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Violence and Frontier in Twentieth Century Native American Literature

by

Paul Charles Whitehouse

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Declaration

This thesis does not contain material that I have used before. The thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

The central argument of my work is that authors Leslie Marmon Silko, Louis Owens, and Gerald Vizenor, working in the latter half of the twentieth century, use violence as a literary device (literary violence) for exposing and critiquing modes of systemic violence inherent in the formative originary myths of dominant US culture, specifically the mythic frontier and West. I argue that they engage with questions arising out of the systemic and normative violence required to sustain exceptionalist and supremacist Euramerican myth, which in turn sanitise the unspeakable violence of settler colonialism. This sanitising effect produces a form of transcendent violence, so called because the violence it describes is deemed to be justified in accordance with dominant ideology. In addressing this, Silko rewrites the mythic legacies of frontier and the West, rearticulating the unspeakable violence of conquest and domination, resulting in an anti-Western, pre-apocalyptic vision that turns away from European modernity and late twentieth century capitalism, looking instead to an Indigenous worldview. Owens similarly proposes an alternative reading of frontier where binaries of racial and cultural difference become malleable and diffuse, producing unexpected breaks with established ideology and narratives of dominance. The unseen systemic violence of the provincial town, in many ways the American societal idyll in microcosm, emerges during key confrontations between Native and non-Native characters in the liminal spaces and boundaries of the provincial town. Bringing these different threads together, Vizenor critiques systemic and institutionalised violence in his fiction and non-fiction work. His breakthrough novel *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* shares key characteristics with the work of Silko and Owens in this regard. Transgressing borders of taste, binaries of simulated Indianness, and notions of Euramerican cultural dominance, Vizenor's mocking laugh destabilises the notion of completed conquest and closed frontiers as the final word on Euramerican supremacy.

Introduction

Civilizations which fail to recognize the violence at their own core—fail to acknowledge that there is that at the heart of human culture which is profoundly antithetical to it—are likely to suffer hubris, overreach themselves in the pursuit of their enemies, and bring themselves to nothing.¹

Terry Eagleton

We should never forget that the very existence of indigenous literatures, not to mention the decolonization imperative of indigenous peoplehood, is a rebellion against the assimilationist directive of Eurowestern imperialism. Empire is driven as much by expedience and simplification as by hunger for power or resources. Simplification is essential to the survival of imperialism, as complications breed uncertainty in the infallibility of authoritative truth claims. Empire contains within it the insistence on the erasure of the indigenous population, through overt destruction or co-optation; indeed, the very *memory* of an unbroken Native presence is often furiously repressed by the colonizers.²

Daniel Heath Justice

Incorporating the nature of the American Myth between the covers of any novel is admittedly a gigantic task, and is made almost impossible by the fact that so many versions of the same myth are used for so many warring purposes. Which America will you have?³

James Baldwin

To offer an examination of violence and frontier in the context of twentieth century Native American literature, is to engage with systems and legacies of violence that oscillate between what is real, imagined, and mythogenic. Defining those positions, which stray between what Slavoj Žižek calls ‘subjective violence,’ – real, visible, tangible violence – and other more symbolic modalities, recognises that violence, as it is expressed in works of literature, must be regarded as semiotically restless. It therefore requires a multifaceted approach if it is to be decoded. As an imaginative

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007), p. xii.

² Daniel Heath Justice, “‘Go Away, Water!’ Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative’, in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, ed. by Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), pp. 147-168 (p. 155).

³ James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction 1948-1985* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1985), p. 14.

medium, literature can produce unique insights into how the rendering of violence into myth can have a sanitising effect, inviting new readings that seek to extrapolate what has been obscured or excised from the dominant narrative account, be that literary or historical. To examine violence in this way is also to cast the critic's net in an extremely wide arc, recognising that of the many remarkable works of fiction to which terms like Native American, American Indian, Indigenous, mixedblood, Mestizo, crossblood, or Métis might be applied, to say nothing of the many tribally specific designations, the subject of violence is certainly not in short supply. That is not to suggest that Native authors practice a unique brand of what might erroneously be called 'Native violence'. Rather, this study offers a four part examination of the function of violence as a literary device, what I will refer to as 'literary violence', in several important novels that tell stories located in Native American and mixedblood experiences.

Modes of literary violence can be characterised in several different ways. My purpose in using this term is to draw attention to the discursive role of violence in works of literature that exceed its use as mere spectacle or that of standard narrative plot device. Literary violence draws attention to itself, provoking a deeper analytical reading that probes beyond the surface level of the text, descending into the subterranean realm of the symbolic where ideological constructs can be teased out into the open. More importantly, literary violence can be understood as a mode of reactive, even creative violence produced in response to underlying and unresolved systemic issues that threaten to erupt into and disturb the established normative world of the story. Recalling an instance when his students complained to the dean of the university that the course reading - Vizenor's *Bearheart* - was degrading towards Indigenous peoples, Louis Owens concludes that while 'the humor of *Bearheart* was undeniably

sick, including a gratuitous amount of truly shocking sexual violence’, it is primarily a ‘scathing expose of white hypocrisy, brutality, genocidal, ecological murder and greed.’⁴ The violence of *Bearheart* forces a critical re-evaluation not only of the text, but how we read it. The literary violence of the text seems to escape the pages of the novel and direct violence at the reader, at their established sensibilities, even – and here is one of the many remarkable achievements of the novel – courting controversy on both sides of the Native/non-Native reading public. Literary violence then does not sit obediently on the page, but forces, sometimes shocks, the reader into searching for its root, its source, even if part of that inquiry is an uncomfortable critique of the reader’s own preconceptions. To break with those preconceptions, to step briefly outside the constraining parameters of one’s own ideological equilibrium can be a painful experience, which might help explain the discomfort of Owens’s English literature students encountering *Bearheart* for the first time, but does not excuse it. Literary violence marks the spot where the critical excavation of the ideological substrate of the text can offer surprising and sometimes neglected results, and it is for this reason that instances of violence in works of literature should not be regarded as the end of discourse but rather the extension of it into uncertain subterranean territory.

Literary violence is not always explicit violence. Consider the everyday casual violence experienced by Archilde in D’Arcy McNickle’s 1936 novel *The Surrounded*. The sheriff’s racist taunts, the systematic humiliation of Archilde and the wider Salish community who must endure their mistreatment and exploitation at the hands of the local Indian Agent, reaches a brutal dénouement when Archilde’s mother kills the sheriff with a single axe blow. This seemingly inexplicable act is so abrupt, so final,

⁴ Louis Owens, “‘Ecstatic Strategies’”: Gerald Vizenor’s Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart’ in *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literature*, ed. by Gerald Vizenor (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), pp. 141-142.

that it is tempting to accept it as the mindless act of a desperate person, unless, of course, one recognises the pattern of violence out of which it has erupted, supposedly unbidden. Earlier in the novel, having been arrested for a breach of the peace, Archilde notes how ‘he had not been in jail, exactly. If he had insisted, or if anyone had insisted in his behalf, he might have gone home’, suggesting that such is his sense of constraint and captivity that he struggles to differentiate between the conditions that beset him in and outside of the country jail.⁵ Illuminating the relationship between visible violence and the unseen systemic violence of the text is crucial here. Once teased to the surface in this way, the reader can begin to appreciate that these apparently inexplicable, standalone events are symptomatic of a deep seated systemic violence experienced by so many in the Salish community on a more or less daily basis. Indeed the novel is punctuated with similar events, presented as commonplace everyday occurrences of normative violence that McNickle tricks to the surface to prevent the reader from dismissing them as a simple narrative technique.

The primary authors discussed in this thesis – Leslie Marmon Silko, Louis Owens, and Gerald Vizenor – who helped shape what Kenneth Lincoln christened the Native American Renaissance in the latter half of the twentieth century. They use literary violence to interrogate the sanitising myths of Euramerican dominance, and the systemic forms of violence they rationalise or obscure. Of signal importance here is the formative role of frontier and frontier thinking, which, as I will demonstrate, reveals an ideologically contrived notion of Euramerican supremacy that has come to define the dominant culture’s encounter with the racialised Other. Significantly, these writers produced work at a time when attitudes towards formative constructs like frontier and the West, which have occupied a sacred position in the popular

⁵ D’Arcy McNickle, *The Surrounded* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), p. 149.

imagination as the imagic space where dominant US culture rehearses and reaffirms its originary myths, were changing in favour of more nuanced revisionist and poststructuralist approaches along with growing concerns about US imperialism. Where these discussions intersected with debates about the study of Native and non-Native cultures, and the status of Indigenous and mixedblood writing, the concept of frontier emerged as a highly contentious staging ground for exploring these issues.⁶ Although a significant debate in the 1990s, the critical utility of frontier has since fallen out of favour, relegated as an unsubtle term severely tarnished by the legacy of settler colonialism in the US. However, as I will explain in chapter one, frontier ideology persists in various forms in US popular and political culture. Considering the enduring influence of frontier as an organising principle, under which US dominant culture continues to define and redefine its treatment of the racialised Other, both in the US and overseas, I argue that a re-examination of this contentious concept is both timely and necessary. On the one hand, the ideological substrate of frontier thinking that the writers discussed here explore has nevertheless proven stubbornly resilient to criticism and, on the other hand, some Native scholars reject ongoing discussions of frontier as helping to perpetuate the arrogance of colonialism. However, while critics have succeeded in diminishing the status of frontier as a credible historical paradigm,

⁶ Although a useful framing device for discussing breakthrough authors like Momaday, Silko, Vizenor *et al*, who achieved notable literary prominence in the so-called Native American Renaissance, it should be noted that this denotation is not without its critics. Kenneth Lincoln suggested the term in 1983 as a way of referring to a particular moment in Native American literature production, inaugurated by the publishing of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969, coinciding with the emergence of the Red Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some scholars working as part of the American Indian Nationalist movement raise concerns that such terminology both obscures earlier literary works produced by Native authors, and risks deemphasising pre-existing oral literary traditions, marking only the so-called discovery of New Native literatures in the mid-twentieth century. However, as Velie and Lee point out, the term 'renaissance' is well chosen, since like previous renaissances in Europe and the United States, 'the Native American Renaissance has involved changes in all aspects of life, political and material as well as cultural' and as such can be seen as a significant moment in an on-going developmental and artistic process. See Alan R. Velie and A. Robert Lee, *The Native American Renaissance: Literary Imagination and Achievement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), pp. 3-4.

it lingers still in US policymaking and popular culture in the form of a supremacist exceptionalism contingent on the containment and/or erasure of the racialised Other. In this sense, Silko, Owens, Vizenor and others look to the historical injustices committed under the ideological banner of frontier, but also anticipate in their fiction the on-going debate about the humanitarian and environmental cost of US imperialism that continues to draw on the wellspring of frontier ideology.

It is important then to recognise that frontier ideology and its enduring popular allure is not so easily dismissed. As I write, billionaire property magnate Donald Trump is making his run for the Republican nomination for the US presidency, and his highly contentious yet successful campaign has been built on a series of broadly xenophobic, even racist proclamations. Some of these include a commitment, if elected, to deter illegal border crossings by building a wall separating Mexico and the US; to impose a moratorium on Muslims entering the country; a strengthening of US military influence overseas as part of the US commitment to the War on Terror; and a bullish denunciation of organisations like Black Lives Matter, who are seeking to address recurring instances of police brutality, institutionalised racism and racial profiling. While presidential candidates often yoke themselves to nationalist mythology, invoking such popular archetypes as the self-made-man and lone frontier hero, who stand in strident opposition to bourgeois European sensibilities, Trump's supremacist position is striking in both its lack of subtlety and the extent to which he is presenting himself in the mould of Andrew Jackson. A stalwart frontier President who sought to distance himself from East coast political elitism, Jackson's supporters cast him in the role of a man of action, a war veteran, possessed of sufficient mettle to do what was needed, what was indeed *necessary* and therefore justifiable. 'It's not that Jackson had a "dark side," as his apologists rationalize and which all humans have',

writes Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, ‘but rather that Jackson *was* the Dark Knight in the formation of the United States as a colonialist, imperialist democracy, a dynamic formation that continues to constitute the core of US patriotism.’⁷ She concludes that ‘all the presidents after Jackson march in his footsteps’ and that ‘consciously or not, they refer back to him on what is acceptable, how to reconcile democracy and genocide and characterize it as freedom for the people.’⁸ Continuing this line of argument in a February 2016 article for *The New York Times*, Steve Inskeep uses a similar reference to the ideological Jacksonian undertow when he too notes how ‘consciously or not, Mr. Trump’s campaign echoes the style of Andrew Jackson and the states where Mr. Trump is strongest are the ones that most consistently favored Jackson during his three runs for the White House.’⁹

Regardless of whether it consciously or unconsciously invokes Jacksonian frontier ideology, Trump’s campaign rhetoric revives an exceptionalist and isolationist position that recalls the overtly racialised binary of frontier thinking, casting the US as a civilised nation besieged by a savage and inferior racialised Other. What Trump presents as the failure of 1990s multiculturalism is subsequently reconfigured as an anxiety about the waning status of white privilege in the US, twinned with a nostalgia that looks to an abstract, idealised past, aptly personified by his campaign slogan ‘Make America Great Again’, previously employed by Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s. Recalling the embattled, racialised binaries of frontier is a powerful political

⁷ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), p. 108.

⁸ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History*, p. 18.

⁹ Steve Inskeep, ‘Donald Trump’s Secret? Channeling Andrew Jackson’, *The New York Times*, 17th February 2016 http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/17/opinion/campaign-stops/donald-trumps-secret-channelling-andrew-jackson.html?_r=0 [accessed 4th April 2016]. This view is also shared by historian Matthew Mason. See ‘The Disturbing Parrallels Between Donald Trump and Andrew Jackson’, *News At Home*, 20th March 2016 <<http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/162259>> [accessed 24th March 2016].

snake oil, enshrined in a frontier ideology predicated on the externalisation and vilification of the racialised Other as the archetypal antagonist to American Progress. John Gast's iconic 1872 painting of the same name depicts Indigenous subjects retreating to the left, shrouded in darkness and pursued by pioneers, covered wagons and steam locomotives, signifiers for modernism and purpose all. American Manifest Destiny is memorably personified as a blonde-haired angel, represented in the classical style of Ancient Greece, and bathed in the light of the righteous, leading the nation towards inevitable greatness. When viewed in this way, frontier is not merely a way of thinking about or understanding history as a series of frontiers to be overcome, as outlined in the highly influential work of Frederick Jackson Turner, shaped by notions of progress, colonial endeavour and European modernism. Rather it has been and remains today a primary means employed by dominant US culture of conceptualising its confrontation with the racialised Other and offering a perversely transcendent rationale for the use of violence in that confrontation.

Tackling the supremacist ideological constructs underpinning US hegemony became something of a rallying cry for Native American and mixedblood authors working in the second half of the twentieth century. Kimberley Blaeser detects a powerful strain of critical reengagement with the ideological machinery of dominance in the work of Gerald Vizenor, Carter Revard, and Gordon Henry, who:

Flesh out the frontier in all its immense complexity. They shift and reshift their story's perspectives, turn the tables of historical events, unmask stereotypes and racial poses, challenge the status of history's heroes and emerge somewhere in a new frontier of Indian literature, somewhere between fact and fiction, somewhere between the probable and the possible, in some border area of narrative which seems more true than previous accounts of history.¹⁰

¹⁰ Kimberley Blaeser, 'The New "Frontier" of Native American Literature: Dis-Arming History With Tribal Humor', in *Native American Perspectives on Literature and History*, ed. by Alan R. Velie (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), pp. 37-50 (p. 39).

Literary fiction is then also a means of redressing notable absences in the simplifying gaze of the dominant historical narrative, specifically Indigenous experiences and narratives that run counter to the established narrative. That literature situates itself between fact and fiction, between what is probable and possible, makes it uniquely suitable for explorations of the conceptual apparatus of ideology. Blaeser notes how such literary responses ‘do not proceed from the illusion of any pristine historical territory, untouched by accounts of the opposition’, but instead ‘draw their humor and power from an awareness of the reality of the place where the diverse accounts of history come into contact with one another’.¹¹ Although Blaeser’s analysis focuses on the tricksterish humour of Vizenor, Revard, and Henry, I argue that this also applies to Silko and Owens. Like Vizenor, they both problematise the concept of frontier and the sanitising reconfiguration of violence it permits when recalled as a popular mythic construct, countering with a reformulation that is more varied and contested, and where its mythic and ideological conceits can be pried away from their secure footing in the popular imagination.

An examination of violence in twentieth century Native American literature must therefore also be an examination of the legacy of settler colonialism ‘premised on displacing indigenes’ in the United States.¹² Commenting on the violence endemic to settler colonialism Dunbar-Ortiz names genocide as the key motivating factor:

Settler colonialism, as an institution or system, requires violence or the threat of violence to attain its goals. People do not hand over their land, resources, children, and futures without a fight, and that fight is met with violence. In employing the force necessary to accomplish its expansionist goals, a colonizing regime institutionalizes violence. The notion that settler-indigenous conflict is an inevitable product of cultural differences and misunderstandings, or that violence was committed equally by the colonized and the colonizer, blurs the nature of the historical process. Euro-

¹¹ Blaeser, ‘The New “Frontier”’, p. 39.

¹² Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (London: Cassell, 1999), p. 1.

American colonialism, an aspect of the capitalist economic globalization, had from its beginnings a genocidal tendency.¹³

It is for this reason that the following readings traverse a number of issues relating to the visible and invisible forms of violence produced of frontier thinking, and importantly, how the violence of dominance has been reinscribed to propose a more complementary US originary mythology. I will discuss how these writers expose and critique modes of systemic and institutional violence that otherwise pass unacknowledged as invisible or normative. Where Spivak uses the term ‘epistemic violence’ when referring to the hard-wired ideologically motivated violence of colonialism, I prefer the term ‘transcendent violence’, utilising Žižek’s theory of systemic violence as a means of describing the unseen machinery of dominance while acknowledging the extent to which systemic violence can be encoded into popular, sanitised myth. Borrowing heavily from Marx’s theory of ideology, Žižek defines systemic violence as a deeply entrenched form of ideologically stimulated violence that, in turn, produces the normative everyday violence that operates *behind-the-scenes* to ensure the smooth running of society. As a corollary of this, the term ‘transcendent violence’ makes explicit the extent to which ideological violence reinscribes the violence of dominance as somehow necessary, justifiable, legitimate, when enacted in service of an ideological imperative. As I will explain in chapter one, dominant cultures create convenient public fictions (myths) that delegitimise the complaints of those who seek to redress historic and on-going injustices produced of

¹³ Dunbar Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History*, p. 8. Gros Ventre scholar Sidner Larson, reflecting on the long-term effect of settler colonialism in the US writes: The persecution of Indians has decreased as the process of colonization has become more complete, but only after some 98 percent of the original inhabitants of this country were slaughtered. And, although persecution has slowed, it has not, by any stretch of the imagination, stopped altogether. In fact, Indian people still live under a policy of continuing genocide enforced by the American government and tolerated by the American people. See Sidner Larson, *Captured in the Middle: Tradition and Experience in Contemporary Native American Writers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), p. 17.

systemic and institutionalised violence, portraying their complaints as hysterical, incoherent, even inexplicable. According to Žižek's model, violence is not one-directional (imposed from the top down), but reverberates throughout society at multiple ideological levels, some of it self-imposed, which can further obscure the source of this violence. We might, for instance, consider the inverse nature of Gramscian hegemony, and how ideologically motivated violence can be both imposed from above and self-inflicted in accordance with dominant ideology. What falls outside of this sanitising ideological framework then appears as a *non sequitur*, hence the propensity of dominant culture to depict such ruptures as inexplicable or incomprehensible acts of violence. Simply put, it is the difference between seeing an instance of civil disobedience as either a riot or a protest, with interpretation contingent on one's subject position in relation to the dominant narrative. Where the consequences of systemic and normative violence are denied by the dominant culture, as typified by a general discomfort around topics of colonial violence and imperial aspiration in mainstream US political discourse, or otherwise reinscribed to fit a more favourable narrative, what is repressed finds manifestation in other ways. By drawing out the unspeakable violence and recontextualising it outside and/or in opposition to the dominant narrative, writers like Silko, Owens, and Vizenor force readers to confront a different kind of reality, or more accurately, the one that exists behind the curtain of sanitising public myth. I argue that literary explorations of violence are similarly multi-directional, helping to draw these hidden forms of transcendent violence to the surface of the text so that they might be examined. Žižek's model is then useful in examining this symbolic literary mode of violence as both a symptom

and a means of exploring the systemic modes of violence that Silko, Owens, and Vizenor are at such pains to critique.¹⁴

I begin in chapter one by locating the concept of frontier as it exists today in the context of Native American as well as non-Native fields of critical inquiry, arguing that while frontier remains markedly problematic in the twenty-first century, it is a concept that nevertheless provokes important questions about how and why the violence of conquest and the dominant culture's encounter with the Other continues to resurface as part of the perverse rationale of *transcendent* violence. Furthermore, the ideological impetus of frontier thinking that seeks to contain, confine, or erase alterity, specifically in relation to the racialised Other, continues to shape US policymaking as well as popular cultural production. Today the status and value of frontier as a useful historiographical and critical framework has been significantly downgraded, while the growing discipline of border studies offers a new transnational and geopolitical framework through which ideas relating to frontier discourse form part of the contextual background for a larger mosaic, interdisciplinary approach for the reading of borders/bordering. 'The Anglo-European belief in the existence of borders (coupled with a belief in the implicit right to violate these same borders) has largely defined the history of the frontier' writes Carlton Smith in his study of the transcultural frontier, adding that 'if, as [Frederick Jackson] Turner had noted with alarm, the borders defining the frontier as "us" and "them" have disappeared, they have also been internalized and thus become part of the deep structure of our symbolic and discursive landscape.' The great irony of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier

¹⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987), pp. 271-313 (pp. 280-281); See also the introduction and opening chapter of Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Verso, 2009).

thesis is that the ideological impetus behind frontier remains a potent force in the US collective imagination. According to Smith, these ‘slippery, problematic, and mobile borders’ remain as ‘ethnic, personal, and nationalized spaces, which require negotiation.’ It is an argument that found a receptive audience in the early 1990s when revisionist historians like Richard White proclaimed that the West and the frontier were politically rather than geographically determined, and that both should be located within a larger mythological framework.¹⁵

In light of these recent developments it would be easy to suggest that the study of frontier is perhaps best left to historians and other scholars primarily concerned with earlier colonial history. However, I contend that critical readings of frontier have much to offer the literary critic interested in the function of systemic violence. Historian William Hadley jokes that despite the problematic genealogy of frontier, ‘what many western historians consider the ethnocentric “f-word” is nevertheless alive and well in American culture, shared by most Americans as a kind of “cultural glue” that holds them together.’¹⁶ David L. Moore is more forthright in his rejection of the term, which he describes ‘as unhelpful to critique the dynamics of Native—and non-Native—American narratives, because [...] “frontier history” is too loaded with dualistic filters that blur the stories of more complex lives.’¹⁷ But this deeply problematic history should not negate further critical engagement. Rather than turning away from frontier thinking, this thesis argues that it is incumbent upon critics to tackle it face on, recognising that the supremacist and exceptionalist ideology of frontier thinking

¹⁵ Carlton Smith, *Coyote Kills John Wayne: Postmodernism and Contemporary Fictions of the Transcultural Frontier* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), pp. 3-4; Richard White, *“It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own” A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

¹⁶ William R. Handley, *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 25.

¹⁷ David L. Moore, *That Dream Shall Have a Name: Native Americans Rewriting America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), p. 9.

remains today a component part of political reality, although certainly more nuanced than its eighteenth and nineteenth century precursor.

Responding to the problem of the ‘f-word’ in the 1990s, Louis Owens is particularly keen to problematise the simplistic binaries of frontier thinking, arguing instead that the conceptual frontier should be reconstituted as a dialogic space for cultural interaction, wresting it from the supremacist control of dominant culture. Owens’s suggestion is then not to reject the idea of frontier out of hand, but to contest its ideological excesses, countering with a more culturally pluralistic and syncretic exposition. Importantly, the ‘cultural glue’ to which Hadley refers is produced of a myth-making or *mythogenic* process that seeks to perpetuate certain dominant ideological beliefs and assumptions about the status and continuity of the racialised Other and Native subject, and it is against these racialised, ideological assumptions that authors like Silko, Vizenor, and Owens consistently take aim.

Commenting on how an ideologically contrived transcendent mode of violence came to define the European encounter with Otherness, Enrique Dussel has this to say about the intimate relationship between sanitising myth, European-style modernity, and the violence directed against Indigenous people:

The birthdate of modernity is 1492, even though its gestation, like that of the fetus, required a period of intrauterine growth. Whereas modernity gestated in the free, creative medieval European cities, it came to birth in Europe’s confrontation with the Other. By controlling, conquering, and violating the Other, Europe defined itself as discoverer, conquistador, and colonizer of an alterity likewise constitutive of modernity. Europe never discovered (*des-cubierto*) this Other as Other but covered over (*encubierto*) the Other as part of the Same: i.e., Europe. Modernity dawned in 1492 and with it the myth of a special kind of sacrificial violence which eventually eclipsed whatever was non-European.¹⁸

The sacrificial violence to which Dussel refers shares the same lineage as that of a transcendent, exceptionalist violence that is rooted in a tradition that seeks to

¹⁸ Enrique Dussel, qtd in Jace Weaver, *Other Words: American Indian Literature, Law, and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), p. 18.

simultaneously appropriate and erase the racialised Other. The resulting sacrificial violence can be understood as a process of sublimation where, as I have said, unspeakable acts of violence are reinscribed according to a larger ideological narrative and one that plots violent atrocities on the sliding scale of cultural progress. As Jace Weaver has remarked, ‘in the myths of conquest, Amer-Europeans did not commit such atrocities’ but when they did occur, ‘from Mystic Fort to the Marias, from Gnadenhutzen to the Washita, they were tragic mistakes never to be replicated, the result of misunderstandings or madmen operating beyond their instructions’.¹⁹ Crucially, Weaver notes how ‘the question that Natives force upon Amer-European conscience and consciousness is: how many such incidents does it take before a pattern can be discerned and they are seen to be, however “tragic,” more than “mistakes”?’²⁰ It is significant then that Silko seeks to expose the unspeakable violence of conquest and colonialism, that Owens re-orientates its symbolism and reclaims the ideological framework of frontier as a means of conceptualising and discussing inter and intracultural contact, and Vizenor traces the enduring legacy of that violence in modern institutions. Underpinning this, the history of US frontier thinking is rife with the kind of transcendent, sanitised violence that Weaver describes, demanding a terrible gratuity from the Native subject, and yet, as Owens suggests, to view the coloniser and the conquered as entirely separate is to perpetuate this reductive conceit; the one invariably influences the other. To operate within the multiple layers of nuance necessary to explore a subject as complex as frontier and the violence produced and legitimised by it, Owens seeks to return to first principles and engage with the frontier as a liminal space engendered with a creative urge to push beyond measured

¹⁹ Weaver, *Other Words*, p. 19.

²⁰ Weaver, *Other Words*, p. 19.

boundaries and the restrictive limitations of preconceived cultural binaries. In his fiction and non-fiction work, Owens reimagines a conceptual frontier uninterrupted by a false declaration of closure and the conqueror's triumphalist cry of 'mission accomplished'.

To legitimise colonial violence as necessary, tragic or transcendent frontier thinking demands that Indigenous peoples are routinely cast as a rudimentary antagonistic foil, or presented as simplistic caricatures to suit any number of ideological claims to European/Euramerican supremacy. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn notes with alarm how in the early captivity narratives that did so much to formalise this degrading peripheral condition, the Native subject is presented as a 'mere prop', with historical events reconfigured to fit an expansionist colonial 'propaganda', downgrading colonial violence in the process.²¹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg similarly notes how 'what Columbus started, North American captivity and frontier warfare narratives continued', enthralling readers with grotesque tales of cannibalism and extreme violence on the frontier, with cannibalism in particular emerging as the 'ultimate European taboo' and the 'fundamental mark of Native American otherness' in the dominant narrative.²² More recently, discussing stock characterisation of Native marauders in the video game *Red Dead Redemption*, Jodi Byrd introduces the term 'remnant peoples' to highlight the troubling remainder status of Indigenous peoples misrepresented in popular culture. This continues to undermine and delegitimise claims of Indigenous continuity that resist cultural appropriation at every turn.²³ This

²¹ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, 'Lewis and Clark and the Captivity Narrative, and Pitfalls of Indian History', in *Native Historians Write Back: Decolonizing American Indian History*, ed. by Susan A. Miller and James Riding In (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2011), pp. 41-51 (p. 47).

²² Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), pp. 225-226.

²³ Jody A. Byrd, 'Red Dead Conventions: American Indian Transgeneric Fictions', in *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*, ed. by James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) [accessed on-line www.oxfordhandbooks.com 16-06-2015], p. 1.

peculiar undead status is a topic which I discuss further in chapters one and two, initially to help contextualise the problematic status of frontier as it pertains to notions of US imperialism, and then as part of an examination of Leslie Marmon Silko's 1991 novel *Almanac of the Dead*. Chapter two then proposes a reading of Silko's harrowing novel as an anti-western which challenges the sanitising effect of frontier myth by putting the real subjective violence of dominance *back in* to this foundational origin narrative. In the novel, a revolutionary Indigeneity is set against the backdrop of a pre-apocalyptic American wasteland, appearing as a haunting spectre troubling hegemonic certainties of late twentieth century capitalism and exposing the sanitising transcendent violence employed by dominant culture.

Chapter three looks to the work of Louis Owens, who explores the idea of an uninterrupted frontier and who argues for a reengagement with frontier as a useful theoretical space of cultural contact and confrontation. Owens rejects the final closure suggested by conquest, noting that the modifier 'post' in 'postcolonial' is erroneously applied to the literatures of Indigenous peoples in the Americas: 'Native American writing is not postcolonial but rather colonial, that the colonizers never left but simply changed their names to Americans'.²⁴ Given his outright rejection of colonialism as a completed project, it is unsurprising then that he should present a reading of frontier as uninterrupted; which is to say that the singular purpose of frontier—colonial expansionism, removal of the racialised Other, and appropriation of Native land—has never abated. However, in drawing a stark comparison between the sense of containment suggested by the term 'territory', and a revitalised interpretation of frontier as an unstable zone of cultural contest, Owens claims that writers like Silko

²⁴ Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), p. 51.

and Vizenor create characters that ‘inhabit the kind of frontier space first explored by Mourning Dove,’ effectively reasserting a vital Indigenous presence in the narrative of Euramerican dominance.²⁵ As Owens has said, ‘a century after Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous pronouncement [of the closing of the frontier], the frontier appears to be moving once again, but this time it is a multidirectional zone of resistance’.²⁶ Shunting back and forth between backwoods and provincial settings, his novels traverse a richly symbolic landscape that reverberates with multicultural and cross cultural tensions, reconfigured as a frontier zone of cultural contact and conflict. In Owens’s hands, the frontier returns as a conceptual apparatus that persists in various, highly changeable forms beneath the surface of dominant US culture, and must be teased out into the open where the systemic violence of dominance can be extrapolated and new discourse be forthcoming. In doing so, supposedly concrete terms like ‘wilderness,’ so important in classical Turnerian readings of the frontier, are similarly problematised and exploded.

Finally, chapter four engages with the critical frontiers explored and transgressed in the work of Gerald Vizenor, who frequently challenges institutional violence and the systemic excesses of dominant culture. Moreover, Vizenor’s concept of terminal creeds proves most useful in examining the self-destructive institutionalised practices of dominant culture. I initially outline several prominent boundaries that Vizenor transgresses in his 1978 debut novel *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, later republished as *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*, arguing that Vizenor uses instances of violence to relocate discussions surrounding the Native subject outside existing semiotic and mythic boundaries. The ruined wastescape of

²⁵ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 35.

²⁶ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 41.

Vizenor's novel is, like that of Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, located in a familiar twentieth century US setting, heralded by the collapse of the petrochemical industry and the End of Oil, a prescient issue if ever there was one. In the second half of the chapter I consider how Vizenor's reportage on the real-life case of Thomas White Hawk, who in 1968 was charged with and stood trial for murder, is emblematic of his transgressive approach to exposing systemic and institutionalised violence, in this instance the oversights and prejudices of the legal process. I conclude that Vizenor refuses to allow violence and tragedy to be the end of discourse, and instead seeks imaginative opportunities within his work that traverse prescriptive boundaries.

To summarise, this thesis is concerned with the following questions. Firstly, considering the colonial aspirations of frontier thinking, how do Native American writers engage with and interrogate the sanitising, transcendent violence of frontier and frontier myth? Secondly, how does this affect the utility of frontier as a critical concept? Thirdly, what role does literary violence play in texts produced by Indigenous and mixedblood writers, and how does this enhance our understanding of visible and indivisible modes of transcendent violence? And finally, reflecting on the challenges levied against transcendent modes of violence, why is this literary exposition of violence an important medium for interrogating ideological constructs such as frontier? The original contribution of this thesis is then an exploration of how these writers use and invite critique of explicit, often shocking forms of violence to upset, reconfigure, and complicate the category of frontier and expose the long reach of systemic violence in its various forms.

A note on terminology

On the much debated question of canonical writers, or the existence of a Native American literary canon, Alan R. Velie offers this mercifully concise summary: ‘Native American literature, while not a tight-knit movement launched with a manifesto like Surrealism, nonetheless encompasses a group of writers, related by ethnicity, who read each other’s work and are influenced by them.’²⁷ This loose fitting definition is useful when it is necessary to refer to Native American writing in a more general sense, although care should be taken in recognising that it functions only as convenient shorthand, with all the attendant limitations that implies. Given the remarkable diversity of Indigenous peoples and cultures, a singular uniform definition is unsurprisingly elusive, and this shorthand approach, while useful, does little to edify the constantly evolving debate surrounding terminology. Writing in the early 1980s, before the term ‘Indigenous’ came into common academic parlance, Velie notes a distinct difference between non-academic and academic usage. ‘Outside the university community’, he writes, ‘I have never heard an Indian call himself anything but Indian’ noting how ‘Amerindian’ and ‘Native American’ appear to him to be largely academic constructions.²⁸ While the term ‘Amerindian’ is seldom seen in the twenty-first century, ‘Native American’ and ‘American Indian’ remain in common usage. In this thesis I use ‘Native American’ and ‘Indigenous’ interchangeably, although it should be noted that these terms carry different political weightings, with ‘Indigenous’ being the more politically charged. The term is generally understood to denote a strong sense of historical continuity, connecting self-identifying Indigenous people and their

²⁷ Alan R. Velie, ‘N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and Myths of the Victim’, in *The Native American Renaissance*, ed. by Velie and Lee, pp. 58-73 (p. 58).

²⁸ Alan R. Velie, *Four American Indian Literary Masters: N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), p. 5.

descendants with the original inhabitants of lands later appropriated under colonialism, hence its significance in activist contexts. For instance, rather than offering a specific denotation, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues offers a series of discursive guidelines, emphasising links to land, territories, natural resources, social and economic systems, cultural beliefs and traditional practices, as well as a resolve to uphold distinctive ancestral traditions and environments. It is a term that is applied and self-applied in different cultural settings around the world, and continues to gain currency in academic, non-academic, and transnational contexts.²⁹

‘Native American’ remains in common usage in academic contexts, although publications appearing in the past ten years or so reveal a growing preference for ‘Indigenous’ in recognition of on-going transnational or *transindigenous* debates surrounding issues of sovereignty, environmental degradation, land rights, disenfranchisement of Indigenous communities, treaty violations, abuse and abduction of Indigenous women, and institutionalised modes of violence directed against Indigenous communities. Where I use ‘Indigenous’ I do so with this globalised sense of the word in mind, and in recognition of the many current and on-going campaigns to address the aforementioned issues. I also use the term ‘Native subject’ when I refer to instances where Native/Indigenous peoples have been essentialised as a crudely drawn homogenous group. The use of ‘subject’ in psychoanalytical and psychiatric contexts has fallen somewhat out of favour in recent years, with concerns over the extent to which it dehumanises or otherwise diminishes the status of the person being

²⁹ ‘Implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Handbook for Parliamentarians No.23’, 2014, p. 11.

<<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/publications/2015/09/implementing-the-un-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples-handbook-for-parliamentarians/#more-7246>> [accessed June 2015].

described, but it is useful here as a shorthand for discussions that actively touch upon points of essentialism, misrepresentation, and/or simulation. However, I make absolutely no claim to any form of insider status or insider understanding of these issues.

Lastly, I do not capitalise 'the Frontier' or 'The West', preferring instead a lowercase 'the' in 'the West' and lowercase 'frontier' for the reason that no such singular definition is possible in light of the many different readings, interpretations, visions, mythic constructs, experiences, and traditions that these associated geographies, histories, and conceptual spaces represent to different cultural groups.

Chapter 1

An Undeclared War on Indigeneity: Frontier Ideology and Transcendent Violence

Next to the case of the black race within our bosom, that of the red on our borders is the problem most baffling to the policy of our country.³⁰

James Madison to Thomas L. McKenney, 10 February 1826

The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.³¹

Frederick Jackson Turner

The wars of conquest that began with the landing of Christopher Columbus on an isolated little island on the edge of the southeastern sea gained momentum until every tribe and every aspect of traditional life was swept up in it; during the centuries of those wars everything in our lives was affected and much was changed, even the earth, the waters, and the sky. We went down under wave after wave of settlement, each preceded, accompanied by, and followed by military engagements that were more often massacres of our people than declared wars. These wars, taken together, constitute the longest undeclared war neo-Americans have fought, and no end is in sight.³²

Paula Gunn Allen

This chapter begins by synthesising some of the main concerns posed by continued critical engagement with the concept of frontier, providing a valuable context for the readings of violence that follow in subsequent chapters. As part of a closer examination of the relationship between frontier ideology and the on-going undeclared war on Indigeneity alluded to by Paula Gunn Allen, I discuss the function of violence in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, and Gerald Vizenor's *Chancers*. Taking each of these novels in turn, I argue that Alexie's

³⁰ James Madison, qtd in Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating & Empire-Building* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), p. 99.

³¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', in *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*, ed. by George Rogers Taylor, 3rd edn (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1956), pp. 3-28 (p. 3).

³² Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 194-195.

novel exposes the violence of this on-going yet undeclared war, and that literary fiction poses a valuable opportunity to create imaginative rebuttals to narratives of dominance that move between different worlds of experience in a manner unavailable to historians. I then use the figurative death/transformation of Abel in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and the ritualistic violence of Vizenor's *Chancers* to begin a discussion on the function of the Third Space, and how violence in these novels problematises discussions around 'real', 'authentic', and simulated *Indianness* outside of predetermined boundaries and binary positions established by frontier ideology. I argue novels like these resist the constraining ideology of frontier, and testify to continuing Indigenous presence and survivance that challenge the notion of a completed conquest and closed frontier as set out by Frederick Jackson Turner at the end of the nineteenth century.³³ Time and again the trope of the dead or vanishing Indian of the classic Turnerian frontier is shown to be a self-fulfilling fantasy of frontier thinking, according to which the racialised Other can be easily assimilated or erased. The chapter concludes by introducing the idea that in these novels and others discussed in this thesis, episodes of literary violence can inaugurate new critical spaces and challenges to established dominant ideologies. Such instances of violent, interventionist ruptures in the dominant narrative can force an examination of a range of issues relating to the systemic, ideological violence produced of cultural dominance, historically constructed simulations of *Indianness*, and the unspeakable violence enshrined in formative frontier myth. Rather than being viewed *through*

³³ Vizenor uses the term 'survivance' to counterpoint notions of Indigenous extinction and simulation by and within dominant culture. Charting the etymology of this term, Deborah Madsen has said that 'what this means in a Native context is the readiness of individuals and communities alike to continue the transmission of tribal cultures, values, and knowledges to future generations, through international and domestic legal instruments, through creative storytelling in literature, art, music, and through the practices of everyday life'. See Deborah Madsen, 'The Sovereignty of Transmotion in a State of Exception: Lessons from the Internment of "Praying Indians" on Deer Island, Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1675-1676', *Transmotion*, 1.1 (2015), 23-47 (p. 24).

narratives and metaphors of dominance like frontier, these writers reorientate that perspective, probing the absent presences that haunt the boundaries and borders of intercultural contact/conflict, while innovating new critical frontiers with which to further expand understanding of these highly contentious yet durable constructs.

Responses to Frontier Part I: Frontier as Fantasy-Making Apparatus

The sacred status of frontier in the popular imagination is a prime example of how the ideologically motivated violence of settler colonialism can be perversely rationalised as the regrettable, yet necessary price of progress. Alternatively, but no less surreptitiously, it can be recast as a tragic misstep in the course of history, or fetishized as a transcendent component of US originary myth. As I deploy it here, the concept of frontier functions first as an ideological construct that conceptualises the European encounter with the racialised Other as a binary confrontation between savage and civilised peoples. Secondly, it functions as the violent material and humanitarian consequences of that ideology when acted upon by colonial powers. And finally, frontier is the product of a mythogenic process that rationalises and reinscribes the real, subjective violence of frontier as transcendent. Here ‘transcendent’ signifies those expressions of violence that carry an ideological imperative linked to notions of Euramerican cultural supremacy and the containment/erasure of the racialised Other. It is partly a euphemism for abhorrent acts, but more significantly it informs a discourse on violence before the act has even taken place, framed in such a way that it does not undermine the ideological imperative.

