturalist is a different but equally intriguing investigation.

It is within these entanglements—the trap of self and culture and the shadow cast over the American writer by such matters—territories in which a trickster would be quite at home—that I want to examine some of Lopez’s work from the perspective the cultural criticisms outlined by Deloria and Morrison. Lopez seems apropos in limning the territory where ecological virtue, evolving out of Romantic and Transcendentalist thought, runs into the darkness of American identity. Lopez engages the cultural dark Morrison outlines. Frequently imbued with notions of ecological virtue, trickster Others inhabit his literary creations. Though these characters don’t fit

neatly into tropes to power, they are problematic: their ghostliness occurs at times in the name of ecological virtue; they are marginalized in the narrative in the usual ways Morrison describes, appearing as “guardian spirits,” as victims of violence, as shadows. At the same time, the crossbreeding of Lopez’ green Catholic metaphysics with an evolving trickster ethics produces a complexity that offers the possibility of a way out of the dark. Lopez, as do other nature writers, suggests that misunderstandings between human beings may be the result of a tragic misreading of the human place in nature. How this sentiment prevails or fails in doing adequate justice to the African and Indian trickster characters he creates will be examined in the following pages. I’ll start with two instances in Lopez’s early work where his own notions of “reciprocity” become entangled in the very trap of colonial culture he wishes to avoid.

Lopez, for his part, like many Western American writers leans from time to time on Western Native American mythology, though he does not enter this territory lightly. His essays reflect a remarkable familiarity with history, language, custom and culture of various American Indian tribes. He explains his long-standing interest in indigenous people this way:

As a rule, indigenous people pay much closer attention to nuance in the physical world. They see more. And from only a handful of evidence, thoroughly observed, they can deduce more.

Second, their history in a place, a combination of tribal and personal history, is typically deep. This history creates a temporal dimension in what is otherwise only a spatial landscape. Third, indigenous people tend to occupy the same moral universe as the land they sense. Their bonds with the earth are as much moral as biological.

As a writer I want to ask on behalf of the reader: How can a person obtain this? How can you occupy a place and also have it occupy you? How can you find such a reciprocity?

The key, I think, is to become vulnerable to a place. If you open yourself up, you can build intimacy. Out of such intimacy may come a sense of belonging, a sense of not being isolated in the universe. (Sumner)

The larger issue here is the notion of reciprocity. Lopez and other eco-poets and writers have suggested a deep consideration of place might efface the transgressions of colonial occupation. But as Morrison observed in describing the phenomenon of Africanism, the act of writing engages a consciousness that extends beyond the intent of the individual writing. And as Franz Fanon has observed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the mindset of the colonizer can very quickly become inscribed in anyone living in the midst of the processes of a colonial hegemony. For Lopez and others, the effort to reciprocate might inadvertently repeats some steps of a colonial past in the well-intentioned effort to ameliorate it.

Early in his career, with the publication of *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping with his Daughter*, a collection of 67 stories loosely translated “Coyote” stories, Lopez made this kind of good-hearted, but according to more than one critic, ultimately misconstrued attempt at this former variety of cultural reciprocity. Jarold Ramsey, in *Reading the Fire* describes the nature of Lopez’s transgressions from an anthropological standpoint:

Lopez, for example, offers very readable retellings of what he calls “Coyote” stories, but in fact he includes repertoires of the Kwakiutls and Tshimshians, and Manabozho tales from the Menomeni trickster cycle, cheek-by-jowl with authentic Coyote trickster narratives from the western plains, desert, and

mountain cultures. As if “Raven and Mananbozho” were merely synonyms for Coyote, and their special regional and cultural affiliations were unimportant!

(184)

Other trickster scholars, including William Bright and Franchot Ballinger, seconded Ramsey’s objections. Their assessment calls attention to legitimate issues in the ethics of translation. A perhaps more searing critique of the very metaphysical assumptions of Anglo writers are prone to make, whether working in literature or anthropology was offered by Leslie Silko in her 1977 essay, “An Old Time Indian Attack.” It was Silko who slapped Gary Snyder like a stern Zen priest would an errant monk, with the crime of appropriating native voices and values for the sake of his status as a poet and white shaman. Her grievances are applied first using Oliver LaFarge’s *Laughing Boy* as an example of the way white writers assume the privilege of inhabiting a “universalist” consciousness:

I do not disagree with the fact the LaFarge cared deeply for the Navajos as well as for other Indian people; he not only had sincere intentions, he actively worked to “better the lot” of Indian people. But as an artist and a writer, LaFarge fell victim to the assumption that he could write a novel centered in the consciousness of a Navajo man, a Navajo who by LaFarge’s own design, had grown up with almost no contact with white people [...] And for the non-Navajo or the non-Indian, it is worse than a failure: it is a lie because LaFarge passes off the consciousness and feelings of *Laughing Boy* as those of Navajo sensibility. (211)

Silko’s criticism here is not so militant as the title of her essay would imply. LaFarge is not a bad guy; only in the act of creating fiction did he injure the Navajo community he devoted a significant portion of the rest of his life to aiding. However, the act of writing, as Toni Morrison

describes it just a few pages back, dredges up collective cultural and societal intentions that move beyond the pale of the individual consciousness.

The privileging of universal consciousness, as Silko describes it has a lengthy, and, with respect to colonialism, problematic history, and raises the possibility that the difficulty for Lopez does not lie wholly within the practice of translation, but in assumptions about the very manner in which the artifacts and ideas of culture are transmitted. At the risk of oversimplifying these difficulties, they might be categorized in the aforementioned way Morrison and Deloria describe: Outwardly, as symptomatic of a peculiar social and cultural infatuation with indigeneity which colonialism inevitably displaces, and inwardly, in the metaphysics of a mindset from Plato onward which has struggled with any kind of viable relationship to the Other. In Lopez's instance, the problems with his Coyote translations can be understood in the "outward," as those inherent to publication. The commodifying effect of reproduction in text, and its concurrent façade of authenticity and authority seems an issue to which Lopez remained blithely unaware in the late seventies. In the introduction to this collection, Lopez justifies his actions this way:

Coyote is a creature of oral literature and mutable. There are no sacred texts. You can find other versions of the following stories in the pages of academic publications, in folklore archives, in out-of-print popular archives, and in tribal archives. Indeed, I used all these sources [...] I took the liberty of rewriting, translating and adapting in the light of this research for several reasons. First, most academic collections preserve to some extent the turgid prose of exact translation, and transliterated prose can be both obscure and misleading in its pretension to accuracy. It is also deadly to read through.

Secondly, to adapt an oral story to the needs of a modern, literate audience does not seem out of keeping with the primary intent of the storytellers--to engage the listener. (xvi)

At this juncture in his career Lopez comes across as less considerate of what might be left out in adapting any indigenous story to the needs of a “modern literate audience;” instead, at the conclusion of this introduction, he projects a colonial trope of admiration and regret, and by doing so relegates any contemporary discussion of “Indianess” to a wilderness long gone:

In the Coyote stories, I think, is more than we, with all our tools of analysis, will ever fathom. We should not feel either embarrassed for it or challenged. To touch them deeply would be like trying to remember the feeling of living years in the open. We have passed it by, eons ago. I offer you this Coyote, and I hope something more of the American Indian than we have had until now. (*Ibid.*)

Astute readers, especially those located in Native cultures, may decide that Lopez’ “something more” is actually less, since in appropriating the ethnographic record, the story is at least twice removed from the source, and since Lopez gives himself editorial license to alter the stories into prose form, and add or subtract as he pleases, one tribe’s “Coyote” story sounds like the next.

The European cultural equivalent might be to take the Renard the Fox stories of the French, the Loki myths of Scandinavian origin, mix them in with the Cuchulain and Finn stories of the Irish, toss in the Paul Bunyan stories of the upper-Midwest white settlers, translate them all into American English, and call them the European Dog-and-Giant stories. Certainly the potential for an entertaining read exists in such a project, but as a tribute to each respective culture, some vital element would be lacking. Further, this analogy breaks down when the colonial history of Native America is taken into consideration. Lopez himself has observed in *The Rediscovery of North*

America that the vast majority of a living cultural record—something which commonwealth countries still enjoy—had disappeared by the time any colonial interest in the cultures they had colonized was materializing in the form of ethnology and anthropology (26).

Lopez here, albeit quite unintentionally, has already run up against the difficulty described by Morrison and Deloria in American literature. The problem for Lopez is a presumptive “I” that blurs the lines between honoring the sources of folklore and myth and being honored as their redeemer. Within this problematized “I,” Lopez’s own writing in the dark should be closely assayed, especially where the universal consciousness Silko questions becomes a narrative mode for Lopez. In these instances, Lopez grants his narrators the ability to operate as the consciousness and conscience of the landscape. This fits perfectly into the kind of trickster transformation I described in the last chapter, where Coyote or one of his avatars comes to embody a larger-than-life portion of the landscape, and through this change, lends the “ineffable” a voice. Yet this shape-shifting in Lopez’s early work, this particular variety of “I” seems vulnerable to a kind of indulgence in which nature is too simply a beautifully idealized concept on which to graft the blueprint for ecological salvation, or as mere scaffolding on which to hang a canvas for a finely-wrought philosophical argument or aesthetic point.

What emerges in Lopez’s early work instead is a questionable kind of exceptionalism, evocative of a new age mysticism in its rendering, with regard to perception, sensation, and the natural world. My point here is not that the development of such senses are not possible or desirable, nor that it is not suitable territory for good fiction, but to make the case that this peculiar “I” in this style of nature writing precludes a crossover into discourse resistant to the historic forces Lopez wishes to mitigate. Lopez evokes a kind of intimacy with landscape here that’s enticing in a purely descriptive realm. But rather than returning from such a pilgrimage

with an experience to share, the mysticism inherent in these texts seems only to baffle, then alienate. From the introduction to *River Notes*:

I have been here, I think, for years. I have spent nights with my palms flat on the sand, tracing the grains for hours like Braille until I had the pattern precisely, could go anywhere--the coast of Africa--and recreate the same strip of beach, down to the very sound of the water on sea pebbles out of the sound of my gut that has empty for years; to the welling of the wind by vibrating the muscles of my thighs.

(64)

Lopez' narrator here is one with the land itself. Again, I don't wish to argue the metaphysics of relating to a given landscape in this way. What's at stake here is the universalization of this phenomenon—taking this knowledge to “the coast of Africa” and creating the same pattern there. Lopez claims for himself a limitless consciousness, perceptual powers without horizon. In doing so he creates a pan-cultural identity that exemplifies the difficulties Silko describes with LaFarge's novel. Without acknowledging the past inherent in his own cultural context, that “at best the Anglo-American is a guest on this continent, and at worst, the United States is founded upon stolen land” (Silko 215), the uncanny ability to embody the land risks becoming a colonial enterprise. The blithe claim of the narrator here that such powers transfer neatly to “the coast of Africa” affirms a cultural context in which all landscapes, their infinite particularities owing to endless combinations of time and elements, and interlopers of both human and animal variety, can be divined through the power of a certain universalist consciousness. What Silko writes of Gary Snyder's hopes for a return to “Turtle Island,” a Native term for North America could just as easily apply to Lopez:

But unless Snyder is careful, he is headed in the same unfortunate direction as other white pioneers have gone, a direction which avoids historical facts which are hard to swallow [...] Unless Snyder comes to terms with these facts, and his own personal, ancestral relation to them, the “rediscovery” which so many Americans are waiting for will be just another dead-end in more than two hundred years of searching for a genuine American identity. (*Ibid.*)

This search for a “genuine American identity” resonates with the new direction for nature-writing Lopez describes at the beginning of this chapter. In Lopez’s words, “the search for a modern human identity that lies beyond nationalism and material wealth,” directs this perquisition toward the Euramerican experience on the North American continent. The clues in this hunt are likely to bear some painful discoveries. If the subject of nature-writing “is not nature but “the evolving structure of communities from which nature has been removed, often as a consequence of modern economic development,” the culprits behind the theft of the natural world, and the full penalties of modern economic development will have to be brought to light here in the homeland before carrying the torch elsewhere. Along these lines, the uneasy beneficiaries of this postcolonial milieu are also the traditional audience of the literate, pen-wielding naturalist, a coincidence Lopez makes the most of in his later fiction, as we shall see, by mirroring back to the reader the sources of this unease. Lopez, it would seem, has taken heed of Silko’s advice, which is perhaps not so militant as her essay’s title might suggest.

Significantly, Silko does not urge an abandonment of the quest for a truly American identity, only that it be undertaken with the requisite care. Lopez, like LaFarge, demonstrates a Samaritan-like quality of care, and in doing so a quandary arises. Though he takes pains to acknowledge historical fact, he does engage the Transcendentalist fantasy, found, for example, in

Thoreau's "Walking," about religious *power* inherent in the landscape, of the sort that open the door to colonial projects like manifest destiny. Without acknowledging the problems that creep into view with this colonial eye, the "I" of this kind of prose does not reciprocate, does not engage in the kind of relationship Lopez identifies as an ideal for his work.

The easy thing to do would be to declare Lopez's work a failure, to call for his penance in some dimly lit kiva or damp wickiup, painstakingly translating his Coyote stories back into the native languages from which they were stolen. That judgment will here be reserved for another critic who feels better qualified. Beyond the question of temerity, as a member of the clan of hairy-breasted nut-scratchers myself, the urge to redeem or reciprocate doesn't strike me as misguided; it may actually be quite necessary. But in some instances, writers have unwittingly repeated the same patterns of appropriation that are part of the wreckage of colonialism to begin with.

The more urgent task implies a reciprocation that avoids such pitfalls, something akin to the updated versions of the earthdiver creation story examined in the first chapter. Vizenor himself maps a route that might be taken, borrowing liberally from the annals of postmodern thought, one that provides both critique and some potentially redeeming value for Lopez's translations. From Vizenor's essay "A Post-Modern Introduction:"

The world is a text, Vincent Leitch argues in *Deconstructive Criticism*, and nothing stands behind this world of tropes because a literal language does not exist except in illusions. The literal translations and representations of tribal literatures are illusions, consolations in the dominant culture. There can never be "correct" or "objective" readings of the text or the tropes in tribal literatures, only more energetic, interesting and pleasurable misreadings. (5)

Vizenor dispenses with the pretense to accuracy that forms the basis of anthropological criticisms of Lopez's Coyote translations. The trouble is not simply with getting the words right. If the nature-writer or naturalist, as Lopez claims in the first chapter, is concerned with a kind of postcolonial discourse, (as is the postmodern writer) the reading of tribal narratives may be liberated in the former writer's undertaking the of "pleasurable misreading" Vizenor advocates. However, Vizenor's description here leaves little room for a *miswriting*, a mis-reproduction of those texts, especially if they are presented with any pretense of purpose other than "pleasurable misreading." Both accuracy and wholesale redemption are unworthy motivations. In this sense, both anthropologists and Lopez, with his reproduction of tribal narratives undertaken under the pretense of a grandiloquent apologia, are off the mark.

Something of a course correction might be gained by applying a different mode of reciprocity in the context of some recent thinking on the multi-valent, multi-cultural nature of discourse itself. Paul Tidwell, in "Imagination, Conversation and Trickster Discourse," suggests Edward Said's definition of reciprocity as "the struggle to communicate ideas across cultural frontiers," and argues in Bakhtinian terms that reciprocity is "the heteroglossic moment" that provides "an all-important space wherein understandings can be voiced and corrections offered" (622). Such a dialogic approach entails skills essential to observation in which the naturalist should be well trained. Tidwell borrows from Giles Gunn to describe an ethos of good dialogical conversation:

In this context, reciprocity emphasizes being a good listener when a good story is being told. Dialogical conversation requires that we be interested not only in what we say to others and in what they say to us, but that we take away from the experience a "renewed sense of what others can mediate to us." Hence the moral

question in such conversations is “how to define the difference another can or should make [for us] when the world of experience is constructed and construed from perspectives different than our own.” (623)

The kind of fiction produced by a writer whose finely-honed skills as a dialogic conversationalist, Tidwell contends, has numerous examples in the novels, short stories and poems being produced by contemporary Native American authors. Lopez, too produces short fiction that features this variety of dialogic, as we shall see. But this dialogic is necessarily different, and addresses in a tacit manner the problems Lopez encounters in his Coyote translations. If the territory Lopez wishes to enter is the unstudied, wild, comic and communal landscape of tribal narratives, but sensible ethical limits placed by culture and language prevent from him from inhabiting this territory, he turns to a process akin to the one Tidwell describes. In doing so, Lopez shifts the focus of his fiction to a reflection, a mirroring of an American consciousness and conscience. Instead of attempting to offer “something more of the American Indian,” Lopez offers something more of the white American than we have generally had, especially from white writers. Lopez enters into a dialogue with the haunting past of American colonialism, addressing “the negative” in Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Hypothesis, for which Lopez provides a succinct summary in *Arctic Dreams*: “[...] the landscapes in which history unfolds are both real; that is, profound in their physical effects on mankind, and not real, but mere projections, artifacts of human perception” (229). Rather than taking an objective, critical or historical view by measuring ideal against reality, many of Lopez’s short stories initiate a dialogue in the present tense with these “artifacts of human perception,” the projection of European colonial ideals that Toni Morrison contends comprise a metaphorical playing in the dark. Lopez’s approach is a conscious and willful engagement of this darkness, undertaken with an earthdiver’s intent: to initiate a dialogue

with these haunting, ghostly projections, to portray them as arising out of the land as part of any honest consideration of the European claim to the continent as a home land.

The makings of Lopez's own writerly consciousness are worth considering in this matter. On numerous occasions, Lopez rejects disembodied Cartesian rationality and the cold analysis of science as the highest available form of truth. His experiences in some of the further outposts of the planet's wild places influence a startling faith in animism that would seem at odds with some of the more dogmatic tenets of his Catholic roots and Jesuit education. It is within this stark contrast between a dominant "old world" religion, with its insistence upon the kind of universalism Silko describes, and a new, or rather long-forgotten belief in the here-and-now world as sharply as the human senses can perceive it where Lopez reckons with the subaltern that not only lies beneath much American literature, but the perception of the American landscape. The stories I analyze here still contain complex and sometimes troublesome relationships to racial others, but Lopez is no longer retelling tribal stories, or relating to the land with mystic omniscience. Instead, what is "heard" in conversation with haunting trickster African and Indian characters—a distinctive history, with a clear ethical and moral tone—is juxtaposed with the comparatively meaningless prattle of voices from the dominant culture. The perplexity and bafflement of the latter type of character, usually well-educated, upper-middle class, and Caucasian, serves as a reversal of fortune, wherein the voice of the dominant culture subsides—it is not exactly silent—but at least pauses long enough for the persistent message of seldom-heard others to be discernable.

One short story by Lopez from *Field Notes* seems particularly well suited to illustrate this process. "The Negro in the Kitchen" is narrated by a divorced, middle-aged white man, an

investment counselor living in Sun Valley, a man whose narrow preoccupations with his own health and welfare will become the subject of satire in this story:

My diet, therefore is both precisely matched to change of climate at my latitude--44 degrees North--and perfectly suited to my body, a biochemistry known to me in detail thanks to a long-term series of tests at the Scripps Clinic--for traces of heavy metals in the fingernails, seasonal fluctuation in the concentration of melanin, that sort of thing. (76)

The coddled persona depicted here ought to be familiar to any reader who has cracked the glossy magazine covers of travel magazines widely distributed in airports and certain towns around the Western U.S., of which Sun Valley may be the original: the pampered banker or business executive who seeks, in limited leisure time, the paradox of a Western “wilderness” experience, protected by the posh trappings of material success. That such barriers might preclude meaningful contact not only with nature, but with any person outside a rather narrow social stratum is a notion to which the protagonist here remains comically obtuse, in spite of the following startling revelation he relates after describing his eccentric health regimen:

On the morning I wish to speak of, I entered the kitchen a little after six and saw a large Negro standing there, a man dressed in baggy khaki shorts and a plain but rather threadbare long-sleeved shirt. (*Ibid.*)

This black man shadows the narrator’s identity: the former is also a financial whiz, well educated from the “black bourgeoisie” but from Greenwich, Connecticut; further, he has left this lucrative business to undertake a trek on foot across the continent. The eerie symmetry in occupation and subsequent class between these two lives leads to speculation that the black man is a projection,

a Jungian shadow of the narrator's, a notion that reaches an apex when the black man confronts him pointedly during the following exchange:

“I'm quite taken with this story of yours,” I declared [...]

“You're interested, but you don't know what to make of it. An educated black, probably with an income comparable to your own. Probably even a politics not much different from your own. Disturbing.”

“Well, whatever you're doing out there in the woods, you seem determined to make something of yourself. *That's* admirable.”

“My life was handed to me.” He caught my eye. “True for you?” I didn't answer. (81)

But this stranger is real, insofar as he has a past. He relates the history of his personal struggle to locate cultural and racial roots; he's spent a year teaching in Kenya, a prospect he regards only as “a tragedy;” his ancestors he tells, “were Kikuyu, hauled out to Zanzibar by Arabs in the 1840's,” but these facts don't ground this man's sense of identity. What does is his pursuit of a native identity on North American soil:

I wanted to become an African-American Indigene [...] A black man who identifies with the American landscape [...] who fractures the immorality of his heritage in this country so completely that he finally gains a consoling intimacy of the place, the very place that for so long had been unapproachable. I had always imagined the hills the rivers, the sky regarding us the way whites did, as interlopers. Because I thought that whites owned the land, that they were the same. We were strangers, whose inquiries, whose desires for companionship, were not welcome [...] I needed to see the breadth of the land. To be in it. To hold it and to be held by it.

“Yes. I see. You may not think this relates but I grew up in Bel Air and I needed to see the land, which is why I built this house.” (81-82)

The protagonist here is ultimately unable to work outside the context of a well-insulated white, wealthy investment banker. His comments throughout the “Negro’s” story indicate a preference for the mundane, for commodifying, categorizing and quantifying, and for making small talk rather than conversation, a penchant that causes him, nearly out of habit, to continually miss the point:

“Have you ever thought yourself,” he [the “negro”] said, “of going out there? Of just walking away from this house, your business?”

“I do. Every winter. I go to Eleuthera in the Bahamas. I have a house. I dive. I know all the species of fish.”

“See those cottonwoods? I’m going to go over there now and make for Galena Pass, then over into Stanley Basin tonight.”

“How do you find places to sleep?”

“Some things remain a mystery, even to me.”

“Those Nike cross-trainers, they’re good?”

“My shoes? These shoes? Why yes, they’re good.”

“If I went, do you think I should run to the Atlantic? What are you going to do when you reach the Pacific?”