Historian Richard Slotkin, whose study of the mythic frontier explores the problematic relationship between violence, myth-making, and expansionist ideology,

understands frontier violence as fulfilling a similar performative role. To paraphrase, violence is not simply a consequence of nation building and western expansion, but a celebrated, fetishised act performed by icons of frontier and used to underpin a patriotic sense of nationalistic achievement and divine purpose. According to this transcendent logic, military failures and other violent excesses can be reinscribed as pyrrhic victories, or unfortunate deviations from the providential reading of Euramerican history. To use Slotkin's example, when tied to a larger origin mythology in this way the villainous actions of a divisive historical figure like George Armstrong Custer can achieve the status of mythic heroism. When viewed through this ideological lens frontier violence becomes a richly symbolic and regenerative mythogenesis, and one overwhelmingly directed at Indigenous populations, shorn of their unique subjectivities, and reduced to crude antagonists in a grand and overtly masculine narrative history that celebrates US colonial ambition in all but name.³⁴

This mythogenic process exercises a powerful editorialising influence over what is recorded, how it is valued and fetishised, and what is erased or deemphasised to the point of extreme obscurity. Slotkin defines myth as 'a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors'.³⁵ In this sense, myth functions like a strand of cultural DNA, reproducing itself according to an underlying code or script. Sam Gill remarks that 'myths function as a means by which human beings can articulate that which is most fundamental to them through the

³⁴ See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

³⁵ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, pp. 6-7.

revision and re-creation of their stories, a kind of eternal renewal.³⁶ In a line of inquiry that echoes Slotkin's, Richard White, a major voice of the New Western Historicism of the 1990s that sought to re-examine the Eurocentric bias of US historicism, presents myths not as falsehoods, but as explanations contingent on certain ideological assumptions.³⁷ In the case of the mythic frontier, that code can be interpreted to include the ideologies of manifest destiny and nation building, or the emergence of a distinctly American national character, as per Turner's frontier thesis. Crucially, there is a tendency to respond to myth in a nonrational and overtly religious manner, where faith in the efficacy of the myth overrides direct criticism or doubt, which carries the risk of elevating myth to that of a sacred and therefore irreproachable status. This irrationality only further complicates attempts to challenge underlying dogma codified as perennial values or beliefs, hence resistance to claims of US colonial aspiration. The problem that then arises is that certain harmful ideologies are communicated to future generations not only with a discernible lack of scrutiny, but with a transcendent gloss that obscures historical instances of subjective violence with a perverse rationale rooted in a more complementary origin mythology. Once myth attains this sacred dimension, it becomes increasingly difficult to confront, with myth overriding objectivity and rationalism, functioning instead as fertile ground for crude expressions of nationalism and prejudice.

³⁶ Sam Gill, 'Mother Earth: An American Myth', in *The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions & Government Policies*, ed. by James A. Clifton (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990), pp. 129-143 (p. 138).

³⁷ White, *It's Your Misfortune*, p. 615. White takes a similar line to Slotkin in defining the creative function of myth. Like Slotkin, White divides and then subdivides the West according to geography, cultural function, historical record, fantasy, myth, and common folklore. Principle amongst the discrete relationships that comprise the 'imagined West' are firstly professional accounts of the West, such as reportage, film, artistic productions, and academic studies, and secondly folkloric constructions of the West. Together these different sites of cultural production generate the requisite materials needed to construct highly compelling myths and fantasies that dominant culture perceives as located in the *real* frontier or West, as opposed to an artist's impression produced of an ideological process. See White, *It's Your Misfortune*, pp. 613-616.

Despite attracting considerable criticism, Slotkin's work has been useful for those seeking to understand the interconnected relationship between violence and frontier in the popular US imaginary. For instance, Annette Kolodny's groundbreaking work on gendered frontier experience uses Slotkin's study of early captivity narratives as a starting point. In her landmark study Kolodny offers the following advice for scholars drawn to the complex relationships that exist between fantasy, history, literature, and the violent realities of America's early frontiers:

The danger in examining the projections of fantasy is the temptation to construe them as unmediated models of behavior. In fact, what we are examining here are not blueprints for conduct but contexts of imaginative possibility. Fantasy, in other words, does not necessarily coincide with how we act or wish to act in the world. It does, however, represent symbolic forms (often repressed or unconscious) that clarify, codify, organize, explain, or even lead us to anticipate the raw data of experience. In that sense, fantasy may be mediating or integrative, forging imaginative (and imaginable) links between our deepest psychic needs and the world in which we find ourselves.³⁸

That fantasy may be 'mediating or integrative' as Kolodny suggests, and capable of 'forging imaginative (and imaginable) links' between fundamental psychic needs and the world at large, should give the critic pause whenever tempted to reduce something as symbolically loaded as the literary expression of violence to that of a strictly cause and effect behavioural explanation. Although unhelpfully broad in her definition, Kolodny's point is that fantasy possesses the power to reveal, if only partially, that which is unspoken or even to some extent unrepresentable. In trying to decode this,

³⁸ Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. 10. Philip J. Deloria notes that 'nineteenth century historians made only subtle alterations to the [captivity] formula that placed opposed societies fighting across a frontier boundary. And indeed, their writing reflected the prerogatives of American manifest destiny itself, as much a colonial and imperial project as those of England, France, and Spain.' Philip J. Deloria, 'Historiography', in *A Companion to American Indian History*, ed. by Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury (Meriden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 6-24 (p. 9). Frederick Turner notes the remarkable, formative influence of the captivity narrative, and it became increasingly hysterical in its depiction of savage Indians and white victims as the frontier moved westwards. Handed down from generation to generation, these narratives passed from oral into written tradition, even supplanting scripture as 'the means of understanding why things had developed here as they had.' Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p. 235.

Žižek notes how ‘fantasy does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way: rather [...] fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its co-ordinates; that is, it literally “teaches us how to desire”’.³⁹ In Kolodny, the idea of a wilderness frontier as conceptualised by men and women in the first quarter-century following European settlement, functions as an imaginative space onto which fear and fantasy could be projected, but also as a space in which European settlers learned how to formulate their desires as pertaining to settler colonialism. Eric Heyne similarly observes how the myth of the Edenic garden popularised by frontier thinking, ‘necessarily hides the violence that took place as Americans gained access to Eden’.⁴⁰ Where that fantasy failed, and the Edenic myth failed to live up to expectations, disillusion and frustration took its place, with violence directed against nature as a consequence. Heyne notes how:

The myth of the frontier also asserts a moral order. Before possessing the land, the new Americans had to wrest it violently from the native inhabitants. Thus the frontier myth originated from the Indian wars of the Puritan era. At first the wars were cast in biblical terms, and though the terms changed from good to evil to civilisation and savagery, their clear contrast persisted. The myth, therefore, inextricably connected violence with innocence. It justified the violence on the frontier by directing it against those outside of society. As with the myth of the garden, however, this myth hid the problem of failure and unsanctioned violence associated with its ideology of unrestrained competition, a frontier social Darwinism that took little notice of those less fit. Again, frustration and impotence led to violence that the myth did not legitimate but nevertheless instigated.⁴¹

Kolodny is instructive here in thinking about how the ideological impetus of frontier produced a formative framework for rationalising acts of violence. Significantly, her reading of frontier is constituted from geographical, linguistic (cultural), and chronological components, and it is in this confrontation with the racialised Other that Europeans began to understand themselves in the context of an alien landscape.⁴²

³⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 7.

⁴⁰ Eric Heyne, *Desert, Garden, Margin, Range: Literature on the American Frontier* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), p. 58.

⁴¹ Heyne, *Desert, Garden, Margin, Range*, p. 58

⁴² Annette Kolodny, ‘Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions: Notes Toward a New Literary History of the American Frontiers’, *American Literature*, 64.1 (1992) 1-18 (p. 9.).

Looking to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa while discussing her vision of a new literary frontier in a later essay, Kolodny writes:

In effect, my reformulation the term "frontier" comes to mean what we in the Southwest call *la frontera*, or the borderlands, that liminal landscape of changing meanings on which distinct human cultures first encounter one another's "otherness" and appropriate, accommodate, or domesticate it through language.⁴³

Kolodny's literary and cultural-historical frontiers are then a moveable feast, and it is important to recognise how this kind of revisionism consistently adds greater levels of complexity to our understanding of this nebulous concept. As Kolodny indicates, European settlers learned to analyse their experiences by projecting them onto a conceptual frontier of their own making, which through a process of reproduction in the form of highly contrived popular captivity narratives and folklore attained the status of accepted fact. Native writers like Leslie Marmon Silko, Louis Owens and Gerald Vizenor then seek to introduce contradictory fantasies in the form of stories to disrupt this circular, self-fulfilling mythogenic process. Both Kolodny and Žižek share the view that fantasy should not be considered a blueprint for behaviour but rather as the 'contexts of imaginative possibility', offering opportunities to imaginatively probe underlying ideological motivations, anxieties, and desires, while simultaneously producing alternative desires with which to countermand them. Fantasy, in this broadly psychoanalytical sense, is not restricted to a mediating process between what is latent and what is manifest, coinciding with 'how we act or wish to act in the world'

⁴³ Kolodny, 'Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions', p. 9. Ralph N. Miller also charts the development and popularity of eighteenth century naturalist theories of the New World, arguing that for Europeans the American continent remained a primordial and distinctly liminal place, still very much in the early stages of natural development. By contrast, the American interpretation of the landscape emphasises its 'extraordinarily vigorous, nature with the aboriginal, as well as the colonial inhabitants partaking of its strength' a view that remained popular throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was reproduced in the influential work of Fenimore Cooper, Theodore Roosevelt, and Frederick Jackson Turner. See Ralph N. Miller, 'American Nationalism as a Theory of Nature', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 2.1 (1955), 74-95 (p. 74).

as Kolodny says, but also teaches us *how* to conceptualise unspoken/unrepresentable desire/anxiety.

Kolodny's analysis is a reminder that literary encounters and imaginative responses to violence may reveal, or introduce, unexpected or previously underexposed discourses. In other words, episodes of violence should not be taken as merely symptomatic of a particular situation or behaviour, but should function as the starting point for new discourses that mediate outwards and from in between different cultural experiences that might produce new readings that challenge the orthodoxy of dominant discourse. What I term 'literary violence' is one way of drawing attention to this discursive practice, specifically in relation to how writers use instances of violence in their work to probe the various modes of visible and invisible violence produced of a colonising frontier ideology, that effectively silences, fetishises or reinscribes subjective violence directed against the racialised Other. That the transcendent violence of frontier is performed in service of a colonising, exceptionalist ideology is then of principle concern in this thesis, owing to the fact that its sanitising effect on the violence of dominance continues to be felt today in US political and popular culture.

Responses to Frontier Part II: The Enduring Spectre of Frontier Ideology in US Culture and Policymaking

The Anishinaabe author/critic Gerald Vizenor terms the cherished yet inherently self-serving destructive ideologies of dominant culture 'Terminal Creeds', which are, as Louis Owens has said, 'beliefs which seek to fix, to impose static definitions upon the world.' Such beliefs and the actions they inspire are 'destructive, suicidal, even when

the definitions appear to arise out of revered tradition.’⁴⁴ Elsewhere Vizenor refers to this process of venerating harmful doctrinal constructs like the frontier and manifest destiny ‘manifest manners’, essentially the habitual continuation of systemic racialised violence and the ‘triumphalism’ of cultural domination that evades being identified as such.⁴⁵ He writes:

Manifest Destiny would cause the death of millions of tribal people from massacres, diseases, and the loneliness of reservations. Entire cultures have been terminated in the course of nationalism. These histories are now the simulations of dominance, and the causes of the conditions that have become manifest manners in literature. The postindian simulations are the core of survivance, the new stories of tribal courage. The simulations of manifest manners are the continuance of the surveillance and domination of the tribes in literature. Simulations are the absence of the tribal real; the postindian conversions are the stories of survivance over dominance.⁴⁶

According to Vizenor, manifest manners is the process by which a supremacist, arrogant, and exclusionary ideology is able to find footing within dominant institutions, including those that outwardly claim objectivity and a growing sensitivity towards Indigenous cultures and issues.

Conflating the idea of manifest destiny and manners – the marker of a civilised and ordered society – alerts the reader to an important issue: what abuses have been legitimised under the ideological banners of Euramerican progress? Judith Martin, otherwise known by her *non de plume* Miss Manners, recognised as an authority on etiquette and orderly propriety, found an unlikely accolade in 1991 when she was quoted in the epilogue to Bret Easton Ellis’s controversial novel *American Psycho*:

⁴⁴ Louis Owens, “‘Ecstatic Strategies’”: Gerald Vizenor’s Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart’ in *Narrative Chance*, pp. 141-142.

⁴⁵ Craig S. Womack, ‘Book Length Native Literary Criticism’, in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, ed. by Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher Teuton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), pp. 3-104 (p. 69).

⁴⁶ Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 4.

One of the major mistakes people make is that they think manners are only the expression of happy ideas. There's a whole range of behaviour that can be expressed in a mannerly way.⁴⁷

The point is that mannerly behaviour is a performance that obscures that which is undesirable, disturbing even, or antithetical to the mythic absolute values that dominant cultures assign to themselves. Vizenor delves far deeper into the problem by drawing out the connection between everyday behaviours, injustices and prejudices. He shifts his critical gaze between institutions of State down to the level of language and discourse, becoming the source material of the 'word wars' in his novel *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, where the language of the coloniser is exposed as complicit in the subjugation of Indigenous subjectivities. Frontier can then be interrogated as a terminal creed, its violence excused under the auspices of manifest manners, but only if the subjective violence of dominance can be exposed and reinserted into the dominant myth-narrative.

Such is the historiographical significance of frontier thinking in American history that it has become part of a series of interrelated ideological constructs employed by the dominant culture (others include the Doctrine of Discovery, the concept of virgin and unclaimed land (*terra nullius*) and manifest destiny), to qualify not only a sense of national sovereignty, but to advance an assumed Euramerican cultural superiority underwritten by a divine imperative to conquer the New World and colonise it. A study of the function of violence in twentieth century Native American literature is then fundamentally a study of how certain texts, produced by Native and mixedblood authors, expose the transcendent violence enshrined in the

⁴⁷ Judith Martin, qtd in Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

terminal creed of frontier ideology and its mythic corollary. Put another way, frontier ideology functions as a *de facto* rationale for US colonialism that codifies and reinscribes those destructive aspects of colonisation that clash with popular, self-aggrandising originary myth. Today, in the context of Indigenous Studies, frontier is a concept that has been rejected, with little tolerance for attempts to rekindle discussions of its historiographical or critical utility, which is understandable given the violence – much of it on-going – that has been wrought under its aegis. The principle ambition here is not to offer anything as distasteful as a defence of frontier thinking, but to argue that despite such calls for intellectual disengagement with frontier as a historicising paradigm, its enduring status as a formative ideology continues to exert significant influence over US foreign and domestic border policy, and most significantly, dominant US culture's treatment of the racialised Other. It is therefore a subject that demands further intellectual scrutiny and one that cannot, nor should not, be dismissed out of hand as an outdated hangover from a bygone era.

Nor is such an undertaking an exercise in the abstract, for as Jodi Byrd and Roxanne-Dunbar Ortiz demonstrate, nineteenth century anti-Indian policy, born of supremacist frontier ideology, has in the last thirty years been resurrected as the perverse legal basis for the state sanctioned torture of enemy combatants as part of the US-led War on Terror. Drawing on the concept of *homo sacer* – from Roman law meaning one who can be killed with impunity – both Byrd and Dunbar-Ortiz explain how such policies continue to shape political discourse.⁴⁸ Citing Žižek's formulation that the 'U.S. imprisonment and torture machine' functions as a 'necromantic process', whereby detainees are reduced to the status of an undead object, Byrd identifies an

⁴⁸ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

alarming nineteenth century legal precedent that returns in twentieth/twenty-first century US law.⁴⁹ The state of exception, normally enacted under extraordinary circumstances, such as natural disasters or times of war, when accepted legal practices are suspended, now appears to have become normative practice when dealing with such questions of moral hygiene. Under these circumstances, special powers and extra-legal blind spots are afforded to the dominant culture, functioning to both sanction and legitimate violent actions like torture and imprisonment, euphemistically recoded as Advanced Interrogation Techniques, without legal recourse.⁵⁰ Byrd notes how this in turn is linked to the recent undead/zombie renaissance in US popular culture, revealing ‘another function at the boundary between human and inhuman, legal and illegal, sacred and bare life that exist in the no-man’s land that constitutes the states of nature and exception’.⁵¹ Byrd’s reading of these historic legal opinions reveals an appalling double standard, whereby ‘all who can be made “Indian” [...] can be killed without being murdered, yet they are held to the standards of U.S. law that make it a crime for such combatants to kill any American soldier’.⁵² Byrd concludes that ‘citizens of American Indian nations become in this moment the origin of the stateless terrorist combatants within U.S. enunciations of sovereignty’.⁵³

⁴⁹ As Byrd observes, legal opinions generated by the *Military Commissions* (1865) and *The Modoc Indian Prisoners* (1873) cases would later be cited by Deputy Attorney General John C. Yoo in his notorious 2003 torture memos, produced as a means of exonerating US military and intelligence personnel of wrong doing in the use of Advanced Interrogation Techniques (torture). Jodi A. Byrd, *Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), pp. 225-226. Dunbar-Ortiz notes that ‘rather than bestowing the status of prisoner of war on the detainees, which would have given them certain rights under the Geneva Conventions, they were designated as “unlawful combatants,” a status previously unknown in the annals of Western warfare. As such, the detainees were subjected to torture by US interrogators and shamelessly monitored by civilian psychologists and medical personnel.’ See Dunbar-Ortiz, p.222.

⁵⁰ See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵¹ Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, p. 225.

⁵² Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, p. 227.

⁵³ Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, p. 227.

Byrd's work highlights an important example of how anti-Indian policy produced under the conditions of conquest continues to directly influence US policymaking today. It is also a sobering reminder of the apparent ease with which such violence can be rationalised as necessary when set against a larger transcendent purpose like that of *delivering democracy* or combating savagery (terrorism). As Byrd has shown, this imperative is underscored by a mindset, developed according to the colonial aspirations of frontier ideology that instinctively seeks to exclude, delegitimize, and/or erase Indigenous continuity. The genocidal conditions produced of settler colonialism should be cause for serious alarm when unveiled in the legal frameworks currently employed by the US. It is vital then that we recognise that these are not minor, standalone actions, but rather the inevitable outcome of systemic racialised violence. Frontier is merely one side of this equation, but importantly it is one that has made the successful transition from the violent conquering directive of settler colonialism, to that of cherished public myth. While it remains an active ideological force in the world it is not enough to simply acknowledge the failings of such a paradigm, and call for its disavowal. If the subjects of ideological violence are themselves deemed invisible or undead non-entities, as Byrd suggests, then it becomes a matter of standard process to dismiss their cries of anguish and reinscribe that violence as an historical anomaly, a necessary intervention, or the righteous transcendent act of a superior culture pursuing its manifest destiny.

Bakhtin can be of use here in highlighting the connection between settler colonialism and the transcendent rationalisation for violent Indigenous erasure. In the first instance European settlers sought to exorcise the open space of the frontier, drive off the Indigenous inhabitants, and then cast themselves as the true Indigene. When viewed through this ideological lens, settler colonialism becomes a form of exorcism,

expelling an unwanted entity by the invocation of something approaching a higher, transcendent purpose. Bakhtin writes:

Exorcism presupposes a deliberate *opposition of what is alien to what is one's own*, the otherness of what is foreign is emphasized, savored, as it were, and elaborately depicted against an implied background of one's own ordinary and familiar world.⁵⁴

In this context exorcism is a particularly apt metaphor, giving form to the idea of ritual expulsion of a contaminating entity that, like Byrd's stateless undead, do not belong in the symbolic order of dominant culture. It is a typically brutal and highly ritualised undertaking, requiring specialist knowledge and an association with a divine authority that demands a strong ideological commitment on behalf of all involved, if it is to have any meaning. In this sense exorcism is a form of ritualised sacred violence, justified according to a pre-existing doctrinal belief that operates as faith in a larger religious or mythic construct. As such, the violence of the exorcism becomes a transcendent act, a mode of transcendent violence, where the trauma of the event is masked and/or reinscribed in accordance with an overarching ideology that excuses or even celebrates it. There is also a self-fulfilling aspect of transcendent violence of this kind, where the act of performing an exorcism is seen to reinforce its validity. Very simply, the more violent and disturbing the exorcism, the more necessary it is deemed to be. However, remove the mediating power of religious doctrine and it becomes nothing less than an act of brutal torture. It is through such transcendent moralistic contortions that violence can be deemed unfortunate and yet necessary, and is therefore valuable when discussing the function of myth as a sanitising mechanism that likewise renders colonial violence as transcendent and necessary.

⁵⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), p. 101.

Dunbar-Ortiz similarly maintains that the primary driving force behind frontier ideology and settler colonialism is the seizure of land, typified by a systematic disregard for its provenance.⁵⁵ However, in killing and marginalising the Native subject, the dominant culture experiences an abject horror, or what Kristeva calls ‘one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside’, which when applied to frontier thinking sees the Native subject resist assimilation, there always being a remainder haunting the cultural unconscious.⁵⁶ I would go further in arguing that this process has more in common with that of exorcism than merely colonial expansionist anxiety. This is the sacrifice that America must make to ensure that what remains bears no resemblance to the cultures that preceded the arrival of European settlers. There is also a peculiar irony underlying the European Christian colonial mindset that perceives unbounded space and the Native subject as paradoxically intolerable, yet symbolic of freedom and romantic notions of spiritual connectedness to the ‘New World’. Open space is seen as uncivilised; the realm of Gods not mortals, and as such, staking claims, posting boundaries, and driving off ‘savages’ is regarded as good Christian (Protestant) labour, even if this ‘purge’ is notable for its violence and inherent conflict with the very principles it is supposed to inspire.⁵⁷ When the open space of the ‘New World’ was ‘thrown open like a providential gift to European explorers the meaning of land in

⁵⁵ Dunbar-Ortiz develops her critique of settler colonialism throughout *An Indigenous Peoples' History* with the first four chapters establishing the basis of her claims tracing the development of European settler colonialism as it transplanted to the colonial frontiers of the Americas.

⁵⁶ Julia Kristeva, ‘Powers of Horror’, in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University, 2002), pp. 229-247 (p. 229).

⁵⁷ Sean T. Teuton, ‘Boundaries: The Squaring Up of the American West’, in *The Image of the American West in Literature, the Media and Society: Selected Conference Papers*, ed. by Will Wright and Stephen Kaplan (Pueblo: Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Social Imagery, 1996), pp. 333-338 (p. 338).

European culture took on a new definition’ as did the ‘legal attributes of its acquisition and use’.⁵⁸

The material consequences of this transcendent effect reverberate in frontier thinking. For example, the Dawes Severalty Act (1887), which saw Native Americans allotted tracts of tribal land with surplus sold for profit to third parties, owes much to the mindset that declares that America’s wild frontier must be tamed, exorcised of its ‘savage’ inhabitants, and liberated. This process also spawned a slew of new cultural representations of Indigenous peoples as domesticated reservation dwellers, which opposes the ‘wild savages’ stereotype of old. This in turn enabled the newly ‘tamed’ Native subject to be further romanticised by the dominant culture, becoming an artefact, a remnant, to be traded rather than treated as meaningful, complex subjectivities. Native Americans have long identified themselves as being a living part of the American landscape, but the dehumanising and anti-Indian reservation programme sought to tie people to the land in purely economic and ideological terms.⁵⁹ Byrd’s undead analogy extends this epistemology in new directions, positing that in the capacity of a cultural remainder, Indigenous people are often forced to endure a spectral, undead presence in dominant culture, reflected in policies and legal practices that continue to delegitimise their status as sovereign people.

Resisting this process of erasure, Indigenous responses to frontier are inexorably tied to an activist agenda, relating to, among other things, sovereignty, land rights, and greater political agency. Dunbar-Ortiz notes how ‘the movement of Indigenous peoples to undo what generations of “frontier” expansionists had wrought

⁵⁸ Wilcomb E. Washburn, *Red Man’s Land White Man’s Law: The Past and Present Status of the American Indian* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), p. 143.

⁵⁹ James Wilson, *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America* (Oxford: Picador, 1999), pp. 302-315; Frank Goodyear, ‘The Narratives of Sitting Bull’s Surrender’, in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth S. Bird (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 29-43 (p. 41); Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 57.

continued during the Vietnam War era and won some major victories but more importantly a shift in consensus, will, and vision toward self-determination and land restitution, which prevails today'.⁶⁰ Wherever frontier ideology appears, she claims, it represents an obstacle to Indigenous self-determination, since it embodies a colonial mindset that seeks to permanently erase or exclude Indigenous peoples. She notes how:

Reconciling empire and liberty—based on the violent taking of Indigenous lands—into a usable myth allowed for the emergence of an enduring populist imperialism. Wars of conquest and ethnic cleansing could be sold to “the people”—indeed could be fought for by young men of those very people—by promising to expand economic opportunity, democracy, and freedom for all.⁶¹

Her point is clear: expansionist frontier thinking returns time and again in the rhetoric and mythic constructs deployed by dominant culture in justifying military intervention overseas, as well as imposing stricter controls on migrant and Indigenous cultures at home. The tragic irony of this situation is most apparent when she observes how the undeclared war on the Indigenous and racialised Other is often paid for with the lives of the same — the poor, dispossessed, marginalised — whose economic and cultural self-interests are similar to those they are told represent enemies of the state.⁶² It is

⁶⁰ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, p. 179. Audra Simpson notes how the study of borders/bordering in North America 'is dominated by and imagined almost exclusively within the Chicano studies literature' in which context border crossing is a transgressive act and 'a means of decentering the national narrative of a culturally homogenous and monolithic nation-state.' However, she goes on to say that 'unlike Chicanos, who move through juridical identities and designation as they cross the border (from Mexican, Mayan, or otherwise, into “Chicano” status within the United States), for Iroquois peoples the border acts as a site not of transgression but for the activation and articulation of their *rights* as members of reserve nations, or Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy peoples.' Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 116.

⁶¹ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, p. 106.

⁶² On the subject of Native American participation in US military action, Winona LaDuke and Aaron Cruz note that throughout recent history 'Native peoples have served in the US military in extraordinary numbers' fighting on behalf of a colonial power that has consistently and violently sought the destruction of indigenous peoples. As of the beginning of the twenty-first century, the authors note that there are somewhere between 160,000 and 190,000 Native American veterans, which equates to around ten per cent of Native Americans living in the U.S., roughly triple the proportion represented by non-Native populations. It is an incredible figure that highlights a tradition that repeats itself though history. See Winona LaDuke and Sean Aaron Cruz, *The Militarization of Indian Country* (East Lansing: Makwa Enewed, 2013), p. 9. As to why so many Native Americans seem to enter military service, Tom Holm,

precisely because of the terrible and enduring effects of frontier thinking that is it vital to examine the work of writers like Silko, Owens and Vizenor in this context. Their exploration of the relationship between Native, non-Native and mixedblood people, as they navigate the fraught ideological landscape produced of frontier thinking opens up new critical spaces.

Beyond Spectacle: Puncturing the Transcendent Myth in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*

The undeclared war on indigeneity that Paula Gunn Allen names in *The Sacred Hoop* and which motivates scholars like Byrd and Dunbar-Ortiz to expose the deep seated mechanisms of settler colonialism in current US policy, finds expression in surprising places. For instance, the dramatic opening scenes of Sherman Alexie's 1996 novel *Indian Killer* describe a murderous spectacle that evokes the devastating aerial attacks of the Vietnam War, relocated to an amorphous 'anywhere' US. The novel begins with the violent birth of John Smith, whose teenage Native mother has been rushed into a decrepit Indian Health Service hospital to give birth. No sooner has the baby arrived than a nurse carries the child to a waiting helicopter pilot, who then flies the child to his new white adoptive parents. The theft of the child, literally ripped from his mother's womb, and spirited away, is a powerful and disturbing image, recalling the institutional violence of the Indian Boarding School system, which systematically

a professor of American Indian Studies and Vietnam veteran, expands the question to ask whether Native peoples have adopted U.S. military traditions to 'suit their own purposes', or as an attempt to 'legitimize themselves as Americans.' By way of an answer, Holm claims that 'few, if any, say that they entered the armed forces to gain acceptance in the white world or to better substantially their socioeconomic status in the larger American class structure.' As an alternative reason, Holm suggests that 'it seems that they have given military service meaning within the context of their own tribal structures, beliefs, and customs. What more than anything American Indians have done in regard to military service is syncretize it with their own systems.' See Tom Holm, *Strong Hearts Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 101.

separated Native children from their families in the cruel belief that in order to ‘save the man’ it was necessary to ‘kill the Indian’.⁶³ Having collected the infant, the helicopter passes over what is described in generic terms as ‘any reservation, a particular reservation’, which has the effect of critiquing the deplorable economic conditions of the reservation and also portraying the US as a vast captive nation, itself a form of reservation.⁶⁴ As it does so, the gunner inexplicably opens fire and ‘strafes the reservation with explosive shells’.⁶⁵ The narrator declares that ‘suddenly this is war’ and, although Vietnam is never explicitly referenced, the allusion is clear. Guns blazing, the narrator adds:

Indians hit the ground, drive their cars off roads, dive under flimsy kitchen tables. A few Indians, two women and one young man, continue their slow walk down the reservation road, unperturbed by the gunfire. They have been through much worse.⁶⁶

Most telling is the behaviour of those people who simply continue in their journey, unperturbed by the surrounding violence. They have grown accustomed to it and ‘have been through much worse’ and, no doubt exhausted by the relentless nature of the undeclared conflict to the point of unfeeling, shuffling onwards with the slow, deliberate yet oddly aimless walk of the undead, oblivious and desensitised.

Analysing this apocalyptic scene, Krupat claims that the particular war of interest is not being waged in the ‘faraway jungles of Vietnam, called “Indian Country” by American troops’, but in ‘American Indian Country’, represented as a war to ‘end domestic colonialism rather than a war to preserve foreign colonialism’.⁶⁷

⁶³ This policy is ascribed to founder of the Carlisle Indian School, Richard Pratt, qtd in Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 36.

⁶⁴ Sherman Alexie, *Indian Killer* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 3.

⁶⁵ Alexie, *Indian Killer*, pp. 3-6.

⁶⁶ Alexie, *Indian Killer*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters: Native American Indian Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 98-99.

The war on Indigeneity is here writ large and on-going. This claim similarly echoes throughout Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, where the Indian Wars have never ended in the Americas, and again in the work of Louis Owens, who as I will show in chapter three, also examines the idea that frontier persists in several forms, especially as a contested point of violent contact between Native and non-Native cultures.⁶⁸ In *Indian Killer* Alexie conjures the Vietnam War to vividly illuminate the war in domestic 'Indian Country' presenting Indigenous people as the sacrificial figure of US colonial aspiration, *homo sacer*, their children snatched away, their homes destroyed under a barrage of gunfire. Later, as a grown man, when John Smith appears to take his revenge on white American society by supposedly murdering and abducting white individuals, it is never entirely clear whether John is actually the killer, and if so, whether he is the archetypal movie monster of the Hannibal Lecter mould or simply reacting to the state of war into which he has been born, becoming an unwilling participant and victim, with the dominant culture's attempts at assimilation now lying in tatters.

The uncertainty around motive and the confirmed identity of the killer raises questions about the reliability of the narrator and of the reader, who must question what preconceptions they are bringing to bear on the text. The obvious cinematic quality of Alexie's prose is of signal importance, utilising readers' well-honed cinematic and televisual interpretive skills. David Foster Wallace notes that such 'illusions of voyeurism and privileged access require real complicity from viewers' transforming them from idle consumer to silent partner.⁶⁹ Likewise, Kathleen McCracken argues that 'as with his sustained appropriation of the serial killer plot, a

⁶⁸ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 15.

⁶⁹ David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2 (1993), pp. 151-194 (p. 154).

standard in the post-sixties Hollywood repertoire, and his politicised inversion of the popular literary and cinematic image of the Indian killer, the ironic-parodic implication is that mainstream movies should and could be used to address, and redress, serious social issues rather than simply to entertain'.⁷⁰ Indeed, Alexie's novel is doing exactly this, cutting deep into the ideological connective tissue of dominant US culture. More than simply appropriating aspects of Western cinematography, *Indian Killer* exposes the raw underlying violence that sustains mythic constructs like that of the John Wayne-inspired Indian killer while also forcing the reader/viewer to bear witness and tacitly participate in the violence these constructs inspire.

In *Indian Killer*, John is both captor and captive, fighting for his life and looking for salvation in Native tradition. In chapter eight, when he identifies his second victim, Mark Jones, a small defenceless child whom he initially surveils from a distance in the pose of a classic serial killer, the reader is appalled to think that he will actually submit to kill an innocent child. When he enters the house, intent on committing this crime, he does so with a sense of righteousness and clear headedness, caught in the transcendent belief that his actions serve a greater purpose than mere personal satisfaction. Truly, then, to do so, it is suggested, he must be a monster, if he can approach a sleeping child curled in the 'fetal position' and go about his abhorrent business.⁷¹

The killer waited in that tree until midnight. The knife felt heavy and hot. With surprising grace, the killer stepped from the tree, walked up to the front door, and slipped the knife between the lock and jamb. The killer was soon standing inside a dark and quiet house, tastefully decorated in natural wood and pastel colors, with stylish prints hanging on the walls. With confidence, the killer explored the living room, bathroom, and study downstairs. Then the killer walked upstairs and into the master bedroom, where the mother slept alone. She had thrown off her covers, and the killer studied her naked body, pale white in the moonlight streaming in from the

⁷⁰ Kathleen McCracken, 'Appropriating with a Purpose: Cinematic Contexts and Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Sherman Alexie', *Irish Journal of American Studies*, 7 (1998), 21-40 (pp. 29-30).

⁷¹ Alexie, *Indian Killer*, p. 152-153.

window. Small breasts, three dark moles just above the light brown pubic hair. She was almost too skinny, prominent ribcage, hipbones rising up sharply. The killer knelt down beside the bed as if to pray. Then the killer did pray.⁷²

The scene is reminiscent of Hollywood slasher films: the killer calmly observing his prey from within the boundary of the victim's private domain, where the object of his fixation—typically, a young white woman—undresses for bed, unaware of his presence. This cinematic motif is meant to place the audience in the position of the killer, to participate in the feeling of predatory dominance. He easily penetrates the home, bypassing the nominal security before casually exploring within, highlighting that this could be any home in North America. Alexie's use of cinematic techniques is so deliberate as to demand attention, and continues, as McCracken suggests, in the tradition of the 'Indian with a camera', outlined in Silko's essay of the same title. Silko writes:

The Indian with a camera is frightening for a number of reasons. Euro-Americans desperately need to believe that the indigenous people and cultures that were destroyed were somehow less than human; Indian photographers are proof to the contrary. The Indian with a camera is an omen of a time in the future that all Euro-Americans unconsciously dread: the time when the indigenous people of the Americas will retake their land. Euro-Americans distract themselves with whether a real, or traditional, or authentic Indian would, should, or could work with a camera. (Get those Indians back to their basket making!)⁷³

The real threat of John's entry into the settled, white domestic sphere is then that despite a brutal attempt at assimilation, the threat of Indigenous survival consolidated in the form of the Indian Killer, returns, passing undetected into the supposedly secure Euramerican domain. During this important scene, the reader is restricted, restrained even, in the manner of the Hollywood slasher, to the position of the passive observer, here to witness this violent transgression of the sacred myth of Euramerican conquest.

⁷² Alexie, *Indian Killer*, p. 153.

⁷³ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), pp. 177-178. See also McCracken, pp. 21-40. For a discussion on how Alexie's serial killer parodies anthropological appropriation of tribal artefacts and human remains, see Janet Dean, 'The Violence of Collection: Indian Killer's Archives', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 20.3 (2008), 29-51.

The return of the repressed, the vengeful Indian, declaring war on white society is, of course, the unspoken fear of dominant culture, but more than just ambiguous random acts of violence, John's actions/fantasies reveal that the power of his character is simply to continue to exist in open defiance of the closed frontier and claims that the conquest of the Americas was achieved at the end of the nineteenth century.

Returning to the opening of the novel, the chapter ends with the infant John being delivered to white adoptive parents, at which point the pilot pauses to snap a photograph, the group waiting 'for light to emerge from shadow, for an image to burn itself into paper'.⁷⁴ The unprovoked attack on the reservation, John's violent birth, and his subsequent abduction reinforces his *homo sacer* non-entity status, and he is passed around like a trophy to be traded and posed for photographs. Two forms of signification are taking place here. The first is the cinematic helicopter attack on the reservation, either real or imagined (it is not entirely clear which owing to the dreamlike quality of the scene), that reveals an on-going and yet undeclared war against Indigenous people. The second is a moment loaded with mythogenic significance, as John's adoptive white family seek to erase his Native lineage and replace it with a false memory, memorialised in film, by posing for a family photograph on the day of his traumatic abduction, falsely believing that this performance somehow assures his assimilation. It is not a coincidence that the helicopter attack draws stark parallels with iconic Vietnam War films like Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, where Vietnamese civilians are casually strafed by passing attack helicopters without thought or consequence, just as the undeclared war in Alexie's novel is similarly a war against the racialised Other

⁷⁴ Alexie, *Indian Killer*, p. 8.

whose life has no currency within the dominant myth-narrative, located on the Other side of the militarised frontier.

Continuing in this trade of cinematic motif, Janet Dean notes how at the end of the novel the killer carries a backpack containing various mementos of his killing spree, including bloody scalps and a scrapbook. Like other cinematic motifs, this too is a standard of the archetypal slasher, where the killer memorialises each violent act. Dean argues that this cinematic intertextuality functions as a critique of Native appropriation, specifically the museumisation of Native cultural identity, whereby Native cultures are posed as artefacts representative of an extinct people. She notes how ‘the killer’s collection reflects Alexie’s penchant for ironic reversal’ and how in the novel ‘collections are part of the mechanism of racial and ethnic hierarchy in the United States’ reinforcing ‘white power and undermining indigenous authority’.⁷⁵ She also identifies a tendency in the criticism of the novel to focus on the physicality of the violence directed towards white characters, and how this is seen as a ‘kind of authenticating act for indigenous characters’.⁷⁶ Interestingly, she quotes Cyrus Patell’s claim that the novel ‘depicts the ontology of hybridity as an ontology of violence’ which follows his larger thesis that hybridity is in itself an inherently violent experience.⁷⁷ However, as Dean suggests, fixating on the directionality of interracial violence risks downplaying the issue of underlying systemic, racialised violence that has been such a defining force in John’s life:

Underplaying the universality of racial violence in the novel misses the point that, as Alexie puts it, ‘this is a country founded on slaughter. Columbine isn’t very far from Sand Creek’. In fact, the novel is constructed of parallel acts of violence, as the author points out in response to critics: ‘there was an Indian kid being kidnapped and a white kid being kidnapped. Everyone failed to see any ambiguity’.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Dean, ‘The Violence of Collection’, p. 31.

⁷⁶ Dean, ‘The Violence of Collection’, pp. 31-32.

⁷⁷ Cyrus Patell, qtd in Dean, ‘The Violence of Collection’, p. 32; Cyrus R. K. Pattell, ‘The Violence of Hybridity in *Silko* and *Alexie*’, *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, 6 (1997), pp. 3-9.

⁷⁸ Dean, ‘The Violence of Collection’, pp. 32-33.

In Dean's analysis, this systemic, institutionalised violence notably surfaces in Alexie's examination of the college syllabus, where the 'abstract cultural violence of ethnographic collection is linked to the concrete physical violence of novel'.⁷⁹ In excavating the underlying systems of violence that shape John's world, Alexie's novel offers a useful example of how literary explorations of violence (literary violence) can engage with the normative, systemic violence that passes unseen in dominant culture. James H. Cox makes a similar point, noting how in Alexie's fiction there is a 'direct correlation between popular culture productions—such as films, television programs, pop songs, New Age books, radio talk shows, and mystery novels—and the many forms of violence perpetrated against contemporary Native people.'⁸⁰ As a product of violence, born into violence and defined, as Dean and Cox suggest, by a culture of violent appropriation, when John starts to act out his own expression of violence it can be read as his awakening to this violent reality. Rather than being a passive, invisible victim of systemic violence, he becomes an active participant, and it is at this point of entry that the reader begins to appreciate the relationship between these different modes of violence. When that system is suddenly inverted the normative, invisible, everyday violence required by the dominant culture to sustain its dominance over marginalised people is thrown into sharp relief, the passive victim becoming an active agent. This inversion draws attention to the deliberate play on the title of the novel, *Indian Killer* which is simultaneously a reference to white violence directed against Indigenous peoples, and in John's case, an Indian who is also (possibly) a killer.

⁷⁹ Dean, 'The Violence of Collection', p. 42.

⁸⁰ James H. Cox, *Muting White Noise: Native American and European Novel Traditions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), p. 146.

It can also be instructive to think of Alexie's *Indian Killer*, for instance, as a parodic riff on captivity narratives, only in Alexie's iteration the white captive of the traditional captivity narrative does not get to go home. In this version, the captivity narrative is allowed to run its course without the intervention of the figure of the white liberator. Instead the novel closes with the supposed killer dancing on a generic cemetery in a generic reservation, much like the generic reservation hospital of his birth, only here he recalls the Ghost Dance, calling for an end to Euramerican violence:

The killer sings and dances for hours, days. Other Indians arrive and quickly learn the song. A dozen Indians, then hundreds, and more, all learning the same song, the exact dance. The killer dances and will not tire.⁸¹

Where Krupat asks if the ending of the novel is a 'warning to whites', I say that it is more an indictment of narratives of dominance, quintessentially the captivity narrative, in effect taking the narrative to its inferred conclusion without the intervention of the Anglo-American hero.⁸² It is as if Alexie is fulfilling the fantasy, returning the 'merciless savage' to the frontier as a means of highlighting the continued existence of both a militarized and all too real frontier zone existing between cultures, and of a culturally divided nation where Indian Country stands as an uncomfortable remainder of failed conquest, threatening dominant culture. Recalling the dead, and the undead of Byrd's work in *Transit of Empire*, echoes of the late nineteenth-century Ghost Dancers can similarly be felt throughout the novel as the return of the transgressive Other on the frontier of contemporary literature. Here the Native subject is no longer a diminishing entity, but rather an inversion of emigrant anxiety where the violent sacrifice of white captives reclaims Indian Country from American territory.⁸³ More than just a revenge narrative, *Indian Killer* explores the

⁸¹ Alexie, *Indian Killer*, p. 420.

⁸² Krupat, *Red Matters*, p. 120.

⁸³ Dunbar-Ortiz offers the following description of the Ghost Dance phenomenon: 'Disarmed, held in concentration camps, their children taken away, half starved, the Indigenous peoples of the West found

extremes of the simulated savage Indian and the fears it engenders in the dominant culture. Although shocking, the violence of the novel frequently overlaps and blurs with cinematic standards, achieving the peculiar effect of allowing a Native character to indulge in transcendent violence, this time directed against dominant culture. When John abducts a child from a sleeping household, it is to mirror the separation that he experienced as an infant. He has the power to use these weapons against dominant culture, and yet he returns the child and merely exposes the murderous, inhuman impulse that would seek to destroy youth and violently wrench a family apart. This underscores an ideology of dominance that seeks to relocate or otherwise ‘displace and exclude’ Indigenous people within the boundary of ‘civilised’ territory.⁸⁴

As the Alexie example illustrates, the problematic status of frontier as a sanitising myth that obscures colonial violence is demonstrably more visible in Indigenous responses, where the tools and practices of colonialism are caught between the dual compulsions of wanting to jettison signifiers of colonialism and the abject suffering that it entails, and wanting to counter monocultural dominance through a sustained process of re-evaluation that puts the violence of colonialism back into the sanitising myths of conquest.⁸⁵ A key underlying anxiety here is whether denying

a form of resistance that spread like wildfire in all directions from its source, thanks to a Paiute holy man, Wovoka, in Nevada. Pilgrims journeyed to hear his message and to receive directions on how to perform the Ghost Dance, which promised to restore the Indigenous world as it was before colonialism, making the invaders disappear and the buffalo return. It was a simple dance performed by everyone, requiring only a special kind of shirt that was to protect the dancers from gunfire.’ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History*, p. 153. B.C. Mohrbacher rejects the idea that the 1890 Ghost Dance phenomenon was the tragic final act of a disappearing people, but a creative response to the problems they faced. He writes: ‘but while the historical realities for many of the dancers were grim, still it may be more accurate to describe the Ghost Dance movement as an act of hope, rather than one of despair. It illustrates the resiliency of culture in dealing with adversity and coping with change’. B.C. Mohrbacher ‘The Whole World is Coming: The 1890 Ghost Dance Movement as Utopia’, *Utopian Studies*, 7.1 (1996), 75-85 (p. 82).

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Anti-Indianism in Modern American Literature: A Voice from Tatekeya’s Earth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 4. See also, Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, pp. 22-25.

⁸⁵ Discussing the notable absence of the US in postcolonial study, Amy Kaplan notes that such an absence effectively ‘reproduces American exceptionalism from without’ by refusing inclusion in the global postcolonial debate. In distancing itself from a demonstrably colonial past, Kaplan argues that the ‘United States is either absorbed into a general notion of “the West” represented by Europe, or it

frontier a place in contemporary criticism invites a form of unintentional complicity, in effect deemphasising historic violence by disengaging with a primary mechanism of its execution. In the following section I will offer a survey of how this anxiety came to the fore in in the 1980s and 1990s.

Responses to Frontier Part III: Re-Conceptualising Frontier as a Site of Intercultural Contact and Conflict

Given the durable legacy of frontier thinking it is perhaps fitting then that Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko, the focus of chapter two, should publish *Almanac of the Dead* just two years shy of the centenary marking Frederick Jackson Turner's landmark public lecture, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', delivered at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893.⁸⁶ Turner's thesis, considered a foundational document in the study of frontier, 'that literally generated the study not just of western but of American history', even now casts a long and

stands for a monolithic West. United States continental expansion is often treated as entirely separate phenomenon from European colonialism of the nineteenth century, rather than as an interrelated form of imperial expansion.' See Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture', in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. by Kaplan and Pease, pp. 3-21 (p. 17). Louis Owens has similarly expressed frustration at Edward Said's description of Native American literature as 'that sad panorama produced by genocide and cultural amnesia which is beginning to be known as Native American literature.' Responding to this, Owens asks: 'what is one to make of such a statement if one is aware of the rich and complex legacy of Native American writing? It is, in fact, precisely the tragic assumption underlying Said's clichéd and abysmally uninformed utterance that Vizenor and other Native American writers have spent years attacking.' Elsewhere Owens criticises the 'total silencing of indigenous voices' in Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, which he accuses of giving 'the impression of being acutely aware of a wide panoply of minority voices [...] referencing Hispanic and Black American writers [...] but nowhere, not even in a whispered aside, does he note the existence of a resistance literature arising from indigenous, colonized inhabitants of the Americas'. Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 36; Louis Owens, *I Hear the Train: Reflections, Inventions, Refractions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), p. 210.

⁸⁶ The relationship between the Columbian Exposition and Turner's paper is an intriguing one, particularly where the central motif of modernism and nation building intertwine with US originary myth. Slotkin offers an excellent discussion of the White City structure that lay at heart of the expo in *Gunfighter Nation*, whereas Robert A. Carter provides a useful commentary on the significance of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in the same context. See Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, p. 63; Richard Slotkin, 'Buffalo Bill's "Wild West" and the Mythologization of the American Empire', in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. by Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 164-181 (p. 166); Robert A. Carter, *Buffalo Bill Cody: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), p. 368.

influential shadow over the subject.⁸⁷ Elizabeth Jameson notes that regardless of its controversial pedigree, as an ‘icon of American popular culture and advertising’ frontier continues to find a receptive audience amongst those who identify with notional ‘frontiers of progress, opportunity, and innovation’.⁸⁸ It is, in her words, an idea that despite a traumatic and exclusionary history has ‘stubbornly refused to die’.⁸⁹ Jameson reluctantly concludes that ‘we cannot just dismiss the frontier’ but must instead ‘address the ways the frontier itself has been historically constructed’.⁹⁰ As we have seen, this is particularly the case at the level of popular culture and US policymaking, where Turner’s romantic idealism still finds expression in the way the US perceives of itself and its place in the world as a broker for democracy.

It is for this reason that Alfonso Ortiz, in an important essay discussing new directions in Native American history, rejects frontier as little more than a triumphalist ‘celebration of Western civilization’ that has since ‘fallen into disfavor as both an

⁸⁷ John W. Caughey, ‘The Insignificance of the Frontier in American History or “Once Upon a Time There Was An American West”’, *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 5.1 (1974), 4-16 (p. 6). Catherine Gouge argues that in the century following Turner’s address, the definition of frontier changed from a designated *place* to a more flexible notion of *space*, hence the common usage of frontier to describe new speculative frontiers of technology, commerce, science, economics, and so on. Catherine Gouge, ‘The American Frontier: History, Rhetoric, Concept’, *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-present)*, 6.1 (2007),

<http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2007/gouge.htm> [accessed 15th August 2015]. Writing in 1952, Ellen von Nardroff uses a curious and somewhat laboured animal analogy to describe a growing uncertainty amongst mid-twentieth century historians about how to best apply the frontier theory: ‘some members of the profession have cherished the animal as a household pet, others have sought to use it as a beast of burden, while still others have stalked it as an undesirable pest. [...] Unfortunately, what the profession has been harbouring is no recognizable breed of theory but a hydra-headed freak that has grown more monstrous over time, flourishing equally well on the nourishment supplied by its friends and the poison furnished by its foes.’ See Ellen von Nardroff, ‘The American Frontier as a Safety Valve—The Life, Death, Reincarnation, and Justification of a Theory’, *Agricultural History*, 36.3 (July 1952), 123-142 (p. 123). In the mid-1980s, historian David J. Weber notes how ‘in modified form [frontier] remains yet today a useful model for many historians.’ David J. Weber, ‘Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands’, *The American Historical Review*, 91.1 (1986), 66-81 (p. 67). See also John Lauritz, ‘Grasping for the Significance of the Turner Legacy: An Afterword’, *Journal of the Early Republic*, 13.2 (1993), 241-249.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Jameson, ‘Frontiers’, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 17.3 (1996), 6-11 (p. 7).

⁸⁹ Jameson, ‘Frontiers’, p. 7.

⁹⁰ Jameson, ‘Frontiers’, p. 7.

assumption and a research tool.’⁹¹ Commenting on the colonial violence produced of frontier thinking, he refuses to extend its lifespan, and yet at the same time recognises that ‘because it has been around so long and is so pervasive in our lives and language, it may be a long time, if ever, before the concept of frontier is expunged from our everyday consciousness.’⁹² Ortiz’s essay makes a compelling call to historians to address ‘the problem of why Europeans view American society as being so violent’ and that ‘the focus on violence in this historical encounter has long been trained on Indian peoples’.⁹³ As Ortiz suggests, it is then necessary to focus on those modes of violence that underpin the day-to-day running of society, not just the more obvious examples of violent excess. Only by going deeper into this subterranean world can we hope to explicate the underlying ideologies and dangerously simplistic assumptions of dominant culture, and in so doing begin a meaningful conversation about them. As such, the ritualistic re-enactment of the core exceptionalism of frontier must be addressed and not, as Ortiz suggests, merely expunged from public consciousness. As critics like Jameson and Ortiz note, however, plucking the concept of frontier root and branch from public discourse is far from straightforward, especially given its pervasive influence at all levels of cultural production and consumption. What is needed is a greater awareness of how its influence has spread throughout dominant culture. Echoes of the supremacist doctrine of frontier can be felt in many different quarters of modern American life. Wherever reductionist simulations of Indianness are stamped into the public consciousness, be that in the form of everyday consumables or unreconstructed political discourse that trades in the common idealism of the West

⁹¹ Alfonso Ortiz, ‘Indian/White Relations: A View from the Other Side of the “Frontier”’, in *Indians in American History: An Introduction*, ed. by Frederick E. Hoxie (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1988), pp. 1-16 (p. 2).

⁹² Ortiz, ‘Indian/White Relations’, p. 3.

⁹³ Ortiz, ‘Indian/White Relations’, p. 13.

and frontier, echoes of that exclusionary, silencing doctrine persist, repeated as the qualifying refrain of conquest. Patricia Nelson Limerick, like Ortiz, argues that the concept of frontier has been so often challenged and redefined, that it is no longer fit for purpose in an academic sense, and instead has become an abridged, heavily sanitised shorthand employed by filmmakers, politicians, advertising agencies, and popular fiction writers as a means of tapping into a cherished sense of manifest destiny and Euramerican cultural superiority that continues to resonate with the dominant culture.⁹⁴ Noting Turner's ideological position, Limerick suggests that because of its beleaguered past and competing definitions of what constitutes a closed frontier, the concept of frontier should be downgraded to the status of an 'unsubtle concept in a subtle world'.⁹⁵ She argues that while the Turnerian conception of the frontier was and remains highly influential, and that the most appropriate examination of the text is the one that locates it within the presentist context of its inception, it should be treated more as an unwieldy metaphor than reliable history, with discrepancies in Turner's account having been robustly challenged.⁹⁶

It is because of this tendency towards reductionism and simplicity in frontier ideology that Huhndorf characterises Turner's iconic speech as a 'performance', or,

⁹⁴ It should be noted that the popular image of the impenetrable frontier landscape has been frequently challenged. In his history of the American frontier, historian Richard A. Bartlett challenges several diehard myths of the frontier narrative that are enthusiastically embraced by Turner, commenting on how far from being impenetrable, even the densest woodlands and forests of the frontier were often 'traversed by a maze of paths and trails', cut deep into the landscape by the passing of animals and generations of Native Americans. Inter-tribal trade networks and established agricultural practices dotted the landscape. See Richard A. Bartlett, *The New Country: A Social History of the American Frontier 1776-1890* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 13-21.

⁹⁵ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: America's Conflicted Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), p. 25.

⁹⁶ Even applying the census data definition of frontier originally employed by Turner, historian John W. Caughey observes that 'the West still had great stretches of land with fewer than two residents per square mile', and likewise no shortage of 'untapped resources'. This suggests that Turner's sense of closure was premature even by his own definitions, and is more closely associated with the decline and containment of Indigenous cultures than the availability of so called virgin land, even if Indigenous presence is deemphasised in his essay to the point of obscurity. See Caughey, 'The Insignificance of the Frontier in American History', p. 12.

as Henry Nash Smith claims, that Turner is perhaps best reconstructed as an unofficial poet laureate for dominant US culture, located in the grandiose tradition of the epic form.⁹⁷ Cutting a clear path through the Turnerian morass, David L. Moore is similarly direct in his criticism, noting that ‘without material facts, Turner was describing an ideology rather than an intellectual history, much less a documented, historical reality’.⁹⁸ Despite attracting much negative criticism, Turner’s influence on the study of the frontier is unavoidable. Anyone writing about the history or the mythic significance of the frontier is, by force of long tradition, required to navigate the Turnerian problem. Handley argues that Turner’s historiography ‘depends for its effectiveness upon abstractions, such as “the United States,” “the individual,” and “an open field” in his claim that “the United States is unique in the extent to which the individual has been given an open field”’, whereas US literary fiction ‘insists upon the imaginative, particularized embodiment of all human activity, even when those particulars participate in cultural typologies or serve culturally to erase other bodies’.⁹⁹ The problem is that Turner’s abstractions are themselves a fundamental part of an exclusionary frontier ideology that relies on a simplistic romantic backdrop against which a succession of American authors have set their scene. Turner’s conception of frontier found a generally receptive audience among his contemporaries, who discovered in his writing a romantic vision of natural progress that aligned a self-reliant image of national character, tempered by hard won frontier experience, with a

⁹⁷ Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 22; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 254.

⁹⁸ Moore, *That Dream Shall Have a Name*, p. 10

⁹⁹ Handley, *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*, pp. 39-40.

resurgent form of rugged masculinity.¹⁰⁰ Slotkin comments on this dramatic shift toward the mythic oversimplification in Turner's frontier and how:

In 1893 the Frontier was no longer (as Turner saw it) a geographical place and a set of facts requiring a historical explanation. Through the agency of writers like Turner and Roosevelt, it was becoming a set of symbols that *constituted* an explanation of history. Its significance as a *mythic space* began to outweigh its importance as a real place, with its own peculiar geography, politics, and cultures. The Frontier had always been seen through a distorting-lens of mythic illusion; but until 1893 it had also been identified with particular geographical regions, actual places capable of generating new and surprising information as a corrective to mythic presupposition.[...] Indeed, once that mythic space was well established in the various genres of mass culture, the fictive or mythic West became the scene in which new acts of mythogenesis [the production of myth] would occur—in effect displacing both the real contemporary region and the historical Frontier as factors in shaping the on-going discourse of cultural history.¹⁰¹

More than an unwieldy metaphor, Turner's frontier is significant in terms of what it is not, and it positions the racialised Other as permanently excluded. Huhndorf similarly highlights the significance of cultural appropriation where it functions as a veil for violent conquest, and the significance of yoking Eurocentric expansionist ideology to popular myths of national originary as laid out by Turner:

Inevitably, popular culture became a critical site for staging debates surrounding what—and, perhaps more important, *whose*—experiences constituted the nation's history and identity. Two emblematic events, the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, manifested particularly clearly the complicated intersections of race, nationalism, and imperialism during this transitional moment in American history. These two world's fairs provided opportunities for the dominant American culture to tell stories of its own origins to vast audiences, through both visual displays and performances like Frederick Jackson Turner's famed frontier thesis speech, delivered at the World's Columbian

¹⁰⁰ For further discussion of late nineteenth century attitudes towards performances of frontier masculinity see Susan Lee Johnson, "A Memory Sweet to Soldiers": The Significance of Gender in the History of the "American West", *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 24.4 (1993), 495-517. Johnson is particularly critical of historians Henry Nash Smith and Richard Slotkin, who are felt to offer an insufficient challenge to hegemonic masculinity in their respective histories of the American West and frontier. For a similar counterpoint to Smith and Slotkin, see Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984). In their introduction to *The Woman's West*, Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson observe that the history of the West and of the frontier is often one of omissions, and that the rugged, overtly masculinised image enshrined in popular culture is unapologetically 'one-dimensional and historically inaccurate and incomplete' leaving out 'most westerners, including the original inhabitants of the land, American Indians, and Hispanics; men who came West, not as loners, but with their kin; and women of all ethnic groups and social classes'. See *The Women's West*, ed. by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p.3.

¹⁰¹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, pp. 61-62.

Exposition. Marking a key historical transition from the last Indian military victory in 1876 to the end of the conquest in 1890, these events expressed critical changes in the place Native peoples occupied in the American cultural imagination. By siting Native America in European America's past, they show white America going native in part to conceal its violent history.¹⁰²

Considering the hallowed status of frontier, the mistake is to assume that frontier thinking can be consigned to a mythic bygone age. And while it is appropriate to treat such concepts with justified scorn and suspicion, its influence in shaping a perversely transcendent, sanitising reading of ideologically motivated violence cannot be understated. The idea of virgin, unclaimed or underdeveloped land, so integral to the acquisitional impetus of frontier thinking, has proven itself to be equally resilient, even in the postcolonial moment. It is a concern that prompts anthropologist Patrick Wolfe to say of the doctrine of *terra nullius* that it is 'astonishing that we had to wait until the 1990s before such a flimsy rationalization for violent dispossession underwent any significant modification.' Even then, having been in Wolfe's words 'refurbished', the suspicion is that in popular usage the colonising process it prefaces retains much of its original meaning.¹⁰³ On the longevity of exceptionalist thinking born frontier ideology Dunbar-Ortiz is similarly unequivocal in her condemnation:

Seventy years after the Wounded Knee Massacre, when the conquest of the continent was said to have been complete, and with Hawai'i and Alaska made into states, rounding out the fifty stars on today's flag, the myth of the exceptional US American people destined to bring order out of chaos, to stimulate economic growth, and to replace savagery with civilization—not just in North America but throughout the world—proved to have enormous staying power.¹⁰⁴

When viewed as an *on-going*, undeclared war on Indigeneity, and as an incomplete conquest it is little wonder that critics like Byrd and Dunbar-Ortiz should both describe US foreign policy as the natural extension of settler colonialism and the expansionist

¹⁰² Huhndorf, *Going Native*, p.22.

¹⁰³ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, p. 203.

¹⁰⁴ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, p. 178.

frontier ideology that produced it.¹⁰⁵ Turner's frontier is characteristically distinct from its European counterpart, *frontière*, which was understood as a more static holdfast for European civilisation, and more of a stationary boundary line than an advancing one.¹⁰⁶

Conversely, Turner emphasised sweeping 'spatial mobility' over European 'geographic closure', borrowing more from the militaristic concept of *frontline* than the more European (Germanic) *Grenze*, or border.¹⁰⁷ This militaristic distinction is significant because it designates those on the other side of frontier as a *de facto* Other. Rather than a natural phenomenon of cultural and geographic succession as Turner suggests, his frontier is actually closer to that of a *frontline* in that he presents it as an advancing and inevitable naturalistic process of acquisition. Conspicuously absent in his reading is any palpable sense of the violence levied against Indigenous inhabitants, rendered by Turner as little more than a spectral primitive presence that 'remained

¹⁰⁵ In attempting to define the new American Indian Literary Nationalism that emerged in the period following the Native American Renaissance that marked the 1990s as a remarkable period of literary and artistic production, Jace Weaver claims that the emergent literary nationalism 'takes as a given settler colonialism' placing it first in his list of four key criteria. Elsewhere, Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack and Robert Warrior note that acclaimed Anishinaabeg author/critic Gerald Vizenor and serial producer of timely neologisms, 'deploys the term "paracolonial"' which roughly translates as a synonym for settler colonialism, with the added qualification of suggesting a modified form of colonialism that cannot be satisfactorily applied to settler colonialism in the U.S. However, Weaver *et al* go further and propose 'pericolonialism' as a useful addition to this evolving lexicon, from the Greek 'peri' meaning 'around,' 'through,' 'beyond' 'having an intensive force' which 'acknowledges the thorough, pervading nature of settler colonialism and marks it as something that, for indigenes, must be gotten around, under, or through.' The legacy and on-going conditions of settler colonialism that continue to deemphasise and exclude indigenous experience while perpetuating a supremacist doctrine of expansion and exceptionalism is placed front and centre amongst the primary concerns of the American Indian Literary Nationalism. Terms like 'para' and 'peri' colonialism are rooted in the dual tension produced of a desire to highlight the historic and on-going effects of settler colonialism, while simultaneously seeking to survive and move beyond it. See Jace Weaver, 'Turning West', in *The Native American Renaissance*, ed. by Velie and Lee, pp. 16-38 (p. 23); Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack and Robert Warrior, *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), p. 39.

¹⁰⁶ Kroes, 'Trespassing in America: American Views of Borders, Boundaries and Frontiers', *Yearbook of European Studies: Borders and Territories*, 6 (1993), 237-247, (p. 237).

¹⁰⁷ Kroes, 'Trespassing in America', p. 237.

invisible, implicitly and ineluctably consumed by the forward progress of America and nation-building'.¹⁰⁸

Although a continuation of European colonial endeavour by another name, Turner is at pains to assert that New World frontiers are distinct from those of the Old World, and that they play a vital formative role in forging a unique national identity distinct from European counterparts. This in turn forms part of a longstanding political tradition in the US political class that refuses to equate European settler colonialism with US expansionism or overseas military intervention. Such ideological sentimentality can still be detected in Presidential addresses when US President Barack Obama declares that 'America was not born as a colonial power'.¹⁰⁹ Turner's infamous binary of civilisation and savagery recalls 'the arrogance of the victors in the centuries-long campaign of colonial conquest'.¹¹⁰ Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher note how anxieties about historical injustices have forced historians and cultural producers to re-examine the cherished myths of dominant culture, prompting a more nuanced and introspective look at what these myths obscure and similarly misrepresent in the valorisation of the US origin story:

¹⁰⁸ Smith, *Coyote Kills John Wayne*, p. 2. Examining Turner's revisions, Klein finds much confusion and ambiguity, particularly where they pertain to actual definitions of frontier. Klein points to two major revisions, the most intriguing of which occurred in 1894 when Turner replaced 'What is the frontier? It is not the European frontier—a fortified boundary running through dense populations' with 'In the US the frontier is not a fortified boundary-line separating populous states, but by common usage implies the outskirts of civilization, the regions partially reclaimed from savagery by the pioneer.'¹⁰⁸ This revision reiterates Turner's emphasis on the formative importance of the pioneer figure in shaping US culture while de-emphasising the combative connotations of frontier as *frontline*, actively reinscribing the violence of frontier as transcendental and naturalistic. This revision is important because it demonstrates how in Turner the direct, real, subjective violence of frontier is continually being revised downwards and delegitimised in favour of a more agrarian view of cultural succession. See Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating The European Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 15; Turner, qtd in Klein, p. 14.

¹⁰⁹ US President Barack Obama, qtd in Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), p. 116. Joseph Bauerkemper also discusses Obama's allusions to US exceptionalism and manifest destiny, see Joseph Bauerkemper, 'Drums Along the Mohawk', in *Seeing Red: Hollywood's Pixeled Skins*, ed. by LeAnne Howe, Harvey Markowitz, and Denise K. Cummings (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), pp. 15-21 (pp. 15-16).

¹¹⁰ Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 9.

Frontiers were indeed the site of violent confrontations, as colonizers sought to conquer territory and Indians struggled to defend native homelands. But, at the beginning of a new millennium, many Americans are less sure than Turner who exactly was the savage and who the civilized.¹¹¹

That concern became a motivating force for the New Western historians of the latter half of the twentieth century, reaching critical mass in the 1990s, and for whom exploding the Eurocentric Westering expansionist narrative represented a logical extension to the Civil Rights era in recovering the silenced voices driven to the margins of society. Susan A. Miller notes how ‘in North America the work of Indigenous historians has hardly begun’, where ‘North American Indigenous historians, like Indigenous writers generally, are seeking ways to express content in terms that will make sense to traditional people of their own tribes and arguably to their ancestors’.¹¹² She goes on to say that:

Although this kind of ‘writing back,’ counter to the Euro-American story of this continent’s history, can be traced to the Indigenous rights movement of the 1970s, it can also be considered as old as the resistance to the invasion of America some five hundred years ago. The methodology of this kind of scholarship differs from that of American history by decentering nation-states to focus instead on tribal entities and their interests, by invoking indigenous narratives that contradict state hegemonies, by rejecting the language and taboos of state hegemony, and by laying out historical matter that tribes can use to pursue their national interests. Works in this tradition make up a literature separate from that of American Indian history.¹¹³

Resistance through the re-telling of alternative histories and the production of narratives (stories) that contradict the doctrine of completed conquest, is a core concern of Native writers discussed in this thesis, in addition to being a prime concern of Indigenous and mixedblood writers more generally. Exploding the sanitising myths of dominance that obscure or erase the violence of colonialism and the undeclared war on Indigeneity connect all of the texts discussed here. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn has

¹¹¹ Hine and Faragher, *The American West*, p. 9.

¹¹² Susan A. Miller, ‘Native America Writes Back: The Origin of the Indigenous Paradigm in Historiography’, in *Native Historians Write Back*, ed. by Miller and Riding In, pp. 25-40 (pp. 38-39).

¹¹³ Miller, ‘Native America Writes Back’, p. 39.

remarked how ‘one of the failures of American history is that so few historians are willing to critique the power of literature, storytelling, and narrative. Written history, then, is characterized by the devaluation of Indians and by the turning of historical events into propaganda.’¹¹⁴ The New Western historicism that found prominence in the 1990s, consolidated by the work of, among others, Donald Worster, the three Richards, White, Slotkin, and Drinnon, Annette Kolodny, Amy Kaplan, Donald Pease, and Patricia Nelson Limerick, has repeatedly challenged the sacred status of foundational US myth, specifically where it pertains to frontier and the West as held in the popular imagination. Worster says of the archetypal myth of Western expansion that it has been for many the retelling of a story of simple folk heroically pitting themselves against an ‘undeveloped vastness stretching beyond settlements’, which they would then transform into ‘the garden of the world [...] never mind that much blood would have to be shed first to drive out the natives; the blood would all be on others’ hands, and the farmers would be clean, decent folk dwelling in righteousness’.¹¹⁵ This historiographical shift in tone and urgency marks a deliberate attempt to confront the unreported realities and troubling legacies of these complex myths, while continually expanding the historical account to include a greater diversity of ethnic experience, specifically the racialised Other and Indigenous subjectivities.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Cook-Lynn, ‘The Lewis and Clark Story’, p. 47.

¹¹⁵ Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 6.

¹¹⁶ It should also be noted that the West, as a geographic location, continues to resist definitive definition. Hine and Faragher conclude that despite an enduring fascination with the West, there remains a general lack of consensus on the matter of actually agreeing its location. ‘Whatever its boundaries in American history’ they claim, ‘the West is not only a modern region somewhere beyond the Mississippi [or the Missouri River for that matter] but also the process of getting there.’ The West, and the many frontiers that marked its changing shape and most far-flung outer comprise a history that has produced a remarkably rich mythology that seems equally relevant anywhere in the United States, since just as ‘every part of the country was once a frontier, every region was once a west.’ See Hine and Faragher, *The American West*, p. 11. For a summary of breakthrough New Western historicism see Jerome Frisk, ‘The Theoretical (Re)Positions’, in *The New Western History: The Territory Ahead*, ed. by Forest G. Robinson (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), pp. 17-60.

This progressive approach is also marked by a desire to connect historical instances of violence with contemporary experiences of the same, resisting the sanitising, over-simplifying effect of the dominant myth-narrative. Writing about the problem of violence in what he terms the American Literary West, Handley notes how:

In fiction, violence so often seems to *have* happened, to be the unviewable moment toward which, or away from which, retrospective narratives move; it both threatens and organizes narrative coherence. To an important extent this is true of historiography, which has either blocked violence from view, in the case of [Frederick Jackson] Turner's optimistic view of frontier history, or brought it to the fore, in the case of the tragic view of New Western historians. Debates among western historians about the significance of the western hinge not only upon the causes and importance of violence, but as a result, on the narrative means by which it is made to matter.¹¹⁷

As a formative principle, violence is downgraded in the Turnerian frontier to that of a muted side effect, elided by a supreme transcendent emphasis on the rise of a nation. Turner uses the over-simplifying metaphor of 'perennial rebirth' to describe his vision of a benign nation building enterprise, in which the violence of settler colonialism is redeployed as a transcendent component of 'American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society'.¹¹⁸

Responding in the 1990s to calls to adopt a more multifaceted interpretation of frontier, and similar concerns about the validity of frontier as a useful theoretical and historiographical concept, Krupat's suggestion was that the figurative utility of old Western metaphors like frontier should not be abandoned prematurely in the rush for greater cultural pluralism. In his 1992 study *Ethnocriticism*, Krupat proposes an ethnographical framework for examining the liminal spaces that exist between Native

¹¹⁷ Handley, *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*, p. 23. See also Roy Harvey Pearce's landmark 1953 study, in which he problematises the exclusionary supremacist logic of Indian hating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, commenting on how within this framework 'the Indian belonged in the American past and was socially and morally significant only as part of that past,' a view which habitually reinforces the savagery/civilization dichotomy. See Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 160.

¹¹⁸ Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier', p. 2.

and non-Native/dominant cultures. This becomes what he terms an ‘ethnocritical frontier orientation’, because ‘one of the things that occurs on the borders is that oppositional sets like West/Rest, Us/Them, anthropological/biological, historical/mythical’, and presumably savagery/civilisation, tend to break down.¹¹⁹ In Krupat’s ethnographical model, frontier is presented as a contested border zone where hardwired cultural binaries enter into a dialectical process of resistance and revision, as well as rejection and in some instances reification. Having proposed frontier/border as a useful conceptual signifier for this process/event, it is significant that Krupat recognises how the act of different cultures facing each other in the proximal frontier zone of intercultural contact, can also produce ‘mutual rejections’ that might, in turn, lead to ‘the reification of differences, and defensive retreats into celebrations of what each group regards as distinctively its own’.¹²⁰ Krupat’s approach utilises frontier as a means of conceptualising contact and confrontation, drawing on both the disputed historical and geographical meaning of frontier while investing it with new interpretative value. Interestingly, his iteration of frontier is something of a fusion of the traditional European fortified border, *frontière*, and the Turnerian frontline, producing a tension between contested yet, to an extent, also stable frontier zone, becoming a liminal space into which ideas relating to identity and intercultural conflict can be projected.

It is a risky business, but importantly, Krupat’s formulation does not connote appropriation. His larger point is that interaction at the border/frontier, where engrained cultural binaries of us/them, Native/non-Native, West/Rest and so on, are felt to loom large, has the potential to lead to some form of cultural interchange where

¹¹⁹ Arnold Krupat, *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 15. Krupat returns to the subject of ethnocriticism in *Red Matters*, redefining it as cosmopolitan comparativism.

¹²⁰ Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, p. 15.

no single voice or experience is permitted to retain the status of absolute authority. It is to this process that Krupat applies the term ‘transculturalization’ to emphasise the ‘dual directionality of cultural contact’.¹²¹ His assertion is that while there is an inherent risk in (re)using instruments of colonialism like frontier when examining colonialism, where even a nuanced ethnocritical approach can fall foul of ‘the imperialism of criticism’, he asks whether any singular path exists that does not stray towards some absolute and therefore exclusive cultural horizon.¹²² According to Krupat’s rationale, this notional frontier does not represent a clumsy unilateral levelling of all cultures, where power differentials are obscured, or a tacit approval of colonial apparatus, but rather a site where differences can be seen to exist without necessarily presupposing hieratic positions. This is partly a move on Krupat’s behalf to anticipate accusations of utopian thinking, since the ethnocritical position he describes, albeit it in a frustrating and incomplete manner, as an encounter on the cultural borderlands/frontier is very much an anti-colonial one, where different cultures form part of a vast mural of experience rather than an assemblage of binaries that reinforce a dominant exceptionalist ideology. Broadly speaking what Krupat asserted in the early 1990s is a multicultural framework that used frontier in a figurative deployment, helping to locate the debates, conflicts and hopefully resolutions that arise at the point of intercultural contact.

Discussing the complex debates surrounding the political affiliations of Native American literary theory, Christopher Taylor warns that it is ‘generally a good policy to be wary of any absolute distinctions between cultures of East and West, colonizer

¹²¹ Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, p. 15. James Clifton’s guiding hand is readily identifiable in Krupat’s reading of frontier, according to whom frontier can be defined a ‘social setting’ and a ‘culturally defined place where peoples with different culturally expressed identities meet and deal with each other.’ Clifton, qtd in Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, p. 5.

¹²² Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, p. 6.

and colonized, or any other simple binary division of the world's people. Scholars of North American history, however, have been too quick to make just such distinctions between Native and settler cultures'.¹²³ Surveying responses to this important dilemma, Taylor explains how the multifaceted approach to North American history has produced several important models, the most notable being Mary Louise Pratt's 'contact zone' and Louis Owens's 'frontier'. Taylor writes:

Pratt's concept of the contact zone makes three important contributions to writing North American history with an eye to Native American nationalism. First, it allows for a model of cultural interaction that does not erase the existence of one or more cultures in the process; that is, while the contact zone is always structured by relations of power, Pratt's model does not immediately relegate one party to the extreme margins of the usurper's culture. Second, Pratt's model stresses the possibility of negotiation between cultures rather than establishing absolute differences between colonizer and Native. Third, Pratt's definition [...] stresses the ongoing nature of cultural negotiation.¹²⁴

Significantly, Pratt's contact zone does not 'disappear when the colonizers declare their conquest complete' with different parties continuing to negotiate, compromise, and conflict with each other.¹²⁵ For his part, Owens takes this idea in a slightly different direction, claiming that frontier is more flexible than Pratt's contact zone will allow. Taylor, however, is suspicious of Owens's frontier, specifically his 'emphasis on continuous flux' which may suggest 'a zone that is almost unknowable in any precise historical way.'¹²⁶ It is important, as Taylor argues, that these different perspectives be considered in conjunction with separatist and/or nationalist theoretical approaches, which when taken together 'allow us to maintain a sense of the meaningful national/tribal contexts in which Native literature is produced without denying that those tribal contexts are in dialogue with other cultures'.¹²⁷ In chapter

¹²³ Christopher Taylor, 'North America as Contact Zone: Native American Literary Nationalism', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 22.3 (2010), 26-44 (p. 35).

¹²⁴ Taylor, 'North America as Contact Zone', p. 38.

¹²⁵ Taylor, 'North America as Contact Zone', p. 38.

¹²⁶ Taylor, 'North America as Contact Zone', p. 39.

¹²⁷ Taylor, 'North America as Contact Zone', p. 39.

three I look at Owens's theory of frontier in greater detail, however I would challenge Taylor's reading of Owens insofar that his 'endless flux' argument is something of an oversimplification, when Owens's suggestion is more that it is necessary to resist prosthetic attempts at cultural closure that risk ossifying essentialised positions.

The tension between cultural boundary, inclusion/exclusion, violence and ideology, repeatedly finds expression in Native American and mixedblood literature where the ideological incentive that sustains the notion of 'territory' as a 'civilised' and contained space, is quite simply that of appropriation and occupation. Returning to Turner, Owens notes how:

It is certainly no accident of the American metanarrative that 1890, the year Frederick Jackson Turner chose to mark the death of the frontier, is also the year of perhaps the most notorious of the countless massacres of indigenous peoples—Wounded Knee, where nearly three hundred unarmed people, two-thirds women and children, were murdered by U.S. troops. That dimension of the colonial American experience which Turner defined as one of 'perennial rebirth...fluidity...new opportunities,' seemed to vanish once the Native inhabitant's capacity for militant resistance was convincingly eliminated and the Indian either killed or securely confined to clearly demarcated reservation space. Frontier, a dangerously unstable space, had become stable and fully appropriated territory, its boundaries marked and known in the Euramerican imagination, with Turner's proclamation.¹²⁸

The significance and timing of Turner's thesis is remarkable in that he identified 1890, the year of the Wounded Knee Massacre, as the year the frontier finally became a 'closed' space, a moment that Howard Zinn describes as 'the climax to four hundred years of violence that began with Columbus, establishing that this continent belonged to white men'.¹²⁹ Turner's thesis marks a point of crisis in as much as the closing of the frontier would seem to deny future Americans a formative space that had previously 'promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American

¹²⁸ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, pp 26-27.

¹²⁹ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States 1492-Present* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), p. 295.

people'.¹³⁰ Despite declaring the frontier a completed project, Turner's thesis represents the point at which the frontier shifted from a largely geographical location for a mythic identity, to a purely imaginary one. This new, largely fictive space opens onto an endless horizon within which a nationalist discourse that sought to connect US Americans to the continent could find a foothold. For example, the allure of the violent frontier has been a consistent feature of American cultural mythology, undergoing repeated transformation and reformulations by subsequent generations as the site of American cultural originary, or as Momaday argues that 'one function of the American imagination is to reduce the American landscape to size, to fit that great expanse to the confinement of the emigrant mind. It is a way to persist in our cultural being', adding that 'as long as we can transform the landscape to accommodate our fragile presence, we can be saved. As long as we can see ourselves on the picture plane, we cannot be lost'.¹³¹

Kaplan suggests that as multiple visions and interpretations of space, landscape, border and boundary begin to open-up, contested concepts like frontier become more porous and less well defined, becoming home to a cacophony of voices. However, one important difference between Krupat's transculturalization, Pratt's contact zone, and Kaplan's 'cacophony' is the added element of chaotic polyphonic interchange suggested by the verb 'cacophony' against Krupat's preference for a more deliberate and deliberative process.¹³² In a separate discussion on the subject of

¹³⁰ Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, p. 295; Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier', p.17.

¹³¹ Momaday, *The Man Made of Words* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1997), p. 97.

¹³² In describing the diverse cultural and ethnic composition of the West, where different ethnic groups are afforded a right to equal billing in the story of the region and the making of modern America, the historian Patricia Nelson Limerick chooses instead the metaphor of a subway to explain a multi-ethnic model of the American West. Accordingly, each station along the track is both a destination in its own right –a cultural centre—and also part of a much larger network comprised of other similar stations. Such a transcultural model is perhaps most useful when trying to conceptualise something as mobile and complex as an inclusive cultural history that seeks to challenge the bi-polar historicism of the twentieth century and to which Krupat alludes in the early 1990s. Limerick also uses the term bi-polar

American Indian Nationalism, multiple Indigenous subjectivities, and recognition of the same, Daniel Heath Justice uses the verb ‘messy’ to describe the fraught and often contentious interrelation of multiple critical voices from across the cultural spectrum. He writes: ‘The world is not simple; it never has been, nor will it be in the future. Kinship, like life, like honest literature, is messy, contradictory, complicated, uncertain; it depends on active engagement and participation, not passive acceptance of ideas and definitions instituted for the ultimate aim of our erasure. The ethical challenge for us is to affirm an adaptive balance between the political pragmatics of racial rhetorics and the familial ideals of attentive relationship that takes complexity as a necessary given for indigenous subjectivities.’¹³³

Indeed, Krupat’s hedging around the existence and value of multiculturalism speaks directly to his formulation of frontier as a liminal space where interchange is only one of many possible outcomes arising from contact. Later on in the same study Krupat proclaims that ‘I believe the multicultural “future” is already here’ only to then add the disclaimer that ‘inasmuch as monocultural supremacy is still promoted at the highest institutional levels’.¹³⁴ Are we to assume from this that in Krupat’s analysis multiculturalism has been achieved under the conditions of monocultural supremacy? Krupat certainly does not offer a straight forward answer, but he does go on to explain how:

In a certain sense, indeed, the term multiculturalism is redundant if, as I have suggested, culture is best conceived in a manner analogous to Bakhtin’s conception of language as a socially plural construct in which our own speech is never entirely and exclusively our own, but always heteroglossic and polyvocal, formed always in relation to the speech of others. As Bakhtin says, ‘language lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s [...] as culture is always, if not ‘half someone else’s,’ at least never all one’s own. No more

to highlight a tendency in some twentieth century histories of the West and frontier to reduce what is a remarkably diverse cultural West, to simply that of ‘whites’ and ‘Indians.’ See Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, pp. 292, 58.