“The Pacific? He looked at me closely, a long look. Perhaps he was sizing me up as a traveling companion. “I might wonder, really, whether I’d earned it.”

He led us out through the French doors and leaned over the table to take a nectarine from a large bowl of fruit. I knew he wanted to leave, but I didn't want the conversation to end. I'd never had such a long conversation with a Negro before.

“Will I see you again?”

“No, I doubt we will meet again.”

“Well,” I said with a shrug, “whoever heard of coming into the kitchen one morning and finding a huge black man standing there, someone who just ran out of the woods and wanted breakfast and then ran off again, like an Indian?”

It's probably happened before, and it will likely happen again.” (84, 86-87)

By introducing the “African Indigene” as the kind of trickster who initiates a dialogue with the subjugated or repressed, the spotlight illuminating the question of cultural identity, of who belongs where, is suddenly shifted to Lopez's narrator (the white banker) here. While Lopez makes his point sharply in terms of an ecological sensibility, the projection of an African-American and Indian imagination on a white conscience and consciousness is still an issue to be resolved. It could still be argued from a Native (as well as African-American) perspective that Lopez is still guilty of the kind of transgression his earlier fiction commits. Significantly, though, the story confounds the white narrator. A kind of reciprocation takes place, a reflexive encounter between the “Negro” trickster, the white banker, and the reader. As the black man continues on his journey (“And then he waved and was just down the stairs, wading the strong, shallow river and gone into the woods” (88)), the white narrator's bewilderment quickly turns to “annoyance,” which becomes cultural, ethical and emotional territory in which the reader is enticed to make meaning. Suddenly this territory for the narrator here cannot be constructed from inside well-

protected borders. Instead he is forced to confront what part of his cultural identity is created by what is *outside* those recently solid boundaries. This raises the possibility that those inside posh gated communities might experience a form of punishment as well as protection. The onus for prophetic insight or revelation is on the bewildered narrator. That he demurs here, opting for annoyance, as if a client were late for a lunch date, entices more complex reactions, which the reader must create for herself.

That cultural identity is constructed through a process more akin to osmosis rather than fortification and transmission is affirmed in a stellar critical essay by Kevin McNeilly, who examines the publication of the Haida myth, “Raven Steals the Light,” by Robert Bringhurst and Bill Reid. The story was published with a preface by Claude Levi-Strauss, whose introduction serves as a stamp of authenticity McNeilly questions, since the authors of these translations have clearly identified themselves as not Haida. What lends the stories any sense of authenticity, McNeilly claims, is not “accuracy,” but “acuity:”

What these tales actually demand and what Lévi-Strauss, as a representative reader, actually offers is a recognition of what it means to be an outsider [...]

Barriers between cultures no doubt exist, as effects of political or socio-economic power, but they are also constructs that are consistently negotiated and transgressed, for better or for worse, rather than fixed or quantifiable limits. Reid and Bringhurst, when read from this perspective, offer no "Haida" tales here, but present instead texts that foreground their own problematic aspirations to cultural access, the fraught cultural fiction of *becoming* Haida. "Accuracy"—understood not as correctness (an impossible ideal, in any case, produced by the documentary fixity of the written rather than the improvisational fluidity of the oral) but as

acuity, as the self-attentive work of approach rather than appropriation—precisely characterizes a recognition of the cultural otherness of Haida for a mainstream "American" audience, to which the tales' uneasy style bears witness [...]

(McNeilly)

McNeilly's emphasis on an approach rather than appropriation aligns with Lopez's engagement of a black character in "The Negro in the Kitchen." With the proper respectful approach, the "self-attentive" process of writing might draw readerly attention not only to "Haida-ness" or "blackness" or Navajo cultural identity, but as well to the margins, borders and boundaries where these cultures interact. This umbra-penumbra analogy rejects the notion of a literary anthropology because of the pretensions to objectivity the term implies, counter intuitively promoting a wide-eyed openness to "bafflement" and an alternate rendition of Levi-Straussian seduction, that, while perhaps not enhancing professional advancement as a critic, allows an encounter with alterity that avoids subversion. As McNeilly writes

[...] bafflement may actually be the right mode for work attempting to encounter alterity, since it converts the posture of disinterestedness—characteristic of colonial ethnography since its inception in the journals of North American explorers, and a hallmark of cultural Eurocentrism—into an admittedly unsure but sincere interest. Seduction, for Bringhurst, is not a ruse but a fundamental condition of cultural work. What is valuable in any situation, poetic or otherwise, is the respectful encounter with what you are not, the pull of the other. Acknowledging nothing more or less, for him, is an ethical imperative, worldliness. (*Ibid.*)

Sincerity, seduction, and bafflement, a rather ambiguous process that apparently describes what both sailors on leave and enlightened critics might desire, might provide a just means for Euramericans to engage in the art, literature of other cultures. Still, the patterns of appropriation through commodification, namely reproduction in print, would be difficult to underestimate. Even the most cautious, perspicacious writer is likely to experience the phenomenon McNeilly describes as the cause of “failure” of Bringhurst’s book, since the act of commodifying discourse seems to mute any homing sense this “pull of the Other” might provide. Indeed, this gentle tug is at times overwhelmed by a pull with the gravitational force of a black hole, as McNeilly observes, when he notes that Bringhurst counts as his motivation for work in Haida spaces the establishment of a “classical,” native Canadian literature. The unquestioning adherence to a decidedly Eurocentric model of comparativist study prompts McNeilly to tarnish the praise he so recently lavished upon Bringhurst:

His premise, clearly, is to make available to English-speaking readers a "classical" literature that has existed almost unnoticed in North America until the present. To establish its stature, its "worth" as he says, Bringhurst makes extensive comparisons to the classical canon of Western European art [...] the comparative form of much of his commentary suggests that the book is a labour of salvage anthropology, the critical recovery of lost texts from a marginalized culture, proving their worth by asserting their import for our own cultural advance. (*Ibid.*)

What’s clearly identified as Haida becomes useful only as fodder for the betterment of Western civilization. One could argue along these same lines that Lopez’ environmental virtue is praiseworthy, but his germination of universalist taxonomies of indigenous people’s ecological worth works to the same end as Bringhurst’s treatment of the Haida. For Lopez, Native lifeways

serve as a corrective for the sins of Western civilization. That idea on its own has its merits. But as McNeilly notes, deep-seated problems arise in the transmission of such moral imperatives. The African American or Indian as a kind of ecosystem spirit, an ethereal guardian or garden-keeper is also the Indian as ghost, a non-presence in the contemporary world, the very kind of shadowed presence Toni Morrison describes as “Africanism.” Lopez’s work that includes these kinds of tropes deserves more scrutiny than has been applied, especially since Lopez lacks the long-term, concentrated apprenticeships an author like Bringham has experienced. Yet simultaneously, the work of these trickster characters in his later stories provide a case study in contemporary literature for the very ethical approach for which McNeilly calls. Many of his short stories are narrated entirely from the position of cultural and ecological outsidership, a predicament Lopez has made an art of sharing with his audience.

The indigene as an ecological guardian occurs in another short story from *Field Notes*. “Pearyland” relates the tale of Bowman, an ethereal biologist whose research concerns the saprophytic web. The story is told through the voice of a lawyer recollecting his brief career “working with Canadian Eskimos, helping to solidify a political confederation with Eskimos in Greenland” (62). The lawyer hears Bowman’s story while stranded with him in a remote airfield in Greenland. The narrator here is at least as unreliable as Conrad’s in *Heart of Darkness*. His recollections of his own work in the Arctic are sketchy. Eskimo is a misnomer—its root is Algonquin and loosely is translated as “skin-wearers.” The term for the native peoples of the Canadian Arctic and Greenland is *Inuit*, and the use of *Eskimo* in referring to these peoples is considered offensive, especially in Canada. What’s commonly referred to as Eskimo by residents of the more temperate south is instead a misnomer for distinct native cultures. The lawyer-narrator recalls he once worked to establish “a political confederation” among people whom he

does not differentiate. This differs from the specific identity with which Bowman describes his very personal encounter with indigenous culture in the Arctic. The biologist identifies the man immediately as Inuk (67). Perhaps because of a lack of attention to detail, perhaps because of a faulty memory, the attorney is unsure of his own story:

Now here is where it gets difficult for me. I've said Bowman, unlike other white men, had no strong need or urge to tell his story. And I couldn't force myself to probe very deeply, for reasons you'll see. So there could be--probably are--crucial elements here that were never revealed to me. It's strange to think about with a story like this, but you'll be just on your own--as I was." (64)

The attorney's version of events conceals as much as it reveals; in spite of his apparently altruistic motives in his work among "Eskimos," the experience was as aimless as Bowman admits his study of taphonomy in the Arctic had become:

He [Bowman] was looking, specifically, at the way white-tail deer are taken apart by other animals after they die, how they're funneled back into the ecological community--how bone mineral, for example, goes back into the soil. How big animals disappear. Expanding the study a little brought him to Pearyland. He wanted to pursue in Greenland some threads of what happened when large animals die [...] He told me [...] that part of his trouble applying for grants was that [...] he had an instinct to go, but no clear, scientific purpose, no definite project [...] (62-3)

The narrator's version of events here describes the landscape in which Bowman found himself, alone on a summer-long research stint, as a place of supernatural phenomena, set in the natural yet sparse beauty--and more importantly, brief, but intense light and vast spaces of the arctic

north. The beauty of the place seems to spotlight his lack of purpose; between Bowman and the narrator, an absence of a specific cultural identity becomes clear. Although Bowman soon encounters this ghostly Inuk man, it is he who seems ethereal in the breadth of a sparse landscape. In Bowman, Lopez reverses the roles understood to be at play under the dominant culture. Bowman, like the Inuk shaman, becomes a shadowed presence who clearly has come to haunt the narrator over the years.

An absence of shadows in animal others works as another narrative trick here. Bowman sees animals in Pearyland, but always from afar, and always without shadows. One morning Bowman awakes to find an Inuk man who serves as “caretaker” in Pearyland in his camp. What Bowman discovers in conversation with him—“The land of the dead. The land of dead animals”—possesses a sharp cultural and moral clarity, an imperative reflected in the landscape, that Bowman lacks. The Inuk man queries Bowman pointedly on the purpose of his work in Pearyland. Bowman prattles on, but is unable to answer the question. Bowman then asks the Inuk man what his purpose in Pearyland might be:

“I know this is your country,” Bowman said cautiously, but why are you here?”

“Caretaker. Until these animal spirits get bodies, and are ready to go back, a human being must be her to make sure the animals aren’t hungry. If the animals want something--if they want to hear a song, I learn it. I sing it. Whatever they want, I do that. That’s my work.” (70)

Bowman continues to ask what he deems respectful, disarming questions, and the Inuk man seems to regard Bowman as somewhat obtuse, his questions perhaps intrusive or assuming too much, echoing a long-standing tendency of colonial interests, however well-intentioned, to misconstrue the meaning of any facet of indigeneity displaced by them. The haunting here

emerges not only with the ghostly appearance of the Inuk shaman, but in what goes missing in the frenzied quest for political or biological data. Further alienating the lawyer, and hence the reader, Bowman in some ways seems to have “given in” to the fecundity of life observable in the arctic tundra. The lawyer recollects:

During his last days, he [Bowman] said, he tried to sketch the land. I saw the drawings--all pastels, watercolors, with some small, brilliant patches of red, purple and yellow: flowers, dwarf willow, bearberry. The land was immense. It seemed to run up against the horizon like a wave. And yet it appeared weightless, as if it could have been canted sideways by air soft as bird's breathing. (72)

Sketching the land, an undertaking not likely to satisfy the scientific rationale of Bowman's journey, signals the degree to which he has been jolted from everyday consciousness. Bowman sketches out of utter bafflement, not only at the scale, texture and color of what he sees, but at the incongruity of the aimlessness of his visit. His interior landscape, to engage the paradigm Lopez limned in “Landscape and Narrative” from Chapter 1, is completely out of sync with the exterior landscape he confronts. Recall Lopez's description of this interior landscape:

[...] the speculations, intuitions, and formal ideas we refer to as "mind" are a set of relationships in the interior landscape with purpose and order; some of these are obvious, many impenetrably subtle. The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes. (64)

An absence of belief, of any moral, epistemological, or ontological bearing confronts Bowman in his discussions with the Inuk man. When the Inuk man queries Bowman on a metaphysical plane about whether or not he can “hear” the bodies of animals in Pearyland acquiring souls,

Bowman offers an affirmative answer. But the Inuk man reminds Bowman that this is not heaven, that death and the act of killing is the paradoxical condition that precipitates life:

“They go back, have children. Then one day, someone is hungry, someone who loves his family, behaves that way. Wolf, human being, the same. That’s how everything works.”

“Is there another place,” asks Bowman, “where the animal souls go if they are just killed?”

The Inuk man looked at Bowman as if he weren’t there and got up and walked away. He didn’t come back and Bowman didn’t see him again. (72)

Bowman here also experiences alienation, but Lopez manages to convey this sense of abandonment in a reflexive sense. The Inuk caretaker disappears, but at the behest of Bowman’s own words. The height of this reversal of fortunes comes through the eyes of the Inuk man: through *his* gaze, it is Bowman who disappears, and not the native.

Speculation on the reasons for the Inuk man’s own evaporation from Pearyland may be less fruitful than a consideration of the important ways this story has haunted the narrator. He is unable to contact Bowman after this encounter, so the biologist becomes a ghost much in the same way the Inuk shaman becomes. The remnants of their story, however, have clearly been fermenting in this attorney’s memory, desire and imagination for some time. The reader is left to speculate what meaning the narrator intends by relating his story here, with its gaps and disjunctures so vast a deconstructionist could park a mental health clinic in them. Trickster-like, Lopez leaves this blank spot on the map for the Inuk man to continue his work with the reader.

On many levels, the haunting entanglements of “Pearyland” outnumber those encountered in “The Negro in the Kitchen.” The aforementioned undependability of the narrator

is key to this. This lawyer occupies the same cultural niche as the banker in “Negro.” His alienation, however, forms out of the idealistic intentions of his past. Along these lines, the biologist who tells the lawyer this story disappears, along with the Inuk man, as does the African-American long-distance hiker. In Pearyland, however, bafflement of the undependable narrator—and hence the reader, serves to “other” Bowman along with the Inuk trickster. It’s as if the “whole of the story” (68), as the lawyer starts telling it with his apologies, takes place entirely within the territory of a narrative trick. The lawyer and the reader, who must depend on the former in receiving the story, are left outside this territory. This is a trickster reciprocation, a “pleasurable misreading,” in an instance in the “struggle to communicate ideas across cultural frontiers,” and a new direction from the wholesale, race-wide redemption Lopez seeks in his Coyote translations.

Of particular interest in approaching these stories through the lens of cultural criticism is that these inversions take place within traditional relationships of power. It is the banker who winds up “annoyed,” and perhaps wondering if he’s imprisoned with a golden chain; the “negro” roams freely; it is the biologist and the Inuk trickster who disappear into the dark, like ghosts, as the lawyer is trapped in the dead-end entanglements of his own narrative. The borders that mark the cultural darkness here also are the networks and nexus of an exchange, wherein the subaltern shadow leaves its mark on the character who exists seemingly above the surface.

This pathology of cultural and economic imperialism, seemingly jettisoned of any appeal to ecological virtue, is the subject of “Light Action in the Caribbean.” Lopez’s ecotrickster here is not a person but a violent, evil event that arises out of a tranquil tropical sea, a wicked depravity more at home as a scene out of a Carl Hiaasen paperback. Culture is implicated here not in the formation and propagation of the forest, but in the way the “whole complex” of the

story responds to the vagaries of a tropical seascape compromised by the vagaries of the global economy.

The protagonists here are a young couple whose tastes seem to be dictated to them by a hip advertising agency or PR firm. The woman, Libby Dalaria, has agreed to a weekend getaway in the Bahamas, diving with a new boyfriend David. The latter is a detestable character. His marital status is uncertain, and he seems to avoid this topic when Libby confronts him directly. He manages to be dishonest or disingenuous in every human interaction he has. His job with a computer firm makes him a faithful servant of the idea that technology will fix everything. That, along with he and Libby's status as ideal targets for just about any viable marketing strategy inherent in late capitalism, makes him oblivious to his surroundings, and to any sort of prudence or discretion the seasoned traveler might exercise. In short, the couple operates as four-star ambassadors of a kind of cultural imperialism that permeates postcolonial life in the tropics.

On the day of their untimely demise, the couple hires a local guide, Esteban, to take them to desirable dive spots. David's interaction with Esteban are marred with racist projections, as well as a predictable neocolonial fantasy that he'll discover some as-yet unrevealed "best place," to explore. He's smuggled a joint along, and foolishly flaunts a large wad of cash, hoping to convince Esteban of his willingness to part with this largesse in return for revealing secret spots.

David's blunders continue on the dive. He brings two conchs to the surface, and Esteban informs him they're illegal to keep, a protected species, and must be put back. David gets miffed at being rebuked by Esteban, and at being limited within an ethical and legal framework he can't manipulate. He lashes out:

"You're cool Esteban, you know? He inhaled the joint and gazed at the passing water. "That's good, about the conchs, no toking while you're navigating.

But you know, mon, you need to evolve--know what I mean? Evolve to get ahead here. You own this boat”? (140)

Esteban then gives a brief glimpse into the collapse of local fisheries, and concurrently, a large measure of hope for cultural and economic independence:

“Ma fatha, he own dis boat,” Esteban began. “He fish, all true here, all di wata here, and out der, way out der, for marlin, for swordfish. De all gone now. Just de little ones lef. He was de fishermon you know, and I am de divin mon. So we be makin de changes mon, we be gettin on. Evolvin.” (141)

Trouble approaches. Esteban notices a sleek speedboat approaching on the horizon. “Could be de military,” he said. “Tings always changin.” Then the violence strikes. The passage is quoted in full to convey a detached journalistic or perhaps forensic tone:

This is not the military,” said Esteban [...] The shirtless man in the madras shorts raised a .9mm Glock and began spraying Esteban. The first bullet tore through his left triceps, the second, third fourth and fifth hit nothing, and sixth perforated his spleen, the seventh and eighth hit nothing, the ninth hit the console, sending electrical sparks up, the tenth went through his right palm, the next four went into the air, the fifteenth tore his right ear away, the sixteenth ricocheted off the sixth cervical vertebrae and drove down through his heart, exiting through his abdomen and lodging in his foot [...] David watched Esteban shudder and fall like an imploded vase [...] The first man to reach him seemed uncoordinated, as if he were drunk, but his first punch broke David’s nose, and then he pummeled him

backward over a seat, and when he fell the man slammed him repeatedly with a dive regulator [...]

The man with the Tattoo hit her in the neck with his fist, knocking her into the engines, and then banged her head on the deck of the boat until she was unconscious. He laid her over the back seat of a bench and raped her. It took him a long time and in the middle he lit a cigarette. The man with the watches trussed David with monofilament fishing line and choked him to death while he raped him. (142)

The objective, police report tone of the passage contrasts sharply with the normative descriptive eloquence expected of travel or nature literature. The sadism, along with the macabre collapse of Esteban's body "like a vase," shatters the ideal of an orderly and compliant nature that would reflect a beautiful but benign landscape or a benevolent God. This shocking turn of events is juxtaposed by a visit to the pastoral sort of descriptive passage to which readers of more traditional nature literature have become accustomed. A seemingly untroubled relationship between bait fish, fish, fisherman, and economy is posited where the story ends:

A few miles east a man was fishing for grouper. He had caught only two among the reefs since sunup, not such a good day, but they pay very good at the dock, he thought, and whatever he brought in they always bought. He was thinking how he liked that, coming in with the fish at the end of the day. The guests from the hotel always liked it that he was wearing the Docker cutoffs his wife had fixed up and his J.Crew shirt or the shirt with the black Labrador. They liked his fish and his accent. They liked his laugh. He only had to get more fish, he thought, more fish and it was going to be good.

He held the baited hook up before his eyes. His father had taught him how to make the tiny marks he had cut in its shank, and he stared hard at them now and said “Do your work.”

He flipped the baited hook overboard and watched the line spool out under his thumb. (145)

In the space between these last two incidents lies a large portion of the story’s meaning. At issue here are notions of adaptability and “survival of the fittest” appropriated from Darwin as a rationale for colonial and imperial enterprise. One possible reading of the story renders these brutal pirates of the Caribbean as simply the logical apex of the social Darwinism food chain, where the biggest, toothiest creatures always eat best and last. Yet implicit to this story is the suggestion that this is a kind of species suicide: not only is it not how biology really works, it’s not an accurate picture of how human civilization has survived (so far) the Holocene.

Lopez gives his readers this generous idea, but again it is not without cost to a viable Other. I can’t help but ask why it is Esteban who “collapses like a vase”--disappearing the way a receptacle turns to broken glass in the narrative. Then again, he’s spared the horror his two clients briefly endured. Lopez, in a roundabout way, redeems Esteban at the end of the story.

To gain further insight into this line of thought, I want to revisit Esteban’s “Evolvin” comment, as well as an exchange between Libby and Esteban that could be construed as an allusion, in a roundabout way, to a process out of which cultural identity is constructed, and by contrast, the absence of such a process represented in Libby and David. Libby’s role in this fiasco begins with her resentment toward David:

Libby asks Esteban about “that other island, Itesea. Esteban: “Dat de military miss. You don’ wan mess wid dem. We don’ go over dat way, that is what I am telling your mon here. Plenty

good places to dive, but not over dat way” (138). Libby admires Esteban both sexually and as a potential foil to David’s overblown machismo. The possibility that she didn’t need David in the first place occurs to her through the sensuality of the diving experience:

Plunging through the surface of the water made her euphoric, feeling the powerful effervescent stroke of her body, the weightlessness of astronauts. She was so happy entering the transparent world [...] she had the momentary sensation she could have done this alone, that she did not need him. The passing streamers of brightly colored damselfish, of French grunts and sargeant majors, huge stingrays rising slowly, regally, from camouflage on the sand flats, the way tiny nudibranchs glistened like flower buds on the coral heads all made her lightheaded with satisfaction, a sense of having chosen right. (138)

For a moment, Libby gains a fuller entrance into the landscape and culture of her travel experience, an alternative to the imposition of a tourist invasion. She seems open to the experience of actually learning something. In this inquisitive state, Esteban provides her with a gentle reminder that vibrant cultures and landscapes are not just for pretty photo ops but a means for survival. Libby “was disappointed to when Esteban confirmed that he had no picture guides aboard for the underwater life.” Esteban offers something of a non sequitur as a response: “Any fish you tell me, I know dat,” he said, laughing. “But people, de don’ eat dat other. Gotta eat, you know” (*Ibid.*).

“That other,” the fish that don’t get eaten, alludes to the absence of fish that do. While the photogenic sea life does put food on Esteban’s table, and provides Libby, at least, with a gateway into a larger world, the relationship here between the divers and their guide, Esteban seems to imply, is not one that “feeds” or sustains a centuries-old traditional fishing culture. The

reciprocal communal and ecological responsibilities are abdicated for a purely economic exchange. In spite of this, she gleans from Esteban as well as from within the vastness of ocean ecosystems, the fecundity of life, the colorful, sensuous biodiversity in all its particular manifestations that was Darwin's inspiration. Esteban's enigmatic observation ("Gotta eat, y'know") connotes a biological imperative, one that has produced a complex web of predatory and mutualistic relationships.

The perversion of this is to be found in David's urging of Esteban to "evolve." This is social Darwinism at its ugliest, the colonial racist rationale that the cream of the human crop will inevitably rise to the top. (This conveniently ignores the coprotropic theme outlined in Chapter 1, that shit can float too.) Esteban's reply, ("We be makin de changes, mon, we be gettin' on. Evolvin.") can be interpreted as an allusion to his African history, which includes the diaspora mandated by slave trade, the acculturation to French, British, and Spanish hegemonies and language, probable plantation work, profound cultural upheaval as this system collapsed, an apparent adaptation to a commercial-fishing economy, and later to a tourist economy as the local fishery collapsed. If one of the tenets of "successful" evolution is adaptation, then Esteban's retort, which he offers in first person plural, connotes a victorious, manifold chorus of voices reveling in their evolutionary prowess. This is obfuscated by his quiet wit and his clients' apparent ignorance of history.

This could be risking an oversimplification. For a more complex rendering of how Caribbean cultural identities are construed by Caribbeans themselves, Stuart Hall, in an essay intended to aid in critical analysis of Caribbean cinema, argues in poststructuralist terms for subtle distinctions Caribbeans themselves make of cultural identity; one emphasizing a common cultural past of the violence, oppression and racism of the African diaspora, another out of

difference; the recognition of tribal identities in Africa, the contrasts, for instance, in Martiniquain and Jamaican culture. Hall describes identity then as a construct Caribbeans “play” with and justifies his choice of verbs this way:

I use the word “play” because the double-meaning of the metaphor is important. It suggests, on the one hand, the instability, the permanent unsettlement, the lack of any final resolution. On the other hand, it reminds us that the place where this “doubleness” is most powerfully to be heard is “playing” within the varieties of Caribbean musics. This cultural “play” could not therefore be represented, cinematically, as a simple, binary opposition--past/present them/us. Its complexity exceeds this binary structure of representation. At different places, times, in relation to different questions, the boundaries are resisted. (238)

Up against this playful, resilient fabric of cultural identity, Lopez juxtaposes David and Libby, who, like the banker in “The Negro in the Kitchen” and the lawyer in “Pearyland” have comparatively sparse means by which to establish a cultural identity that might nurture the longevity of their own kind. The final scene of “Light Action” resonates with these ideas in at least two ways.

The first is a narrative trick employed by the author. Lopez returns to a seemingly innocent, tranquil scene where readers can no longer travel with innocent eyes. The merciless shooting of Esteban, the rape and murder of the two Americans, no matter their culturally induced myopia, is a shocking, tragic twist, one in which the reader is intended to feel violated. The abrupt shift to the scene of the fisherman baiting a hook, then, is more likely to be read through the extrasensory awareness brought on by the shock of a wounding (though the

contusions are merely textual.) The reader's attention is shifted in this manner to the pathways by which American and Caribbean cultures relate to and inform one another.

This closer look reveals this fisherman is "wearing the cutoff Dockers his wife had fixed up and his J-Crew t-shirt" (140). This harkens back to Libby's Hilfiger windbreaker and the litany of commodities with which she and David had measured acceptance and success. The labels' commercialized lines of signification have been severed. Here they've become work clothes--the labels still recognizable and still pleasing, but in a different context, and therefore, for different reasons.

The fisherman ritually baits his hook in the way his father taught him, and then utters his pragmatic prayer: "Do your work." The prayer seems half of a laconic call and response, an answer to the riddle posed by Esteban before his death: "Gotta eat, y'know." The voices of Esteban and the enigmatic fisherman echo one another here, another heteroglossic allusion to adaptation and survival. There's no collapsing of ecological virtue onto Others who exist only as repositories of European ideas about redemption. The narrative trick—as well as Lopez' hopes for reciprocation—exist here in the juxtaposition between a brutal crime and what appears to be a scene of piscine innocence. There's a trickster reciprocation there in the space between those two worlds, visceral in its rendering, that comes after the realization here that all characters have disappeared into the depths. The final scene here depicts the seeds of survival for the Caribbean characters in *Light Action*, and hints of a comic continuance rather than a tragic ending.

No such possibilities are offered for the survival of Libby and David; in not depicting any means of continuance, their respective families or communities as the result their abrupt end, the reader is left to wonder what options exist for viable cultural survival in this milieu, indeed even if such a glitzy matrix of consumer signs and signifiers could be construed as culture. Thus

Lopez turns the reflexive quality of story-creation at a new angle. Libby and David die alone (the latter being the sort of company with which one is alone even in his presence) with no one attending to the biological imperative culture was invented to address (“Gotta eat y’know...Do your work”). By portraying the abject ethical and cultural poverty of a couple pressed into the glossy confines of neocolonial consumerism, an embarrassment of material riches ironically is turned to a symptom of the long standing absence, properly understood as a crisis, of true residency.

The urgencies produced in such a profound crisis are what Lopez hopes to draw attention to in his more recent fiction. The nature of the problematic occidental conceptualization between self and other comes under close scrutiny, regardless of a preference for birds or fish. Such work resonates with a trickster paradox identified in the last chapter: in significant ways, self cannot contain, usurp or become the other; cannot uphold with any integrity the notion of a universal eye or consciousness. Yet access to the other is mediated through the self: through this mediation, and all its inherent distortions, it’s possible to see an individual composed of many influences, one who necessarily will be defined by what she is not, but who struggles with the confines of such a definition, to make a home ground of them; the creation, in an ontological sense, of a little piece of earth on which to stand.

As Lopez makes clear in a short story titled *Nilch’i*, in which the narrator comes to terms with a lifetime immersed in Navajo and other cultures, this kind of reckoning might simply be a return to the place where a journey began:

I’ve no illusions about being Navajo or even understanding fully what they know. I am Caucasian. I was raised to be a member of the upper class of New England and am comfortable accepting that history. It is specifically to that group of people,

moreover, the hardest for me to accept, that I wish to return. I have to find a language they can accept, an experience they will trust. But I believe this too will be there when I put my face into these winds. I believe there is more here than the Navajo idea with which I begin.

I hope I do not make a fool of myself. (*Resistance* 141)

The protagonist here defines home as a new and untried territory, yet also one with which he is quite familiar. His revelation offers the possibility that any community might locate the vital substance of culture, if only they search out the acceptable words, and the common, trustworthy experiences.

Within the imperative of these reciprocal engagements, the clan of the hairy-breasted nut-scratcher may yet find its own true nest. Disregarding such imperatives risks abjectly tragic and more permanent endings. The trickster, stuck at the top of his tree in the deluge, or out at sea with the pirates, will always need his earthdivers, sooner or later.

Dead Voices, Naturally: Haiku Hermeneutics and Textual Tricks in Gerald Vizenor's Urban-Wildland Interface

If we wish to understand the cognitive orientation of the Ojibwa, there is an ethno-linguistic problem to be considered: What is the meaning of animate in Ojibwa thinking? Are such generic properties of objects as responsiveness to outer stimulation--sentience, mobility, self-movement, or even reproduction--primary characteristics attributed to all objects of the animate classes irrespective of their categories as physical subjects in our thinking?

Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are all the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while and then replied, "No! But some are." This qualified answer made a lasting impression on me. And it is thoroughly consistent with the other data that indicate that the Ojibwa are not animists in the sense that they dogmatically attribute living souls to inanimate objects such as stones. The hypothesis which suggests itself to me is that the allocation of stones to an animate grammatical category is part of a culturally constituted grammatic set. It does not involve a consciously formulated theory about the nature of stones. It leaves a door open that our orientation on dogmatic grounds keeps shut tight.
A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior and World View Culture in History."

"There's a trickster use of words that includes the natural world."
-Gerald Vizenor, *Dead Voices*

In the winter of 1929-30, Nez Perce tribal member Archie Phinney returned to the Fort Lapwai Indian Reservation in Idaho. Having trained under Franz Boaz, he came home to record some stories told by his 60-year old mother, Wayilatpu. He produced a book from this effort, published in 1934, simply titled, *Nez Perce Texts*. It's a beautiful book: 41 stories; on each page the English transliterated below the phonetic Shahaptin in paired lines. Each story is followed by a "free" English prose translation.

Taking great pains to remain true to the narrative rhythms in his mother's native tongue, providing multiple in-roads for the monolingual English speaker to comprehend the story, and

possessing a rare credibility, both cultural and familial as an interviewer, these stories under Phinney's considerable care might represent the best of chances to bring the life of the original tale to the page. Alas, Phinney himself came close to declaring them a failure. His less than ringing endorsement of his own work is palpable in the introduction he wrote to *Nez Perce Texts*:

Humor is undoubtedly the deepest and most vivid element in this mythology, the element that animates all the pathos, all the commonplace and the tragic, the element that is most wasted by transliteration. Indian humor of this kind does not incite to laughter. There is nothing hilarious or comical but there is the droll, the ludicrous and the clever exaggeration...

Any substantial appreciation of these tales must come not from the simple elements of a drama unfolded but from vivid feeling within oneself, feeling as a moving current all the figures and the relationships that belong to the whole mythbody. (ix)

With this introduction, Phinney falls just short of a first in literary publishing, convincing readers to steer clear of his own book. His self-doubt, however, continued. In *And Coyote Was Going There*, Jarold Ramsey recounts a letter written by Phinney to Franz Boaz in which the latter expressed the gravest of doubts about his work:

A sad thing in recording these animal tales is the loss of spirit—the fascination furnished by the peculiar Indian vocal tradition of humor. Indians are better storytellers than whites. When I read my stories mechanically, I find only the cold corpse. (48)

Phinney, it seems, felt alienated from his own myths in translating them for lack of evoking “a vivid feeling within oneself.” Distinguishing the comic and “humor” from the merely funny,

Phinney points to the absence of this nonrational sensation as the key to an animated narrative, without which a story withers and dies. Humor, as Phinney uses the word averts this tragic death.

This ambiguous, elusive, perhaps euphoric feeling in the art of the narrative is not oft-discussed among social scientists and literary critics. For Gerald Vizenor, this “feeling as a moving current all the figures and relationships of the mythbody,” creating resonance between interior and exterior landscapes, very much concerns the work of a trickster. Recollect that Vizenor defines the trickster as [...] “a comic holotrope [...] the whole figuration that ties the unconscious to social experience” (“A Postmodern Introduction” 9). But how, exactly or even generally, is this “whole figuration” this nonrational sensation evoked? In the previous two chapters, from indigenous traditions, I’ve offered anecdotal evidence for the primacy of maintaining through narrative art forms communal kinship ties to specific landscapes and their inhabitants. Recollect from Chapter 1 Barre Toelken’s description of this cultural phenomenon in the Navajo tradition, “which insists on delicate reciprocal responsibilities among elements of nature”. From this premise, I’ve attempted to make a connection between these reciprocal responsibilities and Vizenor’s idea of the trickster as a comic holotrope. From Lopez’s essay “Landscape and Narrative,” I attempted to show how the ethical imperative of energizing the circuitry between inner and outer landscapes might crystallize and clarify the neologism, “holotrope.” In Chapter 2, I examined how Lopez’s fiction confronts the absence of such communal obligations, in dominant culture’s usurpation of ethnic and indigenous identities of the Other. Lopez accomplishes this, I tried to show, by reversing assumptions and ideals about nature, culture and true residency in a place.

Gerald Vizenor shares Lopez’s penchant for the narrative trick that flips assumptions, as well as the sense of moral obligation to community maintained by metaphorical connections

between landscape, conscience, and consciousness. For Vizenor, the mythic figure most responsible for stringing the lines between the order of interior and exterior landscapes is the trickster, who, given the opportunity, bleeds the colors between the sacred and profane. In *The People Named the Chippewa*, Vizenor recognizes the connection to landscape, and relates this to the Navajo idea of balance:

The trickster is related to plants and animals and trees; he is a teacher and healer in various personalities who, as numerous stories reveal, explains the values of healing plants, wild rice, maple sugar, basswood, and birch back to woodland tribal people [...]

The trickster is comic in the sense that he does not reclaim idealistic ethics, but survives as part of the natural world; he represents a spiritual balance in a comic drama rather than the romantic eliminations of human contradictions and evil. (3-4)

Vizenor's trickster, it should be emphasized, does not rely on nature to "reclaim idealistic ethics," but "survives as part of the natural world." Survival takes place despite the bleak reality unraveling ecosystems; in some of Vizenor's stories, tricksters thrive under such conditions.

In Vizenor's fiction, trickster's restoration work between inner and outer worlds in a postmodern context concerns restoring a connection between "refuse and refuser" (*Landfill Meditation* 98). The phrase appears in the teachings of Martin Bear Charme, who fills wetlands near San Francisco Bay with trash, and then files a petition with the federal government to designate this new bit of earth as an Indian reservation. Vizenor at once lampoons environmental virtue and conjures another rendition of the earthdiver myth via Bear Charme, scavenging the ruins of the city for new beginnings.

Another of Vizenor's Bay Area tricksters is Bagese, the malodorous, shape-shifting bag lady in Vizenor's *Dead Voices: Natural Agonies in the New World*. Though she turns into a bear on the first and last pages of the novel, she frequents the remaining text of the novel as an eccentric living in an apartment on the shores of Lake Merritt in Oakland. She eschews personal hygiene, attends to the ceremonial mirrors in her apartment, and acts as something of a comic shaman, inducting her pupil, Laundry into her wanaki game, a role-playing game loosely based on an Anishinaabe contest which enacts a tribal myth. ("Wanaki" is an Anishinaabe word that means "peace.") The plural pronoun "we" is mandatory in this game, as is assuming the identity of an animal painted on the face of a card drawn from a deck specialized to the game. Both the game and the pronoun serve to confuse standard divisions between human and animal, wild and urban, and ultimately reader and text.

Laundry, for his part, is an apparently well-groomed university professor, but according to Bagese, it's *his* scent that offends: "Laundry," she said at the door, and that became my nickname. She laughed and pounded me on the head. "You smell like television soap, the sweet smell of laundry is a dead voice" (16). Laundry "lectures on tribal philosophies at the university," and is a "wordy" in Bagese's lexicon, a "dead voice of civilization," a "word demon who hears no stories on the run." Bagese repeatedly rejects the printed word, and insists books are the habitat of dead voices: "She said that tribal stories must be told not recorded, told to listeners not readers, and she insisted that stories be heard through the ear not the eye" (6).

Laundry questions the veracity of Bagese's contention. A brief exchange between the two crystallizes their differences:

I was more than eager to remind her that the wanaki cards were an obvious contradiction to what she had told me. The pictures on the cards were the same as

the written words and could not be heard [...] “So how can you hear stones and pictures?”

“The bear is painted, not printed [...] This is a shadow, a chance, not a word,” she insisted.

“Written words are pictures.”

“Printed books are the habits of dead voices,” she said and turned a mirror in my direction to distract me. “The ear not the eye sees the stories.”

“And the eye hears the stories.”

“The voices are dead.”

“So the wanaki pictures are dead.”

“There are no others, these are my picture stories, no one sees them but hears my stories” [...] (18)

The issue Laundry presses is representation, the degree to which every symbolic image corrupts or distorts on some level, and the ethical obligations between reader, author or storyteller that lie in the inherent ambiguity of such distortions. Laundry “gets dirty” in the first page of the book by admitting a broken promise, leaving the reader to speculate whether his nickname is apropos. He’s broken Bagese’s cardinal rule: Bagese warns him repeatedly never to publish her stories. The reader holds the evidence of his crime in her hands. A comic yet complex rendering of appropriation and representation ensues. Laundry’s first-person narration in the first and last chapters of the book mediates between the appropriative gaze that apparently deadens his university work, and his sworn allegiance to Bagese to honor her stories in some other way than a published text. Has Laundry written his way out of this trap, or should he be beaten on the head again? More importantly, can the oral, aural, and visual “shadows” that keep stories alive

(though certain voices that reproduce them may be dead) maintain a viable presence in the artifact known as the book? And if such a presence is possible, how does it maintain some semblance of a relation to the genealogy of the narrative?

Vizenor's response in *Dead Voices* to these difficult critical questions is rooted in part in the ancient art of haiku and its lucid relation to the natural world. Thus, this chapter will examine the influence of haiku in Vizenor's *Dead Voices*. On one level, this influence is aesthetic: the sparse, occasionally befuddling quality of haiku verse, its reliance on textures, lines, and minute detail, the way it encourages as perception of the extraordinary in the common, are all elements incorporated into the aesthetics of *Dead Voices*. On another level, the influence of haiku plays in the realm of hermeneutics: Vizenor's "haiku hermeneutics" aims to transfer a trickster aesthetic of language at play conventionally attributed to the author onto the reader, thereby including the latter in a community of responsible and responsive discourse, where the struggle over translation, reproduction and meaning might finally move beyond the limited role of the reader as a mere consumer of published works.

Vizenor cites the reading and writing of haiku as his entry to work as a writer, inspiration as a reader, as well as his personal "liberation." In "The Envoy to Haiku," (the title of the essay a play on Vizenor's serendipitous discovery of haiku while serving in Japan in the U.S. Army) his description of a "haiku hermeneutics" conjoins the poetic practice with the seemingly incongruous roles trickster plays mediating textual meaning and wild nature:

Haiku hermeneutics, that sense of haiku, is a natural habitude in tribal literature; the interpretations of the heard and the written must consider the shadow words and sensations of haiku. The turn of the seasons, the course of spiders, the heat of stone, and the shadows of remembrance rush to the words laced in stories and

poems. Stories must have their listeners and readers to overcome a natural impermanence. Oral stories must be heard to endure; haiku are the shadow words and sensations of the heard. Words wait for no one on the page. The envoys to haiku are the silent interpretations of a “haiku spirit.” (32)

The idea that stories must work to overcome a “natural impermanence,” and that this might be accomplished through “haiku hermeneutics” seems elusive as the meaning of a haiku poem itself. But rendering meaning from text in the spirit of haiku is a central mission of *Dead Voices*. The novel attempts to infuse the reflexive nature imagism found in the concise poetic form into contemporary narrative. A marriage between a minimalist tendency in haiku and the same aesthetic preference in Vizenor’s Anishinaabe tradition creates room for the “shadow words” Vizenor strives to make visible. This ethereal yet etymological connection to nature, an older tradition of nature writing, emerges anew as Vizenor utilizes it in his postmodern novel. Like a Japanese ink drawing, *Dead Voices* is a novel created by teasing from a few natural elements a picture the sensations of the living world. In keeping with this aesthetic sensibility, I’ll focus on shadow, treeline, reflection, and stone, as they all contribute to an animistic network of textuality where voices are heard beyond the dead utterance. Vizenor quotes Lafcadio Hearn on the necessity of such animism in landscape art: “ ‘Until you can feel, and keenly feel, that stones have character, that stones have tones and values, the whole artistic meaning of a Japanese garden cannot be revealed to you’ ” (*Interior* 129). The contention Hearn is making would be familiar in Vizenor’s Anishinaabe culture. Such animism may have as much to do with a mind and an ear open to possibility as it is to literal conversation. As A. Irving Hallowell observed from his interactions with the Ojibwe, “[animism] leaves a door open that our orientation on dogmatic grounds keeps shut tight” (25). Much of the trickster work in haiku and *Dead Voices*

occurs in play with words, definitions of texts, images, and the categories teased by them in the mind, a scattershot approach to eliciting feeling outside the rational bounds of everyday speech and writing. As in haiku, no definitive answer avails itself to the many ironies and paradoxes found in *Dead Voices*. What emerges instead is a complex ecology of text first gleaned by Vizenor in the shadow of haiku verse. A path into the peculiar nature of haiku, namely its uncanny textual animism containing “shadows,” can be reckoned by tracking Vizenor’s peregrinations between postmodern, tribal and Asian influences.

I. Shadows

“Haiku hermeneutics” as an interpretive tool initially appears as useful a task as building a chair for some theoretical sitter whose lower half bends the other way. The phrase implies the search for meaning through an art that plays at the edge of meaninglessness. Practicing hermeneutics unaccustomed to being burdened with such oxymoronic methodologies will be tempted to quit before they start. However, if the practice is undertaken as a form of trickster play with intent to free language from the tedium inherent in the intent to “mean,” the goal Foucault was alluding to when he said “let us pervert good sense and make thought play outside the category of ordered resemblances” (qtd. in Babcock, *The Reversible World* 32), the apparent contradiction in meaningful meaninglessness becomes an entry into the freewheeling hermeneutical scrutiny Vizenor invites. For him, the evidence of what looms outside the category of ordered resemblances are “shadows.” The term, within the loose bounds of Vizenor’s definition, is at once tribal and postmodern, and tangles with the Derridean notion of traces. The

postmodern venture aligns with tribal narrative, which Vizenor claims has always possessed a characteristic “postmodern condition”

The postmodern opened in tribal imagination; oral cultures have never been without a postmodern condition that enlivens stories and ceremonies, or without trickster signatures and discourse on narrative chance--a comic utterance and adventure to be heard or read. The immanent pleasures of an aural performance are unbodied in translation; the tribal experiences that were heard in stories, and natural variations on stories, are transformed in publications that are seen as cultural information, some with imposed historical significance. The word postmodernism is a clever condition: an invitation to narrative chance in a new language game and an overture to amend the formal interpretations and transubstantiation of tribal literatures. (“A Postmodern Introduction” 3-4)

For Vizenor, the postmodern ambiguity posed by the relationship of the oral to the aural is one source of shadow in tribal narratives. The act of translation deadens voices, and revokes a playful chance in the language game, but cannot kill the story. In Vizenor’s conception, narrative shadows can survive even the worst translations. “Narrative chance,” is a Vizenorian signifying phrase for the possibility of creative play between reader and writer, speaker and audience. Shadows, which he describes most concisely in “The Ruins of Representation” as “the unsaid sense in names, the memories in silence, and the imagination of tribal experience” (3), lay in hibernation, wintering out in the ruins of representation, a state of decay apparent in any word that claims finality or indisputable conclusion. Derrida, following Saussure, suggests a similar phenomenon in “arche-writing,” the notion that words have multiplicities of meaning only in relation to other words but no substance on their own. There is a kind of shadow implicit in

arche-writing, but it is not the one Vizenor would claim for breathing life into stories, nor as a feature of haiku hermeneutics. Vizenor sees shadows as being uncovered in the ruins of representation. In the essay that utilizes that phrase as its title, Vizenor questions Derrida's homotextuality, rejecting the "objectification" of text, and goofs on Derrida's neologism "arche-writing" with his own, "archshadows":

Jacques Derrida turns his differance to overread the dash, variance, and indeterminate traces that misconstrue the past *representations* of presence and absence in written literature. The causal compromises of objectivization in transitive actions are the terminal poses of presence and past. The archshadows arise in tribal silence and are heard in that aural distance to the chance concept, the reach of lonesome silence between the signifier, signified, and their signs; the traces and difference of meaning are dashed and deferred to the silence of other texts in the literature of dominance. Shadows are that silence and sense motion of memories over the sign; shadows are not the burdens of conceptual references. Shadows and differance in other texts threaten the *representations* of presence and the run on simulations. (16)

In other words, while Derridean concepts of absence and presence with respect to the nature of language bear an uncanny perspicacity, mere representation of presences and absences in literature or history will not suffice for Vizenor's purpose. Language is a chance at *mediated* access to the world of phenomena, not merely symbols representing events and objects.