¹³³ Daniel Heath Justice, ‘Rhetorics of Recognition’, *The Kenyon Review*, 32.1 (2010), 236-261 (p. 257).

¹³⁴ Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, p. 236.

than language as a medium of actual communication could culture *in historical time* ever be pure; only as the projection of an idealized logic could one posit either a strictly pure speech or culture.¹³⁵

Krupat's use of Bakhtin is instructive in understanding how he uses frontier as a conceptual space where difference is to some extent shared, with points of contact and comparison effectively built-in to linguistic interchange across the frontier/border. This, in turn, becomes a common ground with a shared familiarity for all parties, and herein lies one of the problems with Krupat's ethnographic frontier: it strays into the politics of the proposed separatism of American Indian (Literary) Nationalism. Another way to think about Krupat's model that does not automatically lead into an essentialised cul-de-sac, is to consider frontier as merely one of many points of contact, defined in part as a site predicated upon the existence of shared experience, even if that experience originates from radically different positions. Of principle difficulty here is the word 'shared' with connotations of something that is mutually agreeable, whereas in Krupat's usage it refers to a shared point of contact without necessarily prescribing a value to that experience.

But while Krupat's ethnocriticism is as an unwieldy oxymoronic beast, which he himself struggles to define in clear terms, his anxiety points towards one of the major problems in talking about frontier within the context of Native Studies – how does one talk/write about one of the principle tools/weapons of settler colonialism without reproducing or deemphasising the effect/consequences/legacy? One response, and one that can be found in Krupat, is the call for a diversity of approaches that combines critical insider and outsider voices from Native and non-Native perspectives. The cosmopolitan approach espoused by Krupat, and one that envisions a polyphony of non-hieratic voices eroding the monolith of the post-Enlightenment

¹³⁵ Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, p. 237.

metanarrative would seem, at least in part, to be a positive move forward, but will doubtless continue to generate much needed debate owing to a fractious position with respect to American Indian Literary Nationalism, where ‘tribalcentric’ Indigenous voices must be heard first and foremost.¹³⁶

The multimodal, shifting meaning of frontier is a surprising development, and certainly one that has fallen out of favour in the twenty-first century. The value, however, of opening-up these old colonial paradigms for renewed criticism, reconceptualising them, and in so doing exposing the supremacist ideology therein, allows for critics and cultural producers to keep these important issues in full view and promote further discussion. This formulation can also be detected in the work of Limerick and Kaplan, where the metaphors of an interconnected subway network and cacophony are used to describe a complex space of shifting and uncertain cultural positions that seeks to defy, at least in spirit, hierarchic structures. Once again, the presence of resilient, monocultural myths of dominance and containment prove to be a principle obstacle that must be overcome and complicated if Other voices are to be heard. Neil Campbell prefers to use the rhizomatic theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix

¹³⁶ Summarising the complex nationalist position James Mackay offers this helpfully concise précis: ‘currently the deepest division in Native American studies is that between a loose grouping of “nationalist,” “separatist” or “tribalcentric” critics, who are concerned with researching the historical foundations of (and furthering) autonomous Native American intellectual traditions, and another group often described as “cosmopolitan,” “hybridist” or “postcolonial,” who are more concerned with investigating the complex interrelationships between European and Native thought over the 500-year colonial period, often encapsulated in the figure of the mixedblood.’ See James Mackay, ‘Review: Native American Literary Theory’, *Journal of American Studies*, 41.3 (2007), 675-680 (p. 676). Emphasising the need for tribalcentric critical theory, Sean Teuton states that ‘When Native scholars recall experiences of colonial domination and cultural privation within their own communities or families, they discover the necessity of theories relevant to the real lives of their people, those whom their scholarship can serve. This exhortation to us by our tribal constituents is often characterized as “heeding the voices of our ancestors,” in the words of Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred. It’s the call of a history that lays claim to our tribal selves. As our tradition shows, a practical criticism in American Indian studies should thus recognize that what we call “theory” must refer closely to our real worlds: the social, economic, and ecological conditions in which we live. As an empirically tested process, theoretical inquiry works better to explain and challenge the political subjugation of Indian Country.’ Sean Teuton, ‘The Callout: Writing American Indian Politics’, in *Reasoning Together*, ed. by Womack *et al*, p. 113.

Guattari, and John Rajchman's concept of 'leaking' society/culture that cannot be contained within the confines of metanarratives and epic (Euramerican) myth, to offer a reading of the New West as a more representative complex of identities, cultures, and experiences. Quoting Paul Gilroy's discussion of 'intermediate concepts' and 'third spaces', Campbell stresses the importance of moving between and beyond 'established parameters and binary definitions' that fixate on discrete *national* dynamics, moving instead towards a postwestern (in the fixed sense of the word) West, and away from rigid notions of *insiderism*.¹³⁷ United in the view that dominant narratives must be re-contextualised and decentred in this way, similar readings of frontier, such as the one proposed by Owens, seek to draw out the useful cultural crossings and interventions that can produce a more richly dialogic experience.

Noting the importance of problematising myths in this way, Weaver draws a parallel between Momaday's essay 'The Morality of Indian Hating' and the climactic revelation at the end of John Ford's classic Western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. In the iconic 1962 film, John Stewart plays Senator Ransom Stoddard who, having confessed his fraudulent part in the shooting of notorious outlaw Liberty Valance to newspaper editor Maxwell Scott, is told in a often quoted exchange that 'This is the West sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend'.¹³⁸ Weaver suggests that the same pathological inability to look beyond mythical constructs and instead render myth as fact prompted Momaday to write: 'The Indian has been for a long time generalized in the imagination of the white man. Denied the

¹³⁷ Neil Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), pp. 25-28.

¹³⁸ Jace Weaver, 'The Mystery of Language: N. Scott Momaday, An Appreciation', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 20.4 (2008), 76-86 (p. 76). Commenting on this memorable line, Ken Nolley explains that 'Ford's narrative strategy often encouraged ignorant audiences to make this kind of mistake'. See Ken Nolley, 'The Representation of Conquest: John Ford and the Hollywood Indian, 1939-1964', in *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, ed. by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), pp. 73-90 (p. 76).

acknowledgment of individuality and change, he has been made to become in theory what he could not become in fact, a synthesis of himself'.¹³⁹

Momaday's vision of the West can be useful here for offering a way of reading the intersectionality of different separate but shared cultures. Expanding on this core observation, Momaday goes on to trace the coordinates of this disparate yet shared experience, linking it to the human desire to project deeply held desires, fears, and anxieties onto the symbolic unknown spaces that exist at the point of contact and confluence between different cultures:

Our human tendency is to concentrate the world upon a stage. We construct proscenium arches and frames in order to contain the thing that is larger than our comprehension, the plane of boundless possibility, that which reaches almost beyond wonder. Sometimes the process of concentration results in something like a burden of belief, a kind of ambiguous exaggeration, as in the paintings of Albert Bierstadt, say, or in the photographs of Ansel Adams, in which an artful grandeur seems superimposed upon a grandeur that is innate. Or music comes to mind, a music that seems to pervade the vast landscape and emanate from it, not the music of the wind and rain and birds and beasts, but Virgil Thomson's *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, or Aaron Copland's *Rodeo*, or perhaps the soundtrack from *The Alamo* or *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*.¹⁴⁰

His extended exposition is a reminder that within a wider cultural context 'integrated' and 'integration' do not necessarily represent a flattening out of different cultures, producing a kind of even multicultural distribution, but rather that different cultural experiences in the US find common footing in the mythologies that define culture in the popular imagination, even if those commonalities often pertain to wildly different, even violently confrontational, experiences.

However, a proponent of the view espoused by the American Indian Nationalist movement, Dunbar-Ortiz is notably cautious in her dealings with both the conception of frontier as a space of shared cultural encounter and the transgressive potential offered by postmodernism that has emerged as one of the most useful

¹³⁹ Momaday, qtd in Weaver, 'The Mystery of Language', p. 76.

¹⁴⁰ Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, p. 90.

approaches for exploring a constantly changing, multi-layered cultural landscape. Lyotard's definition of the postmodern is instructive here and is worth quoting in full, noting how the postmodern allows for the explication of that which is unrepresentable within the confines of the modern:

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquiries into new presentations—not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable. The post-modern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgement, by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating.¹⁴¹

For Vizenor, the irreverent rule-breaking, border crossing, frontier-busting potential offered by the postmodern overrides criticism that portrays postmodernism as a fashionable nonsense, albeit a very convincing and tricksterish one. This critique of postmodernism claims that it cleverly substitutes one metanarrative for another, in this instance a fragmented postmodernist bricolage, which, like the modernisms it sought to supplant, looks oddly anachronistic and tied to the anti-realist literary experimentalists of the mid-twentieth century. For Vizenor, postmodernism offers an invitation to 'narrative chance,' which forms the centrepiece of a slippery 'new language game and an overture to amend the formal interpretation of tribal narratives'.¹⁴² As I explain in chapter four, Vizenor's approach is, by turns, 'playful, paratactical, and deconstructionist', placing cultural ideas, voices, and experiences in unusual juxtapositions, offsetting the historic inaccuracies and misdeeds of cultural anthropology, while giving tenure to new Native criticism.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Jean-François Lyotard, qtd in John Lowe, 'Monkey Kings and Mojo: Postmodern Ethnic Humor in Kingston, Reed, and Vizenor', *MELUS*, 21.4 (1996), 103-126 (p. 103).

¹⁴² Gerald Vizenor, ed., *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), pp. 3-4.

¹⁴³ Vizenor, *Narrative Chance*, p. 4.

One overarching concern in this area of the debate around the relevance of frontier is that it is grossly reductive to consider frontier as a *shared* space, when quite clearly that has not been the case. However, that reading suggests that counter readings will always be overshadowed by the dominant narrative, since frontier is a product of dominant culture and principle means of securing conquest, albeit unsuccessfully. Readings that work against the grain of the dominant narrative, that assert different cultural perspectives, can complicate and denaturalise the implied truth of founding constructs like frontier bestowed from a position of dominance. What emerges is something altogether new that maintains a fraught relationship across a contested frontier that has the potential to offer new and inclusive ways of challenging dominance. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, for instance, have emphasised the importance of occupying multiple positions with respect to the conceptual frontier, illustrating the tensions between those who wish to deemphasise frontier as a useable concept, and those who wish to repurpose and explode it in favour of a more pluralistic interpretative framework:

In general, we might think of the ways in which the frontiers are places of highest tension, vigilance, delay. But we should add that all talk of boundaries sits in a complex relation to recognition of the larger whole within which most of the profession [English studies] operates. We do not generally identify ourselves as occupying only one of the subgroups with which our volume is concerned. Each of those subgroups functions in a coordinated, if not exactly an integrated, system in which we may occupy more than one position. Within this system there are tensions, but these tensions are themselves part of the way the larger whole functions. The frontiers in our profession seem to exist only to be endlessly crossed, violated, renegotiated.¹⁴⁴

However, counter to this and commenting on the period leading into the Native American Renaissance of the second half of the twentieth century, Dunbar-Ortiz is clear in her suspicions of such claims. She states how the ‘cultural upheavals’ of the 1960s, propelled by the civil rights movement, triggered a call amongst historians for

¹⁴⁴ Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, qtd in Smith, *Coyote Kills John Wayne*, p. 19.

a more objective, more ‘culturally relative’ revisionist interpretation of US history. The claim against this worthy undertaking is that in ‘striving for “balance,” historians spouted platitudes: “There were good and bad people on both sides.” “American culture is an amalgamation of all its ethnic groups.” “A frontier is a zone of interaction between cultures, not merely advancing European settlements.”’¹⁴⁵ The last in her list of challenges is taken more or less directly from a line of argument that grew out of the 1990s that can in turn be traced back to James Clifton, Richard Slotkin, Arnold Krupat, and Louis Owens, all of whom have explored the idea of frontier as a site of contention, conflict, and cultural encounter where people of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds confront and *deal with each other*. Dunbar-Ortiz’s suggestion is that the so called ‘trendy postmodernist studies’ that followed in the wake of the new historicism of the 1960s ‘insisted on Indigenous “agency”’. She argues that the term ‘agency’ is merely a cosmetic disguise that, while claiming ‘individual and collective empowerment’, also makes ‘the casualties of colonialism responsible for their own demise’.¹⁴⁶ Her most vehement criticism, however, is reserved for those who claim that the ‘coloniser and colonized experienced an “encounter” and engaged in “dialogue,” thereby masking reality with justifications and rationalizations—in short, apologies for one-sided robbery and murder’.¹⁴⁷ In using these obfuscating terms and leaning too heavily on a revisionist history that rewrites unilateral genocide and oppression as a dialogue as Dunbar-Ortiz claims, this ‘allows one to safely put aside present responsibility for continued harm done by that past and the questions of reparations, restitution, and reordering society’.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁶ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁸ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History*, p. 5

While greater awareness and responsibility for historic and on-going injustices are clearly of importance, much may be learned from the continued interrogation of these problematic and often controversial terms without necessarily diminishing one group in favour of another. The central issue in Dunbar-Ortiz's critique is that she considers it impossible to continue to employ these concepts since they systematically absent the Indigenous and racialised Other and deemphasise the extent to which settler colonialism is a fundamentally one-sided affair. Her analysis seems to entirely exclude the idea that concepts like frontier can still be useful in exploring and exploding the very issues that she is as such pains to address. By concentrating on instances of literary violence it is possible to navigate the pitfalls that Dunbar-Ortiz identifies, focusing on the very heart of the problem – ideologically motivated transcendent violence. Survival and recovery, watch words of the Native American Renaissance, have in the twenty-first century been expanded to include an emphasis on the new American Indian Literary Nationalism espoused by the inaugural triumvirate Weaver, Warrior, and Womack. Western paradigms like frontier that are demonstrably tied to the institution of settler colonialism might then appear as redundant when compared to critical developments in American Indian Literary Nationalism. It does not detract or distract from these important developments, however, to suggest that an examination of frontier continue *alongside* developments in the new literary nationalism since these ideas clearly have a place in the work of influential writers such as Silko, Owens, Vizenor, and Alexie, even where mixedblood identity remains a contentious issue. Acknowledging that frontier is one of the primary mechanisms of colonialism deployed against Indigenous peoples is to also acknowledge the need to better understand how these multiple and varied modes of violence perpetrated under the ideological banner of frontier continue to pass muster

in the twenty-first century. It is useful to consider how important Native and mixedblood authors responded to the monolithic status of frontier and traditional frontier thinking in the US cultural imagination, and more particularly, their focus on the enduring problem of a heavily sanitised transcendent violence perpetuated by an unreconstructed reading of these paradigms.

Responses to Frontier Part IV: Boundary Transgressions and the Third Space in Momaday and Vizenor

It is the experience of violating narratives of dominance and containment, of working to counter modes of transcendent violence by posing alternative discourses and imaginary spaces that Paula Gunn Allen has in mind when, in contemplating the end of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, she writes:

At the time I didn't realize what the end of it meant. I thought Abel ran into life, into tradition, into strength [...] I realized that in the end Abel ran into another world; that he reclaimed himself as a long-hair Pueblo Indian man by running out of this particular world-frame, this particular universe, this reality. In other words, he died. Abel was a good Indian.¹⁴⁹

Reflecting on her own experiences as a Native scholar and author trying to put into words the experience of living in a society wedded to the idea of the dead or vanishing Indian, Allen's reading suggests that Abel moves beyond the prescriptive boundaries of this world and into the sacred and imaginary space of an *Other* world. It is a motif that appears in all of the novels discussed in this thesis, in which protagonists either welcome the arrival of a new world as per the Pueblo myth of (re)creation, or transcend to another state of being that exists beyond the world described in the text. In terms of who or what Native Americans are seen to represent in America, Allen concludes that 'what an Indian is supposed to be is dead', and it is through this lens that mainstream

¹⁴⁹ Paula Gunn Allen, *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing Loose Canons* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), p. 39.

American culture perceives the Native American subject as permanently *Othered*, excluded, a fixture of a violent and formative past.¹⁵⁰ When viewed in this way, the Native subject becomes something that is ‘unrecognizable to an Indian’ but easily reproduced in the public consciousness in the form of largely stereotypical and derogatory simulations.¹⁵¹ In her analysis of Momaday, Allen emphasises the importance of the Third Space, of that special realm unique to literature that moves protagonist, narrator, and reader towards a dynamic conception of Indigeneity that exists beyond the metanarrative of the dead or disappearing Indian enshrined in frontier myth. In such a space cultural memory exists in experiences and stories born of sacrifice and resistance, creating what Momaday refers to as the ‘sacred dimension’ of the American landscape, where memory, landscape and sacrifice combine.¹⁵²

The Third Space or alternative world space presented at the close of these texts also suggests a revolutionary vision of global or transnational Indigeneity in which the world is remade according to core tenets and beliefs held by Indigenous peoples as opposed to the largely capitalist economic impulses of globalisation. Frontier and frontier thinking is abandoned at the threshold of a new paradigm, where spirituality blurs human/non-human boundaries in a favour of a more holistic worldview. If the tendency is to read violence as the end of discourse then it would seem to fix the subject as abject and unable to move or progress, in effect caught in the amber of a traumatic experience, unable to move forwards or return to its previous state. To take a well known example, the death of the protagonist Abel, in Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* is not a literal death, but a form of resurrection similar to that of a mythic

¹⁵⁰ On the development of Native Americans as the exotic Other see also Bonnie Duran, ‘Indigenous Versus Colonial Discourse: Alcohol and American Indian Identity’, in *Dressing in Feathers*, ed. by Elizabeth Bird, pp. 111-128.

¹⁵¹ Allen, *Off the Reservation*, p. 39.

¹⁵² Momaday, ‘The American West and the Burden of Belief’, in *The Man Made of Words*, pp. 89-107 (pp. 105-106).

transformation or metamorphosis which, as Bakhtin suggests, ‘serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life in its more important moments of *crisis*: for showing *how an individual becomes other than what he was*’.¹⁵³ Abel’s death is necessary if he is to move beyond the prescriptive construction of Indianness that follows him throughout the novel. Consequently, he is resurrected and his death becomes a form of violent metamorphosis which can occur because he passed out of this world and into an *Other* world where he is not subject to a host of social conventions determined by racial prejudice and a nationalist mythology that demands he remain dead and buried. Fiction, and the imagic spaces that poetic language create, here allows for new discourses to be born out of violence rather than being silenced by it. What emerges is a mode of literary expression that, to quote Žižek:

As the background of the phenomena it describes, an inexistent (virtual) space of its own, so that what appears in it is not an appearance sustained by the depth of reality behind it, but a decontextualised appearance, an appearance which fully coincides with the real being.¹⁵⁴

Episodes of violence can indeed produce unexpected critical spaces in which the traumatic and taboo can be explored and where, most importantly, the Native subject is not confined to reductive stereotype, labelled as an eternal and passive victim, permanently excluded to the closed historical frontier. The ‘inexistent (virtual) space’ created by acts of literary violence – violent interventions in supposedly stable, predetermined narratives of dominance – create new opportunities for exploring a newly defamiliarised landscape.¹⁵⁵ As a writer known for his tricksterish disregard for settled boundaries and borders, Vizenor maintains that attempts at fictional representation of Native subjects will always run the risk of becoming simulacra and

¹⁵³ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 115.

¹⁵⁴ Žižek, *Violence*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁵ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 16

are doomed to fail, hence Žižek's claim that it is in fact *realistic prose* that fails where the 'poetic evocation of the unbearable succeeds'.¹⁵⁶ It is for this reason that Vizenor's fiction strains the boundaries between problematic terms like 'authentic', 'real', and 'simulated'. Vizenor notes how 'simulations of the other are instances of the absence of the *real*,' and where the *real* remains unknowable, it creates a void into which he projects his imagination, teasing apart established constructions, or *simulations* of Indianness.¹⁵⁷ The endless resurrection and reinscription of Native American simulacra gives the impression of a spectral tribal real, which for Vizenor at least tends to produce a highly convincing but equally problematic illusion and one steeped in the ideology of oppression. In Vizenor's fiction violence is frequently tragic-comic, which points to this problematic, with the Third Space located somewhere between the two extremes. In his novel *Chancers*, the *wiindigoo*, a cannibalistic monster of Anishinaabe tradition, is embraced by a group of Solar Dancers who have adopted their own ironic totemic names: Bad Mouth, Touch Tone, Fast Food, Token White, Knee High, Injun Time, Fine Print. These Native students ritualistically kill and mutilate faculty members at their university whom they consider to be Nativist charlatans and co-conspirators in the desecration of Native American remains. The narrator describes the Solar Dancers as a 'ruck of cultural fusions, crude revisions, and naïve sanguinity', who are seeking enlightenment through a combination of traditional ceremony, New Age religion, and pop culture kitsch.¹⁵⁸ Vizenor has explained elsewhere that:

Chancers [...] is about the volatile issue of the repatriation of native skeletal remains. The Solar Dancers, a group of native college students, resurrect the native remains that are housed in the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Those faculty and administrators associated with the possession of native remains were sacrificed in gruesome ceremonies. The Solar Dancers

¹⁵⁶ Žižek, *Violence*, p. 4.

¹⁵⁷ Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, pp. 9, 1.

¹⁵⁸ Gerald Vizenor, *Chancers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), p. 12.

replaced the native remains with those of the academics, and by this ghastly substitution, the ancient natives were resurrected and became the Chancers.¹⁵⁹

The act of resurrection once again allows the ‘good’ dead Indian to violate the myth of the disappearing Native and occupy a space where terms like authentic and Indian begin to lose their cohesiveness. The ritualistic violence of the Solar Dancers which occurs throughout the novel is often comic, and even appears youthfully misguided at times, located more in an amalgam of postmodern MTV culture than anything that would dare to be called an ‘authentic’ practice, which is precisely the point.

Momaday’s character of Abel and the remains of dead Native Americans in *Chancers* and Alexie’s John Smith are reclaimed through acts of literary violence without recourse to arbitrary constructions of *Indianness* and without sustaining the myth of the vanishing Indian enshrined in frontier thinking. In *Chancers* it is precisely because of this disconnect that acts of gruesome violence produce a space-out-of-time or a self-contained moment in a similar vein to the alternative worlds presented at the end of *Almanac of the Dead* and *Bearheart*, as we shall see. The Solar Dancers are neither *real* Indians nor fake. Nor are they meant to be seen definitively as either. What is significant is that the act of violence allows the question of *Indianness* to stand apart from the bric-a-brac of Native American studies personified by the ridiculous Ruby Blue Welcome and her grotesque puppet Four Skins. Blue Welcome, a Creek and Seminole crossblood and lecturer on Native religions, posed with ‘the abusers of native chancers, praised the historical archives of dominance, and honored theories over intuition, dreams, and personal experience’.¹⁶⁰ She tells traditional stories through the medium Four Skins, a crude puppet endowed with a giant penis, stories

¹⁵⁹ Gerald Vizenor, *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), pp. 24-25.

¹⁶⁰ Vizenor, *Chancers*, p. 17.

which are intended to be satirical commentaries on the interface between Native and dominant American culture, although this frequently backfires due to Ruby Blue Welcome's position as a hack and a hypocrite. The Solar Dancers single her out for ritual execution, citing her hypocrisy and collusion with the academic institutions that have separated her from traditional knowledge. The Solar Dancers call upon the *wiindigoo* to inspire their violent ritual, where:

The *wiindigoo* monster is not a tradition, but a wicked, cultural separation, and the customary sacrifice is the other side of victimry. The arrow of the shaman pierces two hearts, one aesthetic, straight to the cold heart of cultural dominance, and the other a natural scapegoat. The solar dancers are demonic, touched by the monster, and authentic only by separation and sacrifice, but not aesthetic, ironic or tricky. The solar dancers are the best reason for trickster stories, to liberate the mind from a hazy winter and nasty separations.¹⁶¹

The ritualised violence of the dancers is meant to produce a healing effect, only it becomes self-indulgent. However, the larger significance of the scene is that it is an act of violence that effectively places the idea of Indianness beyond the amalgamated rituals, DIY smudge fans, and eclectic religiosity of the Solar Dancers. Owens writes that 'the Indian in today's world consciousness is a product of literature, history, and art, and a product that, as an invention, often bears little resemblance to actual, living Native American people'.¹⁶² The complexity of this predicament is made all the more obtuse because the 'simulacrum, or "absolute fake," is constructed out of the veneer of the "tribal real."¹⁶³ The myth of frontier, the captivity narrative, and the inherent conflict embedded in the term 'Indian Country' are all sites of colonial violence, and yet through the intervention of Indigenous and mixedblood writers that violence does not represent the end of discourse, or a sense of final closure in the case of the Native subject, but represents a degree of chance in that new formulations and relationships

¹⁶¹ Vizenor, *Chancers*, p. 51.

¹⁶² Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1992), p. 4.

¹⁶³ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 13.

may arise through interrogating these formative constructs. When Sherman Alexie's killer reopens the mythic space of Indian Country he succeeds in exposing the true horror and human cost of sustaining unreconstructed frontier myth and the legacy of frontier thinking, where the unseen transcendent violence of dominance is recycled by subsequent generations and is evident in the on-going abuse of Indigenous peoples. As we will see in chapter four, one way to escape this mythological burden is to reject the manifest manners of the dominant culture and force a break with that restraining ideology, even transitioning into a revolutionary vision of an alternative world. However, before turning to Vizenor's apocalyptic vision it is necessary to traverse Silko's wasteland, where the sanitised transcendent violence of frontier ideology is again exposed, along with the acquisitional Neoliberal gaze it has come to engender.

Chapter 2

Putting the Violence Back In: Reimagining Frontier in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

One day a story will arrive in your town. There will always be disagreement over direction-whether the story came from the southwest or the southeast. The story may arrive with a stranger, a traveller thrown out of his home country months ago. Or the story may be brought by an old friend, perhaps the parrot trader. But after you hear the story, you and the others prepare by the new moon to rise up against the slave masters.¹⁶⁴

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*

Charting both Native and non-Native responses to frontier ideology, the previous chapter concluded that violence, as it is presented in works of literary fiction, is the continuation of discourse by other means. Although always a complex and multifaceted affair, literary violence can also be thought of as a form of figurative violence - a metaphorical and symbolic construct that requires further decoding beyond what is sometimes taken as either literal or inexplicable. This idea is broadly in keeping with Louis Althusser's claim that artworks do not necessarily provide knowledge of the world they describe, but rather they help us to perceive and experience the reality produced of underlying ideologies that give form to that world. In chapter one I argued that frontier ideology and its mythic offshoots actively reinscribes acts of colonial violence as transcendent and/or necessary, which is then subsequently encoded into a much cherished public myth that continues to exert

¹⁶⁴ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 578.

considerable influence over public and political discourse in the US.¹⁶⁵ Building on this general thesis, this chapter argues that Leslie Marmon Silko's challenging masterpiece *Almanac of the Dead* (hereafter *Almanac*), works against this transcendent conceit as laid out by Turner, and exposes its legacy in the destructive terminal creeds engendered by neoliberalism and a vampiric form of global capitalism. As Turner closes his frontier, which occupied and continues to occupy a sacred space in the US imagination, the Western genre emerges as one of the dominant narrative forms for negotiating US imperial aspirations, and which through popular and political avenues seeks to preserve in perpetuity the formative romantic idealism of the frontier. It is therefore impossible to talk about frontier or the Western without invoking the mythic legacy of both, while also straying into discussions of the material consequences of unrestrained *laissez-faire* free market capitalism and the brutal forms of economic shock therapy that embrace a terminal creed of unchecked expansion underwritten by military intervention.¹⁶⁶ It is this legacy, one that externalises the Native subject as conquered, defeated, or dead, whose unacknowledged 'furious, bitter spirits' demand redress, to which Silko gives voice in her novel.¹⁶⁷

In exposing insidious forms of systemic violence, what is *experienced* - to borrow Althusser's terminology - is a supremacist doctrine of exceptionalist transcendent violence defined in large part through the binary opposition of dominant

¹⁶⁵ Louis Althusser, 'Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre' in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* trans. by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), pp. 221-228.

¹⁶⁶ I use the term 'shock therapy' in reference to Naomi Klein's study of Chicago School style free market economics, and how profiteers exploit disaster, be it manmade or natural, for financial gain regardless of the human cost of such actions. 'Shock' refers to a combination of electroshock and torture metaphors, whereby ailing economies are subjected to brutal economic interventions prior to the aggressive deregulation of the marketplace in accordance with the free market economic model broadly outlined by the economist Milton Friedman. Asset stripping, social unrest, widening disparities in wealth and poverty, corruption, and atrocity follow close behind. See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

¹⁶⁷ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 424.

Euramerican culture and the racialised Other. Essentialising the racialised Other as ‘savage’ and the Euramerican counterpart as ‘civilised’ is one aspect of Turnerian frontier ideology that has proven most stubborn, even in light of sustained critique. For her part, in removing the transcendent veil of colonial violence Silko reveals the savagery of so called Euro-Western civilisation and its woeful dependency on inherently destructive terminal creeds. Byrd notes how the sanitised ‘historical narrative American studies repeats to itself is that of a journey into a wilderness defined by whiteness from which the nation emerges as a multicultural, multihistorical cosmopole where convergences and divergences against normativity feed nonrepresentational politics and resistance’.¹⁶⁸ The inherent contradiction of that narrative is one that *Almanac* complicates, disrupting the ‘sanctioned narratives of American innocence and the presumption of the inevitable triumph of superior Anglo culture over the dark-skinned Natives of the ‘New World’.¹⁶⁹ In so doing she subverts the most common vehicle of that mythic narrative, the Western, along with its defining ideological framework: frontier. The novel opens onto a violent, pseudo-apocalyptic wastescape, the horrors of frontier ideology no barely concealed. Geographical she centres on the US-Mexico border regions, which are experiencing a state of escalating social decline in which corruption and systemic economic violence in the form of unrestrained free market capitalism, have reached a critical tipping point. Stripping away the transcendent mask, Jessica Maucione argues that *Almanac* strives to ‘demystify the capitalist, neoliberal myths of progress by way of attention to the material and embodied reality of suffering and victimization’.¹⁷⁰ The question that this

¹⁶⁸ Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁶⁹ Sara L. Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western: Myths of the Empire on the Postmodern Frontier* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005).

¹⁷⁰ Jessica Maucione, ‘Competing Mythologies of Inevitability and Silko’s *Almanac*’, in *Howling for Justice: New Perspectives on Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead**, ed. by Rebecca Tillett (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014), pp. 150-163 (p. 157).

thesis seeks to answer is how that suffering and the violence that produced it can be rendered almost invisible to Euro-Western eyes through a process of mythogenesis and ideologically motivated reinscription or erasure. As we shall see, Silko's wasteland, and her use of literary violence, forces us to look again at the deep seated ideological substrate of dominant US culture. Importantly, this crisis is not restricted simply to the US, and heading across the border from Arizona into Mexico and Guatemala via Cuba, war and revolution are found to not only threaten the security of the US-Mexico border states, but portend the emergence of a reactionary wave of subaltern anarchism that will define the second half of the novel, with the emergence of the People's Army who seek to repatriate stolen Native lands and address historic injustices.

Throughout, Silko presents the relationship between dominant US culture and Indigenous people as existing in a state of perennial conflict and incarceration; the direct consequences of the undeclared war on Indigeneity. This last should be added to the list of long-term effects of sustained economic violence historically directed against impoverished and displaced Indigenous peoples. Lidia Yuknavitch notes how the political response is itself couched in the overt language of war, be it 'drug wars, race wars, sex wars, wars on crime, wars on poverty, wars on homelessness, even psychic warfare'.¹⁷¹ She asks 'what then does this say about the dominant culture that sanctions such violent rhetoric?'¹⁷² That the response of dominant US culture to the last consequences of systemic violence is more violence, albeit dressed as a social good, is striking in the circuitous nature of its logic, in essence an unchanging,

¹⁷¹ Lidia Yuknavitch, *Allegories of Violence: Tracing the Writing of War in Late Twentieth Century Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 100.

¹⁷² Lidia Yuknavitch, *Allegories of Violence*, p. 100.

habitually destructive terminal creed. Responding to the many traumas and historical injustices reflected in the novel, Rebecca Tillett writes:

As an almanac ‘of the dead’, the text is inundated by the souls of millions of slaughtered indigenous peoples and African slaves, and acts to facilitate and amplify their ‘howls for justice’. Most significantly, Silko traces the legacy of such inhumanity and injustice in a wide range of contemporary forms of oppression: corporate, social, political and national. Consequently, the American societies of *Almanac* are inherently corrupt and depraved, the result of their links to a history devoted to destruction, oppression, exploitation and manipulation.¹⁷³

This probing and unsettling take on contemporary US-Indigenous relations plays upon Euramerican colonial anxieties. In the post-911 world we might also add the ‘War on Terror’ to this list as the latest in a reductive line of reasoning employed by a succession of US governments that effectively dresses complex social issues in the language of conflict, without ever, it seems, stopping to assess the cumulative damage of these policies as they continue to shape public discourse.

Recalling the Turnerian War on Wilderness, it is also not unreasonable to suggest that the threat of climate change and the declining biosphere constitutes another undeclared war in Silko, Owens and Vizenor, all of whom chart the environmental cost of American Progress. In an attempt to drive these circular narratives from well-established paths, Silko offers a vision of the US as a nation that habitually couches important social issues in a highly politicised lexicon of conflict, which is itself dependent on a perverse logic of transcendent violence whereby poverty can be addressed through a declaration of war. Accordingly, the US is portrayed as a nation that is at war with itself, with institutionalised corruption, violence, and endemic exploitation playing a leading role. In this context, literary expressions and examinations of violence can be read as symptomatic of a much more insidious

¹⁷³ Rebecca Tillett, “‘The Indian Wars Have Never Ended in the Americas’: The Politics of Memory and History in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*”, *Feminist Review*, 85 (2007), 21-39 (p. 22).

systemic violence which takes its cues from the ideological values preserved in mainstream US culture.

On-going tensions along the US-Mexico border and divisive immigration policy similarly gesture toward a fundamental anxiety surrounding the presence and containment of the racialised Other, again evoking the systemic, racialised violence of frontier. Silko's point, and one that conspicuously adorns the opening pages of her novel, is that the 'Indian Wars have never ended in America'.¹⁷⁴ It is this tension between the sacred mission of the Turnerian frontier, the sanitised transcendent violence that it engenders, and the continuing systemic violence of unrestrained global capitalism directed against Indigenous populations that provides the main impetus for the novel. The anger is palpable, as is the unremitting, even 'overwhelming' nature of the violence portrayed, but this is precisely the point.¹⁷⁵ Silko forces the reader to look beyond mythic platitudes and experience the unspeakable violence of the Real, or to quote David L. Moore, to bear witness, and to test the competence of the witness 'against the textual brutality of *Almanac*' and in so doing 'turn the world's story of violence toward healing.'¹⁷⁶ Principle among Silko's concerns is how the systemic violence of late twentieth century consumer capitalism has become so pervasive that it forms the conceptual background against which she sets her novel. Silko has said that *Almanac* is a novel that 'talks about how capitalism destroys a people, a

¹⁷⁴ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 15.

¹⁷⁵ Rebecca Tillett, "'Sixty Million Dead Souls Howl for Justice in the Americas!'" *Almanac* as Political Activism and Environmental and Social Justice', in *Howling for Justice*, ed. by Tillett, pp. 14-25 (p. 14).

¹⁷⁶ David L. Moore, 'Silko's Blood Sacrifice: The Circulating Witness in *Almanac of the Dead*', in *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), pp. 149-183 (p. 151); David L. Moore, 'The Ground of Ethics: Arrowboy's Ecologic in *Almanac*', in *Howling for Justice*, ed. by Tillett, pp. 164-180 (p. 164).

continent’, and as this chapter will show, Silko’s novel delivers a condemnation of that universal violence and the dominant narratives that sustain it.¹⁷⁷

As a high value political centrepiece frontier myth works from the first principle of presumed Euramerican cultural superiority, while providing tacit justification for US expansionism (both in the westward and transnational sense) and any ensuing conflict. And while the greatest groundswell of public support for transcendent and providential thinking can be traced to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the language of exceptionalism continues to find favour with politicians keen to yoke themselves to American sentimentality for the mythic frontier.¹⁷⁸ Writing in *Empire*, their critically acclaimed study of US imperialism, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri offer a scathing analysis of the morally barren ideological impetus that has driven and continues to influence US imperial endeavour:

This utopia of open spaces [the frontier] that plays such an important role in the first phase of American constitutional history, however, already hides ingeniously a brutal form of subordination. The North American terrain can be imagined as empty only by wilfully ignoring the existence of the Native Americans—or really conceiving them as a different order of human being, as subhuman, part of the natural environment. Just as the land must be cleared of trees and rocks in order to farm it, so too the terrain must be cleared of the native inhabitants.¹⁷⁹

In regard to the literary aspect, before this *hidden* systemic violence can be analysed it must first be made manifest so that it can be read and invested with meaning. As it is deployed here, systemic violence is used to discuss the causal ideological forces at play in the foundational myth of the frontier, in which notions of transformation and regeneration are combined in a quasi-transcendent metaphor for American originary

¹⁷⁷ Ellen L. Arnold, ‘Listening to the Spirits: An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko’, in *Conversations With Leslie Marmon Silko*, ed. by Ellen L. Arnold (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 162-195 (p. 183).

¹⁷⁸ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), pp.162-168. For a compelling analysis of Winthrop’s ‘conquering ideology’, see the introduction to ‘Triangulated Power and The Environment’, in *Other Words*, ed. by Jace Weaver, pp. 189-190.

¹⁷⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 168-169.

and progress. Slotkin's general thesis of regeneration through violence is that US civilisation is the progressive and somewhat inevitable product of a westward expansionist project that was made possible by acts of, at least in the popular imagination, necessary or exceptionalist violence, so called because the ends are felt to justify the means. Accumulatively, episodes of frontier violence coalesce to become a broader formative metaphor that perceives this strain of exceptionalist violence as transcendent in that it makes possible the spread of US culture and civilisation. Brian Boyd notes that literature:

offers us incentives for and practice in thinking beyond the here and now, so that we can use the whole of possibility space to take new vantage points on actuality and on ways in which it might be transformed. The ability to imagine the world as other than it is underpins pretend play, and the ability to conceive of alternatives underpins all modelling. Free thought needs alternatives and counterfactuals.¹⁸⁰

This ideological reading of violence raises questions of how best to read a literary figuration, particularly where it is not sufficient or even practical to make a like-for-like substitution of subjective violence for imagined violence as it is presented on the page. What is imagined in literary fiction may not provide concrete knowledge of the world, but it can, through the innovation of language and metaphor, create a space in which the latent can be made manifest. One recurring and notable counterfactual is the rejection of regenerative and transcendent notions of frontier violence. Where violence has been introduced into the fantasy-making apparatus it necessarily assumes a figurative role, sometimes as the expression of will, power, and dominance, or inversely as powerlessness and voiceless desperation. In *Almanac*, Silko combines aspects of cultural and social history with fiction and myth, spanning more than five hundred years of colonialism in the Americas, essentially bringing the requisite

¹⁸⁰ Brian Boyd, *On The Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2009), p. 197.

components of the classical Turnerian frontier together in order to better expose a fundamental lack of cohesion between mythic fantasy and material reality, specifically transcendent violence.

Importantly, Silko's novel arrived at a time in the early 1990s when, as previously outlined in chapter one, New Western Historicism was breaking ground on this very front. This new historicism sought to re-evaluate the Western frontier myth for a generation for whom the ghosts of Vietnam and other 'national disgraces' such as poverty, racial prejudice, and environmental degradation were of signal importance.¹⁸¹ What was notably absent in histories of the frontier and what Silko begins to address in her novel, is an examination of the frontier as a process of violent imperialistic ideology secured against the sovereign claims of Indigenous people. Most significantly, Silko's novel demands that it is time to 'call such violence and imperialism by their true name' and present a vision of the West and its legacy that at least acknowledges the fact that to those on the receiving end such violence is anything but transcendent.¹⁸² Historian Jerome Frisk summarises this paradigmatic shift:

This new history has tried to put the West back into the world community, with no illusions about moral uniqueness. It has also sought to restore to memory all those unsmiling aspects that Turner wanted to leave out. As a result, we are beginning to get a history that is beyond myth, beyond traditional consciousness of the white conquerors, beyond a primitive emotional need of heroes and heroines, beyond any public role of justifying or legitimating what has happened.¹⁸³

Whether it is, as Frisk claims, even possible to write a history 'beyond myth' remains to be seen, and surely mythogenesis – the creation and adaptation of myth – is an important component of the historiographical process that cannot simply be ignored. The *unspeakable* or invisible violence of the frontier that New Western historians like

¹⁸¹ Limerick, qtd in *The New Western History*, ed. by Forest Robinson, p. 4.

¹⁸² Limerick, qtd in *The New Western History*, p. 4.