Vizenor's critical stance; his aspirations for haiku hermeneutics, reside in the kind of language that relates rather than represents. The shadows of words grant immediacy, that elusive access to the phenomenal world outside text, a sense of possibility, however fleeting. Words of themselves

do not contain traces. Traces reside in “shadows,” which are revealed in the detritus of language that presents itself as fully representative of a given idea. Moreover, in Vizenor’s language theory, shadows are traces of the “natural” phenomenal world *and* other words, not merely words alone; each is always in floating, flowing, and changing. Just as the river junkie cannot step in the same stream once, let alone twice, the alert reader cannot read or hear a narrative without being subject to the vagaries of language shadows, which seem to operate under the same mode of a perpetually-moving and shape-shifting fluid dynamics.

How are these metaphorical shadows affiliated with tribal identities, and how does Vizenor go about invoking them? Birds, animals and shadow are inextricably intertwined in Vizenor’s mythology. In Anishinaabe belief, certain totemic animals hold the possibility of visionary powers for the properly prepared. Vizenor updates the heritage of his tribal menagerie for urban times, making the wild animals of the city new totems for those who would meditate on such presences. In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor writes, “Shadows are metaphorical traces of the natural world,” which is “a venture of sight and sound” (72). A trace, denotatively, is the hint of a possible presence, which begins to describe the way in which animals depicted in art, verse or song play as signposts within a text for other kinds of traces, for meaning beyond the obvious tell-tale sign of feather, bone, blood or the impression of a cloven hoof in mud. Vizenor’s bestiary includes mytho-historic Anishinaabe characters with animal identities, animals with human abilities and humans with animal’s names. In his autobiography, *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*, Vizenor opens his story by remembering his clan’s totem animal.

When the earth was new, six tricksters posed as humans on a wild landscape; one revealed the power of a trickster stare, a mortal wound to humans, and then

returned to the sea. The others abided on the earth as totems in tribal narratives, but these five were the first woodland families. The crane is one of the five original totems of the Anishinaabe.

Alice Mary Beaulieu, my paternal grandmother, was born more than a century ago on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota. She inherited the crane totem, a natural tribal pose [...] Clement William Vizenor, my father, was a crane descendent. He was born on the reservation and murdered 26 years later on a narrow street in Minneapolis. My tribal grandmother and my father were related to the leaders of the crane; that succession, over a background of cedar and concrete, shamans and colonial assassins, is celebrated here in the autobiographical myths and metaphors of my imagination, my crossblood remembrance. We are cranes on the rise in new tribal narratives. (3)

Vizenor provides a kind of genetic history of the crane in his family, pointing out the generations where the trait was recessive and how it again emerges as dominant. Animals in Vizenor's prose, particularly those with mythic significance to his Anishinaabe heritage, seem to serve at least two important functions. The first is to update, and in doing so revitalize, as Vizenor alludes to above, the abiding totemic animal in tribal narrative. A second role enlarges the definition of textuality, creating alternative, new, and creative interpretations of "dead" tribal histories.

Though the reasons animal imagery rouse the human psyche have been much pondered, animals in Vizenor's writing play as a "shadow," a third possibility in the dualism of presence and absence, mimetic of the way animal tracks point to the presence of a living thing. The ability to "read" with such insight relies on the recognition of patterns in the flow, the observation that the

visible and audible birds of spring, pleasing to eye and ear, are memorable from the previous year, and implies in their absence their migration to similar habitats in parts unknown.

To elaborate on this point, some tracking of the migration cranes will be necessary. Haiku master Kobayashi Issa died a century before Alice Mary Beaulieu was born on the White Earth Reservation, but her grandson would recognize Issa's crane immediately from R.H. Blyth's second volume of Haiku translations:

Waka-no-Ura:

The crane alighted

On a rubbish heap.

(517)

Blyth himself comments,

Here Issa has taken a proverbial expression [...] which corresponds to “jewel in a dunghill,” and reanimated it by making it the scene of Waka-no-Ura, one of the most beautiful places in Japan. It is perhaps more perverse than profound, but illustrates Issa's *weltanschauung*, and love of the whole truth. If he could have made us see the significance of this rubbish heap, this would have been a great poem. (518)

Further cause for *weltanschauung*, or mystical contemplation, exists in the dialogic between Vizenor and Issa: Vizenor's crane seems to pick up where Issa's left off, showing the significance of the dung heap, which for Vizenor's crane clan would include oppressive colonialism and the resulting abject poverty and violence.

Where cranes alight in the pages of text, others see gardens in bloom. Jean-Luc Nancy came up with the term “exscription” to describe texts that so incite imagination and metaphor,

they become a living memory in the mind of the reader. Nancy commented on this phenomenon and his phrase to describe it in an interview:

It is a word which has occurred to me in reaction to a craze for writing, the text, salvation through literature, etc. There is a sentence from Bataille: "Language alone indicates the sovereign moment where it no longer has any currency." It is my daily prayer. He means: there is assuredly only language, but what language indicates, is non-language, the things themselves [...] I have never forgotten: the "excrit" is the garden, the fact that writing indicates its own [*propre*] outside, is decanted and shows things. (Nancy)

That "language indicates non-language" and can point to "things themselves" is the paradox in which Vizenor's shadows are cast; the shadow's outline is most often in animal form. The animals themselves are not "real," but coax the reader into a frame of mind in which such distinctions are momentarily forgotten. Vizenor scholar Tom Lynch, in "To Honor Impermanence: The Haiku and Other Poems of Gerald Vizenor," notes the way in which the Japanese art works with illusion and paradox, discusses how a certain kind of thinking in haiku is a mistake:

[...] a haiku has 'presentational immediacy,' setting objects and events right before us without words getting in the way. At least that is the illusion--an illusion created by words and our expectations about them.

This illusion is a paradox. In most literature the word signifies an external object, and that object in turn signifies symbolically some transcendent meaning. The words "old pond" on a page evoke the image of a pond, and that pond must, if we are to value the poem, we think, stand for something else, some significant

meaning. In haiku, this is a mistake. If Japanese haiku seems a meaningless image to a Western reader, it is not because the reader lacks familiarity with Japanese culture and so misses the symbolic significance, it is because the haiku is indeed, perversely, meaningless. Haiku seems to slide back down the chain of signifiers, eliminating the final stage and, by eschewing most literary tropes, creating an illusion that it has evaded the first stage of signification. (212)

The “point” of a haiku, Lynch suggests, is that there is no point: all it can do is situate its reader at the edge of a clearing where seeing and hearing might preclude naming. Textual insight wholly becomes the onus of the reader; such insights are often free of the burden of rationality.

Vizenor quotes Donald Keene to describe the vitality of the reader’s role in the process of haiku:

[Keene] observed that “a really good poem, and this is especially true of haiku, must be completed by the reader. It is for this reason that many of their poems seem curiously passive to us, for the writer does not specify the truth taught to him by an experience, nor even in what way it affected him.” What haiku poems have sought, he pointed out, “is to create with a few words, usually with a few sharp images, the outline of a work whose details must be supplied by the reader, as in a Japanese painting a few strokes of the brush must suggest the world.” (Envoy 3)

Saying more by saying less, haiku requires that the reader insert herself into whatever potential metaphors might lurk in the images presented in order to make the words dance. Thus there exists a sense in haiku that it is the reader, not the writer who is speaking. Paradoxically, when this occurs, the ideal of “poem” is no longer necessary: Vizenor comments:

Haiku is “when the relationship between subject and object is forgotten [...] a dreamscape in natural harmonies beneath the words [...] The reader creates a

dreamscape from haiku, nothing remains in print, words become dream voices, traces on the wind, twists in the snow, a perch in the high bare poplar. The haiku serves only as a spark to the reader's own powers. (qtd. in Blaeser 117)

Where division subject and object can be momentarily suspended, something closer to an unobstructed view of the phenomenal world arises. Words in haiku leave the impression they've dissolved, the image outlasting its alphabetical rendition. Anishinaabe poet Kim Blaeser observes this process in her critical book on Vizenor, *Writing in the Oral Tradition*:

The goal of Haiku is its own annihilation. Haiku exists solely to be obliterated and replaced by experience [...] A haiku is not a poem, it is not literature; it is a hand beckoning, a door half-opened, a mirror wiped clean. It is a way of returning to nature. (118)

The idea that any form of life exists to be obliterated and replaced by experience, in biological terms, would cast haiku in the role of a saprophyte, though instead of living on dead organic matter, the seventeen-syllable organism lives on the "dead" words on the page. To facilitate the blurring of lines between subject and object, where words recede and cranes alight, the role of the composer of haiku is to remove himself from consideration in the poem, so that the reader may become a decomposer of the verse. This is accomplished by reflecting, in as sparse, yet concise terms as possible, the thing at hand. The reader sits patiently for the germinating metaphor, while the writer "disappears" into the thing itself. The result is another meaning that grows from the decomposing shell of the old words. Poet Lucien Stryk, in his essay, "Modern Japanese Haiku" recalls the advice of two haiku masters:

The master said, "Learn about a pine tree from a pine tree, and about a bamboo stalk from a bamboo stalk." What he meant was that the poet should detach his

mind from self [...] and enter into the object, sharing its delicate life and its feelings. Whereupon a poem forms of itself. Description of the object is not enough: unless a poem contains feelings which have come from the object, the object and the poet's self will be separate things. (11)

The notion of the self as having no particular identity, or conversely, a multitude of identities, begins to resonate with the habits of tricksters. Blaeser notes that much of Vizenor's poetry contains a kind of "trickster signature:"

Such unusual intersections between human nature and the natural world, and unusual intersections between civilization or technology and nature [...] his trickster [...] frequently appears in the haiku that offer illuminating twists on the way we perceive ourselves, or in those which challenge our overserious or isolationist view of our actions. (128)

The task of moving beyond an "isolationist view of our actions" relies on the presence of a trickster reader, one who completes the narrative through asymmetric, unorthodox connections. While the tribal and postmodern share common ground in the contention that texts are never fixed, but always free-floating, territories are clearly delineated in the former's acknowledgment of the chance at wild nature animating a narrative. Birds, bears, rocks, and trees, even people are an outside chance; the trick of haiku hermeneutics is in the wild nature of the hands holding the book.

II. Treeline

The trickster at what Blaeser terms "unusual intersections" is close to what Vizenor described in himself as "the teller in mythic stories at the treeline." Tricksters, in Vizenor's

terminology, often travel “down from the treeline,” to the city, and in tracking his tricksters this way, he hints at the reason for their dependable location in the world’s larger urban settings. While ample evidence has been gathered to support the widely-held critical notion of tricksters as being situated on borders and margins, the treeline, as Vizenor conceives it, implies more complex relationships in at least three ways: as the margin between urban and wild, and then the fecund but also dangerous territory within that margin.

Neither language nor cities can function well without an acknowledged dependence on systems beyond their respective control. Yet both function efficiently by creating what is useful or significant—signified—working with available material. (Lumber, cement, brick, stone, steel, water, electricity, the alphabet, numbers.) Each labors in “construction,” under the delusion that only what is bestowed with significance functions within the bounds of its system, yet both postmodern critical thought and modern urban planning are beginning to acknowledge this costly oversight. What is not signified in text, or in the city, designated as human space, is still at work in both print and metropolis. Trickster’s realm is the unsignified, the repressed, the unacknowledged presence, the longing in the aftermath of absence or loss. The apparent absence of nature, the pushing back of the treeline to create the clearing for the city, often prompts in the urban dweller the sense of nature’s absence, and a subsequent feeling of loss, the proverbial concrete jungle. In “Textual Interstices: Mirrored Shadows in Gerald Vizenor’s Dead Voices,” five Vizenor scholars co-authored a critical essay that describes further the metaphor relating text and city:

The trickster becomes a language game within a text she both constructs and yet which confines her. The free play of this language game is only as free as the bounds of the construction, unless it takes a form the construction does not

recognize [...] The city as a confining discourse can only enclose that which it recognizes. Being lost in the cities is analogous to a virtual submersion in the flood; the text of the city is a self-reflexive loop. Within its lumen, that which remains unsignified in the larger text is free to play. (181)

In simpler terms, the built environment signifies a field of play in which the rules are well known and generally obeyed by its human inhabitants. But squirrels, feral cats, and rootwads pushing up sidewalks don't stop for red lights, and it has always been difficult to keep the cardboard dwellings from proliferating under bridges. These unacknowledged influences from the underbelly of nature, its pests, abandoned pets, rodents, miles of underground pipes for water coming in, tunnels for sewage going out, are repulsive to most urbanites and therefore repressed, buried in the ground, the carcasses scooped up by the sanitation department on their frequent rounds. The busted water main, the sewer backing up into the basement of city hall, and the occasional wild animal hustling down main street are the evidence of entities and forces in nature to which the city's code does not apply.

In *Dead Voices*, the unsignified in text and the undomesticated or feral in the city are intertwined. Freedom to play paradoxically relies upon exclusion from the playing field. In ecological terms, it isn't so much that nature abhors a vacuum, but that certain species will seek out such enclosures from which natural processes are apparently vacant, and recolonize the habitat from which they've been evicted. Ecological models of disturbance and succession, the "chain of signifiers" in an ecosystem, what ecologist term trophic levels, show that the life of the soil remains a frenzy of activity underground even when sunlight-dependent life forms have been abated. Such opportunism isn't limited to underground occurrences. Coyotes, crows, pigeons, squirrels, fleas, dogs, and cats, to name a few, have all adapted well to urban environments, and

may be using, human habitat (and humans) to further their own evolutionary agendas. Nature is not absent from the city, but has been bumped down an ecological ladder of signification--a development not without its stark consequences--to produce the illusion it isn't there. Many city-dwellers miss the more readily observable of these ongoing events, an obtuseness Vizenor plays with in *Dead Voices* by sending his tricksters down from the treeline. (Several chapters begin with a ceremonial incantation, spoken in the plural voice, "We are...down from the wild treelines.")

Treeline plays with another ecological sensibility that has implications for the textual tricks in *Dead Voices*. Biologists employ the term "edge habitat" to denote these places where two habitat types converge and overlap, and even the casual hiker or careless outdoor observer will note the berries at the edge of the trail, the hawk perched in a tree branch at field's end, the coyote scat in the clearing. This mixing of niches within an ecosystem has been more recently recognized as a highly desirable urban trait. High-density, mixed-use neighborhoods, where the grocery store, school, park, church, tavern, and office are all within easy travel distance may eventually trump the proliferation of the urban-suburban divide. The treeline functions as a site where all possibilities are available, a chance to encounter a panoply of sensation, emotion and thought. Treeline, metaphorically, is a location of cultural creation. The symbiosis between forest and village, and the concentration of life in the between-spaces where habitats overlap suggests a complexity beyond what might be conveyed by the notion of a border, fence, or margin. Tricksters are "down from the spacious treeline," alluding both to the edge of a framed reference in the urban landscape of text, as well as the possibility of cashing in, perceptually, on a well-cultivated chance by hunting in rich terrain where all possibilities are palpable, detectable, but shadow-like, indicative of neither absence or presence.

Treeline as a space of cultural creation, in the ecology of Vizenor's metaphor, also allude to the seeds of destruction, a dark side to this territory that can be understood in the various ways in which Laundry's and Bagese's predicament parallels and recreates the Earthdiver creation myth. Narrative utterance or imaginative creation may promote cultural survival but makes no guarantees. Bagese awaits Laundry at Lake Merritt having suffered through this disillusionment: "Bagese told me she was born dead at the treeline, buried in tribal voices" (9). But she moved beyond this defeat:

She [...] practiced the manners of animals and the stories of birds. She learned to hear their shadows and survived on their stories [...] She said the past was stolen, the tribe was invented and recited in dead voices, and the present was hunted and driven with the animals and birds from the treelines. The animals and birds, their shadows of creation, she insisted, had become outcasts and dreamers in the cities.

She heard the dead voices and became a bear in the mirror. (10)

Laundry's enlightenment, spurred by the recognition of his teacher's rebirth, depends on an engagement with the mirror (though in his introductory remarks he makes clear he's not able to enter the mirror as a bear like Bagese did.) Initially, he turns away from his own reflection, for reasons similar to the ones Wenebojo turns his head away from his own turd floating around his mouth. Like Wenebojo, Laundry is guilty of transgression that might destroy creation. The flood prompted by Wenebojo's evil duel with Michibizhii, increases the territory of the possible, and yet may destroy much of what has already been created in the world.

Similarly, Laundry's publishing of the stories destroys his word--clearly to Bagese, to whom he promised to never publish her stories, but within another more complex set of circumstances as well. In the earthdiver myth, Wenebojo himself must escape to the tops of the

trees to avoid being submerged in the flood he incited. His own shit floats up around his mouth, signifying his complicity in the deed. Only through the help of other animals, who dive deep for a little bit of ground out of which a new earth can be created does Wenebojo escape his own immolation. The central hero/anti-hero moves to the periphery as his earthdiving constituents delve into the dark for a new earth. Similarly, The “I” of Laundry’s voice narrates only the first and last chapters; in between is the “we” of Bagese’s wanaki game. Laundry becomes peripheral, lost in the rising flood of the narrative and the voices of nature in the Wanaki game.

Metaphorically, he and Wenebojo are up the same tree until the flood “recedes” at the novel’s “end” which also signifies a beginning, the re-emergence of Laundry’s voice. Laundry’s absence from the text, then, is mimetic of both the earthdiver myth—Wenebojo nearly drowned in the flood—and the manner in which a haiku poem is annihilated, coming to “mean” only in its new life in the eyes and ears of a reader.

III. Mirrors

In *Dead Voices*, the reader first glimpses Laundry on the heels of this dilemma: faced with the choice of publishing the stories, possibly enlarging the discursive space, yet potentially destroying much of what is seen and heard in Bagese’s narrative, Laundry goes for expansion rather than integrity, and as a consequence, his own voice disappears into the flood--the floating patterns of the indeterminate, polyvalent nature of Bagese’s stories, the “we” that narrates the middle chapters of the book. Laundry’s near-drowning is evident in novel’s first chapter. Significantly, the first time Laundry seeks out Bagese’s apartment, he gets stuck in a storm, where he glimpses the mirrors in her apartment through the distortions of a window blurred by sheets of rain (15). Before Laundry is submerged at the end of his introductory chapter, the

windows onto, and mirrors within Bagese's apartment become the metaphorical lenses through which Laundry sees Bagese, the mirrors and himself. Initially Laundry doesn't like the view: "I avoided the mirrors for fear that my face would vanish" (20), a paradoxical fear that the authors of the aforementioned essay "Textual Interstices" contend correlates to Laundry's textual de-centering, a phenomenon in which the reader is implicated alongside Laundry:

Laundry fears that his position of absolute selfhood as an agent of discovery behind the appropriating gaze of the window will be translated into a fragmented identity in which he himself becomes the artifact. The irony is, of course, that within the construction of the narrative, he is already there. [...] Laundry is initially counted, or counts himself among the wordies, and the critique of the written contained in *Dead Voices* is facing inward on itself from the title onwards. Being situated within a printed text draws attention to its frame, to the text itself. This is not an easy appropriation from a voyeuristic stance. Vizenor is pointing to the waterlogged glass and containing frame of the gaze in a postmodern endeavor to problematize the reader as a reader. The arguments within the text against the text constitute a final vocabulary which cannot be accepted from the text itself without question. (185)

Within this dizzying array of water-logged glass, mirrors, and the fragmentation of the authorial "I" seems in one sense to return to the model of textuality Derrida theorized, that texts only have meaning in reference to other texts. But the seemingly contradictory arguments against text within text signify a process in the novel that relies on the reader, and ultimately works to free the reader from the territory of the novel's pages. The mirrors in *Dead Voices* never reflect merely the gaze of the onlooker, but a host of other fragmented images reflected and refracted.

Within this matrix, the image Laundry simultaneously dreads and desires is a glimpse of the “bear in the mirror,” which fits Vizenor’s notion of an “archshadow.” In “The Ruins of Representation” Vizenor explains this term using Luther Standing Bear’s recollection of the significance of bears in tribal memory:

Luther Standing Bear, for instance, wrote in *My Indian Boyhood* that the "Indian very seldom bothers a bear and the bear, being a very self-respecting and peaceful animal, seldom bothers a human being." The bear is an archshadow in tribal memories and heard stories. The sound, silence, and shadows of the bear are animate and intransitive. The shadows, silence, and unsaid essence of bears, end in signification; shadows and silence have no representations, presence or absence. The bear is "so much like a human that he is interesting to watch. He has a large amount of human vanity and likes to look at himself," wrote Standing Bear. "Before we had looking-glasses, we would look at ourselves in a clear pool of water. This the bear does, too, and I suppose he thinks, 'Well, I'm not such a bad-looking fellow,' for he walks away after an inspection of himself as if quite satisfied, and as for myself I do not see why he should not be. He is wise and clever and probably knows it." (11-12)

Vizenor suggests here that some mirrors have memories, “shadows animate and intransitive.” That “the shadow, not the bear is the referent” implies for any kind of reading the relationship Standing Bear describes with the observed bear in the clear pool: the sense of isolation in reflection is illusory. The image reflects the worlds behind the faces, and the self-conscious onlooker who gazed on the self-conscious bear engages his sense of ursine introspection as well as his own human sense when he takes a turn at the pool. A mirror with depth, a calm pool or

still water, in which patterns above and below the surface create a palimpsest of images in constant transformation, hints at Vizenor's choice for the appearance of Lake Merritt in *Dead Voices*. Walking in the mode of the wanaki game fosters an approach to Lake Merritt and its surrounding urban environs as another pattern of text. Visually, the skyline reflected in the surface of the water, containing buildings, treelines, and shadows, plays as a large-scale map of the overlapping territories that converge in the novel. Laundry's solitary fixed image in a reflecting pool the size of Lake Merritt becomes an impossibility. He turns from the mirrors not for fear from being sucked into the depths of the abyss, but because of his own sense of foreboding that the wanaki game will force him to see himself as a miniscule fraction of a much greater whole, whose own perceptions and reflections in some way influence the outcome of the image, but are nonetheless nowhere near to being its sole proprietor or creator. Worse yet for Laundry, there is no fixed image reflected in the lake's surface, nor in the other reflections in the mirrors in Bagese's apartment, yet each reflection depicts some part of another, fragmenting any hopes for omniscience or the commanding authorial view. Capturing representations of "the real" also becomes illusory, since at any given moment, the reflected image changes according to a set of variables--wind, light, time, movement--over which Laundry has no control. What's reflected in the mirror becomes a game of chance, the patterns recognizable but ultimately impossible to precisely replicate. Since impermanence makes replication impossible, textual representations must work toward the invocation of some element of the patterns at work in the ever-changing reflection. If the invocation works, the "haiku shadow," the animation of text beyond the bounds of everyday speech may occur.

IV. Stone

Laundry, ontologically unmoored on the shores of Lake Merritt, unnerved at the revealed vagaries of replication and representation, relinquishes control of the narrative after the first chapter, diving into Bagese's game. A ritual storytelling acts as transition to the polyvalent "we" of the wanaki game. The story begins with an archetype common to tribal creation myth. A woman impregnated by an animal or the elements, in this case the wind, before the time when life on earth appeared in its current form. In this instance, she gives birth to three trickster children, Naanabozho; a silent, not entirely human brother, and a third brother, Stone, whose birth coincides with the appearance of flora and fauna that supports human life on earth:

The third manidoo child did not appear to be human in any sense of the word. The last-born trickster was a stone, a hard stone. With the birth of the stone there were birds and animals, flowers and insects on the earth. A bear, a bird, a stone could feel at home on the earth for the first time. (25)

Despite his agency in earthly creation, Stone, as one might imagine, was quite immobile, and this becomes a source of frustration to Naanabozho, who wants to travel free of the obligation of returning home each evening to share stories with his brothers. To facilitate his wishes, Naanabozho proposes to kill Stone. He seeks approval from his silent brother, who remains silent. Naanabozho decides to perform the evil deed without familial approval. The consequences are serious: "This would be the most terrible crime on earth, the death of the first born stone" (26). An attempt with an ax fails, and Naanabozho goes for broke: "I will do whatever you tell me to do to kill you," he pleads with Stone. Stone has his brother build a giant fire, with himself in the middle of it. When the time was right, he instructed Naanabozho to pour cold water over the fire:

“Here comes the cold water then,” said Naanabozho as he poured the water on his brother Stone [...] when the cold water touched him, he broke into thousands and thousands of pieces and flew in the four directions of the earth. At first it seemed that one of the first manidoo children had died on the earth, that the first stone had come to a wild death in a fire. (27)

Naanabozho seemingly is granted his wish, he can now travel freely and immediately lights out for the territory, not bothering to come home in the evening. But self-immolation for Stone turns out to be a greater advantage:

Stone had broken into several families and covered the earth in the four directions. Stone families lived everywhere in the mountains, on the rivers, in the meadows, in the desert. No matter where that trickster traveled he would not be far from his brother and the families of the stone. One break of the stone became a bear in the cities. Stone is in a medicine pouch. Stone is in the mirror. (28)

Out-tricking his trickster brother, Stone invents the wanaki game, closely associated with his creation of an earthly nature:

He created three sets of seven cards with pictures of animals, birds, insects, and the picture of his brother the trickster on one card from each set [...] the players create their own cards [...] the player arises at dawn, turns one of the seven cards, meditates on the picture, and imagines he has become the animal, bird or insect on the card for the day. Then stories are told about the picture and the plural pronoun we is used to be sure nature is not separated from humans in the wanaki game.

(Ibid.)

There are other rules: the player must walk on a familiar trail, (for Bagese, Laundry and their wanaki animals this is around Lake Merritt) and gather “leaves, flowers, feathers, and other natural things of the season,” (*Ibid.*) on the day of the game, and place them in a room or on a table “according to where they were found,” creating a living map of sorts. Representation in this game is synecdochic: the purpose of the game is not cartographic precision, but to create a variety of representation that is, at least partially, what it represents. Maps work as a mnemonic device, an entry into the animated recollection of experience:

When animals, birds, insects, and living things are seen on the trail a stone is placed to remember the place. In this way, Stone is always present where life would be in the wanaki game. (28)

The game goes on for seven days, a new card is turned each dawn. The last card is the trickster, and the player can choose his own identity. Though the game seems simple, perhaps childish, Stone is quite serious about it:

Stone created a game that remembers him in stories. To end the game his brother would have to end the world, and he would never do that because he would be too bored and lonesome. Stone became a bear in his own trickster meditation. The wanaki game is his war with loneliness and with human separations from the natural world.” (28-9)

Stone, in Vizenor’s novel embodies the variety of animism A. Irving Hallowell noted in his conversation with an Ojibwe man, quoted in the epigram to this chapter. Certain stones hold the possibility of being animate as they memorialize the words, events, and unspoken biologic processes occurring in its midst. The stone may not have a cartoon mouth that delivers a monolithic monologue or shoots the schist with other rocks, but it may be granted a voice in the

kind of mnemonic, synecdochic form of representation Vizenor creates with the wanaki game. With this in mind, it's possible to see how the wanaki legend and game creates the potential for the perception of text laid out in *Dead Voices* to extend beyond its pages. The cards and the ritual of the game, as Laundry early on points out, are a kind of representation, as are images in the mirror, stones, and the sounds and signs of animals. Bagese takes great care to show Laundry the choices he faces in whether or not such representation manifests as a dead voice or, figuratively, as another crane alighting on a dung heap. To this end, Bagese's mission becomes, very much in the manner described by Basho to "enter the object," (Basho qtd. in Stryk 11) to train Laundry's mind to meditate on the ruins of representation, so that he might reinhabit the ruins. Bagese's pedagogical approach involves no books. The perception of such "living" textuality is coaxed through the nonrepresentational, synecdochic "maps" at the end of each wanaki session that memorialize the day's travels. Moreover, the wanaki rules dictate that found objects must be returned from whence they came, and replaced with stones to memorialize their discovery. The maps are at once what they purport to be—a representation pointing the way—but coded synecdochically in that they are composed of artifacts from the "real" world. The resulting pattern of stone is at once "real" and symbolic, the latter meaning indecipherable without an interpreter, one who knows the stories.

Herein lies the genius of Vizenor's narrative: by revealing the whole figuration of Laundry's predicament in the text of the novel, Vizenor conjoins the fate of his readers with Laundry. The ones who know the stories in *Dead Voices* are Laundry and whosoever cracks the book's first page. Just as in haiku, where an image might outlast the sparseness of the words, giving the impression it is the reader's thoughts that are spoken, just as isolation in reflection is an illusion, the reader of *Dead Voices* is an archshadow, a barely absent presence in the

reflection of its text. The maps laid out in Bagese's apartment, viewed in isolation are therefore eventually meaningless without the arch-shadowed voices of those playing the game. A pattern of stone may not be discernible to the untrained eye. "Seeing" requires training in this instance in ritual form:

The wanaki is cedar bark, thick oak leaves, dove feathers, camellias, and plum blossoms patched on the floor of the apartment. On the other side of the miniature lake, wisteria, bay leaves, narrow red petals, and seven stones to remember the birds on the trail. Later that month at dusk we circled the lake once more, and with ceremonial care returned the blossoms, leaves and feathers to the places where they were found. The stones were [...] our memories in the apartment. (42)

Eventually, Laundry begins achieve at least a glimpse of the parable of the trick of Stone. Fragmentation, dispersal, and decentering extends stone, the weaves of sediment in text, and the realm of what can be "read" to all the phenomena of sensual, physical world. This is the virtual reality of Derrida's idea that nothing exists outside of text: in the game Laundry and Bagese play, everything exists as text. The symbols in the game double as the things themselves.

V. Voices in Nature

Shadow, treeline, reflection and stone, in the way Vizenor employs them, evoke both a haiku aesthetic as well as a quirky, Vizenor-scripted tribal poststructuralism. Each contributes to a broad conceptualization of textuality, and the decomposition of the notion of language as a merely representative phenomenon. Experience, imagination, memory, and empathy become keys to an animistic language that mediates the phenomenal world rather than merely represents as an inanimate text. But Laundry's predicament remains; he's neck deep in the rising tide of text he's unleashed by publishing Bagese's stories.

Laundry disappears into the text, following the aesthetic advice of ancient haiku masters. He is less interested in the nature of pine trees or bamboo than in the nature of textuality. Laundry enters his own story, at the behest of Bagese, to learn about the nature of text. What she shows him, paradoxically, are the voices of animals. By scrutinizing portions of the narrative that takes place in Bagese's wanaki game, specifically invocations of the praying mantis, crow, beaver, and the elusive bear in the mirror, it might be possible to see how the limiting frame of the book, in which the novel is apparently contained, is pushed outward through the voices of these animals.

First, Vizenor writes a picture of an urban territory being invaded by nature. Common domestic plants burst into the cityscape with the presentational immediacy apparent in haiku. Many times in the text of the novel, Bagese speaks in sparse terms mimetic of haiku, which has the effect of a kind of initiation into the specific times, places and events of a given point in the novel. A few examples:

Broken windows on a truck. Beer cans and chicken cartons at a bus stop./

Cigarettes buried in the concrete. (33)

That coil of blue hoses had vanished. The mongrels barked at a calico cat on the iron gate. The windows were clouded. (42)

White daisies stand over a bush. Elusive catbirds whistle deep in the shrubbery. Secrets are remembered. (61)

The mantis warrior posed with the ghosts. At last the sun burst over the sycamores, and the haze lost once more to the mantis. (76)

The animal identities Bagese and Laundry inhabit under the auspices of the wanaki game are all ritually described in the first paragraph of each chapter as "on that slow burn at dawn, down from

the wild treeline to our tribal agonies in cities,” lending a martial atmosphere to the sustained effort of nature to take back the city, and to do so *sotto voce*, so that the deed is done without the intervening eye of the wordies.

Along these lines, a recurring theme in *Dead Voices* is pest control. In a chapter preceding the mantis episode, a group of fleas get politically organized to fend off the bombing (with insecticide) of an apartment building near Lake Merritt. Significantly, the mantis is known as a natural form of pest control, eating flies and other bugs up to the size of grasshoppers. *Stagomantis carolina* is also something of a trickster warrior. It can fly, and is routinely mistaken for a hummingbird when it does but prefers to pose as a twig in absolute stillness, (hence the praying) and waits until its prey wanders within striking distance of its gangly forelegs, devouring its meal in freakishly powerful mandibles. (Observing the process instills an odd desire to offer a bib or napkin.) The mantis is best known for its unique version of sexual appetite; the female devours the male after copulation. Vizenor depicts the mantis as a trickster insect warrior, with more than a little in common with the warrior class of Zen monks that once occupied Buddhist monasteries of feudal Japan.

We are praying mantis, the natural inspiration of that famous school of martial arts with the same name, on our last urban adventure from the southern frontier to the ocean cities. We march by ourselves in slow but certain moves, we trickster twigs on the breeze, our reach is camouflage, wild to the touch. (73)

The mantis fits into the methodic relentless march of natural forces that Vizenor satirically portrays as insect militarism, but moving beyond the *Animal Farm* mode of political allegory, it is the trickster’s identity of the mantis that reveals the life-in-death nature of words. Mikado, a famous mantis warrior, (the name taken from the Gilbert and Sullivan opera in which a grisly

execution is staged) greets the wanaki gamers in their incarnation as mantis. Mikado skirts disaster at every turn. He's figured out a way to avoid being devoured during sex, "coitus interruptus, a new martial art he learned from the wordies," and has turned his attention to the problem of mantis collection by a local science class at a nearby school. He eats well because of his finely-honed mantis moves, and because of his natural abilities and instinct for survival, jealousies have erupted within his clan. A plot calls for his elimination. The mantis seem to embody the spirit of a narrative chance:

The praying mantis wear chance on their sleeves, a chance to hear the comic side of their survival. Mantis pray that sex is a chance, and comic survival is on their side. The mantis are slow, not stupid, and everyone knows sex can be a trickster at the right moment, even the wordies. Sex can turn the best minds to comedies, but how to the mantis survive sex with a chance? (79)

A clear connection between mantis sex and the congress between reader and book can be discerned in the juxtaposition between this paragraph and the following, which attests that wordies would make poor mantises:

The wordies are no better than the mantis. The wordies hear comic in their sex and wear tragic on their sleeves. The mantis are more disciplined and better hunters, and we are wiser with our disguises. The truth must be obvious, the mantis are much smarter than the wordies, because the wordies pretend to be like us and practice praying mantis martial arts. Have you ever seen a mantis pretending to be a wordy at anything? (*Ibid.*)

The reader here is left to wonder at the parallels between sexual mantis and textual print reproduction. Without ruining the koan-like spirit of the riddle, a few possibilities rise to mind. If

sex here can be intuited as the intercourse between reader and writer, then Vizenor's recurring description of a comic holotrope, where the "author dies in comic discourse," might apply here as the doomed male mantis. The female mantis as reader then devours the narrative; this is a natural, not tragic occurrence. Tragedy occurs when the reader/mantis is no longer praying/preying upon the text, but as in Mikado's pending victimization, the act of devouring becomes simply a means to a political end. The fable here plays as another bizarre crossroads in Laundry's journey with Bagese. Certainly most species of professor, or any manner of professional reader are capable of devouring and digesting texts, but Vizenor has created an allegory wherein the politics of reading threatens the practice—the propagation of the narrative species being the practice—with extinction, a death without humor.

Mikado then, represents not so much the author but the narrative chance that the story will survive, a possibility Vizenor presents in comic tones in one of Mikado's political exchanges:

“We must endure after sex,” said Mikado.

“Indeed, not to be eaten overnight is a basic mantis right,” we told the martial mantis. “Even wordies can count on that much in the city, and you deserve more out of sex than sudden death.”(74)

The call to arms resonates with the contention that the story must go on; one way to ensure narrative continuity would be to defer endings by risking death in the gamble of reproducing narratives. To this end, Mikado soaks his wings in a stream where the “bear healers” have congregated. The healers, a coalition of mantis who devour without sex, pleasure, or food but simply to achieve political power, seem to protect Mikado, but their protection is a trap “a cruel

deception to capture and devour him with or without sex.” Mikado, embodying the fearlessness of a Zen warrior, remains nonchalant:

Mikado seemed unaware or unconcerned that he was about to become the sacrificial victim of the bear healers at his own casino celebration in the eucalyptus. He said it was the best expression of civilization he could imagine, to act like a word and end like a mantis. (81)

In other words, the bear healers would devour Mikado, convinced that he “means” something beyond what his actions would indicate, but for Mikado, to end like a mantis (echoing the macho rejoinder to “go out like a man”) means a gamble on mantis sex and his own comic survival. A biological imperative for narrative survival would place textual congress between reader and writer higher on the food chain than devouring for moral, political, or cultural sustenance. Skipping sex for a politically motivated fast-food meal necessitates Mikado’s newest martial move, coitus interruptus, and borrows from the bumbling repertoire of wordy moves the means for his own survival. Acting like a word would be to feign an overly-charged significance, to go out like a mantis would mean, one way or the other, the story lives on in the devourer.

If mantis are totemic creatures recolonizing the habitat of text for the reader, crows loom over cages whose wires are words. Vizenor’s cages in the crow chapter are modeled on a real bird sanctuary situated on the shores of Lake Merritt where injured wild birds are nurtured back to health. Such “sanctuaries” rehabilitate eagles, hawks, and owls, but these birds are often unable to return to independence. Vizenor seems to glom onto the living avian contradiction such birds embody: captive or tame “wild” birds whose injuries have conscripted them into a life of “playing” at wildness for an audience. Unlike Mikado, the mantis who would play with the

female mantis' perceptions of overwrought significance, risking death to be sure that the game goes on, one particular wordy crow inhabits a captivity narrative wherein the cage—the ontological habitat created by the wordies—becomes his preferred residence.

Like all good tricksters, the crows in *Dead Voices* are free to roam; their wanderings map the metaphor between city and treeline, the printed word and the world outside it:

There were crows behind the wordies, crows that once healed with blue wings and trickster stories. We heard the crows heal and wounded the caged birds in the cities. At dusk the crows raised the windows with their caws. The wild birds turned in magical flight. The wordies were held back by their dead voices. (89)

Some cages are self-imposed while others have their cages imposed upon them. As an example of the latter instance, crows and the wanaki player posing as crows first visit a preschool and incite a playground riot by enticing children to become the animals they imagine. The scene engages a fantasy world where children, whom adults often deem as possessing undeveloped powers of mind and body, can achieve the power of their visions and dreams, ironically by virtue of being unaware of the horizon lines the fully-conscious adult mind might recognize. For the crows, the experience is ultimately a disappointment, since the adults intervene, order is restored, and the children are whisked away to the classroom cage:

There must be a better connection to the sacred stones and natural memories in the crow world than sour children at school in the morning.

“What will we do with the children of the wordies?”

“The trickster stone was hated at creation.”

“Stones break, crows dance too much for the wordies.

“Their voices died so soon”

“Children may never hear their stories.” (91-2)

The leader of the crow clan, Moses, refuses to let the classroom teachers have the final say in the matter. While the children daydream and their teacher ostensibly drones, Moses entertains them in the schoolyard, gesticulating outside the window like the bad boy expelled from class:

Moses amused the children with a wounded crow dance. He bounced on the stones, spread his great wings, and turned blue right there outside the window. The children pressed their tongues to the glass and have never been the same since then. The stories of their wild time that morning ended with a glance from a cage.

(94)

While Moses treats children whose classroom cage is imposed upon them with humor, his reaction to a fellow trickster also incarcerated as a ward of the state isn't quite as gentle. He and his wanaki avatars encounter the aforementioned crow who prefers his cage. A dialogue ensues between Moses and the wordy crow, punctuated by a remark, which scans as a Zen koan at the end of this exchange:

Moses shouted to the crow, “why would you be a prisoner?”

The caged crow turned on the perch. He avoided our glances and was silent at first, but then he said, “my wounds are an advantage, the cage is my solace, my protection from the wild outside.”

“Cages are no protection,” said Moses.

“They are when the door is open,” said the caged crow.

“Protection is a condition, not a cage.”

“Once a day, without fail, the park attendant leaves the door open for a few hours, said the caged crow. “I broke a wing and was poisoned by the city, and since then got tired of flying to survive my next meal on the road.”

“Crows are the condition,” said Moses.

“When the cage is open, no one leaves, no one enters.” (95)

From this litany of non sequiturs the two operating motifs in the chapter, crows and prisons/cages, are inverted: It is not prison but crows that are the condition; it is not the enclosure of the cage but its open gate that maintain separations. This reversal occurs at the behest of a trickster crow who becomes a wordy by virtue of a wing broken in the city. Significantly, the caged crow enjoys the ease of life as a ward of the state. The resonance of the caged crow with Laundry’s situation, a professor who lectures comfortably, though perhaps ineffectually on tribal philosophies, whose much-vaunted intellectual and professional freedom has become his own sentence, a dead voice, makes it possible to hear him in the koan at the end of the conversation. The remark indicates a moment of possible self-realization for Laundry, who by seeing something of his own reflection in the crow may have roused the courage at least to not avoid his own reflection so insistently.

In his role as mediator between between Bagese and reader, Laundry as wanaki crow also performs a textual trick with this second koan. “An open cage where no one enters and no one leaves” describes the city as a frame around an apparently denatured habitat, which Vizenor also employs as an allegory for the frame of any text that purports to stay within the realm of its bound pages, a habitat for wounded crows. The cage as the page, by association then, becomes a signpost directing the reader back to the differences between Laundry and Bagese regarding the nature of representation and the written word. (“Printed books are the habits of dead voices,”

says Bagese.) If the cage—the text—when open prevents entry or exit, there would seem to be at least two possibilities that mirror the presence of the reader: text as the prison house where dead voices expire, in which case Bagese was right all along, or a possible reification of printed words wherein the potent symbolism behind representation in the wanaki game could be brought to bear on the representations in books. True to the aesthetic whims of haiku hermeneutics, the choice is not made within the pages of *Dead Voices*, but swirls along with a host of other dichotomies into its own narrative currents, leaving the reader to mind the possibilities that might arise.

Bringing to bear, wherein the third word in that phrase is not construed as a verb but an ursine noun, becomes the journey that Laundry undertakes, with Bagese as his guide. Bagese, Virgil-like, has disappeared, turning into a bear on the penultimate page of the book. Laundry, for his part, has become at once pessimistic of written discourse and resolutely committed to fighting for territory in the ruins of representation, having been transformed into a soldier in the word wars:

We must go on, there is nothing more to be done with our voices in the cities [...] Hold back the promises, hold me back with the bear, send me nothing but sound, sound, sound to be remembered.

There is no peace, and our best stories must be heard in a trickster war, in the shadows, in a world of chance. Peace is a tragic end, we are lost in peace [...] I would rather be lost at war in the cities than at peace in a tame wilderness [...]

(135-6)

But Laundry as a word warrior has also become a trickster. In addition to inverting the moral hierarchy inherent in war and peace as well as civilization and wilderness, and in spite of the

rebirth he experiences playing Bagese's wanaki or "peace" games, the professor publishes his story.

I waited a few more years and then decided the stories should be published. She warned me otherwise, but she made the first record and published the first mark for the ear not the eye.