¹⁸³ Frisk, 'The Theoretical (Re) Positions', p. 18.

Frisk are trying to reintroduce to the classical Turnerian frontier narrative, must then be articulated if frontier is to have any conceptual or historical relevance. Not only must the unspeakable violence be *put back in*, but the overall imagery of the West must be similarly reconstituted to accommodate multiple subjectivities beyond that of the archetypal white explorer, or pilgrim father, which have been historically privileged over Indigenous and racialised subjectivities. Silko's long and disturbing novel sets out to achieve precisely this aim, providing readers with a fictive reimagining of a contemporaneous cultural frontier landscape in which the unspeakable violence of the War on Poverty, the War on Drugs, and the unspoken War on Indigeneity can be experienced, not only from the privileged vantage point of white Anglo-America, but from the perspective of the disenfranchised Native subject.

The central argument of this chapter progresses from the general thesis established in chapter one that frontier myth, as established by public intellectuals such as James Fenimore Cooper and Fredrick Jackson Turner, is in large part produced by the ideological desire to not only marginalise the racialised Other, but to embrace as transcendent the violent practices that make this exclusionary relationship possible. Importantly, these practices are presented within frontier mythology as being wholly necessary, deterministic, and even providential, often silencing or reinscribing abhorrent acts of violence with a perverse nationalist rationalism. A close reading of *Almanac* renders visible a rejection of the transcendent discourse of exceptionalist violence that continues to carry water with US economic, foreign, and border policy. I begin by arguing that *Almanac* functions as an anti-Western, delegitimising the exclusionary logic of the Western while redrawing national borders/boundaries that similarly contradict the dominant historical account. In the concluding section of the chapter I examine the relationship between violence and the apocalyptic and

revolutionary forces at play in the novel, before considering the critical significance of violent forensic overexposure in *Almanac*.

Almanac of the Dead as Anti-Western

In complicating the remarkably durable violent mythology of frontier, *Almanac* exposes the processes by which the brutal consequences of metaphysical utopianism, as it was envisioned in the nineteenth century image of the US frontier, has by the twentieth century been replaced by a desire to move beyond merely visionary fantasy and actually ‘deliver the thing itself,’ regardless of the humanitarian cost of such imperialist endeavour.¹⁸⁴ Hardt and Negri argue that from the moment that the large open spaces of the US interior began to disappear, the US Constitution would be forevermore ‘poised on a contradictory border’ on which the US would be tempted to engage in ‘European-style imperialism’.¹⁸⁵ As Hardt and Negri note, however, this new drama of the US political project was played out in the Progressive era, from 1890s to the First World War which, incidentally, was the same period that ‘class struggle rose to center stage in the United States’.¹⁸⁶

As already discussed in the introductory chapters, historically speaking it is politically motivated individuals who have been the most adept at mining the rich imagery and emotive reserves of the frontier by aligning themselves with the American Mission. In what is considered an instrumental endorsement of twentieth century American exceptionalism and transcendent violence, President Woodrow

¹⁸⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 5-6.

¹⁸⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 172.

¹⁸⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 173.

Wilson, speaking at a luncheon in September 1919 in the wake of the Treaty of Versailles, said of US soldiers:

These men were crusaders. They were not going forth to prove the might of the United States. They were going forth to prove the might of justice and right, and all the world accepted them as crusaders, and their transcendent achievement has made all the world believe in America as it believes in no other nation organized in the modern world.¹⁸⁷

For Wilson at least US involvement in the First World War could not and should not be reduced to simply that of a military engagement, but rather be heralded as an example of an on-going US-led ‘transcendent achievement’ in helping to make the world ‘safe for democracy’.¹⁸⁸ In attempting to realise the transcendent conceit of the frontier, with a particular emphasis on the Turnerian legacy as articulated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, repugnant acts of violence have been sanitised, erased, or reinscribed as a necessary but unfortunate consequence of the expansionist process. The gun slinger and Indian Killer, two returning archetypal frontier stalwarts, are typically cast as unlikely heroes, helping to clear the way for a more benevolent mission, when they would be perhaps more accurately classified as convenient serial killers, as brilliantly reimagined in Cormac McCarthy’s frontier and anti-Western novel *Blood Meridian*, set in the same US-Mexico borderlands as Silko’s novel and

¹⁸⁷ US President Woodrow Wilson, speaking in favour of the League of Nations to a luncheon audience in Pueblo, CO., 25th September 1919, Michael Duffy, ‘Primary Documents’, in *A Multimedia History of World War One*, (2009),

<http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/wilsonspeech_league.htm> [accessed 23rd April 2013].

¹⁸⁸ US President Woodrow Wilson, ‘Address to a Joint Session of Congress Requesting a Declaration of War Against Germany,’ 2 April 1917. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, ‘Document Archive’, The American Presidency Project, (2013), <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65366>> [accessed 23rd April 2013]. Noam Chomsky discusses the significance of the US as universal emancipator argument in the context of the Cold War, noting how the ‘worship of the state has become a secular religion for which the intellectuals serve as priesthood’. The larger thesis of Chomsky’s book is that the post Reagan-Bush period has witnessed the transfer of tremendous wealth from public into privileged hands, with the cost ‘borne by the general population and future generations, with ‘no serious proposals to deal with the consequences of these policies’ in the long-term at government level. As of 2015 the same process continues, and as Chomsky suggests, requires that US citizens be convinced of the need for such actions. A continual state of war/conflict and/or pervasive anxieties about national security, the worship of wartime presidents and nationalist symbols divert public attention from societal and economic injustices at home. See Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 19, 408.

published six years before *Almanac*. The dangerous, often violent hostility of the frontier landscape has long been defined as fundamental in the relationship between the frontier hero - whether he or she is a pioneer, Indian killer, hunter, captive, soldier, or settler - and what is perceived as a form of natural, exceptionalist violence. It is then appropriate that Silko invokes an equally harsh and unforgiving (south) Western environment in *Almanac*. The Edenic agrarian view of a savage yet bountiful land grew out of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when US Americans were presented with two competing and contradictory images of the frontier and frontier violence, with a particular emphasis placed on violence directed towards the Native subject. The first remains one of the principle ideologies driving US expansionism, namely that of a Puritan fear of the untamed wilderness and its Native inhabitants, who are depicted as barbarians and signifiers of negative progress occupying the incomplete geographic potential of North America. The lands they occupy are similarly portrayed as wasted potential delivered by divine right to those who would cultivate them. The other grew out of eighteenth century European Romanticism, which instead chose to portray the Native subject as inherently noble, although primitive, almost child-like people with a simple spiritual purity that was both exotic and fascinating to European audiences.¹⁸⁹ The normative process sanitises and confirms acts of horrific violence as necessary, just as the violence of conquest is similarly re-dressed and the victims driven off into the cultural oubliette of racialised otherness. This expression of violence is unbearable and unremitting because it needs

¹⁸⁹ See Pearce, *Savagism and Civilisation*, p. 70, 159; Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), pp. 57-84; Martin Brückner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, & National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 238-263; Margo Kasdan and Susan Tavernetti, 'Native Americans in a Revisionist Western *Little Big Man* (1970)', in *Hollywood's Indian*, ed. by Rollins and O'Connor, pp. 121-136.

to be; the reader cannot be allowed to look away while the real violence of frontier is rearticulated.

However, Silko's is not a fantastic or unfamiliar depiction of the contemporary frontier, rather it is disturbingly *over familiar*: a hyperreal landscape conceived of popular myth and culture in which the real and the unreal coalesce in producing an appalling spectacle of violent societal decay. Carlton Smith notes that 'everywhere in Silko's fictional landscape, things seem to be falling apart'.¹⁹⁰ Within the boundaries of this frontier it is no longer possible to determine where rank consumerism ends in her novel, and where genuine, nurturing human relationships begin. The two main alternating settings of Tucson, the 'city of thieves' populated by 'third-generation burglars and pimps turned politicians' and Mexico City, are defined as being essentially borderless; the homogenising effect of systemic violence clearly visible in both cities and on both sides of the US-Mexico border.¹⁹¹ In Silko's New, or Anti-West we also find a coterie of similarly psychotic killers free, or so it seems, to operate without recrimination or consequence. Beaufrey and Serlo, two wealthy drug dealers and pornographers, one a twisted psychopath and the other a megalomaniacal white supremacist, crisscross the US-Mexico border in execution of their trade, leaving death, addiction, and broken lives in their wake. This unaccountable exceptionalist behaviour promoted Annette Van Dyke to observe how Serlo and Beaufrey see themselves as existing outside of the legally contrived bounds of society. She ascribes this self-appointed exceptionalism to their deeply held conviction that they can do whatever they like, secure in the knowledge that they are 'shielded by their status as wealthy pureblood aristocrats'.¹⁹² This has the effect of portraying a particularly

¹⁹⁰Smith, *Coyote Kills John Wayne*, p. 39.

¹⁹¹ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 386.

¹⁹² Annette Van Dyke, 'Writing the Unthinkable: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in *Howling for Justice*, ed. by Tillet, pp. 29-41 (p. 36).

arresting and disturbing vision of white privilege as a form of corrupting exceptionalism, the gross supremacist assumptions of dominant Euramerican culture taken to a disturbingly unsubtle extreme. Silko is also quick to further complicate the archetypal frontier hero by drawing jarring comparisons with other historic outlaws and renegades such as John Dillinger, Pretty Boy Floyd and Geronimo, all of whom operated in and around Arizona and the wider US borderland region, and who have been similarly misrepresented by attendant myth. Her point is that this remains a region that luxuriates in the quick, transcendent violence of the Old West while refusing to acknowledge the extent to which this myopia has enabled the marginalisation and subordination of the Native subject and racialised Other.

Given the significance of violence in the shaping of frontier myth and the importance placed on the frontier landscape in terms of a Turnerian geological determinism, it is perhaps unsurprising that Silko should open her novel with a map of the Mexican borderland that stretches from Tucson to Culiacan and Mexico City. Silko's map places Tucson at the epicentre of both the region and the novel, and just as 'Boise or Spokane centered maps in a previous century' here all roads and lives lead to Tucson.¹⁹³ For Turner maps were essential in outlining the expansion of the frontier and providing the foundation for a graphic realisation of his formulation of the Western frontier.¹⁹⁴ The map is framed by a series of brief summaries with titles such as 'The Indian Connection' and, more cryptically, the 'Prophecy'. The first

¹⁹³ Carl Abbott, *How Cities Won the West: Four Centuries of Urban Change in Western North America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), p. 15. See also John Muthyala, *Reworlding America: Myth, History, and Narrative* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), pp. 140-141.

¹⁹⁴ Robert H. Block, 'Frederick Jackson Turner and American Geography', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 70.1 (1980), 31-42 (p. 34).

briefly summaries the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the Americas between 1500 and 1600 while neatly introducing one of the central problems of the novel:

The defiance and resistance to things European continue unabated. The Indian Wars have never ended in the Americas. Native Americans acknowledge no borders; they seek nothing less than the return of all tribal lands.¹⁹⁵

Similarly, 'Prophecy' presents a Pre-Columbian view of the Americas in which the Maya, Aztec, and Inca are positioned as civilisations equal to those of Europe, having already established 'great cities and vast networks of roads' along with a complex prophetic calendar that foretells the arrival and eventual disappearance of the European invaders. The map also encompasses a region crucial in the settling of the Americas by Europeans, including modern day Haiti and Cuba, the sites of first contact and violent persecution of Indigenous peoples during Columbus's initial exploratory voyages. In open defiance of the colonising mythology of the Americas, the narrator reiterates the original course of Spanish colonialism to be that of political connivance and treachery, not cultural superiority:

The so-called explorers and 'conquistadors' had explored and conquered nothing. The 'explorers' had followed Indian guides kidnapped from coastal villages to lead them as far as they knew, and then the explorers kidnapped more guides. The so-called conquerors merely aligned themselves with forces already in power or forces already gathered to strip power from rivals. The tribes in Mexico had been drifting toward political disaster for hundreds of years before the Europeans had ever appeared. How many years had the U.S. army garrisoned five thousand troops in Tucson to chase one old Apache man, twenty-five or thirty teenagers, and fifty women and small children? When Geronimo had gone to Skeleton Canyon, he had gone under a white flag of truce, lured there by one of his most trusted lieutenants. Only by betrayal of the truce flag did the white men take him. Geronimo would never have been taken except with treachery.¹⁹⁶

Beyond simply contextualising some of the major themes of the novel against the backdrop of European invasion, the map that introduces *Almanac* offers a visual representation of the formative role violence has played in creating this highly

¹⁹⁵ Silko, *Almanac*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁹⁶ Silko, *Almanac*, pp. 220-221.

contested space. Connecting Aztec with Apache cultures and the dissolution of both at the hands of rampant colonial expansionism, marks a point of symbolic continuity that extends into the contemporary moment. In the novel the mythic regenerative and transcendent function of settler violence is repeatedly exploded, since violence is presented not as an understated aspect of westward expansion, as Turner suggests, but as an indelible consequence of conquest and colonial occupation. True, violence frequently serves a practical purpose, particularly in the novel's many chapters that focus on criminal activity, but violence is never simplified or reduced to a workable solution without serious consequence. Contrary to the mythologised precedent, it charts the long-term consequences of systemic violence, crossing geographic and temporal borders to explore the often horrendous and dehumanising effects of regenerative expansionist violence in discourses of national identity and foreign policy.

Writing in *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, Enrique Dussel argues that for the world's subaltern and displaced populations, the current world system of late capitalism and waning liberalism now exists so far beyond their sphere of influence in which they might affect positive social change, that it risks being rendered meaningless:

The ethical conflict starts when the victims of a prevailing formal system cannot live, or have been violently and discursively excluded from such a system; when sociohistorical subjects, social movements (e.g., ecological), classes (workers), marginal groups, genders (feminine), races (non-white), peripheral impoverished countries, and so on, become conscious, organize themselves, formulate diagnoses of their negativity and prepare alternative programs to transform the systems that are in force and that have become dominant, oppressive, the cause of death and exclusion. For such new sociohistorical subjects, the 'legal' coercion of the system (which causes their negation and constitutes them as victims) has stopped being 'legitimate.' It has stopped being so, first, because the subjects have become aware that they had not participated in the original agreement setting up the system (and thus it stops being

‘valid’ for them); and, second, because in such a system new victims cannot live (thus the system stops being a feasible mediation for the life of those dominated).¹⁹⁷

Dussel goes on to say that military power has grown into the huge, fetishistic leviathan of militaristic transnational capitalism.¹⁹⁸ If, as Dussel suggests, ‘instrumental reason has reached its totalization’ and is indeed turning against us, following the same Gramscian hegemonic closed circuit of the master-slave dichotomy, then humankind can be said to be mindlessly devouring itself, having unleashed a self-replicating military industrial complex.¹⁹⁹ Echoes of this can be felt throughout Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel, beginning with the conquest of the Aztecs, the US-Mexico War, the Indian Wars, the corrupt dealings of cities like Tucson in fomenting conflict between the US Government and so-called renegades like Geronimo, and culminating in the short-sighted interest of private security firms managed by General J and Menardo. Dussel notes that humankind – in the homogenising sense of a global humanist community – does not control the ever expanding military industrial complex. Rather the reins of this particular animal are held almost exclusively by the US, concentrating a worrying degree of power and international political leverage. Violence, as a means of continuing discourse by other means, such as the last desperate act of desperate people, loses its legitimacy and instead becomes the preserve of a dominant, overtly militaristic US culture. What lies on the other side of this complex and what is necessarily excluded, even targeted by it, is the Other. As Dussel says, having played no significant role in the devising of these policies, the Other is fundamentally excluded and written-out of the relationship, interred in a seemingly inescapable liminality.

¹⁹⁷ Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 401.

¹⁹⁸ Dussel, *Ethics*, p. 402.

¹⁹⁹ Dussel, *Ethics*, p. 402-403.

Lindsay Claire Smith contends that in *Almanac* ‘Silko invites a challenging understanding of the Americas both as an all-encompassing geography, blurring national and ethnic or racial borders, and as a specific landscape, offering Native, and more particularly, Laguna orientations as the source of a prophecy that portends Natives’ literal reclamation of land’.²⁰⁰ This reimagined landscape is no longer the proving ground of Anglo-American cultural superiority and exceptionalism, but an ally in the on-going process of Indigenous emancipation. The motif of the giant stone snake of the Laguna homeland portends the end of days and the beginning of a new world cycle, just as the great bull snake that fascinates the old woman Yoeme is valued for its ability to hear the ‘voices of the dead: actual conversations, and lone voices calling out to loved ones still living’.²⁰¹ It is as if in *Almanac* the borderland landscape is complicit in rejecting the violent frontier mythology that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, allowed the landscape to be claimed as a form of geologically and determinist American homeland. Silko’s portrait of the West is then dramatically more complex and nuanced, suggesting that even a notional conception of the West as a unified homogenous whole is woefully inadequate, and significantly ‘too unformed to sit for a traditional novelistic portrait’.²⁰² The map blends the fictive elements of the novel with real geographic locations and an Indigenous historical counterweight differentiated by mosaic forms of social and cultural history. This is not a map in any strict cartographical sense, but a hyperreal *mélange* of subaltern experiences, obscured histories, geographical discontinuity, and the omniscient presence of systemic violence that has not been accommodated in more traditional histories of the region.

²⁰⁰ Lindsay Claire Smith, *Indians, Environment, and Identity on the Borders of American Literature: From Faulkner and Morrison to Walker and Silko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 146.

²⁰¹ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 130.

²⁰² Abbott, *How Cities Won the West*, p. 290.

Baudrillard notes that ‘today the abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it’.²⁰³ In applying Baudrillard to Silko, her map can be understood as a rejection of territory as a claimed, completed idea of space that follows the closing of the frontier. Graeme Finnie notes how Silko ‘erodes the identity of the United States by omitting the lines of demarcation between the states of New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas’ further blurring the intertextuality of real and imagined maps.²⁰⁴ This cartographical intervention, he claims, helps to off-set the acquisitional colonial gaze of Europe. By including these discursive components in her reworlding of the region, the formative, constraining power of frontier is similarly diminished. As a product of the hyperreal, Silko’s map also becomes difficult to define in referential terms. Equally it would be problematic to catalogue it as something approaching a novelistic schema, owing to the fact that it includes evaluative comments about the history of the region and instead functions primarily as an image of the border territories in which territoriality has been usurped by human story. Through alluding to a sense of fractured Indigenous continuity the notion of the vanishing or dead Indian is further problematised, as is the narrative of conquest.

United States of Damage: Silko’s Pre-Apocalyptic Wasteland

Moving beyond Silko’s remapping of America, engendered within the landscape and the broader public myth of the frontier is the systemic problem of transcendent

²⁰³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 2.

²⁰⁴ Graeme Finnie, ‘Rooted in the Americas: *Almanac* and Silko’s Environmental Ethic’, in *Howling for Justice*, ed. by Tillett, pp. 105-117 (p. 107).

violence. Through Sterling's research into famous criminals and the double power their simulated stories convey, Tucson is revealed to be America in microcosm, and a city that both celebrates and suffers the humanitarian consequences of transcendent violence. The city is home to all manner of scavengers and human parasites, including the illegal arms dealer Greenlee, who traffics guns across the Mexican border, fuelling border tensions and civil violence; and a phantom army of homeless veterans and forgotten Diaspora led by the 'walking wounded' anti-heroes Rambo and Clinton, who echo the neurotic dislocation experienced by Tayo in Silko's first novel *Ceremony*, suggesting that the existential malaise of modern life is similar to that of PTSD, its victims overwhelmed and their nerves shattered from living in a state of perpetual conflict and tension. Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence William Gross offers a rather more startling analysis of the post-apocalyptic landscape, arguing that in light of the fact that no single Indian nation can claim a 'complete record of contact with its precontact culture' the old ancestral world has effectively come to an end and that subsequent generations of Native Americans are now invested in the process of 'building new worlds – worlds that are true to our history but cognizant of present realities'.²⁰⁵ Consequently the Native subject exists in a post-conquest, post-apocalyptic cultural and historical space haunted by the experience of genocide. The symptoms of living in this post-apocalyptic world are many and varied, but Gross identifies ten markers that could be lifted directly from descriptions of social conditions on Pine Ridge Reservation, including mass unemployment, substance abuse, a dramatic increase in violence, especially domestic violence, increased rates of suicide, mental illness, fanatical religious beliefs and more generally a loss of hope,

²⁰⁵ Lawrence William Gross, 'The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion', *The American Indian Quarterly*, 26.3 (2002), 436-459 (pp. 449-450).

ennui, and crippling survivor complex. Meanwhile, following a sequence of graduated collapse that echoes the sociological conditions of Silko's contemporary American wasteland, government institutions similarly begin to weaken and with them human compassion leading to what Gross has poignantly termed Post Apocalypse Stress Syndrome (PASS).²⁰⁶ Similarly, Byrd has written that 'as works by American Indian and Indigenous authors including Leslie Marmon Silko, A. A. Carr, Drew Hayden Taylor, Gerald Vizenor, LeAnne Howe, Daniel Heath Justice, and Stephen Graham Jones demonstrate, it is not just the Western that invokes an attachment to Indians within the structural forms and interpretable codes of meaning' but multiple genres ranging from science fiction to horror. Connecting these different genres is the image of the 'merciless Indian savage' of the frontier captivity narrative tradition that 'inhabits a zombie-risen Wild West that surrounds and imperils the encampments of civilization'. Responding to this, Byrd concludes, 'the literatures that American Indian authors produce disrupt and resist the narrative strategies of colonial imaginings by transforming the modes of interpretation and revealing the structures of dominance by turning generic conventions against affiliations'.²⁰⁷

The characters of Silko's novel populate a similarly apocalyptic 'wasteland of violence, bestiality, cruelty, and crime' within which it is impossible to develop anything like meaningful, nurturing relationships that could otherwise help sustain them.²⁰⁸ Those who do have the means to survive do so through a psychic connection

²⁰⁶ Gross, pp. 449-450. Commenting on the post-apocalyptic experience of Indigenous peoples, Sidner Larson also remarks that 'American Indian people have recently experienced the end of the world. It is ironic that Indians are so strongly associated with horses, for it has been their lot to 'behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him (Rev. 68). They are postapocalypse people who, as such, have tremendous experience to offer all other people who must, in their own time, experience their own cultural death as part of the natural cycle'. Larson, p. 18.

²⁰⁷ Byrd, 'Red Dead Conventions', p. 2.

²⁰⁸ Janet St. Clair, 'Death of Love/Love of Death: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*', *MELUS*, 21.2 (1996), 141-156 (p. 141).

to a more humanist, pre-industrialised past. Janet St. Clair reads this as Silko's comment on the catastrophic failure of individualistic society and a call to return to communal society, since characters have been stripped of the 'social and spiritual structures that define their humanity' leaving them without the necessary means to understand their place in the world or effectively build relationships with others. She notes that throughout the text:

Vicious, manipulative homosexuality and injurious even murderous sexual perversions become relentless metaphors of the insane solipsism and phallogocentric avarice that characterize the dominant culture. Gone is even a vestigial sense of those virtues which undergird community: there are no personal values because the triumph of individualism has eroded every rationale for moral discipline; there are no institutional ethics because social systems are inevitably infected by the corruption of their constituents.²⁰⁹

This is a world on the brink of collapse, its inhabitants either straining to hold onto the last vestiges of humanity or otherwise infected with a destructive amorality and avariciousness that will ultimately destroy them and those around them.

Across the Mexican border the picture is very much the same. The wealthy and political class is exposed as a destructive self-interested Neoconservative elite, aptly personified by Menardo, owner of Universal Insurance, a private security firm that thrives on the civil conflict that exists between the Mexican government and the socialist Indigenous and Mestizo guerrillas who, in turn, mirror Rambo's homeless army in their search for a sense of belonging in a place that was once their homeland. In a disturbing repetition of history, Menardo and his associates, the corrupt Mexican General J, the Mafioso Sonny Blue, and Mexico City's Chief of Police, who takes great pleasure in feeding and exploiting the 'filthy perversions of thousands hopelessly addicted to the films of torture and dismemberment', all unite in the exploitation and exacerbation of social and political tensions to ensure the conflict maintains a high

²⁰⁹ St Clair, 'Death of Love/Love of Death', p. 141.

demand for their service both in Mexico and across Latin America.²¹⁰ If the Conquistadores have achieved anything, then it is establishing a system of exploitation that pits political opponents in unrelenting conflict for personal gain. Across the border this echoes the Tucsonan merchants who manufactured and fomented armed conflict between Geronimo's Apaches and the US government in the nineteenth century to safeguard their own economic futures, appositely reflecting what Silko portrays as a fundamental systemic failure where violence has become the *modus operandi* of state power. Similarly, the feuding guerrilla faction, led by Angelita 'La Escapía' and 'Comrade Bartholomeo', struggles throughout the text to agree a Marxist political doctrine with which to counter the corrupt corporatist elite marshalled by Menardo's triumvirate.²¹¹

However, even the idealism of La Escapía's revolution is brought into question when its revolutionary teacher, El Feo - 'the ugly' - is exposed as a corrupt fraud operating in a similar fashion to Menardo, exploiting civil tensions for personal gain. Marxism does find fertile ground in *Almanac*, but only in so far as it is presented as the least objectionable doctrinal alternative to the political status quo that marginalises Indigenous people or otherwise publicly vilifies them as outlaws and misguided revolutionaries. The only practicable alternative is suggested towards the end of the novel with the introduction of Awa Gee, a computer hacker and Zeta's former lover, who has developed a 'solar war machine' that will reset the world by triggering a global economic collapse, and who dreams of creating 'the equivalent of a hydrogen bomb, a computer program that would destroy all existing computer networks'.²¹² Rather than settling for a revolution that could be commandeered by nefarious

²¹⁰ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 342.

²¹¹ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 477.

²¹² Silko, *Almanac*, p. 688.

outsiders, Awa Gee's system reset appears as the best possible future, rejecting European style modernity and all its technological trappings in favour of a fresh start and a return to Indigenous communal values. Appraising Silko's work, Lucy Maddox notes that:

Her fiction defines indigenous intellectual traditions as the *only* ones with any ultimate legitimacy or potency in the Americas, contrasting their longevity and their power to clarify experience, both individual and collective, with the obscurities, distortions, and dangers that Silko sees as resulting when European systems of thought are transported to the Americas and become hegemonic. In Silko's view of post-contact history, indigenous traditions have allowed Native people to survive that history by exposing the racist violence inherent in the colonizing imperatives of the imported traditions and providing an alternative to them.²¹³

Awa Gee's actions are those of a global emancipator whose machine will free all people, Native and non-Native, via a technological system reset, from the endless cycle of destruction that has plagued the Americas since the time of first contact. This will be the final revelation of Silko's novel: to expose the toxicity of this system and the myths it produces as a form of endemic violence, with Awa Gee functioning as a facilitator for the end of the current world cycle:

Awa Gee had no interest in personal power. Awa Gee had no delusions about building empires; Awa Gee did not plan to create or build anything at all. Awa Gee was interested in the purity of destruction. Awa Gee was interested in the perfection of complete disorder and disintegration. At first Awa Gee had experimented with disorder by unwinding spools of rope to snarl and tangle deliberately into mounds of thick knots; then he studied the patterns of the snarls and tangles as he worked to remove them. Empire builders were killers because to build they needed materials. Awa Gee wanted to build nothing; Awa Gee wanted nothing at all to happen except for the lights to go out; because then he would top them all with his 'necklace' of wonder machines so efficient they operated off batteries and sunlight. Earth that was bare and empty, earth that had been seized and torn open, would be allowed to heal and to rest in the darkness after the lights were turned out. The giants of the world would fight of course, but their retaliation would serve Awa Gee at every turn. The greater their retaliation, the greater the destruction.²¹⁴

According to Dussel, the great contradiction that resides at the core of a broadly Western and post-structuralist notion of enlightenment is that posed by the existence

²¹³ Lucy Maddox, *Citizen Indians: Native American Intellectuals, Race & Reform* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 171.

²¹⁴ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 683.

of its victims. Dussel contextualises this argument in terms of the myth of modernity, in which a given social-political system has become a ‘closed system of death’, ‘paranoid’ and aggressively limiting or outright denying the expediency of the Other.²¹⁵ Crucially, the myth of modernity, as Dussel employs the term, relates to those aspects of modernity that foster domination and sublimation.²¹⁶ Consequently what passes for an apparently ethical and legitimate political order would be better understood as an expression of subjective Ego that merely passes as legitimate and ethical, and in those instances where it is enforced with a dictatorial vigour manifested as violence directed against the Other. Although Dussel is applying his theory of ethics in broad strokes, taking in Europe and the Americas over the entire history of the nation state, it is useful here when attempting to locate the *political impetus* at play in novels that engage with the politics of Indigeneity. Starting with Kant’s assertion that the principle function of the system should be the reproduction of life, Dussel notes that the Other is seldom included in that calculation, existing instead within the dominant political discourse as a kind of sub-species of human being. Re-humanising and imbuing the Other with a differentiated political energy, and drawing attention to violence and pain experienced by the Other becomes a defining action. Dussel reminds us that we must always be critical of totality, as it represents a self-fulfilling discourse that by its nature excludes counter-discourse. The silence of victims is a testament to the censoring effect of totality, and as Dussel suggests, ‘the ethics of liberation is an ethics of everyday life’ that must first describe what in time will be articulated as nascent political action.²¹⁷ Dussel also draws a parallel between Walter Benjamin’s notion of messianic time - a revolutionary concept of time that explodes into a mode

²¹⁵ Dussel, *Ethics*, p. 209.

²¹⁶ Dussel, *Ethics*, p. 218.

²¹⁷ Dussel, *Ethics*, p. 211.

of creative praxis and redemption - and the awakening of the victim's consciousness. The free-floating idea of a cyclical time and multi-verse temporality that inhabits *Almanac* plays loosely with both messianic and historical time, specifically in the Anglo-European world of experience, and instead produces something else altogether: a system re-set. This is not necessarily an anarchic force of renewal, but rather a natural cycle, as embodied in the seasonal functionality of an almanac, and carried to an inevitable rebirth. The term 'revolution' would also seem playfully appropriate in as much as it represents a full turn of the wheel, but as held in Laguna Pueblo traditions, with the world being remade while the chosen people remain underground ready to emerge and begin anew.

Ward Churchill's provocative essay 'Pacifism as Pathology: Notes on an American Pseudopraxis' also proves useful here in navigating the revolutionary strains of violence in Silko's novel. He writes:

Proponents of nonviolent political 'praxis' are inherently placed in the position of claiming to meet the armed might of the state via an asserted moral superiority attached to the renunciation of arms and physical violence altogether. It follows that the state has demonstrated, *a priori*, its fundamental immorality/legitimacy by arming itself in the first place. A certain psychological correlation is typically offered wherein the 'good' and 'positive' social vision (*Eros*) held by the pacifist opposition is posed against the 'bad' or 'negative' realities (*Thanatos*) evidenced by the state. The correlation lends itself readily to 'good versus evil' dichotomies, fostering a view of social conflict as a morality play.²¹⁸

Silko, by turns, refuses to enter into such a clear-cut, either/or moral dichotomy, and instead goes to extreme lengths in demonstrating how an insidious form of systemic violence has been produced by the global exercise of capitalism. Everything in her novel is touched by this corrupting force. Accordingly, the only way to escape this pervasive, stateless, universal violence is a system re-set. Churchill dismisses what he

²¹⁸ Ward Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America* (Edinburgh, WV: AK Press, 1998), p. 52.

terms the pathologic state of pacifism as a meek, self-deluding worldview sold to the underprivileged by a dominant culture that does apply the same moral standards to itself. Inverting Chomsky's famous tenet, it is in Churchill's view a form of manufactured dissent, that has achieved historic gains but not without a tragic human cost and no small amount of peripheral violence against which pacifism and non-violence look like the safer, more rational option for achieving pragmatic dialogue.²¹⁹ His essay makes for uncomfortable reading, but raises an important point in respect to the use of violence as a means of securing vital social change that can be posed against Silko's novel. Churchill's notion of 'liberatory praxis' is one such point of convergence, and would seem to fit with Silko's deployment of Marx as a emancipator-storyteller.²²⁰ He notes how the term 'praxis', often taken to mean something approximating 'action' is better understood as the practical effect of philosophy/theory on the material world. Churchill credits Marx's revolutionary praxis as bringing about a cultural awakening or awareness to one's social condition, and of historical self-realisation. He takes this to mean 'action consciously and intentionally guided by theory' while also expanding that theory through praxis. Churchill's essay is a call to radically rethink the 'hegemony of pacifist activity and thought within the late capitalist states', and acknowledge the power and reach of state sanctioned violence.²²¹ His suggestion is that violence must necessarily be part of a larger revolutionary framework, along with non-violent activism. In serving a revolutionary higher cause, Churchill's emancipatory, revolutionary violence — his

²¹⁹ On the subject of non-violence Chomsky has said in interview that 'anybody is going to try and do things non-violently if possible: what's the point of violence? But when you begin to encroach on power, you may find that it's necessary to defend your rights—and defense of your rights sometimes does require violence, then either you use it or you don't, depending on your moral values'. See *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*, ed. by Peter Mitchell and John Schoeffel (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 193.

²²⁰ Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology*, pp. 87-95; Amanda Walker Johnson, 'Silko's *Almanac*: Engaging Marx and the Critique of Capitalism', in *Howling for Justice*, ed. by, pp. 91-104.

²²¹ Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology*, pp. 88, 92.

liberatory praxis — strays into the territory of transcendent violence. He concludes by acknowledging this fundamental contradiction, noting how ‘in order to achieve nonviolence, we must first break with it in overcoming its root causes’.²²² At either extreme it is an oversimplification that Churchill is forced to confront in his essay. The question of locating violence as a means of securing necessary change is so fraught with moral implications that Silko seems unsure how to proceed when confronted with this obstacle. The system reset option appears then as a form of bloodless coup, even if it is occasioned by a mass and rapid economic and environmental decline. In interview Silko has said of this form of sudden systemic change: ‘you have to look at how suddenly everything can change overnight and now I’m thinking about the way natural disasters can shift and change things’. She goes on to pose the question:

Could a global financial meltdown destroy European dominance over time? Who knows? The domination relies so much on military force, on huge expenditures of money. [...] There are many possible ways the domination might end suddenly all at once or slowly, as one part then another dies, another, another, because the cost of this world domination is rising.²²³

Silko’s response suggests both a form of wishful anti-capitalist optimism that the system will cannibalise itself, and a discomfort with instigating violence to end violence. Ultimately, however, the violence of her novel is unbearable, with the result that it reflects a reality true of many impoverished and disenfranchised people around the world. As David L. Moore suggests, she makes the reader an unsuspecting witness to this abject horror, and in so doing uses literary violence to achieve, or at least move towards, a moment of liberatory praxis. Churchill is profoundly suspicious of the suggestion that the state could be coerced into *doing the right thing* by non-violent

²²² Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology*, p. 104.

²²³ Leslie Marmon Silko in interview with Laura Coltelli, in Laura Coltelli, ‘*Almanac: Reading Its Story Maps After Twenty Years: An Interview With Leslie Marmon Silko*’, in *Howling for Justice*, ed. by Tillet, pp. 195-216 (p. 204).

means, whereas *Almanac* exposes the far reaching corrupting influence of systemic violence as being a human dilemma more than just an Indigenous one. The hope of the novel although certainly not obvious, is that humanity can achieve this realisation as a collective before it destroys us as individualists. The strangely wishful longing for a natural disaster to come along and kill the system, or a similarly uncontrollable economic collapse would seem to be Silko's preferred method of delivery, but does leave the question of justifiable revolutionary violence without a definite answer. Her anxieties about technologies 'we may not understand and don't control' also point to her concern over the direction and cost of a failed European-style modernity.²²⁴ The poignant image of ants, busily gathering food, that appears in the closing chapter of the novel, 'home', shows them to be unfazed by humanity's suicidal tendencies. Survivors all, the ant colony exists as a collective, having made their home in a wounded landscape.

The future that is imagined in *Almanac* is one where it is possible to navigate a path through the atrocities and traumatic legacy of empire building, and in so doing the unsavoury notion of transcendent violence is found wanting. It is only when this has been achieved that the earth can heal itself. Yoeme's almanac will no longer operate as a record of the dead, but will become a record of survivance in the former world, the missing link between the living and dead, that ensures the ancient line of continuity is preserved. The reason Lecha struggles to translate the almanac is because it exists betwixt these two worlds: one barely remembered, the other imagined, demanding that she invest her psychic will in traversing them. Pages have been removed, some lost, others sold, and some even consumed in times of extreme hunger, quite literally keeping Lecha's people alive in their escape from Mexico. The stories

²²⁴ Coltelli, '*Almanac*: Reading Its Story Maps After Twenty Years', p. 99.

have been fractured, but they still remain and such is the value of their secretive content that it takes a psychic, versed in the language and imagery of death, to witness it and *speak* it back to the living. Quite simply it is an act of love, and a form of two-way communication that cancels the negative binary of transcendent violence that has become so thoroughly and inextricably engrained in dominant US culture as to be ostensibly invisible. More than just a signifier for Indigenous survivance, however, the almanac is suggested as a means of recovering a more wholesale human reconnection to the natural cycles of the earth. Yoeme, a ‘twentieth century witness to the devastating damage being done to the earth’ has spent years dutifully collecting farmer’s almanacs, documenting ‘the fact that Euro-American peoples did not always believe that the earth was inert matter and could be exploited for personal gain’.²²⁵ In the introductory chapter to her multi-genre work *Storyteller* Silko recalls the significance of storytelling, survival, and the multiple ‘bundles’ of history and experience passed through the Pueblo people, and where different narrative threads inform many stories:

Storytelling among the family and clan members served as a group rehearsal of survival strategies that had worked for the Pueblo people for thousands of years. This was the case among the Pueblo people of the southwest and at Laguna Pueblo, where I am from.

The entire culture, all the knowledge, experience, and beliefs, were kept in the human memory of the Pueblo people in the form of narratives that were told and retold from generation to generation. The people perceived themselves in the world as part of an ancient continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories.²²⁶

Lecha’s reading of the almanac owes much to this tradition. Mary Ellen Snodgrass cites an exchange of letters between Silko and her mentor, poet James Wright, in which Silko describes the eternal life of the spirit as a symbiotic ‘deathless [...] two-

²²⁵ Geoff Hamilton and Brian Jones, eds, *Encyclopaedia of the Environment in American Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013), p. 280.

²²⁶ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. xviii-xix.

way communication' in which departed spirits speak back to the living just as the living speak back to the dead.²²⁷ The almanac of the dead is then a manifestation of this two-way relationship, and one that allows Lecha and Zeta to imagine a new world and a refuge from ceaseless genocide. If, as Slotkin suggests, the US in part defines itself through a regenerative notion of violence, then here in *Almanac* regeneration can be similarly achieved through the continuity of family, storying, and love. This connection to an alternative past where the racialised Other has survived despite systematic attempts at cultural erasure provides a sobering point of contrast to the self-destructive avarice that gives form to Silko's American wasteland as a dystopian contemporary frontier, home to failed but nevertheless toxic binaries and systemic, racialised violence. Unlike the giant stone snake, the almanac has been successfully preserved and its cryptic secrets have remained sacred, offering an alternative narrative history of the Americas as seen from the perspective of the conquered.

The borderland region that intercedes between Arizona and Mexico is then not only a landscape synonymous with the Western frontier myth, but remains a site associated with important questions of national identity, US foreign policy, and racialised Otherness. In *Almanac* the legacy of the frontier becomes a corrupted vision of twentieth century America, in essence an anti-frontier and anti-Western narrative, writing against 'sanctioned narratives of American innocence and the presumption of the inevitable triumph of superior Anglo culture over the dark-skinned natives of the "New World."' ²²⁸ Reflecting on a series of negative academic reviews of *Almanac*, Rebecca Tillett contends that there is an element of intellectual hostility when it comes to examining texts produced by Native authors, particularly where contemporary

²²⁷ Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Literary Companion* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), p. 95.

²²⁸ Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western*, p. 102.

society is derided for its double standards and manifest manners in dealing with Native subjectivities. Moreover, this constitutes a ‘hostile theoretical recolonization’ that operates to keep the Native subject at the periphery of a dominant culture.²²⁹ It is perhaps for this reason that Silko was received more as a heretic than a healer when she first published *Almanac*, since the novel dared to challenge sacred American institutions, rousing feelings of colonial guilt and discomfort amongst her non-Native critics.

In this regard, Silko’s novel shares a point of comparison with Alexie’s *Indian Killer*, in that it functions like a literary Ghost Dance, conjuring the spirits of the departed to scour the surface of the white menace. However, unlike the Indigenous exclusivity of the Ghost Dance, Silko’s Ghost Dance embraces the world’s disenfranchised and offers an alternative world built on ideas of community and traditional knowledge and where violence is reconstituted as a creative energy that serves the remaking of civilisation.²³⁰ Appropriately then, in *Almanac*, as in *Indian Killer*, violence becomes a signifying spectre haunting the lives of those who find themselves the unfortunate inhabitants of a modern American wasteland. Looking ahead to Vizenor’s *Bearheart*, Silko’s traumatised wastescape has been shorn of any tangible sense of the optimistic potential that previously defined the Turnerian frontier. Instead it infects all those who fall under its influence with a sense of placelessness from which the novel’s protagonists find scant relief save that offered by indulging terrible addictions and doomed relationships. The great Garden Empire, the agrarian life-sustaining myth of the West and the frontier as a space of actualisation is neatly

²²⁹Tillett, “‘The Indian Wars Have Never Ended’”, p. 24.