Bagese would pound me on the head if she heard me say that the real trouble with published stories is where our troubles ought to be, because dead voices have no troubles. The published stories over those we hear are not more trouble than the earth over our bodies, cold water over a hot red stone, a cage to hold wounded crows [...] (143)

Offering something of a corollary to William Blake, who coyly observed in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," that "Where man is not, nature is barren," Laundry seems to have determined that where text is not, nature is barren. Laundry arrives at a conceptualization of text that recognizes language, as all else, starts as a wild system, but with the specialized potential to catalyze communion with the phenomenal world. Laundry's assertion that "published stories are where our troubles ought to be," admits the postmodern milieu to the practice of haiku hermeneutics. This blend of disparate ingredients plays with the possibility that evoking "the natural" might begin with dredging up its fragments within the context of any discourse or language game. Such fragments are an apt description of Laundry's bear in the mirror.

The bears Laundry tracks recognize in their own grunts and growls and gesticulations in the mirror the resonance with many other creatures, including humans. Like an encounter with the trickster, Laundry catches only a fleeting glimpse of this metaphorical bear, and only on rare

occasions, simultaneously doubting its presence but relying on its vitality in a language game, as well as its shadow in his own identity:

Was there a bear in the mirror? [...] I should have known there would be nothing at the end but animals in the mirror and caged birds, the dead end of the eye, because there was nothing more than that at our creation, and wars of chance in the trickster stories [...] I am a bear in the mirror. I hear to see, and stories come to me over the dead voices. (137-8)

The images and ideas that occur over “dead” words on the page constitute a kind of tracking that defies mere alphabetic representation. Haiku hermeneutics relies on this kind of life beneath the shadows of words.

Tracking for presence in a postmodern context may occur indoors, difficult as it is to detect footprints on a cool tile floor in a library. But the birds and the beasts, as Bagese shows Laundry, have never quite disappeared. Rendered in representations or glimpsed in town, their image recalls Archie Phinney’s imperative to remember how a word might be a single species that ought to incite the wonder of its entire migratory path:

Any substantial appreciation of these tales must come not from the simple elements of a drama unfolded but from vivid feeling within oneself, feeling as a moving current all the figures and the relationships that belong to the whole mythbody. (Nez Perce Texts ix)

Shoha, in R.H. Blyth’s translation in *Eastern Culture*, seemed to swim in this current between words and the world, and saw the words animals inspire as an animate delight. If Vizenor’s koan, “when the cage is open no one leaves no one enters,” suggests a Zen-like

gateless gate swinging open to a world of wider possibilities, Shoha saw the role that the migratory swallow's shadow might play in finding that figurative opening:

As the swallow flies to and fro,

Its shadow is cast

Upon the old door. (508)

Paws for Effect: Trickster Bears, “Pronouncement,” and Silence

*The pieces of my voice
have been thrown
away I said, turning to the hedgerows
and hidden ditches
Where do the pieces of my voice lie scattered
The cedarcone said you have been ground
Down into and whirled*

*Tomorrow I must go look under the clumps of
Marshgrass in wet deserts
and in dry deserts
when the wind falls from the mountain
inquire of the chuckwalla what he saw go by
and what the salamander found
rising in the changing sand
I must run down the pieces
and build the whole silence back...*

-A.R. Ammons, “Rack”

If the natural world, especially in its animal forms, impels a cognizance of texts beyond their merely representative powers, this possibility, as Laundry aptly demonstrates in *Dead Voices*, initially tends to fall on deaf ears in a modern or postmodern context. As William Howarth writes in his essay “Some Principles of Ecocriticism,” “Unlike writers or hunters, nature makes direct statements, without implication or analysis” (71). Nature, “speaks” to us in the realm of direct experience; all else can be construed as a secondary, but quite necessary type of hearsay. The tendency in the modern Western world, as Christopher Manes writes in “Nature and Silence,” has been to reverse this long-standing natural order:

Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative.

The language we speak today, the idiom of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogs in the natural world. (15)

Manes' observation describes a kind of silence that isn't necessarily without a sound, but occurs instead in the absence of the heard, as a kind of prerequisite to the formation of a Cartesian ontology that places the individual at the center of consciousness. The subjugated silence of the Other is Manes' concern. The communal hazards of this conception were described in Chapter 1: the totalizing, hegemonic control over meaning that begins with removing language and other cultural artifacts from the contexts in which they were created, and the mere "lies" that deaden metaphor and symbol systems under such regimes. In *Dead Voices*, Laundry slowly comes to realize the penalties of viewing text as a mere autocratic authority, as a mere representation of ideas: a fragmented sense of self derived from an inability to listen to the voices Bageese to which Bageese exposes him.

This is also the subject of A.R. Ammons poem "Rack." In Ammons' poem, the narrator pursues a quietude he perceives as holistic in the face of his own oblivion. This can only be achieved, he suggests, by recovering the pieces of a fragmented self, the "pieces of my voice," by listening to the voices of animals and plants, mountains and trees. Ironically, the ideal is not to recover the self, but to "build the whole silence back." Seeing the individual in relation to a greater community by listening to its "voiceless" members, Ammons draws attention to possibility of reconciliation between a self long alienated from communion with a larger world.

Ammons' "Rack" is remarkable for its running against the grain of the Western tradition of assigning speech as the sole privilege of human voices. As Susan Stewart points out in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, recalling the story of Ovid,

The separation of human and animal functions is [...] one that marks the division between the expression of meaningful and nonmeaningful sounds. Ovid, for example, turns many of his transformations upon this boundary. Io is changed into a heifer by Jupiter, and when she tries to complain, she is "terrified by the sound of her own voice," a lowing sound from her lips. [...] Ovid reminds us that animals are not dumb and in fact have their own methods of communication, including communication with humans, but animals do not speak; they do not produce individual expressions of meaning designed to be intelligible and at the same time uniquely expressive of their own being [...] For these characters, losing a capacity for speech is yoked not just to the loss of their human form, but also to the loss of the form of their persons or proper names—that name by which they are called or summoned into the reciprocity of living human speech. (61)

Ovid plays on the very human fear of a nameless existence, of a silence that precludes the possibilities inherent in the declaration "I am..." But as Ammons and Vizenor have written it, silence does not always serve the function of the negative or punitive. To summarize the haiku aesthetic from chapter 3, it is in the silence, the considerable spaces between the words and lines of text that can furnish its illusion of a dialogic unity between author, reader and text. In *Dead Voices*, the silence of the bear, the "archshadow" becomes a metaphor inciting an animate view of textuality. Bagese in ursine form represents her fierce guardianship of the sanctity of her stories. In Bagese's role as Laundry's guide, Laundry must achieve a kind of silence before he

can hear Bageese, or any of the other animals in the wanaki game. In this sense, silence becomes a precursor to the perception of an animate metaphor. The subtly nuanced voices in the natural world, specifically animal forms in both their totemic and literal appearances are the agents of animate metaphor, and eventually of a more holistic sense of self that finally “hears” manifold voices long-silenced.

This final chapter will examine tropes of silence evoked by a specific animal form, the bear, in the introduction to Vizenor’s *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* and in Lopez’s short story, “The Bear in the Road.” Both Lopez and Vizenor work with the ethical and aesthetic implications of silence; foremost among their concerns with silence are the various ways in which it simultaneously reveals and conceals meaning both inside and outside the text. In doing so, a question is implied: By what name are we called or summoned into the “reciprocity of living human speech”? Is the referent only to “you” and “me”? Can the mute appearances of animals, specifically the bear, offer a way into the game of discourse through the back door?

Ammons’ poem hints that a loss of human form or voice in one context can also be interpreted as gain in another, one in which the reciprocity Stewart alludes to involves (somewhat mysteriously) addressing an other who does not regularly offer a reply in direct address; or one in which the speaking subject offers only silence.

In a tribal context, for example, the loss of a name and a narrative voice can work as a means of cultural preservation and an invocation to mystery. In the opening scene of Gerald Vizenor’s play, *Ishi and the Wood Ducks*, “a pathetic figure crouched on the floor”—Ishi—utters the first line: “Have you ever heard the Wood Duck stories?” (302) The audience is immediately aware of a polyvalent irony: no one has “heard” Ishi’s wood duck stories, certainly

not anyone attending the play, as the theater lights have just dimmed, and in a larger historical sense, not anyone familiar with Ishi's story*

In the text of the four-act drama, the two most common stage directions are "pause," and "silence," the latter a quality Vizenor associates with his notion of narrative shadows described in chapter 3. The significance of such gaps relates to Vizenor's interpretation of Ishi as the first "postindian," who acts out an absence masquerading as presence. In *Shadow Distance*, Vizenor writes,

Postindian simulations are the absence, not the presence of the real, and neither simulations of survivance nor dominance resemble the pleasurable vagueness of consciousness [...] Postindian simulations are the absence of shades, shadows and consciousness; simulations are mere traces of common metaphors in the stories of survivance and the manners of domination. (161)

Such shadows are for Vizenor what hold the possibility of animation in narrative. Shadows are described by Vizenor as "the unsaid sense in names, the memories in silence, and the

* As recollected by Robert Heizer in Ishi, *The Last Yahi: A Documentary History*, In 1911, Ishi, the "last man of his tribe," walked out of a rugged tributary of the Sacramento River and into a slaughterhouse in Oroville, California. After being jailed, he was released to the custody of Alfred Kroeber, the famed anthropologist at the University of California. One of Ishi's first recorded acts was to spend some six hours regaling linguist Thomas Waterman with the ceremonial tale of the wood ducks. Waterman took copious notes; Ishi chastised him for repeatedly leaving to answer the phone and attend to other official business. The admonishment proved to be well-grounded. Waterman's scrawled notes of the Yahi wood duck tale are being scrutinized to this day. The current tasks, to reveal the significance behind the urgency and seriousness with which Ishi needed to tell this story, and to further decipher the lost Yahi dialect, seem well out of reach. Ishi himself is destined to remain enigmatic. Since it was taboo in his Yahi culture to utter one's name to strangers, and since Ishi, as the last man of his tribe, was a stranger unto all but himself, Ishi's real name died with him. (Ishi is simply the Yana word for "man," a name given by Kroeber and his colleagues.) (6-41)

imagination of tribal experience” (Ruins 3). The absence of specific meaning in Ishi’s wood duck stories can be read as the very kind of shadow Vizenor describes. No one hears the wood duck stories anymore, except in the “shadow” of Ishi’s urgent narrative, which Vizenor teases out in *Ishi and the Wood Ducks* by punctuating dialogue with pauses and silences on stage. What is not known about Ishi, what ultimately can’t be known, is in part why he continues to hold such fascination for modern audiences. Vizenor highlights how the wood duck story’s shadow is cast alongside Ishi’s, invoking a haunting sense of loss. The wood duck narrative, under the influence of Vizenor’s sleight-of-hand, leaps in its last unheard telling into the realm of Vizenor’s postmodern trickster. The silence of the wood duck, a totemic animal in Ishi’s Yahi culture, becomes along with Ishi an absence disguised as presence. Unlike the instance in Ovid’s tale, in which god-like humans devolve into animal forms as a punitive act, both Ishi and the mythic wood ducks are rendered silent not because their forms of speech are unintelligible but because of a squandered opportunity to hear on the part of the listener. Whatever sense of punishment or ruin is evoked is reflexive on the listener’s behalf. Both Vizenor and Lopez frequently choose birds, reptiles and mammals, both biological and mythic, to invoke this kind of silence—a signpost to the reader to listen, as well as the space in which readers or audiences might bring to the text their own mythic, cultural, religious, critical or intellectual insight.

At least two other critics have described possible connections between ancient cultural traditions, postmodern theory, and animals. Animals are “transcendent Others” in the phrase of Howard Herrod. In *All the Animals Came Dancing*, Herrod discusses the way a kind of dialogue with many creatures fostered kinship within Northern Plains tribes, relating the sense of mystery, contingency and indeterminacy to evolutionary theory. In Herrod’s view, the scientific rather than the religious or philosophical yields a possible worldview that connects to the tribal:

Evolutionary hypotheses vary and are often contested, but the consequences for constituting experienced of animals and plants in the everyday world can be generally characterized. Central to many of these perspectives is the framing of the emergence of the human being on a very broad canvas. This canvas often includes notions concerning the deep interconnection of all life forms as well as the complexity, mystery, and sometimes seemingly arbitrary character of the evolutionary process. Northern Plains world apprehensions also focus in their own way upon ideas of interconnection, complexity, mystery, and the dangerous arbitrariness that often characterizes the transcended powers [...]

[...] there was the notion among Northern Plains peoples that not only do human beings live in a world populated by transcendent Others, but these others could, by their own powers or by their control of other powers, produce rhythmic renewal of the world. (118-119)

When an animal other talks in tribal discourse, there may be ears culturally attuned to such voices. Biology and ecology, through extended hours of quiet observation in the field, have prompted a “contested” discourse that in some ways parallels some of the characteristics of discourse Herrod identifies in Northern Plains tribes.* The latter has cultivated a capacity to

* In *Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez makes some important distinctions between indigenous, in this case “Eskimo,” ways of knowing animals, and the means by which Western science approaches the subject: “The Eskimo’s methods are usually less formal than those of the scientist, but not necessarily less rigorous. By comparison, Western scientists usually fall short on hours of observation; and usually only select a few aspects of an animal’s life to study closely. The Eskimo’s ecological approach, however, his more broad-based consideration on an animal’s interactions with many, some seemingly insignificant, aspects of its environment, is increasingly becoming a Western approach. Western science is better informed about the life history of migratory animals, especially distribution and movement. Eskimos, on the other hand, show a marked reluctance to extrapolate from the individual to include all other animals of that type, as Western scientists do.” (241)

“listen,” yet Herrod and Lopez both would recognize the lack of precedent in contemporary Western thought for the means by which animals might talk, and through this conversation “produce the rhythmic renewal of the world.” The common territory here is the observed nature of a given animal. Much has been written on the central standing of animals in myth and religion worldwide, as well as in the archetypal human psyche. Paul Shepard emphasizes the role the animals themselves play:

The meaning of animals is implicit in what they do: eat, run, leap, crawl, display, call, fly, mate, fight, swim, sing, swim, hide, slither, climb, and die. One or another of these animals does each of these things with more expertise and finesse than people. Their keenness is reflected in the shapes of their bodies and the traces they leave. Animate signs and signatures move through our dreams and imagination, evoke our feelings and portray “us” in a kind of allegory [...] (202)

Shepard describes the animals as much as possible on their own terms, describing *their* role in inspiring both symbolic and mimetic roles in the human mind. Echoing Vizenor’s holotrope, “the whole figuration that ties the unconscious to social experience,” Shepard describes the animal world in similarly holistic terms, evoking a social experience that generously includes the nonhuman world. Animals have communicated their role in this evolving social drama wordlessly, raising awareness on behalf of their human counterparts of a hazard incurred in the use of human speech. As there is a world of human utterance that animals cannot enter, there is an actual world we become cut off from. The sense of loss, the fear of the unknown, and the inscrutability of mystery in an encounter with the Other may be most acutely sensed in encountering animal others. Perhaps this is why so many tricksters emerge in animal form. As

Inductively turning “a” caribou into “the” caribou reflects, as Lopez notes, the tendency in Western paradigms of conceptualizing animals to deny an individual identity.

Shepard notes, animals at once affirm similarity and emphasize difference, the latter most often through specialized behavior that exceeds the human capacity for that task.

As Paul Shepard and Barry Sanders make clear in *The Sacred Paw: The Bear in Nature, Myth and Literature*, no animal might exemplify the empathy for the wordless intelligence of animals, as well as the mystery of animal Others as do bears. Bear myths, dances, poems and epics are nearly universal in the folklore of Northern Hemisphere cultures, and may be among the oldest kinds of stories humans tell. Bears occupy a central location in Vizenor's Anishinaabe tradition, and also in his fiction. Bears tropes are found in the majority of Vizenor's stories, from Bageese in *Dead Voices* to Bearheart and Proude Cedarfaire in *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*. Bears appear in *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, and in many pieces of short fiction. Puns on the word "bear" appear in fiction and essay form; bears bear the central burden of metaphor in Vizenor's concept of "archshadow," as described in chapter 3. Vizenor's bears are related to Anishinaabe ceremonial bears appearing in the myths and ceremonies of the midewinwin, a shamanic society in Anishinaabe culture, as Vizenor scholar Nora Baker Barry makes clear in her essay "Postmodern Bears in the Texts of Gerald Vizenor." Barry also describes the function of bears in Vizenor's work:

If, as Vizenor often asserts, trickster is a figure in a language game, then bear is a shadow in remembered tribal stories and rituals of the Grand Medicine Society or midewinwin, and this shadow looms heavily over Vizenor's texts [...]

[...] Bear motifs in these texts most often serve as ways for characters and readers to bridge the inconsistencies, even chaos, of post-modern life and be renewed, just as the initiates in the midewinwn ceremonies are reborn with the help of bear guides. In their animal presence and their spiritual being, bears inhabit

some characters and are the spirit guides for others as Vizenor connects them to their functions and the midewinwin. As the breakers of barriers, they are the beings at the doorways between realism and magical realism, between horror and transcendence, in Vizenor's texts. They bridge the gaps between the secular and the spiritual and connect the spiritual to the physical. (92, 95)

Barry tracks a connection Vizenor insists has always existed; the alignment of tribal discourse with postmodern critical theory, but adds the possibility of more than awareness of the contingencies of any language game, holding out for an awakening or renewal in the process of playing those games. To accomplish this, Vizenor's bears are always in dialogue, offering cryptic advice, making wisecracks, and offering incantations for rites, ceremonies and stories. The onus is on the reader or audience to "listen" to the bear, as Vizenor's bears often cajole the reader to do.

The obstacles to this kind of "hearing" are embodied, by contrast, in the silence of a ghostly bear in "The Bear in the Road," from Lopez's collection *Resistance*. The protagonist of this story, a white man, Edward Larmirande, maintains an intimate family connection to the Assiniboine culture through a member of that tribe named Virgil Night Crow. Edward has several encounters with a mysterious and somewhat ethereal plains grizzly bear, an animal that, unlike Vizenor's bears, does not speak to Edward; nonetheless, through its silence, ironically is able to infer some rather pointed questions about the direction of Edward's life. Lopez's bear, based on Edward's description, is the "real" *ursus arctos horribilus* of the Northern Plains, a silent, shadowed presence who antagonizes the protagonist over a period of years, silently prodding him to "listen," a skill that for reasons personal, cultural, and perhaps metaphysical seem to have atrophied in him. The reckoning with this deafness compounds the frustration

Edward deals with in losing the bear's meaning, a rational pursuit that Virgil quietly attempts to show his apprentice is the wrong path. This initial comparison reveals both Vizenor's and Lopez's bears encourage the act of listening, Vizenor's through speech, and Lopez's through silence. This distinction is an important one for several reasons. Recall that Ovid had Juno turn Callisto into a bear to deprive her of the powers of speech; by contrast, Vizenor's bears work in some ways as a sanctuary for preserving the spoken word. This frequently occurs when the character in question undergoes some form of assault, oppression, or trauma. The psychology of refusing to speak is a sensation not unfamiliar to Vizenor himself. In his autobiography, *Interior Landscapes*, he recalls how he did not talk for the entirety of the third grade:

Tribal tricksters, benign demons and woodland atomies of praise and pleasure, arose in my imagination that year of silence in the third grade and became stories, metaphors, certain names with stature. (72)

In such self-imposed sentences of quiet, the imagination often finds room to take flight.

Silence can nurture a return to an inner sanctum where ceremony or ritual, whether personal, cultural or religious, form the core of an identity that can't be harmed by oppressive or intrusive regimes. The prerequisite for taking part or witnessing such rituals, whether a Christian baptism or initiation into the Anishinaabe order of the midewinwin, is silence itself, respectful, quiet observation conducive to a heightened state of awareness. Some form of invocation to silence to commence the ceremony is common. In Vizenor's texts, the signpost for this is frequently a laugh. In *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, the second line reads "Listen, ha ha ha haaa." The first is, "The bear is in me now. (vii) (This Vizenorian mantra is repeated throughout *Bearheart* and some of Vizenor's other works. Bagese utters it in *Dead Voices*.) Their purpose is a mimesis of an invocation to ceremony. The declaration of entrance of the bear into the narrator is loosely

akin to the prerequisite of baptism, with its tacit understanding of transubstantiation, for Christian communion: a ceremony for members of a community has commenced; the meaning and significance might not be understood by outsiders. In Vizenor's case, it also serve to confuse, obfuscate, and thereby elude or alienate colonial pursuits that would work toward a final possession of the Anishinaabe world by co-opting the printed fragments of the rites of the midewinwin. With this kind of unspoken code in mind, Bearheart recounts how he first became aware of the bear inside him after being locked in the closet at a federal boarding school for seven days. The conversation takes place with a woman who is an AIM activist; Bearheart's banter in this exchange is fragmented by non sequiturs, obscenities, and the apparent fact that he is seducing someone or something while talking to her.* The AIM activist receives in wisdom nothing more than what she is prepared to hear, which apparently isn't much: soon enough, she's had it with Bearheart's "shit talk." But Bearheart is quite serious: The conversation is a prelude to the ceremony of the novel's text, a story that includes, albeit in an unorthodox way, moral instruction on how to survive a greater darkness than a locked closet in a federal boarding school. In this initiatory conversation, the AIM woman's more obtuse questions and comments are greeted with the same stage direction that dominates the opening scene of *Ishi and the Wood Ducks*: silence and pregnant pauses. Then Bearheart talks:

* A legitimate reading of this prelude casts Bearheart as a bear, in which case Vizenor has written that rarest of novels with an opening scene depicting bestiality. The sexual play and the "shit talk" of Bearheart might be read as serving the same purpose as a koan, that is, to jolt the reader out of a rational and into a nonrational, mythical, dreamlike frame of mind before tackling the novel. In another sense, sex with a bear would also simply serve as a more graphic retelling of a common motif in tribal folklore, in which a woman marries a bear and has children with him. Gary Snyder has written on the modern day implications of otherness inherent in this old story in his essay, "The Woman Who Married a Bear."

Listen ha ha ha haaa. Once in a white boarding school we were locked in the darkness. The enemies have changed but the places and visions are the same. She smiles under the paw. On the seventh morning in the closet at the boarding school the bear became a personal vision. Magical flight through sacred time. Our dreams in secret languages over human word wars into the world of bears. The bear is in me now. (xi)

Silence clears the way for imagination; Bearheart's banter begins. Terms become interchangeable; heirship becomes hairship and confuses a reference to either written records or bears. Identities and boundaries of "bear" and "word" are violated and blurred; at times just who is saying what isn't discernable. I've quoted a full page of text here to convey a comic "Who's on First?" variety of misdirection Vizenor employs:

Indians know how to survive.

With words now. Plants and animals have become words.