²³⁰ Carlton Smith notes how functioning as ‘a “literary ghost dance,” *Almanac* apprehends this process of reclamation in its fantastic projection of an apocalyptic end of “white history”’. See Smith, p. 41.

inverted to become a region preserved in the popular and political imagination courtesy of a structural reliance on normative violence.²³¹

The principle tenets of the frontier myth that praise rugged individualism, expansionism, exceptionalism, and violence as a regenerative and transcendent means of civilising the US interior, are exposed as part of the underlying systemic failure in Silko's dystopic borderlands. Here the formative frontier ideology has been taken to a point of excess, whereby the mythic transcendent quality of violence – a civilising tool at home in a dangerous frontier borderland – is exposed as a self-destructive over dependency on unreality and myth. In the second half of the novel, the character Tacho expresses grave concern over the autophagic tendencies of twentieth century consumerist society to destroy itself simply to satisfy materialist expansionism:

Blood was powerful, and therefore dangerous. Some said human beings should not see or smell fresh blood too often or they might be overtaken by frightening appetites [...] Human sacrificers were part of the worldwide network of Destroyers who fed off energy released by destruction.²³²

Tacho is of course attributing the sickness of society to the shadowy network of Destroyers who operate with impunity in safeguarding the economic and political status quo. At times attempts to negotiate acts of horrific violence become performative, with characters like the artist David and the Chief of Police of Mexico City attempting to artistically recreate on film some degree of experience outside the hollow parameters of their lives, the conditions of torture and death, where the imaginary is no longer acceptable, only the real, lived experience will satisfy. As subjects of empire and conquest, perhaps these characters are so far lost in the

²³¹ For an historical analysis of the garden empire and agrarian myth see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*, p. 187; Worster, *Under Western Skies*, pp. 3-18.

²³² Silko, *Almanac*, p. 336.

simulacrum that they actually wish for death and the dissolution of the world in its current state.

Certainly the novel wishes for the arrival of the end of times in as much as it eagerly anticipates the new, globalised Indigenous cultural rebirthing. Elsewhere, Leah Blue, the realtor and estranged wife of crime lord Max Blue, is engaged in a civil engineering project to build a Venice-like suburb in the middle of a desert, adding another layer of simulation to the bricolage of competing *Westerns* in the region. Such performances succeed in further emphasising the absurdity of the situation and a general lack of human empathy and basic common sense. The motif of blood and consumerist self-devourment or autophagy running throughout the novel is there to remind the reader that the systemic and normative violence that it engenders underpins the functioning of the state. Consequently the Destroyers and human sacrificers of vampiric capitalism are found to be quite literally bleeding the poor to death, as in the case of the bewildered homeless victims of Trigg's blood plasma enterprise:

'Nobody ever notices they are gone. The ones I get,' Trigg had said, looking Roy in the eye. Trigg had been too drunk to remember that Ray was himself "homeless." Trigg talked obsessively about the absence of struggle as the "plasma donors" were slowly bled to death pint by pint. A few who had attempted to get away had lost too much blood to put up much fight even against a man in a wheelchair. Of course the man in the wheelchair had a .45 automatic in his hand. Trigg had paid extra if the victim agreed. Trigg gave him a blow job while his blood filled pint bags; the victim relaxed in the chair with his eyes closed, unaware he was being murdered. What Trigg does with the swollen cock in his mouth never varies: he catches an edge or fold of foreskin between his teeth. The cock might shrivel temporarily, but then it would encourage greatly from the nibble. All this Trigg performs from the wheelchair. Trigg blames the homeless men. Trigg blames them for being easy prey.²³³

Performing oral sex on his victims at the point of near-death ensures that they are placidly unaware of their terrible predicament, but more than this it allows the reader to identify with the dispossessed of society. Like the homeless wretch in Trigg's chair,

²³³ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 444.

we are close to death, societal death, and blinded by the fleeting pleasures of a capitalist system that promises a longed-for reward. The reader watches, just as he or she will *watch* the aftermath of Eric's death become a macabre performance of the simulacrum reclaiming what has dared to try and escape.

Within this moral vacuum anything is permissible. The trade-off is that life in Silko's American wasteland lacks any real substance or meaning. Menardo, the wealthy owner of a private security firm that leases military personal and equipment to corrupt regimes across South America while trading illegal arms across the US border with his contacts in Tucson, is an excellent example of a man adrift in a world of material excess but haunted by visions and fantasies of his own death. One of Menardo's main sources of income is his booming insurance business, a front for his vastly more lucrative private security firm. In life he is apparently free to do whatever he pleases: trading weapons, undermining governments, indirectly killing his first wife to accommodate his younger, more beautiful mistress, and scheming with his business partner, a corrupt Mexican General. But in his dreams the terrible cost of his actions surface in nightmarish, prophetic visions of a world in rapid economic and social decline, fuelling his paranoia and obsession with assassination:

For years Menardo had not had to worry about the 'civil strife, strike, or insurrection' clause of his insurance policies. The long-haired, filthy communists had disappeared from television screens, and Menardo believed the days of mobs and riots had truly passed. Then suddenly one night Menardo had awakened to a loud buzzing sound. The screen of his television had been filled with what appeared to be larvae or insects swarming. When Menardo had raised the volume and looked closely, he saw the swarms were mobs of angry brown people swarming like bees from horizon to horizon. At first Menardo had thought he was seeing a rerun of videotapes taken at the Mexico City riots years before; then, looking more closely, he had seen the city was Miami, and the mobs, American. All over the world money was the glue that held societies together. Without money or jobs even the U.S. was suffering crippling strikes as well as riots and looting. Cities such as Philadelphia that were bankrupt had to appeal for the National Guard, but riots in Detroit, Washington, and New York City had also required federal troops. Menardo shook his head. He didn't like the look of things in the United States. What a shame such a power as the U.S. had gone the same

direction has England and Russia. Almost overnight, the people had discovered all their national treasuries were empty, and now everywhere there were riots.²³⁴

The emptiness of those national treasuries signals the fragility/emptiness of the dominant myth of benign Neoliberal globalisation, NAFTA and unrestrained free market capitalism. Menardo is profoundly unsettled by the image of Americans, not South Americans or Mestizo Indians or the marginalised of society who usually find themselves the first to feel the sting of economic downturn, but Americans. Twice he mistakes the people on the screen for grotesque swarming insects and larvae, suggesting that the riots he is witnessing are themselves only the larval stage of development, alluding to Silko's larger theme of a nascent global revolution. Major US cities, once hubs of industrial activity, are now bankrupt and part of the growing American wasteland that partly anticipates the rapid deterioration and insolvency of major US cities in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Interestingly, Silko neither spares Washington nor New York City, the centres of US wealth and power, but uses them to make an emphatic statement about the extent of social unrest in the US. The American Empire is devouring itself, its people transformed into insects swarming over the imperialist cadaver. Perhaps most significant of all is the fact that the majority of the people that Menardo sees on the television screen are 'mobs of angry brown people', suggesting that the rallying cry for this uprising has a distinctly racial dimension. Silko will again use the metaphor of swarming insects at the very end of the novel as a reference to globalised unity, and the figurative nod to worker bees working in union implies a degree of socialist cooperation. Swarming is organised madness; millions of individual creatures surrender individuality in the

²³⁴ Silko, *Almanac*, pp. 481-482.

mob-like hysteria of the swarm, but the image of ants that ends the novel is one of collective responsibility and shared consciousness.

It is also important to recognise that this is a Mexican capitalist pitying the collapse of the US economy and likening it to the fall of former empires. In this moment the historic dominance of the US over Mexico and South America more generally is reversed, and Menardo, a co-conspirator in the Destroyers' rush for omnipotent power, is left with a profound feeling of disquiet. He too is an imperialist, having grown fat, quite literally, through exploiting the amoral vacuum created by societal breakdown and unimpeded consumerism. The sound of buzzing swarms emanating from his television set is the white noise of an empire in decline finally made audible, the systemic violence rendered telematically for all to see. 'Dreams', Menardo understands, can be used to 'destroy you'.²³⁵

In problematising the ideological undercurrent that gives form to the US frontier myth and transcendent violence as a means of safeguarding what former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright described as the 'indispensable' America, *Almanac* makes manifest the human cost of this doctrine.²³⁶ Silko's dystopic vision of America can then be read as a response to the moral hypocrisy of the convenient, overtly romanticised frontier myth that continues to be used as a narrative veil for exceptionalist US violence, and remains a key component in US foreign policymaking and national identity. Similarly, Slotkin assigns what he calls the public-myth of the frontier the same value as ideology, where the widely recognised popular myths that sustain aspects of US national self-image are enshrined, occasionally challenged, but

²³⁵ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 321.

²³⁶ Madeline Albright, US Secretary of State, speaking on NBC-TV *The Today Show* with Matt Lauer, Columbus, Ohio, February 19, 1998, as released by the Office of the Spokesman US Department of State, < <http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/1998/980219a.html> > [accessed 22nd July, 2014]

always reproduced at least in part by institutions of cultural production. One primary function of frontier myth is to continually remake itself, adding additional layers of signification even as new degrees of criticism are levied against it.²³⁷

Conversely, what cannot be neatly contained within the parameters of the ideological form of the frontier myth becomes extraneous or antagonistic. This is the case for the Native subject which is perennially cast in the role of foil to manifest destiny, or otherwise relegated to the footnotes of history as a vanishing or illegitimate entity, devoid of any significant political representation. This primitivism is also carried across into the reception of the literary output of twentieth century Native American and mixedblood authors, whose work publishers habitually align with tragic recurring themes of self-destruction, the vanishing (Native)-American, drug and alcohol abuse, the conflict between traditional and non-traditional ways of life, all drifting towards what Vizenor calls the ‘denouement of commercial literature’ to add the final stamp of closure to the narrative.²³⁸ Certainly the foundational twentieth century novels of, among others, D’Arcy McNickle, M. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, Louis Owens, and Gerald Vizenor highlight and return to these themes.²³⁹ The archetypal protagonists of these novels, who are typically cast as traumatised outsiders, find themselves facing questions of how best to negotiate their Native identity in a world largely hostile to Indigenous subjectivities.²⁴⁰ Their world is dominated by violence and haunted by the memory of violence. Silko’s *Almanac* generalises these same conditions to all aspects of life on a borderless

²³⁷ Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, pp. 654-660.

²³⁸ Gerald Vizenor, ‘The Unmissable: Transmotion in Native Stories and Literature’, *Transmotion*, 1.1 (2015), 63-75 (p. 64).

²³⁹ Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 107-108.

²⁴⁰ See Brian Fergus M. Bordewich, *Killing the White Man’s Indian: Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1996); Dippie, *The Vanishing American*; Bird’s introduction to *Dressing in Feathers*; Rollins and O’Connor, eds, *Hollywood’s Indian*.

American continent. The problem that arises is that popular thematic readings seem to suggest that fiction produced by Native American authors necessitates the inclusion of violent episodes and must lean heavily towards the tragic. To suggest otherwise runs the risk of appearing at least disrespectful to a long and profoundly traumatic history of violence, and at worst guilty of crude, even ideologically motivated, revisionism that continues to ‘constitute the colonial subject as Other’.²⁴¹ Moreover, if such recurring popular representations of Native American culture and identity are to be believed, violence and tragedy are the *de facto* conditions of Native American and mixedblood existence. This creates a permanent state of what Gerald Vizenor calls victimry, in which the Native subject is only ever defined as tragic, dead, or disappearing. The struggle to write beyond this and educate new readerships has in turn come to define much of the new emergent Native American and mixedblood writing of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, with the rise of postmodern and post-Indian comic/ironic subjectivities, typified by an increasingly polymorphic sense of Indigenous cultural identity that complicates simplistic and deterministic modes of representation.²⁴²

By challenging the singular metaphor of US civilisation – the settling of the frontier and westward expansion – Silko succeeds in deconstructing this formative myth and the systemic violence obscured by it. The Native subject is no longer silent in her novel, but she does not reduce the relationship between the US and Indigenous people to a moral dichotomy; instead she complicates the myth that enables the US to

²⁴¹ Spivak, pp. 280-281.

²⁴² See Deloria’s chapter on Indian humour in Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), pp. 146-167; Louis Owens’s discussion on the editorial decisions that beset D’Arcy McNickle as he prepared to publish *The Hungry Generation*, which later became *The Surrounded*, in *Other Destinies*, pp. 49-89; Allen, *Off the Reservation*; Vizenor, *Narrative Chance*; Vizenor, *Native Liberty*; Robert Warrior, *Tribal Secrets* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

perceive the Native subject and racialised Other as either extinct or marginalised to the point of obscurity. Public myth is remarkably durable owing to a ubiquitous and largely self-referential presence in popular culture. Violence must not be allowed to hide behind celluloid fantasy, and the real, lived, colonising violence of the frontier must be put back in if Native and marginalised subjectivities are to be respectfully located within an attentive dominant culture.

Unmaking Myth: Extreme Violence and Forensic Overexposure in *Almanac*

In an early chapter of *Almanac* entitled ‘famous criminals’, Seese and Sterling – a Laguna Pueblo who has been forced to leave his home in a storm of controversy surrounding the filming of sacred tribal icons – explore the sites of historical violence in Tucson. Sterling is fascinated by the famous criminals who at one time or another passed through the city or ended the days there. He spends much of his free time reading *Police Gazette* magazine, a true crime periodical, and conducting his own research in the dubious criminal celebrity of the city. As they drive through the streets taking in Tucson’s criminal past, the subject turns to Geronimo:

‘I wonder what Geronimo thought,’ Seese says, sitting down on the front steps staring straight ahead at the pickup loaded with all the purchases. ‘He thought he and his men would be allowed to go back to the White Mountains and live in peace.’

‘You mean he had to take their word for what he was signing?’

‘Well, look. The U.S. army had kept five thousand troops in southern Arizona and southern New Mexico in the 1880s and ‘90s trying to catch him. They never did catch him. The only way they could do it was by tricking him. They sent word General Miles just wanted to talk to him. And General Crook had promised Geronimo the Apaches could go home to live in peace. But the territorial politicians and the Indian agents didn’t like Crook. General Crook was on his way out when he met with Geronimo. None of the promises were ever kept.’

Seese got up suddenly. “I don’t want to be anywhere near this place.” She drove slowly through the “historic district’s” old mansions.

‘They made money off the Indian wars, did you know?’²⁴³

²⁴³ Silko, *Almanac*, pp. 79-80.

Seese likes to think of herself as reasonably well informed, certainly street smart. The revelation, however, that the popular version of Geronimo's so called capture is a staged simulation leaves her feeling nauseous, ashamed that she could have been so easily hoodwinked by such a fraudulent misrepresentation of events. Seese's discomfort arises from the unexpected realisation that behind the once familiar myth of Geronimo's capture lies a far more unsettling story of betrayal and rank dishonour. In light of Sterling's retelling, the beautiful townhouses and historic district of the city now appear less majestic, and as Sterling reveals yet more of Tucson's bloody past Seese feels increasingly alienated, even threatened by the powerfully symbolic architecture. As Moore suggests, this uncomfortable *witnessing* of the unspeakable, of the silenced and unspoken, is essential in producing a critically aware reading of Silko's unsettling novel, along with a readership attuned to the problems of racialised marginality.²⁴⁴ On the significance of Sterling's fascination with outlaws, Silko has said:

Sterling has always been curious about 'outlaws' because he senses that the dominant culture has relegated Indians to a category which is outside the laws. Sterling is curious about the non-Indians who ended up as 'outlaws,' because Sterling is trying to understand how the white man's law and order work. Sterling knows that 'outlaws' suffer injustices in the hands of police and the courts who sell 'justice,' and he knows intuitively that what passes for 'law and order' in the U.S. is actually just injustice and racism. Sterling is fascinated with flamboyant, daring rebels who oppose the unjust system.²⁴⁵

Sterling goes on to explain how the local Tucson merchants 'did not want to see the Apache wars end' because the on-going hostilities had proven to be so profitable. Merchants conspired to incite violence and manufacture confrontations to ensure that a steady stream of soldiers would continue to flow through the city's bars and

²⁴⁴ Moore, 'Silko's Blood Sacrifice', p.152.

²⁴⁵ Laura Coltelli, 'Almanac of the Dead: An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko', in *Conversations With Leslie Marmon Silko*, ed. by Arnold, pp. 119-134 (p. 120).

outfitters.²⁴⁶ When Silko opens her novel with the proclamation ‘The Indian Wars have never ended in the Americas’ it is this form of surreptitious, systemic violence to which she is referring.²⁴⁷ Just like the myth of the frontier, the myth of Geronimo’s capture has allowed Tucson to expand, feeding the larger public myth of transcendent violence that considers Geronimo’s capture and the deliberate continuation of the Apache Wars a necessary step in the closing of the frontier. In line with this logic it is better that Geronimo should be imagined and remembered as an uncompromising and charismatic warrior who was finally cornered after a lengthy campaign, than as an ageing leader tricked into surrender by false promises of peace and safe passage.

Indeed anyone reading the novel for the first time cannot help but acknowledge the volume and intensity of the violence that infiltrates the lives of these characters. For one, Sterling’s fascination with Geronimo’s capture and understanding of how Tucson merchants and investors exaggerated reports of Indian violence, suggests that Sterling is all too aware that the territoriality of the region and the violence of his own life is intricately connected to the way the region has been preserved in myth and legend. Sterling’s role as amateur social historian is fitting, as he is well acquainted with the cost of exposing traditional cultures to the reifying forces of Hollywood production teams that habitually represent the Native subject as permanently Othered. Before his banishment from the reservation, he had been ordered by his tribal council to protect the giant stone water snake of the Laguna, warning them of the coming End Times, from the visiting filmmakers.²⁴⁸ The snake God was not to be witnessed by outsiders, especially filmmakers who were suspected of sharing the same ethnocentric mentality as successions of anthropologists, who had for years only sought to validate

²⁴⁶ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 80.

²⁴⁷ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 15.

²⁴⁸ Silko, *Almanac*, pp. 92-96.

their interpretation rather than allowing the Laguna to speak for themselves. The concern is that if the giant stone snake, that had ‘always lived in the lake and loved and cared for the Laguna people as children’, was lost to the outsiders, filmed and exploited so to speak by those uninterested in its importance to the Laguna, a fundamental part of Laguna culture would be irreversibly altered. It is for this reason that the filmmakers and visiting anthropologists are labelled as ‘conspirators’, to whom all ‘current ills facing the people of Laguna could be traced back’.²⁴⁹ Tellingly, the destructive habits of the conspirators are seen to reach back five hundred years to the first arrival of Europeans in the Americas. The tribal council who banish Sterling from the reservation following the filmmaker’s unwarranted filming of the giant stone water snake, understand that if Native American subjectivities must welter under the weight of dominant US culture what is secret to their people is also sacred. If those who witness the snake and its power are compelled to speak of it, as in the case of the filmmakers, then what is sacred may be trivialised and misrepresented.

Silko exposes the hypocrisy of transcendent violence in an early chapter of *Almanac* entitled ‘suicide’, in which Seese is confronted with the sudden, violent death of her friend and confidant Eric, who has shot himself following a long period of bipolar depression. After first discovering his corpse, Seese’s estranged lover, David, an artist, seizes the opportunity to snap a series of black and white photographs which he will later exhibit, before finally calling the police. After David carefully positions photographic reflectors, lights, and vinyl backdrops, Eric’s body assumes an unreal quality, his blood shining with same plastic aesthetic gloss of ‘enamel paint’.²⁵⁰ David wants Eric’s violent death to be seen as a tragic performance, violence as spectacle,

²⁴⁹ Silko, *Almanac*, pp. 92, 96.

²⁵⁰ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 108.

not the last desperate act of an intelligent, creative individual living in an unstable and uncaring world. In short, David wants Eric's violent death to become *transcendent*, akin to the melodramatic suicide of a film star or rock musician where their dramatic death constitutes the continuation of their story *post mortem*. Seese does not want to bear witness to Eric's death because for her it represents one possible outcome for her own life, over which she has precious little control at this point in the novel. She also recognises constituent immorality in David, whose scavenger-like actions confuse and disgust her. She reflects how Eric's death 'might have been bearable except for what David had done' and struggles to contemplate David's posed photographs.²⁵¹ Conversely, she had previously been able to view the colour forensic photographs 'without flinching', but after discovering that David had delayed calling the police for several hours so that he could complete his work, Seese wonders if delayed shock is the cause of her lack of empathy, or whether David's strange *memento mori* are to blame:

The black-and-white prints David had made were all high contrast: the blood thick, black tar pooled and spattered across the bright white of the chenille bedspread. Was that why she didn't feel anything, not after she'd realized David had photographed Eric's body? David had focused with clinical detachment, close up on the .44 revolver flung down to the foot of the bed, and on the position of the victim's hands on the revolver. Or did she feel no horror because she had already been filled with it, and no photographs of brains, bone, and blood would ever add up to Eric.²⁵²

Later, when patrons and critics applaud David's artistic ability following a successful exhibition of the Eric series, which in turn triggers a lawsuit from Eric's family, the myth surrounding his death is validated. The abjection and horror of Eric's violent suicide are reimagined through David's lens becoming a commodity to be consumed.

²⁵¹ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 105.

²⁵² Silko, *Almanac*, pp. 106-107.

As Tillett notes, in the novel ‘everything and everyone is ripe for consumption’, and in David’s case all that is required is a little cynical marketing.²⁵³

David’s installation is a huge commercial success and for a time David actually becomes an integral part of the artwork himself, appropriating the role of Eric’s body, accompanied by a slick of blood, further dramatising the rather unsubtle performative component that sustains the mythogenic process while essentially erasing the actual, real violence and horror of Eric’s death. The abject status of Eric’s corpse disappears into the photograph while Seese cannot view his physical body without experiencing a personal crisis of identity. The ritual of taking crime scene photographs should theoretically re-establish social convention, imposing an objective view, but here Silko suspends convention by blending David’s photographic artifice with those of the functional, sterile crime scene photographs and Eric’s death is lost in a ménage of simulated realities that are at once artistic, scientific, performative, and melodramatic. This also raises the problem of unachievable realism or the impossibility of realism. David’s installation is praised for its stark realism, when realism is precisely what it is lacking. What his supporters recognise in the artwork is not a form of realism, but an affectation of convention, or an intriguing simulation.

In his historical analysis of frontier myth in the twentieth century, Slotkin suggests that while myth-making or *mythogenesis* is the work and trade of cultural production, and can be employed in a range of ideologically motivated fashions, it is not necessarily the exclusive preserve of elite institutions. Rather it is an ongoing and sometimes discursive process that can be revised with subsequent retelling or revisioning. That myth represents a ‘restraining grammar of codified memories’

²⁵³ Tillett, ‘Sixty Million Dead Souls’, p. 14.

echoes Barthes' earlier examination of mythogenesis whereby the ideological concepts that give rise to myth have the potential to alter all that falls within the ideological parameters or *form* of the myth. According to Barthes, myth is merely the most overt expression of the ideological concept that gives it form and sustains it. This framing concept alters or 'impoverishes', to use Barthes' terminology, the accumulated meaning suggested by any individual components that comprise the larger form of the myth, in effect re-casting those components according to the internal logic of the ideological myth-concept.²⁵⁴ Applying this to the Eric sequence or to the function of systemic violence in *Almanac* as a whole, reveals the extent to which myth functions to oversimplify vastly more complex experiences. Hence Eric's death becomes something to be posed, reduced to a self-indulgent moment of individual artistic excess. David's use of a range of professional photographic techniques to light Eric's corpse in the kitsch style of '*Police Gazette*' magazines, also suggests that the photographic medium somehow changes the fundamental quality of the scene, making it less *real* yet somehow more compelling, at least to the critics who appreciate his work.²⁵⁵

Emerging from this scene is Silko's critique of the tendency of postmodern/poststructuralist art and thought to elide 'fact' and 'fiction', or at least to posit multiple realities, all of which are equally valid. The scene also suggests that postmodern/poststructuralist thought similarly appropriates something like a mythogenic process, even in the act of supposedly destabilising such structures. It then becomes almost impossible to distinguish between different shades of real and imagined, with only the act of performance to remind the viewer that what is being

²⁵⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 118.

²⁵⁵ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 106.

witnessed cannot necessarily be trusted. Indeed, as David L. Moore has already said, numerous acts of *witnessing* punctuate the novel, reminding the reader of the importance not to be deceived and to bear witness. As mentioned earlier, the Chief of Police of Mexico City is heavily involved in a lucrative snuff and hardcore pornography operation that works out of the cells of the municipal police station. When reviewing some of the material he notes that he:

could not remember the girl's face, much less her dark buds of breasts or her small, thin buttocks, which he had seen on the video screen. What he could not forget, what remained in his thoughts, had been something far more horrible, something that he had not expected to see but that the video camera had revealed. It was the long, thick erect organ of the governor; in low light it might be mistaken for a loaf of bread.²⁵⁶

Like Seese, the Chief of Police witnesses something all too human in the violent porn film that prevents him from simply consuming it. The gratuitous nature of the film and the monstrous performance of the governor, whom the chief knows personally, complicates what had previously been - despite the horrific nature of the video - somewhat routine, devoid of empathy, and therefore disturbingly unremarkable. The casualisation of violent rape and bodily mutilation further emphasises the notion that this is a society in moral freefall. In what other scenario would the city's police force engage in such objectionable and amoral behaviour? Later, in a scene that touches upon the interplay between violence perpetrated against the racialised Other and the expression of a fundamental ideological position, the Chief reflects on the content and meaning of the most recent pornographic production featuring the torture, rape, and eventual murder of innocent victims:

The chief was delighted to make money from the filthy perversions of thousands hopelessly addicted to the films of torture and dismemberment. But a short time later the police chief had an idea. The videos Vico sold to the Argentine pornographic film company were only copies of the originals; the chief's idea was to educate the people about the consequences of political extremism. He wanted the people to see the

²⁵⁶ Silko, *Almanac*, 273.

punishment that awaited all agitators and communists. Stern messages could be interwoven in the interrogator's questions [...].²⁵⁷

The presence of the simulacrum is clear, as is the overweening and perverse sense of a transcendent, justifiable use of violence as a means of public instruction. In his analysis of Friedkin's 1973 film *The Exorcist* Fredric Jameson notes how a seemingly banal setting, such as the middle class suburbs of Georgetown, becomes the silence against which the 'ominous wing flapping in the attic will be perceived'.²⁵⁸ In *Almanac* that same cinematic silence is performed by the normative, casualised use of violence in the execution of basic state services. This normative violence has become so prevalent that it is rendered almost invisible. It is for this reason that the irony of a police chief contemplating the use of violent pornography as a warped form of public service announcement is not out of place in a novel that examines ideologically motivated systemic violence. Reviewing the latest snuff film, the narrator begins to describe the harrowing setting of the production:

The interrogation room had been decorated with colored paper and paper flowers as if for a party, but in the center of the room on a tinfoil "throne" sat the prisoner. The prisoner's eyes had been taped with the silver tape the Argentine used to bundle cords on video equipment. But the chief had not been prepared for masks on their faces. The interrogators wore carnival masks-the wolf, the rat, the vampire, and the pig. In this video they wanted no trace of the police. This they had done for a special video called Carnival of Torment. How quickly they had lost sight of their true purpose. Of course, they wanted to make money, but what had been most important to the chief was the message, the warning that must be sent.²⁵⁹

The 'Carnival of Torment' is an apt metaphor for an examination of systemic and normative violence at play in Silko's novel, while the choice of costumes employed by the attending police officers, namely the 'wolf, the rat, the vampire, and the pig' each invoke an anti-capitalistic personification of greedy scavengers. The ridiculous, carnivalesque performance only further emphasises the extent to which Silko is

²⁵⁷ Silko, *Almanac* p. 342.

²⁵⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge Classics, 2007), p.119.

²⁵⁹ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 343-344.

challenging ideological assumptions about the regenerative properties of violence, the frontiers in this instance being those which are perceived to exist between the police and those identified by the chief as political activists and Indigenous agitators, and the historical significance of the US-Mexico border states.

Such a visceral display of violence reminds the reader that in a society marked by a near total disregard for human life, as depicted in the novel, the root causes of violence often go unseen and unspoken. Examining the forensic photographs and later David's performance, Seese is struck by the 'extreme angles of Eric's limbs' which seem to outline the 'geometry of his despair' as if the act of interpretation initiated by the subject framing of the camera has translated the event into metaphor. She notes how his 'clenched muscles guarded divisions and secrets locked within' had been laid bare in the photographs, the 'gridwork of lies had exploded 'bright, wet, red all over'.²⁶⁰ In Seese's hands, David's work made the simulated tragedy of the scene explicit, allowing her to view Eric's body through the signifying lens of David's camera in much the same way that the mysterious *Almanac of the Dead*, from which the novel takes its title, promises to make sense of a violent and traumatic past and a similarly violent present, since both attempt to dispel the myth of transcendent violence.

According to Barthes, only in its major artefact, the cinematic or photographic still, can the filmic be truly captured, forcing the viewer to fixate on the scene before them, rather than traversing the constantly shifting landscape of the film proper, offering us 'the inside of the fragment'.²⁶¹ It is for this reason that *Silko* repeatedly confronts the reader with violent scenes delivered in explicit forensic detail, ensuring

²⁶⁰ *Silko, Almanac*, p. 106.

²⁶¹ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p. 67.

that the reader cannot look away or undertake a comfortable reading. This kind of forensic fixation or overexposure sheers events depicted away from the normative background against which such acts of violence seem disturbingly ordinary, expected even. Considering the extremity of these violent episodes, there is distinct effort on her behalf to move discussions of violence beyond the superficiality of violence as spectacle that is meant to be instantly consumed and then forgotten, the image of spectacular violence barely registering in the mind of the consumer. In contravention of this, Silko wears her reader down, forcing them to look again and again, quickly establishing the sense that violence in *Almanac* is not to be glossed over and treated as ancillary to the plot. The reader must bear witness, and witnessing requires a prolonged visual fixation on the subject. The relationship between reading and witnessing resists passive engagement with the text. Crime scene photographs, like those documenting Eric's death, invite close inspection, calling the audience into the story where they may, as Walter Benjamin suggests, discover the underlying 'secret', or 'instinctual unconscious' of the image.²⁶² Only when the real world is captured in this way, paused so-to-speak in a photographic freeze, can hitherto unseen or obscured elements be given time to develop in the mind of the observer. The scene of crime forensic photographs follow a series of closely monitored conventions designed to preserve clinical detachment, whereas David's photographs force Seese to view Eric's suicide as a simulated, staged performance. Significantly, photographs of this nature materialise at different points throughout the novel, ranging from David's morbid installation, to Beaufrey's trade in images and videos of late-term abortions, violent interrogations, and human autopsy, along with the violent sexual imagery collected by

²⁶² Walter Benjamin, qtd in Henry Bond, *Lacan at the Scene* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 3.

General J. and the snuff videos produced by the Mexico City Municipal Police. Similarly, the novel abounds with acts of surveillance footage and videotape examining the illicit dealings of Max Blue, and the vivid, violent nightmares of Menardo which are dutifully interpreted by his Indian chauffeur Tacho, whose forensic dream interpretation similarly exposes the hypocrisy and violent dealings of his employer.²⁶³ The ubiquitous presence of video and photography haunts the reader, repeatedly drawing them into the role of active *witness* instead of passive observer. Silko in fact structures her novel around a sequence of relentless violent episodes that manifest themselves first as experience and then as image, forcing the reader to contemplate the underlying ‘secret’ violence that gives form to this perverse version of still life. In each instance violence must not be allowed to pass unnoticed but held in the reader’s imagination long enough to provoke a deeper critical engagement. One is reminded of recurring ethics debates in new media as to the use of graphic images. Too much violence, it seems, is unnecessarily morbid, whereas too little and people begin to suspect an underlying political agenda. One important distinction in *Almanac* is that the novel weaves these violent images together in such a way that they cannot be viewed as individual acts of violence erupting inexplicably out of normal everyday life, but rather as the symptom of a pervasive systemic violence that reaches across borders and into the lives of all. In the hands of a critical witness, what is an act of reportage for the Crime Scene Investigator or Scene of Crime Officer becomes in *Almanac* an act of artistic revelation exposing a causality of violence.

Moore argues that ‘witnessing [...] precedes the power of telling’ in *Almanac*, constituting a ‘double power’ that enables the reader to explore the underlying causes

²⁶³ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 278.

of normative and systemic violence in the novel.²⁶⁴ For Seese this critical process has been overwhelmed by the sheer excess of normative, day-to-day violence that she experiences at the hands of David, Beaufrey, and Serlo, his handlers. Moreover, the relationship between witnessing and telling is fundamental in understanding how the novel enables the absence of the subaltern to be articulated. Eric's suicide can then be read, somewhat perversely, as a performative collaboration, with the reader or *witness* becoming partner to the crime insofar as they are needed to complete the performative act. Silko does not want violence to constitute an easy reading, but to create a moral obstacle that impedes and disturbs Indigenous and non-Native readers alike. This active voyeurism is essential in creating an informed and critically engaged reader since the violence of the text cannot be allowed to pass unexamined, and as the novel progresses the violent episodes only increase in frequency and extremity. The overall effect is to pose one very important question: how are such extremes of normative violence permissible?

Through repeated double exposure to episodes of violence *Almanac* succeeds in destabilising the myth of transcendent regenerative violence. In this regard James C. Scott's concept of the public transcript is useful in helping to explicate those instances where the subjugation of a stereotyped group can be interpreted as a self-regulating hegemonic performance, whereby the structural integrity of a dominant social hierarchy, as enshrined within the myth of the American frontier, is consistently reinforced, even when it appears to be under the greatest level of scrutiny. In his analysis of public and private displays of domination and resistance, Scott draws an important distinction between what he terms public and private transcripts, the latter being the manifestation of what cannot be expressed in the presence of power,

²⁶⁴ Moore, 'Silko's Blood Sacrifice', p.152.

functioning as a form of muted resistance that can find expression in surprising and unexpected ways.²⁶⁵ In a 1985 interview, Silko explains how in a work of literary fiction an act of subversion is always preferable to ‘straight-out confrontation’, and while confrontation certainly abounds in her novel, its subversive quality is to uproot the defining ideological content of the frontier and reveal the systemic violence that has produced and continues to sustain it as a vehicle for an expansionist and exceptionalist doctrine.²⁶⁶

However, it should be noted that Silko cannot ‘refute the sanctioned American myths of Anglo superiority’ without a notable hegemonic dependence on those very same myths and mythic heroes that she is at such pains to debunk.²⁶⁷ The permissible *anything goes* violence of the frontier affects all, both Native and non-Native, although for characters like David, Serlo and Beaufrey, all caught in a toxic web of abuse, this violence is seen as normative. Only Seese seems to be aware of the real horror of her situation following the death of her friend.

For Silko’s novel to succeed as a mode of literary resistance it must successfully reimagine both the ideological concept that informs the myth and its *form*, which in this instance is taken to be the imagined frontier. The imagined frontier becomes the vessel in which a collection of cultural values and doctrinal beliefs can be imagined as being rooted in an historical reality and a sacred component of manifest destiny and the Winthropian City on the Hill in which the Native subject is either notably absent, rendered impotent, savage, silent, or dead. Guidotti-Hernández argues

²⁶⁵ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 45-58.

²⁶⁶ Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 147.

²⁶⁷ Snodgrass, *Leslie Marmon Silko*, p. 48.

that ‘to illuminate the prevailing ideas of domination, violence must be read as both a subject of representation and a historical factor’.²⁶⁸ Such is the interconnectivity of the frontier-myth-as-story-and-history that it is near impossible to talk about one without invoking the other, especially in an act of parody and subversion that requires a point of reference within the dominant cultural analogue if it is even to function. With this interconnectivity and tension, then, *Almanac* becomes a dense, frequently unsettling dystopic text that combines elements of the Western with the anti-Western, and is firmly rooted in the parent myth of the frontier. In this way, the novel problematises a frontier mythology underpinned by soaring, although greatly romanticised notions of colonial naivety, innocence, and sacred, regenerative violence that criss-crosses borders and remains, as Slotkin suggests, the de facto metaphor of US cultural originary, expansionism, and an increasingly isolationist form of transnational exceptionalism.²⁶⁹

Where James Scott sees a public transcript that interfaces, albeit in a toothless and rather ineffectual manner, with a dominant culture, Antonio Gramsci sees, within the context of an elaborate superstructure, a hegemonic apparatus that has both the potential to generate new ideological terrain that maintains dominance and, at the same time, the potential to reform modes of consciousness and methods of knowledge in what can be thought of as a form of guerrilla *repurposing* of the same structures that give rise to subordination.²⁷⁰ If Silko is restricted to working within such a hegemonic framework, then by re-purposing that framework and offering a counter-historical rejectionist view, the novel can challenge the doctrinal legacy of frontier mythology

²⁶⁸ Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, *Unspeaking Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican National Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 7.

²⁶⁹ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, p. 5.

²⁷⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, ed. by David Forgacs (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1999), p. 192.

and more generally the Western genre. Robert Warrior argues that ‘insofar as Gramsci is correct in famously asserting that classes and groups give rise to intellectuals, I think it’s important to recognize that subalterns also generate their own intellectuals’ and an intellectual tradition in part characterised by a ‘historical rejection of American power and values in favour of retention of older, Indigenous forms of polity and sociality’.²⁷¹

Connecting these paradigms is the idea that the form ideology assumes in the public sphere is that of a homogenising grand metaphor that outwardly appears to unite social disunion under the banner of a supposedly shared cause, namely manifest destiny and America’s unique position in the world, but which in reality serves to marginalise the racialised Other in a timeless cultural wasteland. Race, gender, and socio-economic inequality are all relegated to the cultural periphery, a wasteland within the dominant public-transcript of the frontier myth. In some ways post-apocalyptic, this effete cultural borderland is in effect the *real* America inhabited by the unspeaking undead: dead Indians, silenced Chicanos, and ethereal Mestizos all lacking meaningful political representation and archived in the public imagination as simulated caricatures. It is this experience that is unspeakable in Silko’s America; but if the hegemonic apparatus could be repurposed, and the ideological content of the myth could be replaced with a nativist, subordinated subjectivity, this would constitute, to quote Slotkin’s definition of myth, a ‘remembering, reimagining and retelling’ of the significance of the Native subject in US culture.²⁷² Silko’s novel represents just such a crisis, where a society has lost all meaningful cohesion and has begun its final descent into moral decrepitude and self-destruction. The superstructure is failing, the Destroyers, Silko’s name for the personified form of a feral or ‘vampire’

²⁷¹ Robert Warrior, ‘The Subaltern Can Dance, And So Sometimes Can the Intellectual’, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 13.1 (2011), 85-94 (p. 91).

²⁷² Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, pp. 659-660.

corporatist capitalism, have lost footing just as a new discursive and distinctly nativist private transcript is emerging, challenging the dominant public discourse of Anglo-American/Euro-American cultural superiority.²⁷³ Responding to this as a formulaic almanac of the dead, the novel is ‘inundated by the souls of millions of slaughtered Indigenous peoples and African slaves’ and functions to give voice to the dead while tracing ‘the legacy of such inhumanity and injustice in a wide range of contemporary forms’ such as the ‘corporate, social, political’ and ‘national’.²⁷⁴ However, the text does far more than articulate and amplify the outrage of the dead - the spirits, who ‘demand justice’ and lament the fact that they did not ‘die fighting the destroyers’ - it also positions the reader as witness to the invisible causes of violence that continue to plague Indigenous and non-Native people in the Americas.²⁷⁵ The overall effect is to unsettle the cherished ideology of the frontier myth as a signifier for US cultural supremacy and the triumphant march of history.²⁷⁶ In *Almanac*, the underpinning ideological content of the frontier myth is exploded and the implicit, formative violence is exposed not as a mode of romanticised American cultural regeneration, as Slotkin suggests, but as epistemic, genocidal, self-destructive violence that threatens to consume the dystopic world portrayed in the novel. Rather than allowing the terminal creed of frontier ideology to reproduce itself, Silko wants to provoke a critical response in her reader and to create an informed, critically aware readership uncomfortable with convenient retellings of American manifest destiny that is

²⁷³ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 312.

²⁷⁴ Tillet, “The Indian Wars Have Never Ended”, pp. 21-39.

²⁷⁵ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 723.

²⁷⁶ Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western*, p. 102.

presented as all but inevitable and divinely wrought according to the expansionist ideology of the frontier.²⁷⁷

When traversing episodes of literary violence, especially when there is not a precise historical referent, historical representation and myth combine to produce metaphor and new subjectivity(s), both of which can be used when attempting to expose the underlying, systemic violence that sustains frontier myth and allows Indigenous or Native subjects to be defined as the tragic, conquered and traumatised victims of a determinist historical process. Guidotti-Hernández claims that within this context violence is ‘an ongoing social process of differentiation for racialized, sexualized, gendered subjects in the U.S. borderlands in the nineteenth century and early twentieth’.²⁷⁸ By stripping away the figurative aspirations of the myth it becomes possible to speak about the humanitarian cost of settlement and western expansion. When Silko opens her novel with the provocative statement: ‘The Indian Wars have never ended in America’, she is establishing a clear challenge to the accepted, mainstream reading of events and the myths that contextualise them as a necessary and important step in the civilising of a savage continent.²⁷⁹ Silko’s novel effectively interrupts the mythological process of the frontier by repositioning the Native experience as dominant and formative in producing the cultural backdrop to the novel, as opposed to the traditional, imagined frontier. Where Richard White points to an inseparable union of myth and history in any discussion of the frontier, Silko’s novel re-imagines it, generating a new strand of mythogenesis that brings the novel to a close at a point of global levelling marked by economic redistribution, and regeneration.

²⁷⁷ Channette Romero, ‘Envisioning a “Network of Tribal Coalitions”’: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, *The American Quarterly*, 26.4 (2002), 623-640 (p. 638).

²⁷⁸ Guidotti-Hernández, *Unspeakable Violence*, p. 3.

²⁷⁹ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 15.

Against this backdrop of moral and societal failure Silko suggests an alternative future as communicated through the cryptic prophecies associated with the epoch of Death-Eye Dog and the Almanac of the Dead. These prophecies call into being a new age of renewal in which the dominant culture of toxic, globalised consumer capitalism, and a sociopathic obsession with terminal creeds will finally cannibalise itself, as Vizenor will show in *Bearheart*, clearing the way for a new age of spiritual renewal and renewed social cohesion. The insatiable material appetites that compel the feral capitalism will, according to the doctrine of Death-Eye Dog, lead to an obsessive avariciousness made possible through the systematic use of violence, and see human beings, specifically European ‘alien invaders’, assume the characteristics of wild dogs.²⁸⁰ Nicholas Monk notes that *Almanac* ‘offers a direct challenge to this version of globalisation in its insistence that the only effective action is group action’; indeed, group action becomes one of the recurring motifs of the novel, especially in the concluding chapters where a new, communal world order emerges as a revolutionary alternative to late twentieth century capitalism.²⁸¹ In her reading of the almanac, the old woman Yoeme uncovers a passage that describes a cathartic end of the world when ‘tears will fill the eyes of God’ and ‘Justice shall descend from God to every part of the world, straight from God, justice shall smash the greedy hagglers of the world’.²⁸² Consequently, the doctrine of manifest destiny as preserved in frontier mythology is allowed to consume itself and the America portrayed in *Almanac* opens as a society in moral freefall, its social, cultural, and economic institutions all in decline and infected with the same self-destructive materialist ideology that has

²⁸⁰ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 251.

²⁸¹ Nicholas Monk, ‘Literary Responses to Modernity in the American Southwest: Leslie Marmon Silko and Cormac McCarthy’ (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2007), p. 150.

²⁸² Silko, *Almanac*, p. 576.

succeeded in rendering human existence little more than a process of violent economic exchange and exploitation.

This is perhaps best personified by the characters of Trigg and Beaufrey, both of whom ruthlessly exploit others for their own individual benefit and fail to reconcile their actions with the terrible cost they have on those around them and society at large. Throughout her novel *Silko* combines acts of violence with sexual violence, reminding the reader that in this world nothing is sacred and nothing is taboo. Beaufrey is the supreme sociopath of the novel, whose ‘selfishness gave him satisfaction’ and who is unwilling to alter his behaviour for others just as

Others did not fully exist—they were only ideas that flitted across his consciousness then disappeared. For as long as he could remember, Beaufrey had existed more completely than any other human being he had ever met. That was why the most bloody spectacles of torture did not upset him; because he could not be seriously touched by the contortions and screams of imperfectly drawn cartoon victims [...] The photograph or diagram of a tortured human body had more impact for Beaufrey than film or video of the victim moaning in handcuffs and leg irons.²⁸³

This combining of torture and sexualised pleasure appears throughout the novel and, like Trigg and the Chief of Police for Mexico City, Beaufrey finds it consummately easy to make money by exploiting the needs of people who wish to experience something real. Such is the lack of human feeling and the near-total reification of both US and Mexican citizenry that the market for extremely violent pornography, human vivisection, late-term abortions and scenes of torture undertaken in a specially re-fitted and disturbing interrogation cell at the municipal police station, has grown exponentially.

Beaufrey’s obsession with collecting, viewing, and distributing video footage of late-term abortions similarly strikes at a central theme of the novel: everything is permissible except the *real*. The near-constant presence of violence and recrimination

²⁸³ *Silko*, *Almanac*, p. 533.

that haunts all the major characters functions as a reminder that, within their world of experience, only pain and obscenity can bring them close to a meaningful existence. A recovering addict, Seese's life is defined by her driving need to find her missing son. Lecha, her sister Zeta, and their hired hand, Sterling, are similarly cast as searchers, whose lives read as a litany of sorrows, regrets, and petty feuds. Pain, it seems, is always close to hand. Seese's role as a sober companion and nurse to Lecha, feeding her charge with pain management drugs, mimics her past life, where her own addictions insulated her in a filtered reality where the horror of her situation and the machinations of Beaufrey and Serlo appeared more distant and ill-defined. In essence, then, these characters face an existential malaise of near-total social and geographical dislocation. The violence of a mythologised past has been transformed into the inescapable trauma of the present. Pain becomes timeless, a connection. Lecha's psychic powers are rooted in her ability to see the world in these terms, appearing as visions stripped of fictitious structures and fantasies that would otherwise intervene and replace the real experience with a prosthetic narrative.

The final chapter of the novel, 'home', suggests that the pervading sense of dislocation and homelessness that dominates so much of the novel has, at least to some extent, been replaced with a sense of belonging, symbolised by Sterling's belated return to his Native home. As he crosses the familiar Laguna landscape, his eyes fill with tears and he experiences what is described as 'shock'.²⁸⁴ The police gazette magazines that had helped him to make sense of a corrupt and superficial reality, the same unreal aesthetic that David sought to reproduce with his Eric series, are discarded, the world they relate to no longer a meaningful referent:

²⁸⁴ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 757.

The magazines referred to a world Sterling had left forever, a world that was gone, that safe old world that had never really existed except on the pages of *Reader's Digest* in articles on reducing blood cholesterol, corny jokes, and patriotic anecdotes.²⁸⁵

As he sits and contemplates Sterling becomes preoccupied with a nest of ants busy collecting food for the colony. He reflects on how Aunt Marie and the elders had believed the ants to be messengers who carried prayers to the spirits deep underground and that the old people had honoured the ants with small gifts. In a moment that reconnects Sterling not only to the Laguna but to the interconnected network of spiritual and physical planes, he deposits a small offering of cooked beans on the ant hill.

However, the image quickly descends into a metaphor for conveyor-like industrialisation, the ants swarming 'excitedly' over the beans which threaten to crush them. Sterling wishes that he had listened to his aunt so that he could understand how the ants communicated with the earth and the dead, but later, as he walks out across the landscape he recalls Lecha's 'armies of Lakotas and Mohawks', which appear to him in dreams as 'ghost armies of Lakota warriors, ghost armies of the Americas leading armies of living warriors, armies of Indigenous people to retake the land'.²⁸⁶ He tries to forget what he has seen in these dreams but the impression Lecha has left is profoundly affecting and the novel ends with Sterling looking to the south, his old world of police magazines and gunslinger heroes now dead.

Sterling's *nostos* is significant in that he returns to the spiritual home he wants to understand. The glitzy, simulated world of *Police Gazette* has been erased and for once Sterling appreciates the power of the stone snake as a signifier for all that is unknown but important in his life. He understands that the snake has always been

²⁸⁵ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 757.

²⁸⁶ Silko, *Almanac*, pp. 758-762.

there, a conduit through which the dead and the living can reconnect through ritual and storytelling. He is far from the toxic world of Tucson and, in that moment, there is a renewed sense of purpose, although Silko leaves this ambiguously unclear. The *nostos* narrative in Native American and mixedblood literature is a recurring one, beginning with D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*, and followed almost in kind by Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Silko's *Ceremony* in which the world-weary protagonist, typically but not exclusively a veteran, returns to his home and begins the process of reconnecting to a traditional culture, healing him in the process. In *Almanac*, Silko purposely avoids this plot structure until the very end of the novel. Sterling is not welcomed as a hero, but allowed to gradually re-enter Laguna society, where the indifference of the elders to his presence is taken as an unspoken form of permission. The healing process here is not initiated by Sterling's return - as is the case with Archilde in *The Surrounded*, Abel in *House Made of Dawn*, and Tayo in *Ceremony*; rather it is the earth that has begun to heal, while the systemic modes of transcendent violence that hampered his return have been made manifest. Watching the ants swarm and recalling Lecha's revolutionary armies, Sterling accepts an alternative Laguna ideology. The armies in his dreams are ghosts and like the Ghost Dance of the late 1800s they symbolise the reimagining of the present in accordance with the communal, pre-Columbian values of the past.

It is a fittingly cryptic end to the novel, but an optimistic one. Problems remain, corruption looms large, and the Native subject remains in the liminal borderland of US dominant culture, but the novel succeeds in reading the myth of the frontier against the grain. The transnational hardships endured by Indigenous peoples are juxtaposed with a triumphalist frontier mythology predicated on the ideological principles of expansionism and exceptionalism. The novel is unequivocal in its insistence that the

genocide and on-going hardships began with the arrival of the first European invaders and have never ceased. The neo-Marxist pretensions of El Feo, Bartholomeo and La Escapía are exposed as equally misguided in their attempt to halt the eroding forces of modernity and globalisation. The alternative is total global revolution and a return to a nativist world system which will serve to nurture the earth and promote a more humanist society, in which communal welfare is thoroughly safeguarded against individualist materialism.

The landscape encountered in the final pages of the novel relocates the giant stone water snake as the only viable reading of the land. Gone is the Turnerian sense of a war with the wilderness and the frontier as a harsh environment delivered by God to hone the American national character. In this 'home', the stone snake appears to dismiss the Christian denigration of the serpent and instead promises a reconnection to the dead, appositely foreshadowed by the colony of ants to whom Sterling makes a small libation of cooked beans. The most important instinct here is Sterling's desire to communicate with the dead and make them live again. If, as film critic Michael Coyne suggests, the filmic Western genre became throughout the 1930s, 40s and 50s a 'vital medium for reflecting and articulating crucial issues of modern American society', with its brand of Anglo-supremacist Americanism beyond question, then in *Almanac* the frontier myth and the Western genre are *witnessed* as a horrific story of rape and murder that has found its way into the superstructure of everyday life across the Americas. These narratives are then retold from an Indigenous perspective that promises to heal the world of its late twentieth century addiction to materialism.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2008), pp. 33-34.

Conclusion

Silko's novel can be read as a rejection of the frontier myth insofar that it continues to function primarily as a vehicle for an exceptionalist doctrine that relegates the Native subject to the margins of a dominant US corporatist culture as a silent, racialised Other. Over the course of this long, complex novel Silko begins to extricate the Native subject from this predicament, and rather than isolating the disturbing colonial doctrine of US mainstream culture she critiques the mythological and ideological foundations that sustain and reproduce it. At times violence becomes a performative act, with characters like David and the Chief of Police attempting to recreate the *realistic* conditions of a violent death and torture. However, these performances only succeed in further emphasising the absurdity of the situation and a total lack of empathy, and the motif of blood that runs throughout the entire novel reminds the reader that this form of violence has reached pandemic proportions, with the destroyers and human sacrificers of vampire capitalism quite literally bleeding the world's poor, homeless, and marginalised populations to death like the bewildered victims of Trigg's blood plasma organisation. The only reprieve comes towards the end of the novel when hope is restored as a longed-for return to a more traditional and spiritually nourishing way of life. Reflecting on the power of the almanac, Yoeme describes how she:

Had believed power resides within certain stories; this power ensures the story to be retold, and with each retelling a slight but permanent shift took place. Yoeme's story of her deliverance changed forever the odds against all captives; each time a revolutionist escaped death in one century, two revolutionists escaped certain death in the following century even if they had never heard such an escape story.²⁸⁸

Yoeme's revelation is one that perfectly consolidates one of the principle effects of the novel: to offer an alternative story to one held as sacred within the dominant

²⁸⁸ Silko, *Almanac*, p. 581.

culture. By retelling and reimagining the formative myths of dominant culture alternative and resistant counter-myths and new subjectivities can be brought into being.

Chapter 3

‘The World Was Like That, Full of Hidden, Half-Forgotten Things’: Systemic Violence and Louis Owens’s Uninterrupted Frontier.²⁸⁹

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought [...]. It strips off the garments of civilization [...]. It puts him in the log cabin [...] and runs an Indian palisade around him. Little by little he transforms wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe [...] here is a new product that is America.²⁹⁰

Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*.

When our people lived here long ago, before the white folks came, there wasn’t any wilderness and there wasn’t any wild animals. There was only the mountains and river, two-leggeds and four-leggeds and underwater people and all the rest. It took white people to make the country and the animals wild. Now they got to make a law saying it’s wild so’s they can protect it from themselves.²⁹¹

Uncle Jim Joseph, reflecting on the plight of the fictional Stehemish tribe in Owens’s *Wolfsong*.

Native American writing is not postcolonial but rather colonial, that the colonizers never left but simply changed their names to Americans.²⁹²

Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*.

Over the course of a varied career that included time spent as a forest ranger, fire fighter, and college professor, mixedblood author Louis Owens produced five remarkable, although sadly understudied novels, as well as a body of celebrated literary criticism.²⁹³ His novels — *Wolf Song* (1991), *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), *Bone*

²⁸⁹ Mundo Morales speaking in Louis Owens, *The Sharpest Sight* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 29.

²⁹⁰ Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, p. 5.

²⁹¹ Owens, *Wolfsong* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), p. 81.

²⁹² Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 51.

²⁹³ Renny Christopher notes that ‘Owens is not only a person of mixed blood; he is also a person of mixed-class background, having been born into an impoverished working-class culture and having become [...] a college professor.’ Renny Christopher, ‘Representations of Working-Class

Game (1994), *Nightland* (1996), and *Dark River* (1999) — move primarily between backwoods and provincial settings, characterised by a richly drawn landscape scarred by heavy industry, swollen rivers, dark mountain roads, and the secret woodland retreats that constitute Owens's uninterrupted frontier. Here 'uninterrupted' signifies Owens's departure from the Turnerian notion of a *closed* or completed frontier, as discussed in the introductory chapters, but also to reflect his longstanding assertion that the systemic, overtly racialised violence of frontier did not end in 1893 with Turner's proclamation. Instead his symbolic act of closure succeeded only in glossing the violence of dominance as unfortunate yet inevitable. It is this systemic, transcendent mode of unacknowledged violence that Owens detects in established notions of containment and the 'ecologically and spiritually devastating consequences of America's invention of wilderness', a Puritan concept formed under the auspices of settler colonialism that actively ignores Indigenous connections to a landscape that had been managed and occupied by Indigenous peoples for millennia.²⁹⁴ By contrast, Owens's characterisation of the outdoors is similar to Pierre Nora's sites of memory, a cultural and spiritual archive generated to protect modes of identity and marginalised histories which would otherwise be forgotten or destroyed.²⁹⁵ Sites of memory like these testify to a residual compulsion to commemorate or record experience within a

Consciousness', in *Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work*, ed. by Jacqueline Kilpatrick (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), pp. 154-174 (p. 158).

²⁹⁴ Susan Bernardin, 'Wilderness Conditions: Ranging for Place and Identity in Louis Owens' *Wolfsong*', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 10.2 (1998), 79-93 (p. 79). See also Dunbar-Ortiz, pp. 27-30; Lee Schweningen, 'Landscape and Cultural Identity in Louis Owens' *Wolfsong*' *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Series 10.2 (1998), 94-110. For further discussion of wilderness and Indigenous perspectives of wilderness see William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. by William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), pp. 69-83; The Wilderness Act 1964; Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 122; Robert G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1986), pp. 190-222; Louis S. Warren, 'The Nature of Conquest: Indians, Americans, and Environmental History', in *A Companion to American Indian History*, ed. by Deloria and Salisbury, pp. 287-306; Lindsay Claire Smith, *Indians, Environment, and Identity*.

²⁹⁵ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations* 26 (1989), 7-24, (p. 12).

secularised and amnesiac modern world, which becomes manifest in Owens's novels as a gothic landscape haunted by ethereal absent presences and unspeakable racialised violence that recalls and challenges the colonising mindset of containment and erasure. The presence of gothic elements in Owens might surprise some readers, especially when Owens has claimed that 'with few exceptions, American Indian novelists [...] are in their fiction rejecting the American gothic with its haunted, guilt-burdened wilderness and doomed Native and emphatically making the Indian the hero of other destinies, other plots'.²⁹⁶ But of course that notion of rejection is all important. As Velie has said, the frontier gothic is a 'romantic novel of terror set in the western wilderness with Indians playing the role of Satanic villains' that shares a melodramatic literary heritage that separates characters into simplistic groups of good and evil.²⁹⁷

In Owens, however, it is the outlying rivers and roads, the outer boundaries of the provincial town that lend an unexpected gothic quality to the staging of his novels, haunted by some unseen, half-buried memory of historical violence, where the 'noble savage's refusal to perish throws a monkey wrench into the drama'.²⁹⁸ The problematic western reading of untamed 'wilderness' and notions of provincial civilisation are forced together, with the result that simple binary oppositions suddenly look less secure. Considering this, it is appropriate to discuss the haunting absences and returning presences in his work in terms of a spectrality that is not simply atmospheric, but points to an underlying cultural impasse, where what haunts the present is the failure of the future to deliver a progression beyond the traumas and obstacles of the past.²⁹⁹ Vizenor notes that 'native stories tease a sense of presence, an ironic presence,

²⁹⁶ Owens, *Other Destinies*, p. 18

²⁹⁷ Alan R. Velie, 'Gerald Vizenor's Indian Gothic', *MELUS*, 17.1 (1991-1992), 75-85 (p. 75).

²⁹⁸ Owens, *Other Destinies*, p. 18.

²⁹⁹ Mark Fisher, 'What Is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly*, 66.1 (2012), 16-24 (p. 16).

and create an elusive consciousness that is more than mere simulations of similitude and sincerity, or the editorial investments of culture, intrigue, adventure, and petitions of conceited reality in commercial narratives'.³⁰⁰ It is compelling then that the idea of closure should be of such principle concern for writers like Silko, Owens and Vizenor, particularly where it pertains to a fixed sense of identity or Eurocentric historiographical frameworks, such as the closed frontier, imposed by a dominant culture.

On the subject of containment Owens notes how the 'dangerously unstable space' of frontier became in Turner's hands a 'stable and fully appropriated territory, its boundaries marked and known in the Euramerican imagination'.³⁰¹ Echoes of Turner's frontier can be felt in the work of historian Albert J. Von Frank, who describes the frontier as 'an antagonist to the continuity of culture, that is to say, in creating and enforcing provincial conditions.'³⁰² The bleeding edge of the mythic frontier is traditionally couched in terms of a forbidding wilderness, home to rough riders and savage Indians. The problem here is that in following Turner's well-trodden path, early twentieth century histories of frontier have a tendency to accept it as a completed process, with a well-rounded American identity emerging at the end of the 1800s having been forged in these wild and untamed lands. Ray Allen Billington, for instance, traces the contemporary idealisation of frontier consciousness to the rise of several distinct frontier characters, each playing their part in the settlement of the US interior. From swarthy frontiersmen performing an initial 'assault on nature' – the basis for Turner's War on Wilderness – through to the establishment of agricultural

³⁰⁰ Vizenor, 'The Unmissable', p. 64).

³⁰¹ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 27.

³⁰² Albert J. Von Frank, *The Sacred Game: Provincialism and Frontier Consciousness in American Literature, 1630-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 5, 157.

practices and nascent provinces, this interpretation, like Von Frank's, lends itself to Turner's embrace of Germanic Germ Theory, viewing westward expansion and social development as a form of natural succession.³⁰³ With his declaration, Turner signalled the conquest of America complete, and it is against that colonising assumption that Native American and mixedblood writers like those discussed in this thesis take aim. In Owens that sense of closure is permanently deferred, replaced with an alternative reading where, as Margaret Dwyer observes, 'myths, cultures, and autobiography mix on a dynamic frontier in which no one voice dominates'.³⁰⁴ As Dwyer suggests, loosening that sense of artificial stability and redeploying frontier as a syncretic, dialogic space, in which different subjectivities and experiences can be expressed simultaneously, is for Owens a means of both challenging the dominant Euramerican narrative, and for exploring poststructuralist potentialities offered by a more dialogic approach. This syncretic approach can be detected in the often diffuse boundaries and borders that Owens transgresses in his novels, where he plays with notions of insider and outsider status in relation to the small provincial towns and Native communities. David L. Moore reads Owens's use of frontier as his means of navigating the complex Native/non-Native duality against which he measures his own mixedblood status. According to Moore, Owens 'frames the key question of Native identity in terms of dilemma between oral and literary traditions', and then proposes a more syncretic and adaptive alternative mode of identity as a way of ensuring 'possibilities for survivance' in the long-term.³⁰⁵ Moore sees this combination of postmodern fragmentation and

³⁰³Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 4th edn (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc, 1974), p. 3. For an indigenous response to the pressures of urban relocation see Donald L. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), pp. 172-189.

³⁰⁴Margaret Dwyer, 'The Syncretic Impulse: Louis Owens' Use of Autobiography, Ethnology, and Blended Mythologies in *The Sharpest Sight*', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 10.2 (1998), 43-60 (p. 46).

³⁰⁵ David L. Moore 'Cycles of Selfhood, Cycles of Nationhood in Native American Literatures: Authenticity, Identity, Community, Sovereignty', in *Native Authenticity: Transnational Perspectives*

Owens's use of frontier as something of a useful contradiction, with Native voices seeking a stable, 'authentic' foundation in the oral traditions of the past in a world where the authentic always seems be just out of reach.³⁰⁶ Fundamentally, as Moore suggests, Owens is striving towards a 'history beyond stereotypes' which requires that duality to be tested and complicated.³⁰⁷ 'The instinct of the dominant culture' Owens writes, 'facing evidence of its own uncontained mutability, is to rewrite the stories, eradicate the witness, and break the mirror. This long project of erasure is what the mixedblood reader sees when he or she looks into the pages of American literature'.³⁰⁸ It is therefore fitting that the landscapes and boundaries that he describes in his novels are seldom stable or secure, but rather subject to the probing spectral presences of multiple, sometimes competing subjectivities, producing a layered landscape that operates like a palimpsest, where narratives of dominance and containment cannot fully erase those of Indigenous presence and continuity. He reinstates the mirror and revises the narratives of dominance, starting with a reinterpretation of the conceptual frontier that is no longer a reflecting glass for expansionist achievements of dominant culture but a space of confrontation.

In his analysis of spectrality, Julian Wolfreys notes that the appearance of the spectral and the effects of haunting are evidence of a refusal to be generalised into a dominant system.³⁰⁹ When applied to Owens this suggests that an intruding Indigenous spectrality is only the partially visible aspect of a much larger but

on *Native American Literary Studies*, ed. by Deborah Madsen (New York: SUNY, 2010), pp. 39-67 (pp. 49-50).

³⁰⁶ Moore, 'Cycles of Selfhood', p. 47.

³⁰⁷ Moore, 'Cycles of Selfhood', p. 50.

³⁰⁸ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 25.

³⁰⁹ Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), p. 22. Although very much a continuation of the general thesis put forward by Derrida in *Spectres of Marx*, Wolfreys's analysis of spectrality can be transposed to wider discussions on the function of spectrality in relation to the closure of ideological narratives.

unacknowledged Indigenous presence. Similarly, Žižek notes that ‘what the spectre conceals is not reality but its “primordially repressed” part of reality, which obtrudes into the dominant narrative and in so doing compels competing ideologies into a state of schizophrenic anxiety and confrontation.’³¹⁰ This symbolic intrusion can take many forms, although this chapter and the chapter that follows it are primarily interested in how Owens and Vizenor use violence and a tricksterish disregard for convention to expose the hardwired exclusionary logic of dominant culture. For instance, Linda Lizut Helstern notes how the title of Owens’s penultimate novel *Nightland* is a ritualistic Cherokee word that describes the West, ‘home of the Thunders and home of the dead’.³¹¹ She goes on to argue that the novel seeks to reconfigure the mythic image of the West inhabited by cowboys, Indians, and shaped by rough frontier justice as an alternative, postcontact Indian Country inhabited by a cultural mix of ‘Anglos, mixedbloods, fullbloods, animals, and ghosts’.³¹² As I will explain, Owens’s syncretic and dialogic frontier is sufficiently diffuse that it succeeds in opening discursive channels through which underlying and alternative narratives can emerge. In one unforgettable scene from *Nightland*, the beautiful and duplicitous Odessa who, having saved protagonist Billy Kaneequayokee from a barroom brawl, expresses her fondness for cowboys and the real men of the West. She explains how she had recently read *When Men Were Men: The Real History of the West* which claimed that ‘most of the real old-time cowboys were queer’.³¹³ It is a wonderful play on the sacred archetype of the grizzled heteronormative cattleman, with the reader wondering how Billy, also a rancher, will respond. Odessa explains that in her new history of the West, nomadic

³¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating The Real*, ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 230.

³¹¹ Linda Lizut Helstern, ‘Re-storying the West: Race, Gender, and Genre in *Nightland*’, in *Louis Owens*, ed. by Kilpatrick, pp. 119-138 (p. 119).

³¹² Helstern, ‘Re-storying the West’, p. 119.

³¹³ Owens, *Nightland* (New York: Dutton, 1996), p. 77.

cattlemen participated in a vast, highly organised underground network that recruited young gay men, noting with a sense of irony that ‘of course cowboys are different now, since most cowboys these days are Indian’. Billy responds in kind, stating that ‘well, at least we half-breed cowboys are. It’s genetically impossible for Indians to handle their liquor, step on twigs, or be homosexual. You might say evolution is responsible.’ Odessa promises to ‘take that up with some of my friends over at Zuni’ before leaving the bar with Billy.³¹⁴

The entire scene is riddled with confusion, japery, and a tricksterish disregard for much cherished US mythology. Firstly, Odessa, who Billy initially identifies as Apache, then Ute, but specifically not Navajo or Pueblo, is never granted a definitive identity, remaining a cipher who wears that confusion like camouflage as she goes about her business. Against this a question is then raised over the illicit sexual practices and preferences of the cattlemen of the Old West, an observation that unsettles preconceived notions of heteronormativity, while simultaneously suggesting greater heterogeneity in the form of Indian cowboys who, according to Billy, refuse to conform to the drunken Indian or clichéd forest sprite stereotypes. Just as Odessa and Billy first unsettle the cowboy myth with the introduction of the homosexual counter chronicle, they also emphasise a Native presence in that myth that had been previously understated or absented. Importantly, the arrival of this counter narrative is signalled by a very real physical confrontation, ensuring that the moment of transgression—the introduction/intrusion of a heretical counter narrative into and against the dominant narrative—is suitably emphatic. This brief exchange is particularly useful in understanding Owens’s deployment of frontier, which he uses firstly as an uninterrupted and on-going process of cultural contact/conflict, with different cultures

³¹⁴ Owens, *Nightland*, p. 78.

overlaying and bleeding through each other, and secondly as a dialogic space in which frontier assumes a more figurative, and therefore more mobile dimension where dominant hegemonic assumptions can be unpicked. Central to this conceptualisation is the idea that frontier, as imagined by dominant Euramerican culture, never really existed, but was applied retrospectively in mythic form so as to place the violence of conquest and colonialism in a more flattering ideological context. As already stated, that colonising mindset has proven most resilient, despite sustained attempts to critique it as a supremacist and exclusionary doctrine. Owens offers an additional secondary interpretation in which the confrontational point of contact between different cultures remains a provocative critical framework for thinking about cultural difference and interchange, at the same time as being a component of frontier thinking that continues to resurface in the twentieth century. These two seemingly contradictory positions, one a denial that Euramerican frontier exists at all, and the other a commitment to using the confrontational encounter proposed by frontier as a critical framework, are key to understanding Owens's complex relationship with this divisive concept.

In the first part of this chapter I examine this interpretation of frontier in more detail, and especially how Owens uses episodes of literary violence to mark dramatic breaks with narratives of dominance, such as bounded notions of wilderness or reductive definitions of Indigeneity that are more easily categorised, and therefore more easily contained, within existing exclusionary narratives of dominant culture. I argue that the violence of the colonising mindset that Owens challenges in the Turnerian legacy is countered in his fiction by the introduction of a mosaic chorus of Native, non-Native and mixedblood voices that confront the monocultural insistence on a closed frontier and an extinct or otherwise contained, crudely definable perception

of Indigenous subjectivities. In the final section I then move the discussion onto the role of rural provincialism in Owens's literary work, focusing on how the use of violence in these settings alerts the reader to the underlying violence threatening the small town provincial microcosms of his novels, where the presence of the racialised Other troubles the supposed stability of Euramerican hegemony.

Violence and the Uninterrupted Frontier in Owens

As previously discussed in chapter one, the status of frontier as a usable historiographical/critical concept in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has met with considerable criticism, especially in relation to the study of Indigenous issues. However, following the work of Arnold Krupat and James Clifton, Owens contends that the conceptual iteration of frontier may yet still retain some degree of critical utility. The colonial implications of frontier are not glossed over or reduced to a crude racial binary as Dunbar-Ortiz and David L. Moore argue; Owens places them front and centre among multiple narratives that test the monocultural assumptions of the traditional frontier.³¹⁵ One additional benefit of what Dwyer terms Owens's 'syncretic impulse' to corral competing and contradictory experiences within a dialogic frontier, is that such a model cannot easily be co-opted to propose that multiculturalism has already been achieved, in so far as different cultures are thought to exist in a kind of mutually equitable cultural harmony, a gross oversimplification with grave implications for those fighting for social justice on a range of issues.³¹⁶ Rather, a syncretic approach contends that culture and cultural plurality are necessarily untidy, incomplete, even contradictory, and that such conflict should not be denied in an attempt to proclaim the arrival of a post-racial politics. That structural friction is

³¹⁵ See Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indigenous People's History*; David L. Moore, *That Dream Shall Have a Name*.

³¹⁶ Dwyer, 'The Syncretic Impulse', pp. 43-60.

instrumental and unavoidable, and as Owens has remarked, ‘because the term “frontier” carries with it such a heavy burden of colonial discourse, it can only be conceived of as a space of extreme contestation.’³¹⁷ And it is precisely because of that profound sense of contestation that Owens claims that frontier can still remain a useful conceptual framework. The key difference between the Euramerican *closed* frontier and the dialogically agitated *uninterrupted* frontier proposed by Owens is that the latter permits contradiction, difference, and conflict to coexist without imposing arbitrary or silencing categorisations, handed down by a dominant culture that uses the Native subject as a *de facto* antagonist in its master conquest narrative. Owens perceives frontier in theoretical terms as a ‘multifaceted, multivoiced, and shifting contact zone where identities and ideologies can meet, mingle, and transform’, and this is also an important distinction within his literary output.³¹⁸

In relation to this theoretical deployment of frontier, Owens locates himself as an author working in ‘a kind of frontier zone’, which he defines as ‘always unstable, multidirectional, hybridized, characterized by heteroglossia, and indeterminate.’³¹⁹ Craig S. Womack has argued that Bakhtin represents the ‘most obvious theoretical influence on Owens in two important ways’, specifically in how ‘Owens draws on Bakhtin’s notion of the heteroglot nature of novels that become a showcase for competing ideologies, diverse linguistic styles, multiple viewpoints, and other ways in which the literary work involves contradictions and tensions’.³²⁰ Emphasising the instability of this ‘frontier/transcultural location’, Owens notes how it safeguards against essentialising positions, claiming that ‘it is difficult and undoubtedly erroneous

³¹⁷ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 26.

³¹⁸ Chris LaLonde, *Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns: The Novels of Louis Owens* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), p. 15.

³¹⁹ Owens, *I Hear The Train*, p. 208; Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 26.

³²⁰ Womack, ‘Book-Length Native Literary Criticism’, p. 46.

to assume any kind of essential stance or strategy, despite many temptations to do so'.³²¹ In embracing the conceptual frontier as the marker for a liminal cultural space in which the politics of containment become ever more diffuse and contested, Owens claims that it is possible to deconstruct or at least defamiliarise essentialised, typically Euramerican constructions of closure and containment. Most importantly, the end-point of this process, if indeed there can be one, remains necessarily opaque, reflecting, as Owens suggests, a multidirectional and hybridised interpretation of culture.

Borrowing a line from Gerald Vizenor's trickster playbook, Owens insists that frontier remains the 'zone of trickster' *par excellence*, where ideas once thought to be sacred and stable, are countermanded and ridiculed:

Within the language of the colonizer the term 'frontier' may indeed, as Pratt argues, be 'grounded within a European expansionist perspective'—and thus bear the burden of a discourse grounded in genocide, ethnocide, and half a millennium of determined efforts to erase indigenous peoples from the Americas. I want to suggest nonetheless that when one is looking from the 'other' direction, 'frontier' is a particularly apt term for this transcultural zone of contact for precisely the reason Pratt cites. [...] Frontier, I would suggest, is the zone of trickster, a shimmering, always changing zone of multifaceted contact within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated, all referents put into question. In taking such a position, I am arguing for an appropriation and transvaluation of this deadly cliché of colonialism—for appropriation, inversion, and abrogation of authority are always trickster strategies.³²²

Owens goes on to propose his reading of 'territory' as another natural extension of the frontier process, in which boundaried space subsumes Native presence:

'Frontier' stands, I would further argue, in neat opposition to the concept of 'territory' as territory is imagined and given form by the colonial enterprise in America [...] Territory is conceived and designed to exclude the dangerous presence of that trickster at the heart of the Native American imagination, for the ultimate logic of territory is

³²¹ Owens, *I Hear The Train*, p. 208.

³²² Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 26. See also Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 74. Philip J. Deloria has analysed how terms like 'outbreak', 'rebellion', and 'uprising', often used in media and mainstream coverage of Indigenous activism reveal 'a fear of Indian people escaping the spatial, economic, political, social, and military restrictions placed on them by the reservation regime. They implied containment (and, ironically, its failure), which, in turn, implied a conquest nearly (but not wholly) complete.' Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p.21.

appropriation and occupation, and trickster defies appropriation and resists colonization.³²³

Within Owens's fiction this frontier zone finds expression in unexpected places, such as the byroads and backwaters of small town provincial USA, where pre-war attitudes towards the racialised Other and attempts to 'understand minorities or their ethnic and cultural differences' were typically of little import to the white mainstream.³²⁴ Owens uses literary violence in these settings to bring underlying tensions and systemic violence to the surface so that they can be addressed more directly. Owens also teases the presumed stability of Euramerican hegemony by repeatedly unearthing what has been previously buried or silenced in his novels. As we will see, those instances of recovery speak directly to a compulsion to expose the extent to which systemic and transcendent violence has infiltrated his fictional worlds.

In his most succinct evaluation of frontier, Owens notes that 'we have long since entered inescapably what [...] I prefer to call a "frontier,"' which, quoting James Clifton, he defines as a 'culturally defined place where peoples with different culturally expressed identities meet and deal with each other'.³²⁵ Owens's inclusion of James Clifton's rejoinder 'deal with each other', also echoed by Krupat (see chapter one), is illustrative of his larger thesis, since it speaks to an on-going process that importantly lacks any fundamental stated goals other than that multiple cultural narratives need to co-exist, even if that means conflict. Owens is particularly vocal on the potential offered by a dialogic frontier in exploring the many facets of mixedblood identity as a counter narrative to the monocultural frontier:

Cultures can and indeed cannot do otherwise than come together and deal with one another, not only within the transcultural regions of frontiers or borders, but also within the hybridized individual, Vizenor's 'crossblood,' who internalizes those

³²³ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 26.

³²⁴ Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience*, p. 164.

³²⁵ Citing James Clifton, Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 52.

frontier and border spaces. As conceived by Vizenor, and by Native American authors generally, however, the mixedblood is not a cultural broker but a cultural breaker, break-dancing trickster-fashion through all signs, fracturing the self-reflexive mirror of the dominant center, deconstructing rigid borders, slipping between the seams, embodying contradictions, and contradancing across every boundary. The Indian has appropriated and occupied the frontier, reimagining it against all odds.³²⁶

One suggestion is that in *dealing with each other* all sides must at least acknowledge the existence of cultural counterparts and the systems of violence that structure that separation. Only through an act of recognition, teasing systemic violence to the surface, is it then possible to challenge the myriad forms of cultural amnesia, ideologically contrived obfuscation and transcendent violence that allow one culture to declare itself as dominant. Owens perceives his mixedblood identity as being located in the liminal space between cultures, in dialogue with both but also a confluence of subjectivities and contradictions ‘caught in the crossfire between camps’ and like Vizenor he argues that diversity of approach is absolutely essential.³²⁷

So engaged, Owens takes his readers into this proximal frontier zone where cherished signifiers of Euramerican cultural dominance are loosened from their supposedly secure footing, often occasioned by a violent rupture with the novel’s

³²⁶ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 41.

³²⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, p. 216. It is important to note that while Owens’s mixedblood hybridity has proved to be a source of contention amongst some Native American critics, most notably Elizabeth Cook Lynn, Sherman Alexie and Craig S. Womack, who critique Owens’s status as a Native American author, nowhere does he claim otherwise. Although often shortened for the sake of brevity to ‘Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish’, Owens describes a fuller account of his mixed ancestry as ‘Choctaw-Cherokee-Welsh-Irish-Cajun’, explaining that ‘I have learned to inhabit a hybrid [...] mixed space in between. I conceive of myself today not as an “Indian,” but as a mixedblood, a person of complex roots and histories’. Owens’s experience of liminality is similarly framed: ‘along with my parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, I am the product of liminal space, the result of union between desperate individuals on the edges of dispossessed cultures and the marginalized spawn of invaders. A liminal existence and a tension in the blood and heart must be the inevitable result of such crossing.’ Elsewhere, in his last interview with A. Robert Lee, Owens further qualifies what he describes as his ‘extreme consciousness of hybridity’ as ‘a kind of constantly shifting story of self. [...] When I wrote “I’m not a real Indian,” I was trying to get at a complex of ideas. First, I’m not what the world defines as “Indian.” As Gerald Vizenor has said eloquently, that creature called Indian is a figment of the Europeanized imagination. There are no real “Indians” in that sense. But at the same time, I’m conscious that I am not “real” in the sense of having been produced within a coherent Native community or culture, whatever that coherence might be. I have never defined myself as “Indian,” but rather as a mixedblood, someone of diverse identity and background’. Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 176; A. Robert Lee, ‘Outside Shadow: A Conversation with Louis Owens’, in *Louis Owens*, ed. by Kilpatrick, pp. 20-52 (pp. 30-31).

established reality. The gothic spectrality in Owens is also partly a response to this palimpsest layering of historic violence and ideological obfuscation, returning to haunt the landscapes and characters of his novels. Discussing his 1994 novel *Bone Game*, Owens talks about his desire to create a story ‘in which all times and all actions coexisted simultaneously’ highlighting his need to avoid a singular or defining narrative.³²⁸ He goes on to say that without this complex layering he felt he would be unable to ‘convey the fabric of violence in that place any other way’.³²⁹ This suggests that the experience of violence, whether immediate or recalled in Owens’s fiction, necessitates a dialogic approach where violence and the consequences of that violence can be traced across multiple discourses. Only then, he suggests, can the ‘fabric of violence’ be fruitfully explored. Pursuing this thought, Owens also recalls how with *Bone Game* he wanted to:

Explore that sense, the enormous sense of loss that the indigenous people of the Santa Cruz area, the Ohlone, experienced. Within a single generation—the matter of a few years, even months—so much was lost, changed forever, as the result of the coming of the Europeans. That’s why the novel begins with the lines, ‘Children. Neófitos. Bestes. And still it is the same sky, the same night arched like a reed house, the stars of their birth.’ I wanted to convey in those lines the extraordinary shock of recognising that the world has not changed at the deepest, most important levels, though one’s people or culture may have vanished. It’s a haunting sense to me.³³⁰

As professed here, the literary expression of violence in *Bone Game* can be perceived as an attempt to reintegrate the haunting remainder of violent erasure into narratives that explore issues of place and identity. The sense of loss that Owens describes is, however, mediated by a sense of potential recovery, in that despite the feeling of irrevocable loss, some element always remains buried of that which has been lost, along with the violence of erasure that can be unearthed from some submerged or

³²⁸ John Purdy and Louis Owens, ‘Clear Waters: A Conversation with Louis Owens’, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Series 10.2 (1998), 6-22 (p. 9).

³²⁹ Purdy and Owens, ‘Clear Waters’, p. 9.