You got weird words on the brain.

Words without vision.

Your brain is a word...

You are here to sift through the ashes from the wordpiles that were burned in the third world. This place is a word hospital for dead tongues and evil phrases from the givers of government. You need more words to live, but the words here have terminal diseases, terminal creeds...

We believe in our sacred cultures

Words are not cultures. Our tribal cultures are locked up in hearts and federal filing cabinets. Were we living in our culture we would not be talking about it here, we would be living somewhere in sacred time.

...Silence ends the word cultures. Your culture is the word and the wars over them.

Your book is sick.

But will you bring it to me here? Hate me and bring me our wordpiles so we can praise the bears through the winter solstice into the fourth world.

Down the white words.

The book is with the hairship records. The others will praise you for finding all the secret words, the tribal names that should have inherited mother earth on trust land reservations.

Show me now.

Return the book to us here.

She is writing on our chest with her tongue.

FUCKMEBEAR

Bearheart ha ha ha haaa. (xv-xvi)

The befuddling arrangement of speakers, and the absurdity of the situation reverses the roles: Bearheart was silent, now he is talking. His crazy talk has driven the AIM woman to leave, though she seems to implore Bearheart to come along:

Please come with me.

Scared?

Not now old man.

We will wait here in the darkness.

She is gone....

She must be reading now. Ha ha ha haaaa. (*Ibid.*)

On whose chest is this unrevealed “she” inscribing salivary graffiti? This skin is jointly owned; reading between the lines, it seems the AIM woman has become the odd person out in a threesome involving a bear, a man, and an erotic semiotic “she” whose somewhat kinky command presages Bearheart’s declaration, “The bear is in me now.” That is a general picture: Whatever exactly is occurring is up to the reader to imagine. When Bearheart and the other participants in this apparent ménage a trois reply to the AIM woman’s demand “show me now” with a simple request to “return the book to us here,” some kind of exchange is implied. The

deictic of Bearheart's "here" is quite ambiguous: though the scene is set in a building AIM activists have occupied, Bearheart's location may be understood as one in sacred time. The book is loaned with the understanding, from Bearheart's position, that some sort of textual coition might take place in the course of reading the book, that the woman might return the book in "sacred time." A hint as to the location of sacred time can be gleaned in the confusion between "heirship," suggesting the legal complications and "word wars" of blood quantum and Indian lands held in trust, and "hairship" connoting the sacred lineage of the ritual bear. "The hairship is in the book," Bearheart claims, but such an inheritance may not come in the form of words: "Words are not culture," Bearheart warns. Hairship—read as the initiation by the bear into the culturally inherited possibility of flying in sacred time—might better be comprehended as a *context* coaxed out of the text of the book. Bearheart delights in this possibility: "She is reading now, ha ha ha haaaa..."

The notion of the sacred draws attention to the incantatory atmosphere Vizenor through Bearheart means to evoke. Oblique references to the ceremonies of the midewinwin (references to third and fourth worlds are part of the eight worlds in the midewinwin cosmology) alert the reader that some rite or ritual is occurring, but at the same time, bawdy humor and the perhaps merciful restraint of a less than graphic picture conceals the "secret words" Bearheart promises his wordpiles might reveal. The atmosphere of ceremony is a context, a sense of a present influence evoked by what is excluded from the text.

In "Sacred Silence in Native American Literatures," David L. Moore describes the relationship between the utterance in text and the silence of context:

The resonances of context are by definition literally silent in a text [...] A contextual reading thus requires an attention to silences in the texts—where they

reside in connotations, in voices, in images, in symbols, in cultural and historical performances, in rhetorical strategies, etc. The process, by which text refers to context, is parallel to the inexact or fallible semiotics of language itself, by which sign refers to an infinitely disappearing signified. Because of the connotative and evocative aspects of language, context is the elusive but indispensable life of text, especially in cross-cultural readings.” (636)

Context, without which text might well be rendered meaningless, remains somewhat elusive, requiring attention to elements not evocative of speech or plainly visible. Nonetheless, Vizenor’s hopes for textual mediation to any discursive community leans on evoking context, a task for which bears are often training (or perhaps teasing) the reader to discern. The path of the ever receding signified in Vizenor’s stories are frequently marked by the bear. Silence frequently precedes the appearance of bears, and when a character becomes a bear, as Bagese from *Dead Voices* or Bearheart from his namesake book are wont to do, the elusive and paradoxical nature of context (silence through language, secret words through wordpiles, archshadows in reflection) emerges with fur, paws and claws. The bear seems to thrive in the “inexact or fallible semiotics of language” much in the same way an actual bear thrives in a human garbage heap. (Indeed the “hairship” might be interpreted as the inalienable right to join the bear in feasting on the trash.) The sense of the ursine, however, goes beyond the standard trickster ploy to unite refuse and refuser. The bear toys with the notion that the naming of things and phenomena is a prerequisite for full entrance into the language game. To make this point, the bear in Vizenor’s work often appears with a confusing array of unreferenced pronouns. To explain this, some further untangling of the aforementioned threesome should be undertaken. If Bearheart is the bear, who is the “she” and the “we” with whom he is involved? Who is the “she” that “smiles under the paw?” Who is the

“we” that gets its chest licked by this “she?” Bearheart seems to enjoy screwing pronouns, in the literal sense as depicted in the text, as well as in context of what Vizenor refers to as “pronounance,” how the assumptions of many English pronouns signify “the absence of the heard.” The pronoun, claims Vizenor, often signals a phenomenon similar to the ghost of Ishi’s wood duck stories, where the “archshadow,” or trace of a story poses as a solid narrative presence. The bear and the pronoun appear as another of Vizenor’s shadows, an absence masquerading as presence, hovering over the inadequacies of pronouns. From “The Ruins of Representation:”

The stories that are heard are the coherent memories of natural reason; the stories that are read are silent landscapes. Pronouns, then, are the pinch hitters in the silence and distance of translation, and at the same time pronouns are the difference that would be unheard in translations. The shadows are unsure scenes in dreams with bears, birds, and demons, and the difference, or temporization of pronouns, in tribal nicknames, memories, dance moves, and shamanic visions. We must need new pronouns that would misconstrue gender binaries, that would combine the want of a presence in the absence of the heard, a shadow pronoun to pronounce memories in silence, in the absence of cotribal names and nouns. The pronounance combines the sense of the words pronoun and pronounce with the actions and conditions of survivance in tribal memories and stories. The trickster pronounance has a shadow with no numbered person; in the absence of the heard the trickster is the shadow of the name, the sound, the noun, the person, the pronounance. (19)

Pronouncement, according to the dictates of Vizenor's final descriptive sentence here, is a form of trickster work in which the seemingly unreferenced pronoun correlates to a trope of tricksterism in which he is many-masked, many-faced, but with no face of his own behind the masks. The pronoun, similarly, is flipped to reveal the question of identity as a point of reference, the "shadow" or footprint of the receding signified. The trick in getting the printed word to talk in Vizenor's pronouncement, begins with silence, and a kind of waiting game wherein the shadows of words begin to move.

Waiting long enough, the reader may begin to hear things. (Even feel things; perhaps the trace of a moist word on the chest.) If, as Vizenor suggests, the "the stories that are heard are the coherent memories of natural reason; the stories that are read are silent landscapes," in a mimesis of a sacred Anishinaabe tradition, the bear furnishes the pronoun with fertile possibility, animating the chance that silent landscapes won't be condemned to barren wasteland. To hear this ursine voice is to read "under the paw," the precise meaning of which might be a highly personal, spiritual journey best left to the secret societies that silence keeps. The initiation into the mystery, however, is as simple as Bearheart's instruction: "Listen ha ha haaaa."

Then again, as jazz saxophonist Red Mitchell suggests in the title to one of his albums, simple ain't easy. The act of listening does not always invoke silence; the patience and alert senses involved in seeing something as elusive as a bear (or the shadow of a pronoun) involves quieting voices both within the observer and without. Purposeful entrance into spaces of designated silence often has the opposite effect from epiphany: fear, hesitancy, self-loathing, and doubt cloud judgment in quiet solitude in even the brightest sunlight. Add an element of mystery and darkness, and the outcome seems even more dubious. Faced with the prospect of silence, the tendency for many is to keep moving and making every available form of prattle. This

phenomenon, which might be referred to somewhat blithely as “white noise” infects the protagonist in Lopez’s story, “The Bear in the Road.” The main character here, Edward, recalls repeated visits over the years to his Assiniboine friend Virgil, who once guided his young apprentice to a place where a vision (in the sense of that word that connotes a rite of passage) might be gained. Edward has regrets, mostly at not having fulfilled the opportunity granted to him by Virgil, though the expectations he sets for the experience are clearly his own. He’s been taught to see the line, texture, and detail in a landscape, and the ways in which each of these elements are connected, but these relationships don’t form the basis of any sort of revelation, religious, metaphysical, philosophical or otherwise. He’s haunted by the obstinacy of this barrier:

Whenever I studied the country around Virgil’s like this, searching hard for something or hopeful of some opening, I’d feel the mind’s language, the naming and analyzing of detail, slipping away from me. I’d feel again the wordless kinship I’d known with Virgil in my boyhood. It was an elusive and elevated physical sense of being present in the world. It chagrined me now, later in life, that I did not act on it then, that I was content to remain an observer despite the repeated invitation this sensation offered. (72)

The mind’s rational language submerged in a sensation described as “wordless kinship” bears some resemblance to the phenomenon to which Vizenor’s Bearheart, “flying through sacred time,” or “reading under the paw”—alludes. Edward has certainly been reading—but not the kind of reading that would delight Bearheart. He’s become a lawyer, defending tribal land claims with the kind of zeal one might expect of an AIM sympathizer. Like the politically motivated woman Bearheart so lewdly and unmercifully teases, Edward is initially baffled by a nonrational

approach. His frustration in the attempt to let himself be seduced by this sensation haunts him over a period of years juxtaposed with pauses and silence on the matter. Enter bear, which initially greets Edward on the hi-line in north-central Montana one evening: “I saw the bear two hundred feet away, still standing the same place on the two-lane macadam, a shadow in the lesser darkness with his shoulders against the sky” (77).

The shadowed presence of this bear, its ephemeral nature, resonates with animal presences in Vizenor’s bestiary, bears included. But this bear differs from the character Bearheart inhabits. The bear represents both what Edward wants to know and what he can’t know. On the latter point, the bear as the boundary crosser, a creature mediating “between” the territories of things, is well described in the aforementioned essay by Nora Barry:

As the breakers of barriers, they are the beings at the doorways between realism and magical realism, between horror and transcendence, in Vizenor’s texts. They bridge the gaps between the secular and the spiritual and connect the spiritual to the physical. (95)

All the dialectics Barry identifies in which bears negotiate come into play with the grizzly Edward sees. The enlightenment that has eluded Edward is embodied in the form of a bear. But the bear can also reinforce the boundaries of the other, and in Edward’s case, affirms the idea that some mysteries might better be reckoned with as mysteries. This apparent conundrum is confirmed in the succinct interpretation of the grizzly’s actions from Virgil. After two years of silence on the matter, the bear appears again. Edward consults Virgil for an answer:

“He’s trying to get you attention I guess,” Virgil said.

“What do you think I should do?”

“Pay attention.”

“Jill is three months pregnant, Virgil, I can’t be taking any chances here.”

He looked at me the way you might someone who repeatedly draws the wrong conclusions. (78)

Absent the signature “ha ha haaa,” Edward is cajoled to listen, in this instance, in the same way Bearheart invokes a ritual silence in the introduction to his novel. But the trouble with listening for Edward is achieving this kind of silence. White noise, perhaps an occupational hazard caused by what Edward describes as “The Great Burden” continuously reconstructs the walls at which the bear has been swatting. Virgil invites Edward repeatedly to return to the scene of his rite of passage—fasting and camping alone on a remote section of the Fort Peck Reservation—but the burden Edward bears refuses to recede into the shadows:

The intrusion of the bear, the bear’s almost human insistence, was not lost on me; but I felt no burning need to rearrange my life to accommodate the bear. What I wanted was an explanation, a direction to head. (79)

Bears, of course, do not offer responses in the expository, nor do they give directions. Edward sets off again on the quest in which Virgil had guided him years before. He manages to enter the country as a constituent rather than an interloper, seeing a herd of pronghorn, a denning badger and a coyote without startling them or sending them on the run. He senses the edge of one territory, the beginning of another:

The landscape seemed primed as I was for something to happen [...] its edges almost glittering they were so sharp. But night fell again and I turned in with my stomach empty and now in knots.

Awaiting sleep, kept from it by a kind of irritation, a frustrated desire for resolution, I thought my way eventually to a crossroad I knew well. On one side

was this high plains country I lay in, resilient and uncapturable. In all the years I'd ridden through it, across its hills and dry watercourses, first as a boy and then as a man, it had seemed on the verge of an offering, a pronouncement. If I would but give into it, it would speak. On the other side were what I might call the impulses of reason, the temptation to figure out every problem—personal, social, financial—the seduction behind the belief that one could engineer a solution.

I might have lain there, I knew, peeling back the layers of silence around me, until I heard the rustling and voices of animals that has lived in this place long ago...but instead I chose the opposite way. I allowed myself to feel that I had been slighted. (81-2)

“Silence,” the “voices of animals,” even “pronouncement” (though not pronouncement) are engaged in Edward's struggle here, yet the precondition to listen yet eludes him. The seduction by the bear is thwarted by the “seduction” of the impulse to reason. Pronouns are thus returned to their standard referents, and Edward spends the better part of the next page and half explaining his wounds incurred as a lawyer representing what many in his profession can only see as a lost cause, an “us” and “them” polarity which posits Edward, perhaps with much justification, as the alienated victim, and binds him to the role of engineering solutions for every problem he can think of, globalization, racism, colonialism, then rails against the impotency and exhaustion this ideal has caused him:

None among my friends has turned his back on the ideas of justice, which seemed so much more plausible when we were young. We've not lost faith, but for some the years have been very discouraging. Many of us can't see beyond the borders of our own difficulties. We're like a tribe of naked people suddenly caught in a

freezing climate, men and women who have located a fire, and now spend their time in forays over a barren land scrounging for wood. Beyond writing my briefs and arguing my cases, beyond reinforcing my friends plans and lifting their hopes, I don't know what I am to do [...] What holds me is the faith of others. What has troubled me is the exhaustion that overtakes me, the way I no longer wish to be responsible. (84-5)

Edward's predicament, while not hopeless, is tinged with a familiar ennui and self-consciousness of one who initially hesitates at the margins of conceiving the world in a different way. Edward has much in common with Laundry from *Dead Voices*, though the former's struggle takes place over a much longer time frame (a decade as opposed to Laundry's nine months.) Edward is a man well intentioned and well educated, yet paralyzed by the very tenets of liberal progress that have sent him on his way to worldly success. There is a similar tension in the brand of pauses, laconic, indirect responses to urgent queries, and relationship to indigeneity each experiences. Edward's "voice" concerning the matters which Virgil has urged him to address is lost in a manner that parallels Laundry's "drowning" in the "text" of Lake Merritt. (Laundry: "I avoided the mirrors for fear my face would vanish" (15)). An essential component of the journey of each character is the evasion of what Vizenor has called "terminal creeds," ways of speaking and thinking that inevitably run up against the kind of dead-end both Laundry and Edward face.

Unlike Laundry, however, Edward's narrative voice persists throughout the text of his story. After another seemingly fruitless effort up the creek, he returns to Virgil, who greets him with a "half-smile" and silence. Edward, perhaps eager to get onto a more comfortable topic than his continuing failures, asks Virgil if the rare bear that seems to be following him would be safer on the reservation. Virgil's response is an impromptu lecture on Vizenorian pronouncement:

“The difference between us is that what you are able to forget will not leave us alone,” said Virgil. His answering was a deeper question, and I assumed he was including the bear in his “we.” His tone was as close as he ever came to exasperation. (86)

Like the cryptic Bagese or the equally obfuscating Bearheart, the referent in Virgil’s pronouns remain ambiguous. The subject here is equally ambiguous. What is it that Edward has forgotten? How is this different from what Virgil remembers? Of what difference is Virgil speaking? Has he been sneak reading Derrida? There are no clues to these obvious questions in the text; they must be answered in context.

His utterance as spoken, “addresses a deeper question,” and works to transcend time and space, especially in light of the course of the following snippet of conversation with Edward, in which Virgil contends no creature walking in the imagination and story of his tribe has withdrawn to other territory or gone extinct in reality.

“They’re around,” he said. Everything, even the buffalo is still around. You get to believing they’re hunted out or starved out, or maybe they’ve run off, but as long as people are telling stories about them, as long as people keep them in their minds, they’ll stay around. You have to keep telling the stories, though, calling up the memory of them. They come back in your dreams at night. They come along when you’re off somewhere, walking by yourself. They’re asking you why. That’s their question. Why.” (86)

Virgil’s insistence upon a collective memory of animal stories that point a way toward making meaning out of human experience seems to aimed at quieting the equally insistent voices in

Edward that keep him chasing (figuratively) his own tail, a game Edward himself insists he cannot quit playing, a proclivity with which Virgil loses patience, confronting Edward:

“You know what it is Virgil? I’m a man thinking all the time. I’m a thinker. I never really stop, so most of the time whatever you’re trying to teach me or show me, it can’t get in.”

“That’s right.”

“I can’t be like you Virgil.”

“No you can’t. But you can answer the bear’s question.” He pulled his horse around to face me. “The bear is coming to you because you say you want to help, and it’s you he’s asking why. He’s speaking for all of them out there, every animal. Why are you trying to kill me?”

“It’s not me.”

“You need to quit hearing your own name, Edward, whenever someone speaks.” (86-7)

With this last sentence, Virgil gets off a one-liner of which Bearheart would be proud. Virgil sees that Edward cannot “peel the layers of silence” to hear sacred animal voices until he takes on the prerequisite job of “building the whole silence back,” as Ammons would have it. Virgil recognizes the question mark punctuating the bear’s question as the same one revealed underneath the masks of a pronoun’s referent. The context of “you” “me” and “we” in Virgil’s lexicon points to a territory analogous to the “sacred time” to which Bearheart hopes to return the book.

Yet there are important cultural distinctions to be made regarding propriety and notions of the sacred. In these spaces, the worldless context evoked by silence also works to conceal the

procedures of tribal ceremony. The capacity for commodification in any published text, as discussed in chapter 2, remains in the age of globalization a nearly overwhelming force. David L. Moore discusses in his article in silence the struggle of Native writers and teachers to maintain a balance between sharing and teaching engaging and enlightening texts and violating standards that keep sacred rituals operating in the realm of the sacred. A variety of strategies are discussed, each has its merits and drawbacks; but the overall impression is an evident care with which these artists and teachers have treated the textual artifacts of their respective cultures. Even Vizenor's avant-garde approach, alluding to the eight worlds of midewinwin order alongside an interspecies threesome, reflects an ethical stance that closely guards against unwarranted appropriation.

The care with which Euramerican writers ought to be treating textual representations of any, let alone sacred aspects of Native American culture is a subject that has thus far been treated with a different variety of silence—the awkward quiet of guilt, acquiescence, or denial. Some Anglo poets and writers have seen fit to discuss such matters; Mary Austin, Jerome Rothenberg, Charles Olson, and Gary Snyder, for example, but their discussions are generally limited to aesthetic preferences and similarities to white forms and genres, where the author in question has granted himself permission in a discussion of the Indian text, or in translation. The motivations vary—from studies conducted in outdated comparativist frameworks to the impulse to breathe poetic life back into the dead translations of ethnographers, linguists and anthropologists—but any rationale is always absent or perilously thin. Zeese Pananikolas, in his artsy social criticism of the American history of Western America titled *Trickster in the Land of Dreams*, immunizes himself against any pending prosecution for transgressions he freely admits to: his artistic license

to “embellish,” “combine sources,” and “create [his] own approximation” (157) of Shoshone and Paiute myth. His rationale?

My ambition has been different. It has been to create a story that imparts its own pleasures—those pleasures in the telling and pleasures in the hearing that are, in my view, part and parcel of the deepest structures of these wonderful stories.

To be inside a culture is like being inside the smooth, hollow belly of Coyote’s water jug. It is to be enclosed, and one understands from the inside, tacitly, intuitively, unconsciously. Any other understanding is an artifact, something made up. So, after all, I’ve made up a story less about the Dust People than about myself.

(Ibid.)

Without discounting the inherent truths about narrative art Papanikolas has identified, his rationale comes across as incongruous with a book that purports to be about how Euramericans consistently projected their identities onto an unfamiliar Western landscape, thereby misconstruing, often violently, the means by which they might adapt without conflict to these spaces. This glaring hypocrisy seems to have struck Pananikolas as somehow inadequate, for in the following paragraph his rationale deteriorates into a mere excuse:

There are some who see these stories as sacred, the particular possession of the people out of whose lives they came and in whose languages they were first told. It is a position I respect but do not share. The one I hold sees the world’s stories as possessions of all humanity. And surely seldom before have we so badly needed the Shoshonean storytellers’ wisdom. (158)

Pananikolas offers a rationale of universality of the kind Leslie Silko dissects in “An Old Fashioned Indian Attack.” On Pananikolas’ last point, many people might be inclined to agree,

but the first is likely to provoke indignation. I don't wish to wade into the inconsistencies of his rationalization, or the good reasons some Shoshones and Paiutes might be inclined to sharply disagree, but to proceed from the following point: Shoshone and other indigenous stories may be sorely needed in the process of transforming the American landscape from a site of egregious occupation to a place recognizable as home. Acknowledging a need among civilized folk seems usually to be followed by devising a respectful approach toward a neighbor that might fulfill a simple courteous request, some way that might, as Kathryn Shanley described it in her essay, "The Indian America Loves to Love and Read,"

[...] lead to an insight Americans need in deciphering the difference between an Indian person they can learn from and one who is mirroring their own distorted images back to them. Such understanding may require nothing less than a shift in moral structure. (689)

Devising such an approach might require the sort of process in which Lopez's fictional Edward is engaged, not only peeling back layers of silence, but quieting the insistent voices that so insidiously solopsize every narrative. With this in mind, I want to return to the conclusion of "The Bear In the Road" with the idea that Lopez offers not an ideal for an approach to the Assiniboine culture through the character in his story, but through a few choice moments of silence, something approaching respectful contact.

Lopez's Virgil is depicted as an Indian whites, Edward included, might learn from. Virgil is a master teacher; eliciting questions, and offering sparsely worded answers that put the issue at hand on the shoulders of the inquirer. He can accomplish more with a baleful stare ("He looked at me the way you might someone who repeatedly draws the wrong conclusions"(78)) than with a sharp retort.

Beyond Virgil's economy of words lies Lopez's exclusion of any sort of detail, cultural, psychological, or otherwise, whose inclusion might risk the sort of commodifying, fetishizing tendency the artifact of the book or film has produced, especially in dealing with matters spiritual and ceremonial with respect to Indians. In doing so, Lopez avoids any need to "authenticate" his story with an extensive bibliography or ringing endorsement from a revered expert. Whereas the process of "fictionalizing" tribal lore in Papanikolas' instance serves to bring the narrative into the familiar territory of his own worldview (he feels, after making Shoshone stories about himself, he is "inside" Shoshone culture) Lopez emphasizes the essential inscrutability of certain aspects of Virgil's existence, which remain as mysterious as the whole of the landscape itself. Virgil withholds any archetypal significance of the animals he and Edward encounter, allowing them silently to reveal whatever portion of themselves they deem appropriate through repeated observation over time.

Virgil treats the process of attaining a vision in much the same way: The precise mechanics of the visionary process are left to the reader to imagine. Any archetypal tribal significance of specific animal forms, even any signposts of the onset of the visionary are not revealed, thus emphasizing a kind long-term patience, the waiting of a lifetime in some instances, (Edward's encounters with the bear take place over a the span of at least a decade) at which the "meaning" of any given phenomenon might be arrived. What is kept "othered" or secret may yet be revealed in time; in the mean time, there is much to be learned by a patient, quiet inquisitive watching. When Edward loses this quality, his patience or sense of loss in not becoming more like Virgil, Virgil himself provides a gentle reminder of the mission at hand: "I can't be like you Virgil."
"No you can't. But you can answer the bear's question" (86).

An irony here emerges in the tracking of a trickster bear, the eventual coalescence of a response to a question the presence of the bear implies: revealed to Edward is the means by which he might attain a vision, and though an Assiniboine guide may point the way, the “self” that reckons with the bear is Edward. Virgil reveals nothing culturally specific about sacred rites or ceremonies in his tradition. Edward remains an outsider, though his relationship to Virgil lends him a unique viewpoint. Edward, for his part, over a period of long years, finally comes to walk through the door the bear has pushed open in the very last lines of the story:

It would be another six years before I went back up on Porcupine Creek. By then, Jill and I had two children and Virgil was in his last days in a hospital in Great Falls. I stayed in my camp above the dry creek bed, until the voices that had so long debated the future within me grew silent, and I stepped through the door.”

(88)

What happens at Porcupine Creek stays at Porcupine Creek: the reader can only speculate or imagine what vision Edward beheld that finally quelled those ego-driven voices. Edward has built the whole silence back, and he intends to keep it. The story ends with his entrance into a new metaphorical territory, which resonates with the initiatory rites of the bear into the sacred spaces Vizenor invites his reader. In either instance, the reader is left in silence to answer the bear’s question to accept his invitation.

The uncanny ability of silence to affirm or cross a given boundary, to simultaneously evoke and maintain a sense of the sacred, is aptly described by in David Moore’s observation on the subject:

A chosen, evocative dynamic silence may itself take on sacred qualities in subtle ways that affirm both cultural boundaries and cultural survival. Silence may be

seen as half empty or half full. Where sacred mysteries operate partially in silence—by intimation and invocation rather than by definition or articulation—then textual silences in a context of sacred materials become themselves infused with a certain sacred power, released by this contextual aesthetics. Since that context includes an internal protocol of cultural property, any reference to or invocation of that sacred power by textual dynamics generates a compelling acknowledgment of that protocol. (637)

Silence, as Moore describes it, can open or close the garden gate, whichever “generates a compelling acknowledgment” of processes that evoke the sacred. In the instance of the “The Bear in the Road,” the bear goes to work on Edward, who begins always talking, and brings him to silence. Vizenor’s *Bearheart*, by contrast begins by invoking silence and migrates toward a dialogue within a sacred spiritual realm. Each affirms a cultural boundary while ensuring cultural survival.

The bear, to appropriate a phrase of Edward Abbey’s, belongs to everyone and to no one, and in this sense, like silence, seems to both affirm the hermetic seal around some borders while scratching gaping holes in others. In the fictional Edward’s case, the persistence of the bear affirms the complexities of Edward’s post-colonial identity: a white man working in a legal system that operates under the auspices of European-derived ideals on social justice, most often on behalf of people who were somehow left off the list of beneficiaries of such enlightenment thinking. Like many Indians, Edward reckons with the inadequacy of any referent to the weave of ethnic, political and cultural elements that comprise a person or a “people,” which is as complex as the eons of light, topography, forage, and food that produces an animal. The bear represents these insufficiencies in words and in perceptual acuity. Seeing the bear acknowledges,

in the vein of Vizenor's pronouncement, that not only is the word that "refers" inadequate, but at times it operates as an unnecessary intrusion. This is also the point of the spell Bearheart seemingly casts on the AIM activist upon whom he bestows the book. "Flying through sacred time," as Bearheart alludes, is occasionally more important than getting the meaning exactly right.

Human speech must rely on named and embodied voices. It seems possible, however, that these voices, along with the volume of space they aggregately signify, (ever-increasing as the signified recedes) might create a buzz all on its own that takes place in a much more vast network of signification than any linguistic model could suggest. It could be that this is what subjects invoking silence hope to hear. As philosopher Henry Bugbee recognized after years of silent contemplation, "Things say themselves, univocally, unisonously, formulating a tautology of infinite significance" (141). Sacred knowledge, of which the bear in these stories is cast as a fierce guardian, protects a nonrational aspect of human existence that the rites of ceremony and story also affirm: the need for mystery often exceeds the need for an answer.

The bear quietly balances the deep and wide process of seeing and hearing, naming and identifying, a long-playing act on a continent where these days, people from everywhere on the planet are delving into the complicated work of constructing social and ethnic identities. The shadow of the bear lurks in these works in progress. Listen: she's growling "Urrrr-american, ha ha ha haaa..."

Coda

Mother, mother earth, the names honored as tribal visions, could become our nonce words near the sour end of a chemical civilization. That naive and sentimental nickname, a salutation to a common creation of nature, is the mere mother of manifest manners and tractable consumerism. [...]

The salamander and the natural mediation of amphibians could be an unpretentious signature of the earth, the trace between land, water and our stories [...] The radioactive ruins and chemical wastes of our time are new worries and without the narratives of regeneration. To name the wounded earth our mother, the insinuation of a wanton nurturance, is the avoidance of our own burdens in a nuclear nation.

-Gerald Vizenor, "The Tragic Wisdom of Salamanders"

The need to reexamine our experience in the New World is, increasingly, a practical need. Contemporary American culture, founded on the original material wealth of the continent, on its timber, ores, and furs, has become a culture that devours the earth. Minerals, fresh water, darkness, tribal peoples, everything the land produces we now consume in prodigious amounts [...]

The question before us is how do we find a viable natural philosophy, one that places us again within the elements of our natural history? The answer, I believe, lies with wild animals.
-Barry Lopez, "The Passing Wisdom of Birds"

In the late summer of 1858, Colonel George Wright and his soldiers came upon an impressive herd of around nine hundred head of horses belonging to the Cayuse, pastured near what is now Liberty Lake, Washington. He ordered his men to cull two hundred of the best-looking specimens, then summarily shot the remaining 700 while the Cayuse looked on*

A few weeks later, on September 24th, Wright watched as Qualchan, a chief of the Yakama nation, rode into his camp with his wife, Whiet-alks, and his brother, Lo-kout on what was then known as Latah Creek, a tributary of the Spokane River now called Hangman Creek.

* I've borrowed from two sources in presenting this brief historical sketch. The full account of the Yakama tragedy at Hangman Creek can be found in *Warrior of the Mist: A biography of Qualchan, Chief Owhi's Son*, by T.G. Boyden. The other is Hein's book, *Atomic Farmgirl*, which offers differing local versions of the events surrounding Qualchan at Hangman Creek, many of which, as Hein notes, attempt to present Col. Wright in a more heroic light. The information on exposure to Iodine-131 is taken from Hein's book.

Already imprisoned there was Qualchan's father, Owhi, who some historians say was there to lure Qualchan into army custody. There is some disagreement about whether or not Qualchan knew his father was there, and other key historical details remain clouded, but there is little dispute about what happened to Qualchan. Wright ordered six of his men to capture Qualchan; according to Wright's account, (qtd. in Boyden 56) fifteen minutes later, the Yakama leader had been hanged. Some time later, as Chief Owhi was being transported, his hands bound, one of Wright's men shot him off his horse, killing him instantly. The grief-stricken Whiet-alks was spared her life, but twenty-seven other Indians were hanged along Latah Creek that autumn.

Though the creek's current name is a roadside reminder of the brutality of Colonel Wright, Qualchan, until very recently, was not memorialized with any spot on the map, and seemed doomed to recede into the history books. That was until a developer with either an extremely dim or sadistic view of history recently named a golf course after the slain Yakama leader.*

Forgetting about another major tragedy to befall the landscape around Hangman Creek by blithely teeing up may be somewhat more difficult, since it features a half-life of around sixteen million years. Eighty-five years after Colonel Wright's extraordinary renditions prompted a name change for Latah Creek, the Hanford nuclear facility, between 1944 and 1972, released an

* From the golf course's promotional material:

Spokane's newest golf course, offering a new dimension to golf in the Spokane area. A creek meandering throughout the course, five ponds, wooded and hilly areas, a few holes with open beauty, and well protected greens add a new treat to Spokane's enthusiasts. Qualchan is located in a very natural setting, a sanctuary for many species of birds and wildlife. The Creek at Qualchan is a member of the New York State Audubon Society. Four sets of tees and a par of 72 will give all skill levels a special golf experience ("The Creek at Qualchan")

estimated 740,000 curies of iodine-131 into the atmosphere. (By comparison, the Three-Mile Island mishap in 1979 released about 15 curies.) Moreover, Three-Mile was an accident. The releases at Hanford were not. In 1986, under the auspices of the Freedom of Information Act, Hanford released some 19,000 pages of documents that proved officials who were fully aware of the health risks to everyone and everything downwind approved emissions during the three decades of Hanford's operation. A protracted legal battle has since arisen, pitting red-blooded, deeply conservative wheat farmers, whose family members continue to suffer from cancer and other diseases consistent with exposure to radiation, against the Department of Energy. The first decision in federal court came in favor of the plaintiffs, and was overturned on appeal. In the meantime, the carefully manicured fairways and greens named for Qualchan lie in Hanford's downwind plume.

Conjoining these two Columbia River watershed tragedies of the past, identifying the historical threads that might connect them is a topic in for a much more complicated thesis in academic discourse. In a more personal way, Terri Hein's 2000 *Atomic Farm Girl: Growing Up Right in the Wrong Place* already has delved into the matter. Hein, whose family farm prospered on Hangman Creek, recalls the details of Qualchan's fate throughout her narrative. Hein's book reads like Garrison Keillor nostalgia for the pastoral idyll of rural American life, juxtaposed with an apocalyptic nuclear nightmare of premature deaths for childhood friends, a father living through cancers, thyroid problems, and a family's grief-stricken trips to the hospital in Spokane. She aligns her own role in bearing the news of a violent history with that of the Yakama Chief's wife in an assessment of the past that seems sober and fair to her own people as well as Qualchan's descendants:

I see a kind of connection between our neighborhood illnesses and Qualchan's murder. Both incidents are about this piece of land, how people should be able to live on it, and about the intrusions of outsiders. Qualchan killed outsiders, and Mom and Dad joined a lawsuit.

And if you'll go with that connection, maybe you'll see that I could be likened to Qualchan's wife, Whiet-alks. As Colonel Wright's men dragged her husband to the hanging tree, she drove her lance into the ground and galloped off on her Apoloosa to tell her story of how it was. Well, it might be stretching it a bit, but this is my book, and here I am, writing this account of how our story has been. To tell you the truth, I have always wanted to compare myself to an Indian princess, especially the beautiful Whiet-alks. (243-44)

In spite of Hein's incautious comparison of histories, she manages a giddy kind of innocence in confessing her desire to be perceived as fulfilling the same tragic cultural niche, as an "an Indian princess." After combing through hundreds of pages on the ethics and aesthetics of working with Native material, and finding plenty of terrain there in which it would be easy to become permanently mired, I found these lines, which serve as the conclusion to her book, to be disarming, emphasizing a personal and creative basis for comparison, rather than cultural, political, literary or artistic. Hein's simple gesture offers possibilities on at least two fronts. First, the saga of her community illustrates what Lopez alludes to with urgency as a quite "practical" task, the "need to reexamine our experience in the New World." Any nation that purposefully poisons its own breadbasket, as is occurring at Hanford, should qualify as one in desperate moral, political and cultural straights. Finding a way out of a predicament such as ours will require not only untangling the threads of the past, as only a clear-eyed analysis of history can

provide, but a commitment of the heart, as a viable local, regional or even national literature can catalyze.

Related to this point, Hein, I think, provides a tentative answer to Vizenor's call for narratives that might address the toxic and radioactive legacy, the largely unacknowledged "burden of a nuclear nation," without capitulating to nostalgic tropes of "mother earth," or becoming Indian with all the problematic baggage that would imply. Hein poignantly demonstrates a respectful approach to others and the past: it may not be possible, on most occasions to speak well enough *for* anyone else, but we have reached a crossroads where the good of the community now depends on speaking *with* these others, both in dialogue and as a means of creating a highly elastic, multi-faceted, and resilient resistance to the powers that produce things like Hanford*.

I believe the linguistic trickster phenomenon Vizenor identifies and advocates for will continue to play a vital role in catalyzing this kind of resistance through the cultivation of a language that directs us to the necessary relationships with others. But if, in the words of poet Richard Hugo, "humanity might outlast civilization," it does not strike me as an extreme view to assert that humans will have to come to terms with the silent endurance of the nonhuman world; what we currently view as the unlikely persistence of processes beyond our control. Hein conjoins her family's battles against the DOE with the Yakama's against the 19th century army on the basis that both are about the ethical and moral obligations to land and people, about the theory and *practice* of ethical systems. The cultural, historical precedents by which we Euramericans might honor such obligations are, for the most part, absent, having in our own tradition been forgotten, ignored or never quite articulated in the first place. With this in mind, I

* Hein's parents are listed as plaintiffs in a class-action lawsuit against the DOE; the Yakama Nation is also suing the federal agency.

chose to scrutinize the work of Vizenor and Lopez, because each, in ways that diverge considerably from one another, urges a conception of the Other in the context of landscape.

Metaphorically, this often evinces a vision of the Other in animal form. Lopez explains,

Again I think of the animals, because of the myriad ways in which they have helped us since we first regarded each other differently. They offered us early models of rectitude and determination in adversity, which we put into our stories. The grace of a moving animal, in some ineluctable way, kindles in us a sense of imitation. They continue to produce for us a sense of the Other: to encounter a truly wild animal on its own ground is to know the defeat of thought, to feel reason overpowered. The animals have fed us; and the cultures of the great hunters particularly—the bears, the dogs, and the cats—have provided the central metaphors by which we have taken satisfaction in our ways and explained ourselves to strangers. (Crossing 208)

Animals are a living, breathing concentration of the natural history of metaphor, Lopez suggests, as well as a constant reminder of the error of margin in human seeing, knowing and speaking.

This pretense is just as clear in Vizenor's writing as it is in Lopez's.

Though Vizenor rarely writes about animals in contemporary ecological terms ("The Tragic Wisdom of Salamanders" is a rare exception) his writing is immersed in animal imagery, allegory, metaphor, ceremony, ritual and folklore. How does a man who grew up traumatized, urbanized, poor and orphaned in Minneapolis, who recollects in his autobiography at age seven, chewing fresh tar off the street for amusement, come to have animals occupy such a central part of his own identity that he makes the following claim of himself, published from an interview with Kim Blaeser in *Writing in the Oral Tradition*:

I am still discovering who I am, the myth in me. [...] I am part crow, part dragonfly, part squirrel, part bear. I kick the sides of boxes out. I will not be pinned down. I am flying home in words and myths. (5)

Vizenor's proclamation, to return to a concept William Bevis laid out in "Homing In," seems exemplary of a fundamental difference between the dominant culture and the Indian. Nature seems to inhabit the Native American mind, whereas too often in the Euramerican experience, the mind attempts, however vainly, to inhabit nature. That little of this Indian cultural imperative was taught to Vizenor in his childhood speaks volumes for the power of metaphor and allegory in the Anishinaabe tradition. As the bleak history of Euramericans with respect to Indian rites, ceremonies and traditions shows, there is some aspect of this power we badly wish to possess, but with few exceptions, have yet to attain. How will Euramericans continue the work certain pioneers have already started, conjuring more words, traditions, stories, and metaphors for and of themselves that bring them "home," into the fold of myriad human cultures and ecological communities of the continent? Lopez's work provides a blueprint, to be sure. But another part of the answer resides with the bears.

Nora Barry's essay "Postmodern Bears in the Texts of Gerald Vizenor" addresses this issue. The bears in Vizenor's prose "are beings at the doorways between realism and magical realism, between horror and transcendence" (95) [...]. Bear metaphors are opening doors, observes Barry, and the generosity of Vizenor's writing can be gleaned in his intention to extend the possibilities in this sacred Anishinaabe tradition to anyone who comes looking in the pages of his books. Barry again:

That non-Chippewas or non-Indians probably do not know about the Grand Medicine Society does not matter because of the power implicit in the texts.

However, the more we know as readers the better we are able to interpret Vizenor's postmodern "poses," for in subtle ways we are being initiated into the power of the midewinwin. The postmodern bears, descendants of the bear figures of Chippewa religion and more widespread bear myths, appear in Vizenor's texts to break cultural barriers and guide all readers through this initiation. When the written absorbs the oral through evocation of metaphors, Gerald Vizenor and other Native American authors infuse the power of native traditions into a new enriched order of American literature. (110)

This "infusion" also marks a powerful propensity toward sharing, and a dedication to the concept of a general good in spite of history, a generosity that should cause many believers in the Judeo-Christian capacity for charity and forgiveness to blush. Vizenor and other Native writers do not, nor should they, offer open access in text to the sacred, and barring that, *private* traditions of their communities. But the virtues such tradition nurtures, Vizenor's coy "postmodern poses" seem to suggest, are universal, available to anyone. All that's required are the honestly searched out or imagined initiatory steps.

More than a few Anglo scribes seem to have figured out such steps, and have occupied themselves dancing this new but somehow familiar dance. The "new enriched order" in American literature has been further enriched already by some American writers who have seen for themselves the animal's vitality in making metaphor come to life, and the sense beyond reason with which such encounters direct the participants home. William Stafford in his poem "Outside" seems to demonstrate a consciousness inhabited by coyotes, a state of mind, he suggests, that inhabits all of us, whether we acknowledge their presence or not:

The least little sound sets the coyotes walking,

walking the edge of our comfortable earth.

We look inward, but all of them
are looking toward us as they walk the earth.

We need to let animals loose in our houses,
the wolf to escape with a pan in his teeth,
and streams of animals toward the horizon
racing with something silent in each mouth.

For all we have taken into our keeping
and polished with our hands belongs to a truth
greater than ours, in the animals' keeping.

Coyotes are circling around our truth. (73)

The sense of “truth” conveyed through animal silences that Stafford describes is a metaphor, one with an analog in the Coyote myths of indigenous cultures from the Pacific Northwest. Stafford’s poem honors and alludes to this tradition, but the metaphor is original, personal, and “native” in the sense that it belongs in the territory.

In the territory of the Pacific Northwest, and in keeping with the central idea of this thesis, the historical and ongoing threat of a radioactive disaster around Hanford furnishes another example of trickster’s uncanny ability to get at the truth behind a good metaphor. It also provides an opportunity for me to fulfill another imperative of storytelling that I think trickster catalyzes: that in the ecology of narrative, we be producers and well as consumers of stories. In maintaining the reciprocal obligations inherent in communal discourse, it’s never quite enough to simply reproduce what’s already been said. On behalf of the speaker, some personal account of an experience they’ve had in the process of becoming, or how they arrived at a given place seems to

me to be an invaluable contribution to maintaining communal ties. I'll close by offering a memory from my home watershed that might meet this imperative.

It was the river that made Hanford possible. The combination of an abundance of cool water and a dearth of people made Hanford an ideal spot to process weapons-grade uranium into plutonium. The federal government removed the few farmers, ranchers and citizens that made up the original town of Hanford. The land was cleared, and declared a sacrifice zone. A preordained ruin.

Hanford, which produced the plutonium for the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, remains one of the larger day-to-day gambles of the nuclear age. Some of the almost 200 storage tanks there are in constant danger of overheating, cracking, leaking or catastrophically bursting, any one of which would spew, leach, or spill radioactive sludge into the remaining 200 miles of Columbia River, ruining the day for most downstream life forms aquatic and terrestrial. Ironically, it's within the former Hanford property, now a National Monument, that the last free-flowing section of the Lower Columbia can be placidly explored. Between the gauntlet of dams and the threat of radioactive contamination, in this unlikely section of water, wild fall chinook, a strain known as upriver brights, still engage in mating rituals completed annually throughout the Holocene. They seem to me to be among the most endangered creatures in the world.

The most productive ground for spawning beds is a half-mile stretch of shallow, gravelly water below a spot known as Coyote Rapids. From here two mothballed reactors from the Manhattan Project, the K-reactor and the N-reactor are close at hand. Coyote rapids is so named for the curious habit of the indefatigable *canis latrans* hereabouts to watch the river, and whoever might be floating by at the time. It's a good spot for them. There are sandhill cranes in season,

geese, ducks, herons to hunt, and on the sagebrush steppe above the river, herds of mule deer and elk.

I went there after a wet spring, because the shape of the river over sixty or so miles here is shaped like a question mark, and because I heard the coyotes on their namesake stretch of water are not shy about keeping close watch on passers-by. (If only because travelers floating the river are not allowed to make landfall on the right, where the husks of the old reactors are.) I didn't see any living thing other than birds. But from the signs, I knew they were all around.

The persistence of these creatures at Hanford, their indifference to the human declaration of a sacrifice zone, and in some way their reinhabitation of these spaces after human endeavors were abandoned, were signs of portent for which I wanted to find evidence. If humanity survives Hanford's legacy, the story may be told that while civilization was frantically trying to destroy itself, nature flourished. The river here still flooded every spring, the animals returned, or never left. Some people took notice, and began to reinhabit this place, to wander home.

The coyotes surrounding this place are waiting, watching to see what happens. The odds are long.

But the animals know the trick of patience.

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