³³⁰ Purdy and Owens, ‘Clear Waters’, p. 10.

spectral level of the text. In the same interview Owens comments on the significance of burial and recovery in his novel *Nightland*, and how the horrors of the past always leave a trace, however small, that threatens to obtrude into the collective consciousness of dominant culture:

I guess one thing I'm working on in most of my writing is the way America has tried, and continues to try, to bury the past, pretending that once it's over we no longer need to think about it. We live in a world full of buried things, many of them very painful and often horrific [...] and until we come to terms with the past we'll keep believing in a dangerous and deadly kind of innocence, and we'll keep thinking we can just move on and leave it all behind [...] that's a reason that one of *Nightland's* protagonists, Will, ends up living on a ranch containing a world of buried things.³³¹

A landscape dotted with strange burial mounds, shallow graves, buried pick-up trucks, stolen money, lost bones, the partially concealed markers of obscured histories and the haunting absent presences of America's colonial past is one of Owens's distinctive artistic traits. The real *wilderness* of the uninterrupted frontier, Owens seems to suggest, the real unknown, is that space where different cultures must confront each other along with their shared, frequently violent, frequently contested experiences of history and, echoing an expression favoured by Clifton, Krupat, and Owens, *deal with each other*.

These different elements coalesce in an early chapter of Owens's first novel, *Wolfsong*, where protagonist Tom Joseph is driving through a violent rainstorm along a pitted track towards the Native cemetery to bury his late uncle. As they approach the cemetery the Christian preacher accompanying him on this journey remarks inwardly: 'Why in thunder did the Indian cemetery have to be so far out in the sticks? A place

³³¹ Purdy and Owens, 'Clear Waters', pp. 11-12. With reference to same interview, Melody Graulich sees this as a recovery of indigenous Chumash experiences: 'unearthing the submerged Chumash stories in *The Sharpest Sight* helps readers understand what was lost or destroyed in California's colonial past, a history that is still buried today.' Melody Graulich, 'Unearthing the Chumash Presence in *The Sharpest Sight*', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 22.2 (2010), 1-21 (p. 5).

that wasn't even really a place.'³³² Immediately alerting the reader to the significance of location, the preacher's reflection is foremost an acknowledgment of his inability to locate the cemetery within a meaningful frame of reference, conveniently forgetting that it is actually he who is out of place. Like a missionary who has travelled off the map, he finds himself traversing a wild and uncultivated landscape *en route* to some mysterious house of the dead, which is itself slowly being reclaimed by nature. The irony of the situation is further played out in the contrast between what the cemetery represents to Native and non-Native characters. What for the preacher reads as a wild and undesignated 'nowhere' introduced here as a placeholder for the Euramerican notion of 'wilderness', is for the Indigenous community an important location. This simplistic binary, however, is not allowed to stand unchecked, and is immediately complicated by Tom's explanation that the burial site is in fact an unwelcome concession forced on the Indigenous community after traditional burial practices were outlawed. Significantly, then, the Native cemetery is not permitted a clear designation, while the act of burial itself is inscribed with an additional layer of contested signification with the revelation that the cemetery cannot be neatly situated in either Native or non-Native worldviews, which Owens describes as being 'almost always in direct conflict'.³³³ Rather it stands as a fiercely contested site where those worldviews collide, revealing that the reductive binaries prescribed by dominant culture are insufficient on their own in trying to make sense of this gothic setting. Tom's actions illustrate this point when the driver of the hearse refuses to risk the car's expensive paintjob on the encroaching vines that 'seemed to almost choke off the road' ahead,

³³² Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 45.

³³³ Owens, *Other Destinies*, p. 8.

denying entry. Nobody, it seems, can progress on this road unless they acknowledge their respective grievances and relative positions:³³⁴

‘You know,’ he [Tom] said quietly. ‘I guess it used to be easier. Our people used to put their dead up in trees, in canoes, in special places. I heard they used to do it right here. But that’s illegal now. White men came along and made a law against it. Now the law says we have to pay somebody like you to help put us in the ground. Isn’t that incredible? You people came to our country and told us that what we’d been doing for a thousand years was not legal. I have trouble understanding that sometimes.’ He wiped rain from his forehead and looked over the driver’s shoulder toward the thicket.

‘If I had a couple hundred bucks,’ he said softly, ‘I’d just give it to you and tell you to get yourself a new paint job when this is over. But I don’t have five bucks, so what I’m going to do instead is suggest that you look around. You’re in Indian Country right now.’ Tom almost smiled as he watched the driver begin to realize the tough spot he was in. Except for the preacher, who didn’t count, he was surrounded by Indians. A few hundred feet away were more Indians, lots of them, maybe even scarier ones.³³⁵

This is not a world that can sustain itself according to simple binary divisions, even if familiar frontier motifs are plain to see in this gothic tableau, recalled in this instance by the figures of a white preacher and coachman surrounded by angry Indians at the boundary of ‘Indian Country’. Crucially, Tom reveals that the cemetery is an unstable location, lacking a definite status in either worldview, while the road functions as the physical outer marker for the fictional town of Forks and the ‘geographical terminus of America’s westering pattern of settlement and ensuing resource depletion’.³³⁶

Additional layers of complexity are introduced once inside the cemetery, where Tom reflects upon how ‘three generations of Stehemish were planted over, under and between the long, twisting hemlock, cedar and fir roots.’³³⁷ Recalling Owens’s desire to explore the enormous sense of loss experienced by Indigenous peoples, the description of the cemetery is noticeably poignant:

³³⁴ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 47.

³³⁵ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 49.

³³⁶ Bernardin, ‘Wilderness Conditions’, p. 80.

³³⁷ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 51.

The graves hung on the edge of the Stehemish River, moss-eaten stones and rotten crosses tilted out of a mad growth of ferns and vines and the broad-leafed devil's club. Here the old-growth had never been taken, and the cedars towered on trunks eight and ten feet through, while enormous, sagging hemlocks dripped needles and moss upon the hidden graves. [...] the forest buried the dead in layers of humus and tangled vegetation. The people vanished while the river, milky with glacial silt, gripped the air so tightly it was difficult to breathe. [...] One day, after a big rain or heavy snowmelt, the current would cut through and sweep the Stehemish people away, tumbling the bones smooth and dropping them on sandbars and gravel bottoms. [...] He thought of the importance of water in the stories. The most powerful spirits lived in the water, and water separated the worlds of the living and dead.³³⁸

Drawing a deliberate contrast with the confrontation that took place outside the cemetery, Tom's reference to violent cultural erasure is here notably more subtle. The metaphor of nature reclaiming the site, the river washing away ancestral bones and, with them, evidence of their existence, is most striking. Loss is an inevitable universal, but here the reason for the disappearance of these people is not explicated, allowed instead to remain as an unresolved question, present and yet unanswered in an image of disintegrating tombstones, leaving the reader to wonder what has brought them to this place. Imagery of burial, decay, unrestricted vegetable growth and a layering of worlds and experience — the spirit world, the ceaseless eroding force of the river, grave markers — describe a place that has for Tom historical significance that is unclear. In a sense the cemetery itself has been buried and now awaits recovery. In his autobiographical writing Owens recalls a similar scene from his time spent as a forest ranger:

In old-growth forests in the North Cascades, deep inside an official Wilderness Area, I have come upon faint traces of log shelters built by Suiattle and Upper Skagit people for berry harvesting a century or more ago [...] Those human-made structures were as natural a part of the Cascade ecosystem as the burrows of marmots in the steep scree slopes. Our Native ancestors all over this continent lived within a complex web of relations with the natural world, and in doing so they assumed a responsibility for their world that contemporary Americans cannot even imagine. Unless Americans, and all human beings, can learn to imagine themselves as intimately and inextricably related to every aspect of the world they inhabit, with the extraordinary responsibilities such relationship entails—unless they can learn what the indigenous peoples of the Americas knew and often still know—the earth simply will not survive.

³³⁸ Owens, *Wolfsong*, pp. 51-52.

A few square miles of something called wilderness will become the sign of failure everywhere.³³⁹

Working through Owens's recollection, the strange, conflicting sense of dislocated familiarity experienced by Tom is similarly articulated. The echoes of the ancestors all but lost to the relentless eroding forces of nature, emphasise survival and the necessity of renewing the human relationship with nature and the nonhuman world as a response to the incrementally slow-moving violence of ecological destruction, and the violence of domination. Lee Schweninger notes Black Elk's 'insistence on sharing rather than dominating is indicative of a major difference between Euro-American and Native American approaches to nonhuman nature' and it is that sense of an 'interrelatedness of man and nature', of a respectful shared responsibility for the land, that is being advocated in Owens's writing.³⁴⁰ The acclaimed eco-critic/writer Cheryll Glotfelty has said that 'writing can be a mediator between nature and culture' in so far that 'to write something you have to pay attention to what you are writing about, you have to find words'.³⁴¹ Something similar is taking place here in *Wolfsong* and Owens's autobiographical recollections, with Tom, the narrator, and Owens *finding words* to describe the matrix of human and non-human worlds and experience. Functioning as a figurative *nowhere* the cemetery is then also a refuge, a site of memory that recalls an earlier humanity that did not perceive itself as separate or superior to the natural world. The decay in this scene carries multiple meanings, and can also be read in a more positive light as an expression of human continuity with nature that must be recovered to counter the effects of erasure. Despite its haunting symbolism, the cemetery represents an alternative way forward, existing outside the

³³⁹ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 217.

³⁴⁰ Lee Schweninger, 'Writing Nature: Silko and Native Americans as Nature Writers', *MELUS*, 18.2 (1993), 47-60 (pp. 48-49).

³⁴¹ Sidney I. Dobrin and Christopher J. Keller, 'Ecocriticism, Writing, and Academia: An Interview with Cheryll Glotfelty', in *Writing Environments*, ed. by Sidney I. Dobrin and Christopher J. Keller (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 255-272 (p. 266).

constraints of the modern world. It is also evidence that the ‘pure, original relationship represented by the Indian’ and the stolen earth cannot be claimed, but that these secretive, unmolested spaces still exist on the outskirts of dominant culture, personified in this instance by the provincial town of Forks.³⁴² In his autobiographical essay ‘Motion of Fire and Form’ Owens makes similar allusions to how the Native people who passed through his childhood in Mississippi lived in the shadowy margins of that world, on the other side of the muddy Yazoo river that hit all manner of ‘shadowy things’.³⁴³ The seemingly incidental violent atmosphere between Tom and the driver alludes to the underlying systemic violence and racial bigotry that has framed both parties’ reading of the cemetery and initiates the destabilisation of those preconceptions.

Importantly, Owens’s rendering postulates a conceptual space in which difficult questions of identity, conquest, and survivance can be sketched in ever increasing detail without recourse to a *closed* or completed notion of frontier.³⁴⁴ On this point, Elvira Pulitano has argued that Native and mixedblood writers like Owens have produced a body of work that both ‘relies on’ and ‘subsumes Western discursive modes’ and in so doing produces ‘substantially multigeneric, dialogic, and richly hybridized works’ that move between different worlds and worldviews to challenge ‘Western ways of doing theory’.³⁴⁵ However, it should be noted that Pulitano’s preference for poststructuralist cosmopolitanism and the central claim of her book that authentic Indigenous narrative discourse is, in her view, unrecoverable/unachievable

³⁴² Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 124.

³⁴³ Louis Owens, ‘Motion of Fire and Form: Autobiographical Reflections’, in *Here First: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, ed. by Arnold Krupat and Brain Swann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), pp. 262-275 (p. 264).

³⁴⁴ Vizenor defines ‘postindian simulations’ as the ‘core of survivance’ and the ‘new stories of tribal courage’ see Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, p. 4.

³⁴⁵ Elvira Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 7.

owing to the hybridity of that discourse, has been vociferously rejected by Craig S. Womack. Dedicating the entire opening chapter of *Reasoning Together* to reviewing book-length Native American criticism, Womack argues that the new American Indian (Literary) Nationalist theory/criticism developing in the US marks a major departure from the breakthrough literary production and criticism of, among others, Louis Owens, and Gerald Vizenor, writing in the latter half of the twentieth century. While Womack is respectful of their contribution, he notes that the theoretical focus of these critics, with their cosmopolitan use of both Native and non-Native critical theory, would perhaps be better contextualised as an introduction to Native American literature and how it has been studied over the past forty years or so, than a reflection of the current state and direction of criticism produced by Native Americans. This, he claims, has to some extent led to the problematic academic fixation with supposedly canonical themes that has not kept pace with new criticism or even contemporary Native American literary production, and instead tends to return to the same landmark authors such as Momaday, Silko, Owens, and Vizenor. Pulitano's thesis is rejected as asserting a reading of hybridity that, in Womack's view, directly contradicts the separatist position where rather than existing as hybrid, composite peoples, many Indigenous cultures possess clear ideas as to their distinct national character, cultural heritage and identity that are separate and distinct from European cultural influences. In *American Indian Literary Nationalism* Weaver, Warrior and Womack again challenge the veracity of Pulitano's thesis, illustrating the extreme contentiousness of this theoretical positioning.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁶ See Weaver, Womack and Warrior, eds, 'The Integrity of American Indian Claims', in *American Indian Literary Nationalism* pp. 91-177.

Rather than becoming entangled in this debate, it is helpful to recall Patricia Kilpatrick's claims that these writers are compelled to not only tell their own stories, but to actively '*un-tell*' the essentialised Euramerican stories of conquest and tragedy, distancing themselves from prescriptive Euramerican readings of Indigeneity.³⁴⁷ Owens's uninterrupted frontier might then be reformulated as a space where the unspeakable violence of conquest and the systemic violence of domination can be interrogated. LaLonde further echoes the revisionist sentiment when he writes:

We might think of the space created by violence and violation as analogous to the frontier: as defined by the dominant culture, that space is created by violence and the violation of its nature as a zone of contact; Owens's reimagining of it indicates the frontier cannot necessarily be mastered by the dominant culture.³⁴⁸

The notion that frontier and the so called wilderness can be, or have been conquered by the dominant culture is challenged on the road leading into the Native cemetery in so far that it remains a dangerously ill-defined 'place that wasn't even really a place'.³⁴⁹ Violence can be said to have created the classical frontier, but that act of creation has not fixed it as a permanent determiner of conquest, rather it is merely one version of frontier produced of dominant culture. In Owens the metanarrative of conquest and containment, along with the framework of formative Euramerican myth and storied ideology that sustain it are anything but *closed* or indeed sacred, in the sense that it is the preserve of a single dominant culture. And just as Silko's *Almanac* seeks to put the unspeakable violence back into the sanitising myth of frontier, Owens is similarly attuned to its perverse exclusionary legacy when viewed from the perspective of the racialised Other, hence his use of violence to insist that frontier

³⁴⁷ Jacqueline Kilpatrick, 'Taking Back The Bones: Louis Owens's "Post"-Colonial Fiction', in *Louis Owens*, ed. by Kilpatrick, pp. 53-78 (p. 54).

³⁴⁸ LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, p. 17.

³⁴⁹ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 45.

should not be allowed to remain an exclusive domain, but a strange and unsettling liminality.

Michael D. Barber notes that when the Other is inserted into a space ‘outside of reigning systems of rationality’, as in the case of the Native cemetery, it has the potential to open the way for ‘more authentic and comprehensive notions of rationality’, echoing Owens’s contention that the frontier should be perceived as a site of mixing and cultural exploration, and not the end-game of a dominant culture.³⁵⁰ The cemetery refuses that final sense of closure, with the memory of the dead lingering in a lost world of uninterrupted natural growth, a relic of the past but also alive and subject to the forces of inevitable natural change. This, as Barber suggests, has the potential to create a new way of framing experience that can redefine understandings of reality. When read in this way, in the liminality of the cemetery and adjoining road, even the categorisation of the Other is destabilised when both parties are revealed to be effectively outsiders in what is notionally *their* world. As such, nothing is truly settled here, making it a reality conducive to the appreciation of complex, overlapping, and contradictory experiences and subjectivities without imposing crude racial binaries. Looming out of this gothic netherworld the cemetery reads like the manifestation of a Native/non-Native Ego, striving to make sense of these contested cultural positions. Not only does the cemetery appear to resist Joseph’s burial, reiterating the point that even the final act of signification, the final closure of death, is not a straightforward affair. Spectrality is a liminal subjectivity, partially obscured, partially unreal, that nevertheless refuses to retreat into abject silence. Any number of ethereal metaphors would do the job, but what marks that of a spectral Otherness as

³⁵⁰ Michael D. Barber, *Ethical Hermeneutics: Rationality in Enrique Dussel’s Philosophy of Liberation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), p. 7.

particularly fitting is the predominance of insubstantial spectres and spirits in Louis Owens's work that continue to agitate the sensibilities of dominant small-town US culture. Indeed, Owens recognises the importance of writing against traditional Turnerian narratives of frontier and territory, noting with a sense of welcome optimism that the 'voices from the margin are beginning to surround if not engulf the center, albeit against significant obstacles', which in turn challenge 'the way we conceive ourselves as a people and a nation'.³⁵¹ The incorporeal 'voice' once again resonates with the tradition of indigenous spectrality, and Owens is quick to note it is now moving to 'engulf' and confront the centre, which can be read as an act of cultural reinscription perpetrated against dominant US culture.

Commenting on the 'necessity' of a multicultural critical practice in the 1990s, Owens argues that amongst the most notable of obstacles is that of a refusal, on behalf of the cosmopolitan literary centre, to hear the voices of Native Americans. This, in turn, creates a reactionary, 'twofold kind of resistance: the resistance of the so-called "other," who very rightly suspects and frequently rejects the critical discourse of the metropolitan center as little more than further colonialism or cultural imperialism.'³⁵² Owens also aligns himself more broadly with the poststructuralism of fellow mixedblood author/critic Gerald Vizenor, whose acclaimed tricksterish repartee unsettles the comfortable relationship between US cultural hegemony and the simulated, reflecting Other of the Native subject that echoes Euramerican assumptions of cultural superiority. Owens's response to this appropriating Euramerican discourse is that it has, over a period of five hundred years, given rise to a 'hybridized, multicultural reality clearly recognized in fiction as long ago as the 1920s and '30s' in

³⁵¹ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 23.

³⁵² Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 50.

which the coloniser and colonised are intimately and inextricably related.³⁵³ Despite what might be considered a type of resistance insurgency, this represents a two-way relationship, with the redeployment of the frontier discourse operating as a ‘collaborative and conjunctural’ dialectic between Native and non-Native, and dominant and marginalised cultures.³⁵⁴ Commenting on this issue Elvira Pulitano claims that ‘no critical theory produced from the so called margin escapes the question of functioning within a “dominant” discourse, not even a Native American theory.’³⁵⁵ Pulitano is very clear on the point of cultural specificity, noting that even while attempting to nurture a separatist Native American theory one cannot help but acknowledge ‘some very real cultural commonalities’.³⁵⁶ Her emphasis on ‘crossreading and cross cultural communication’ speaks directly to the crux of the issue facing those attempting to cross-examine Native and non-Native critical perspectives. Only by exploring multiple epistemologies is it possible to develop a coherent yet sufficiently promiscuous critical approach that can adapt as understanding increases.³⁵⁷

Anxieties over burial and the ritualistic laying to rest of a loved one surface in several of Owens’s novels, including *Wolfsong*, *Sharpest Sight*, and *Nightland*. Chris LaLonde partially interprets this as Owens’s commentary on the trope of the vanishing Indian, ‘an ideal created and then clung to by the dominant culture.’³⁵⁸ But it is also a concern that Owens reflects back onto dominant culture, which assures itself of its own superiority through the denigration of the racialised Other. LaLonde reads the

³⁵³ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 52.

³⁵⁴ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 52.

³⁵⁵ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, p. 4.

³⁵⁶ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, p. 11.

³⁵⁷ Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, p. 13.

³⁵⁸ LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, p. 47.

imagery of separation in Owens as a ‘line of demarcation between two zones’ and as a ‘metaphorization of the contact zone or seam that Owens labels the frontier’, in contrast to the Euramerican concept of frontier that ‘chose to negate its transformative potential’.³⁵⁹ Following LaLonde, who argues that Owens invites readers to gaze back across the frontier line in contravention of the dominant narrative, I argue that Owens works to destabilise this binary relationship, often through violent episodes that characterise the sudden break with dominant ideology that insists on simplistic readings of race and identity. More than just a marker signalling the provincial outer boundary of the town and, by extension, Western civilisation, the Native cemetery functions as a liminal setting in which conflict over supposedly settled ideas, both Native and non-Native, are brought abruptly out into the open.

Just as Derrida employs the term ‘spectre’ to signify the ‘elusive pseudo-materiality that subverts the classic ontological oppositions of reality and illusion’, Žižek suggests that ‘it is perhaps here that we should look for the last resort of ideology, for the pre-ideological kernel, the formal matrix, on which are grafted various ideological formulations.’³⁶⁰ The argument is that as our understanding of classical ideology changes to reflect an increasingly complex and interconnected

³⁵⁹ LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, p. 14.

³⁶⁰ Žižek, *Interrogating The Real*, p. 229. Gerald Vizenor utilises the Derridean notion of *trace*, defined as ‘the radically other within the structure of difference that is the sign’ as a means of destabilising both the concept of authenticity and the idea that there exists some form of embryonic origin upon which authenticity is contingent. In either case, be it *spectre* or the Derridean *trace*, ethereal metaphors are useful to the critic in attempting to distinguish lived from imagined realities since both categorically undermine the notion of a pure referent and ideologically insulated culture. However, Robert Warrior has criticised Vizenor for what he perceives as his overreliance on cosmopolitan and European critical theory, most notably Derrida and Baudrillard, both of whom feature predominately in Vizenor’s work, where ‘difference becomes the only politics that the creative artist or intellectual can offer.’ Elvira Pulitano notes that Warrior’s position is such that in defending it he would surely be forced to reject all European discourse and essentially ‘decolonize’ their minds’, an untenable position that would appear to court hypocrisy. What is absent in Warrior’s critique is that unlimited difference does not preclude a cohesive sense of identity, merely that the notion of identity is always subject to forces of change, revision, and amnesia. See Jacques Derrida, *On Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. xvii.; Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*, p. 17; Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, p. 78.

globalised existence, its ideological apparatus has been forced to relocate to a netherworld somewhere between illusion and fantasy.³⁶¹ As a consequence, reality is never ‘directly itself’ but rather an ‘incomplete-failed symbolization’ in which spectral apparitions emerge and separate reality from the real.³⁶² Žižek captures the essence of this model in his phrase: ‘the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality.’³⁶³ In the act of being excluded, or at the very least grossly misrepresented, the presence of the racialised Other in the conceptual frontier emerges as a legitimate presence to trouble Euramerican hegemony.³⁶⁴ When viewed from a position of dominance, the presence of the Other appears as an indeterminate spectral interference. Owens’s frontier then assumes a gothic quality, where Indigenous and mixedblood spectrality is consolidated as a means of opposing dominant Euramerican and colonial ideologies while also offering alternatives to prosthetic notions of closure and Indigenous erasure.³⁶⁵

³⁶¹As it is deployed here, illusion is taken from Freudian psychoanalysis to denote what Terry Eagleton describes as the ‘fitfulness and fragility of reason’ and a tendency to rely on external schemas such as religious doctrine to structure subjective reality. In turn, fantasy is rooted in Žižek’s interpretation as a fundamental constituent of desire that effectively teaches us how to desire. To the crux of fantasy is that we know what we want, but we do not know why we want it, a definition broadly in-keeping with Marx’s reading of ideology as *praxis* rather than a distinct epistemology. See Eagleton, p. 175.

³⁶²Žižek, *Interrogating The Real*, p. 230

³⁶³Žižek, *Interrogating The Real*, p. 230.

³⁶⁴The question of ideological spectrality can also be considered as the by-product of the *times of death declarations* that accompanied the death of utopia, death of art, end of history and so on, that emerged at the end of the twentieth century, leading some critics, most notably Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, to ask if ideology can now be thought of as the ghost of politics, disassociated from clearly definable fundamentalist positions. See George I. Garcia, Carlos Gmo and Aguilar Sánchez, ‘Psychoanalysis and Politics: The Theory of Ideology in Slavoj Žižek’, *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, 2.3 (2008), (no page range given).

³⁶⁵The preponderance of book titles and journal articles that speak directly to indigenous cultural liminality demonstrate that indigenous spectrality represents a prominent critical device, often in response to the trope of the vanishing, deceased, or undead Native subject. Julian Wolfreys connects spectrality with symbolic but ultimately fruitless attempts at achieving narrative closure. He writes that: ‘the spectral is the parasite [...] or *para-site*, which we call modernity. Haunting exists in a certain relation to the identity of modernity which both informs the narratives we construct of modernity and as those which are produced within the space and time of the modern; and it is a sign of the hauntological (see Derrida) disturbance that, because of the various spectral traces, we can never quite end the narrative of modernity. We cannot with any confidence narrate to ourselves a teleology of the modern, whether we are seeking a narrative beginning or a moment of narrative closure. Haunting disrupts origin and eschatology (from the start we might say). A spectre haunts modernity, and the spectral is at the heart of any narrative of the modern.’ See Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, pp. 2-3. Vizenor chooses not

The dead refuse to stay dead, returning, for instance, as the dislocated spirit of Attis McCurtain, whose body is floating down a California river at the start of *The Sharpest Sight*, or the ghost of the dead smuggler who visits Grandpa Siquani Kaneequayokee in *Nightland*, requesting burial.³⁶⁶ The supernatural constantly shuttles back and forth between these discursive points, confusing illusion, fantasy and reality in such a way that protagonists sometimes struggle to understand which world they currently inhabit. Most notable amongst these spirit beings is the returning figure of *Ishkitini*, the horned owl, whose morbid, unsettling presence frequents all five novels. In a playful scene from *The Sharpest Sight*, the character of Uncle Luther, a wise old man experienced in Choctaw magic, uses the cyclical image of a rising and falling river as a metaphor for Native spectrality:

There is a river. The whites have broken it so that it runs only underground except when the big rains come. Then the river grows angry and when it is strong enough it rises up to revenge itself. When it is done, it goes back down into its home in the ground. It has the bones.³⁶⁷

Those bones are at once the bones of Cole's Vietnam Veteran brother Attis, who has been murdered and his bones lost to a flooded river and, more generally, the metaphorical cultural-historical *bones* of Indigenous people subjected to appropriation and the theft of ancestral remains. Here Vizenor's epistemology is appropriate in decoding the image, with the missing bones also functioning as a Derridean trace, echoing something meaningful but oddly insubstantial back to those engaged in the

to capitalise the 'i' in Indian as a marker for what he calls *post-Indianness*, a term which attempts to arrest the development, at least in academic circles, of the simulated Indian.

³⁶⁶ LaLonde notes that 'like Derrida's *revenant* and Freud's uncanny, however, the Native will not stay dead and buried. The *revenant*, then, is conjured by the West in a dual sense: both to call back and exorcise or expel. The West runs from and chases the specter because mourning for the dead will not get rid of it.' LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, pp. 15-16.

³⁶⁷ Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*, p. 26. For discussion of Choctaw burial and ritualistic practices see Angie Debo, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*, 2nd edn (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961).

act of recovery. Having made this observation, Luther and his reluctant partner Onatima ‘Old Lady Blue Wood’ hear an owl call once outside the cabin, causing both to pause in their conversation and wait for the ‘answering call that never came, confirming what they both knew’.³⁶⁸ It is a sign that stimulates them to a discussion on how best to deal with the recovery of Attis’s bones, reuniting his *shilup* and *shilombish* — the two halves of his spirit — so that he can finally be laid to rest. LaLonde notes that should they fail in this important mission, then Attis’s *shilup*, or *outside* shadow will ‘like the spirits of the recently deceased Salish’, whose Chumash brothers and sisters were the original inhabitants of that region of California ‘continue to threaten to take someone with it to appease its loneliness’.³⁶⁹ Indeed theirs is a world steeped in a rich tradition of magic and mysticism, where the metaphysical and physical frequently intermingle. Here Owens’s narrative reveals a spectral presence that threatens to intrude into physical reality and claim a victim if not appeased. The ominous *koi* and Attis’s wandering *shilup* refuse to allow his murder to go unnoticed, even if the investigating FBI agents do not consider his disappearance a possible murder inquiry, focusing instead on Attis’s crimes. Closer to home, the deputy sheriff Mundo Morales, a close personal friend of Attis, and himself a Vietnam Veteran and Mexican Catholic Chicano mixedblood, cannot escape the similarities between his life and the life of his dead friend. He describes their lives as somehow related, ‘tangled up together like a ball of baling wire’.³⁷⁰ In that same moment he recognises that ‘He, Mundo, was part Indian, though no one in the family had ever liked to admit it. Pure Castillian, they had always pretended, holding out their underarms to show the whiteness. And the McCurtains were white and Indian both. Tangled, mixed,

³⁶⁸ Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*, p. 26.

³⁶⁹ LaLonde, *Grave Concerns*, p. 76.

³⁷⁰ Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*, p. 196.

interrelated'.³⁷¹ It is a moment that brings to mind the confusion and reassurance offered by a nuanced, multiform mode of identity. Mundo feels oddly connected by virtue of his cultural discontinuity, and what better metaphor to explain this tangled interconnectedness than a ball of knotted twine made of one long woven thread.

Similarly, in his last novel, *Dark River*, Owens refuses to reduce the question of cultural identity to that of a superficial binary, replacing Mundo's tangled yarn with the image of a jig-saw puzzle. Having been accused of forgetting 'his own culture', Jacob 'Jake' Nashoba outlines his cultural experience as a bric-a-brac of stories, fragmented knowledge and family experiences, all drawn together into a compelling but largely incoherent bricolage. Beginning with a discussion of popular misconceptions surrounding the tribal moniker 'Choctaw', Jacob attempts to draw his polyphonic identity into focus:

'Chahta,' he said. 'Chahta okla. White people say "Choctaw." They have plenty of stories. Stories, in fact, that tell me who you are.' He knew he was treading on thin ice. He remembered only the barest fragments—*alikchi*, sorcerers, dream-senders, *isht*-something or other. There were good ones and bad ones with different names. His grandma's stories had become bits and pieces like a jigsaw puzzle dumped thoughtlessly on the ground, some pieces carried off by careless children. There were owls and foxes meaning different things at different times. Different kinds of owls. Screech owls were witches. He was supposed to be afraid of *ishkitini*, the great horned messenger owl. The panther was she, and she came for you. He yearned, suddenly, for deep, dark waters and forests forever in shadow, remembering an old, stringy-haired man whose eyes were the color of the brown river.³⁷²

Owens's preference for spectral *Otherness* and a Vizenor-like appreciation of multiform identity has been identified by several other critics, most notably Chris LaLonde and Patricia Kilpatrick. Taking as her guiding metaphor the title of Owens's third novel, *Bone Game*, and the motif of the Choctaw Bone Pickers from *The Sharpest Sight*, Kilpatrick observes how Owens is engaged not only in a process of 'untelling'

³⁷¹ Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*, p. 197.

³⁷² Louis Owens, *Dark River* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), p. 42.

Euramerican stories of conquest, but actively *writing back* against reductionist and essentialised readings of Native experience. She describes this practice as an act of taking back ‘the cultural bones’.³⁷³ It is a metaphor that neatly encapsulates part of the creative impetus that motivates Owens’s work, alluding to his memorable depiction of Choctaw Bone Pickers in *The Sharpest Sight*, who ritualistically clean the skeleton of flesh with their long, fingernails, cultivated explicitly for this purpose, before interring the bones. In the novel the ritual process of bone picking is part of a larger, more complex mourning ceremony, not least for Cole McCurtain’s departed brother whose bones must be recovered if he is to be laid to rest. Body and soul must be reunited, but for Cole this task will require him to let go of some of the core assumptions he holds with regards to his own mixedblood identity. Through his uncle’s teachings Cole learns of the *Shilombish* and *Shilup*, the inside and outside shadow which accompany a person though life and death, and of the horned owl and harbinger of death *Ishkitini*. In concert with *Nalusachito*, the soul eater, all inhabit a world that remains slightly out of reach to Cole and yet remains a source of continual surprises and intrigue.

In *Wolfsong* Owens again utilises violence as a means of announcing an ideological break when Tom is forced to confront a group of local labourers who have taken exception to his decision to remain in the small town of Forks. Superficially, the conflict centres on a romantic rivalry between Tom and the son of the town’s preeminent businessman who has brokered the development of a large copper mine, controlled by the Honeycutt Copper Company, that is gradually changing the character of the town. More significantly, however, the conflict is the sudden manifestation of

³⁷³ Kilpatrick, ‘Taking Back The Bones’, p. 77.

an underlying cultural tension that has been simmering since Tom arrived back in Forks to attend his uncle's funeral:

A voice from somewhere far up in the mountains thundered 'Kick the mutherfucker in the head this time,' and he [Tom] grabbed the bumper of the truck and pulled himself up just as another dark figure came around the end of the pickup. [...] Tom shook his head and staggered back around the truck, remembering once when he'd run a trail too hard and tasted blood in his lungs. The image of the weeping deer rose in front of him. Thunder shook his wings over the valley again, sending the peaks crashing toward the valley floor. His uncle was telling stories about the way it had been and way it really was, and his lungs felt as if they would burst and he knew he'd have to rise to the surface soon and the vision would be lost.³⁷⁴

Note the sudden shift, in the midst of the fight, from simple descriptive language to a figurative homily, with Tom's traditionalist uncle appearing before him as if in a vision to tell him about 'the way it had been and way it really was'. In this moment Tom is forced to confront the covert differences between his and his uncle's individual ideologies, and is also visited by the mysterious figure of a weeping deer. That this moment of clarity is attended by a brutal act of violence should indicate that this is more than just a violent assault triggered by racial bigotry or the petty romantic jealousy of a rival. Rather, the act of struggling with multiple ideologies along with the underlying violence being perpetrated against the racialised Other and the mining corporation's assault on the environment has produced an unavoidable confrontation. Tom's late uncle, Jim Joseph, lived and died by his conviction that if the mountain should die, then so would the sacred connection between his culture and the surrounding landscape. The simmering provincial tensions of Forks are here brought out in the open, first in a physical confrontation, and then as a transcendent confrontation between Native, non-Native, and mixedblood subjectivities. Such is the violence of the encounter and precariousness of Tom's emergent subjectivity that he is compelled to reflect that 'he knew he'd have to rise to the surface soon and the

³⁷⁴ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 132.

vision would be lost'. For Gerald Vizenor, the act of survivance is emphatically tied into a 'sense of presence' while 'the true self is visionary. The true self is an ironic consciousness, the cut of a Native trickster. Stories of truistic selves tease the originary.'³⁷⁵

Owens uses violence to indicate a break with the established ideology of the fictional world described in his novel, signalling to the reader that something is terribly wrong in the town of Forks that is struggling to find expression. The sudden violent eruption of the fight, on a dark road outside the town is reminiscent of the cemetery road from an earlier, similarly confrontational scene between Native and non-Native parties. The presence of the supernatural, spectral figure of the spirit deer and the dislocated voice of Tom's late uncle, alert the reader to the underlying conflicts. Owens's fascination with the image of the backwoods roadway is also intriguing. Events in the novel, as in all of his novels, often take place on the road or close to the other natural arteries of the river. In *Bone Game* Attis travels back and forth between distinctly different worlds of the college campus, his cabin by the river and the secretive forest dwelling of Uncle Luther and Onatima. *Dark River* opens onto a truck negotiating a treacherous road, awash with rainwater, leading to the discovery of a prize elk that had been shot and left in the road, the stench of rotting mud and juniper confusing Jacob Nashoba's olfactory palette. *The Sharpest Sight* begins in much the same way, with headlights piercing sheets of rain that threaten to 'come through the windshield'.³⁷⁶ In all instances, what is primal and unseen lurks close to the manmade feature of the road, cutting a sharp comparison with the natural world beyond and the small town behind. A river that dashes underground (*The Sharpest Sight*), a river that

³⁷⁵ Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, p. 20.

³⁷⁶ Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*, p. 3.

retreats into the ground (*Bone Game*), an unseen hunter in the appropriately named *Dark River*, a serial killer who drags his victims off the road into the terrible seclusion of the forest (*The Sharpest Sight*), and the out of town tracks where provincial niceties give way to racial violence in *Wolfsong*. In these settings violence always seems to have either just happened, or is about to happen, suggesting that the landscape is itself conducive to bringing violence to the surface, acting as a site of memory in which systemic violence has been inscribed. This is the condition of living in a captive land: nowhere is truly safe and secure, and only the thinnest of veils keeps this underlying systemic violence from exploding into the open. Once outside of the archetypal civilising space of the provincial town, Tom's assailants have no reservations about attacking him. In fact they feel positively empowered in doing so, standing into the middle of the road blocking Tom's access to his home, a powerful statement of ownership that is meant to remind Tom that he does not belong in Forks, and that not even his home is safe ground.

Owens's choice of mystery crime thriller/mystery genre for *The Sharpest Sight* also speaks to this desire to expose and uncover what is thinly hidden. The road, the river, the cemetery are all permanent yet transient markers of both stability and instability, one of natural origin, one of human construction, while the cemetery transgresses these distinctions. This would fit with Owens's professed interest in a notional frontier where contestation and conflict exert a formative influence on cultural contact and readings of difference in that signifiers of stability/instability like the road, river, and cemetery frequently take characters to places they do not want to go, or alternatively away from places of presumed security. Owens has acknowledged that his second novel, *The Sharpest Sight*, was born out of the experience of his brother

Gene's disappearance, 'out of the paradox of his nonreturn' from the Vietnam War.³⁷⁷ Quoting his brother after renewing their friendship following a twenty-nine year hiatus, Gene talks candidly of his wartime experience, noting how 'out there, in Indian Country, anything could happen. A person might never get home.'³⁷⁸ The implicit tension of terms like 'Indian Country' and 'Indian Territory' are for Owens unavoidable metaphors for containment, an experience which is abundantly clear in his novels.³⁷⁹ That sense of restriction and containment ruptures in moments of explosive violence when characters come up against yet another obstacle, be it the giant earth moving vehicles at the start of *Wolfsong*, a reluctant driver who refuses to pilot his hearse down a pitted road, or the brutish figure of Jake Tobin blocking the road ahead. The dominant ideology of containment and erasure so prominent in frontier thinking pervades all of these novels, manifesting itself in strange and unexpected ways. The gothic quality of Owens's settings, the spectral presences, fistfights, slobberknockers, serial killings, and the motifs of submersion and burial speak of a world with a lot of terrible secrets and a poorly concealed history of violence. It is interesting then, that Owens claims that his novels are 'stories of survival, not cynical or life-opposing reflections of the Euramerican construction called the Vanishing American.'³⁸⁰ That notion of survival is evident in the experiences of characters located in a hostile environment that has been shaped by dominant forces that seek to contain and define the Native subject. 'The world' Owens writes, 'is dangerously literal' suggesting, perhaps, that only through the discursive practice of imagination and the production of art can the symbolic, the figurative, the subterranean, be expressed and held in the mind's eye just long enough to begin to

³⁷⁷ Owens, *I Hear The Train*, p. 12.

³⁷⁸ Owens, *I Hear The Train*, p. 15.

³⁷⁹ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 116.

³⁸⁰ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 164.

explore them. Part of Owens's interest in frontier is bound up in this idea of violent confrontation with the monsters of history, that a space is needed to trigger powerful memories and invite conflict because like the violence undertaken on the provincial road outside Forks, it is in those moments of confrontation that the ideology and formative energies that carried a person there make themselves known. People die in his books, and the survivors want to know why. The crime thriller, the mystery novel, a dead elk in the road and a human skeleton tumbling down stream pose the very real question of what has just taken place, and how did we get to this point, questions that also reverberate throughout Owens's autobiographical writing.

As a means of distinguishing between the multiple forms of violence on display in Owens's novels, Paul Beekman Taylor introduces Nietzschean distinctions of Apollonian and Dionysian violence. Where Apollonian is 'measured, moderate, anticompetitive, [...] exercised to maintain life' and 'rule bound', Dionysian is the violence of domination, of 'group against group, where balance is neither possible nor sought'.³⁸¹ Taylor takes this model further, reformulating Dionysian violence as 'imperialistic and ideological' where it pertains to 'violence of speech and gesture that gains by dominating an individual or group'.³⁸² Tom's violent encounter with Jake is broadly Dionysian; it is overtly competitive with two men engaged in a bitter romantic imbroglio. As a feud between rivals, however, it is also subject to and the consequence of unspoken rules that govern patriarchal attitudes towards male heterosexual rivalry, and as a perversely racialised social etiquette of dominance. Accordingly, Tom is not only a love rival, who has pursued the fiancée of town bully Jake Tobin, but he is also a signifier for the presence of the racialised Other in the small town of Forks. As far

³⁸¹Paul Beekman Taylor, 'The Ludic Violence of Louis Owens's *The Sharpest Sight*', in *Louis Owens*, ed. by Kilpatrick, p. 215.

³⁸²Taylor, 'The Ludic Violence of Louis Owens's' *The Sharpest Sight*', p. 215.

as his attackers are concerned, he is in every sense an unwelcome outsider, and should either abide by their rules and conform, or return to California to complete his education. Earlier in the novel, Jake's father appears to offer Tom something of a compromise, suggesting that Tom might come to 'symbolize the future for Indian people, progress' although J.D.'s notion of 'progress' would involve Tom working for him, and by extension the Honeycutt Copper Company that has played a pivotal role in his uncle's death.³⁸³

To draw a distinction between Dionysian and Apollonian –or to use Taylor's *ludic* 'rule bound', 'game codified'—is a risky business, in that dominant cultures frequently and euphemistically present acts of unspeakable violence as measured, consequential, unavoidable, and, most unsettling of all, necessary. State sanctioned violence is the obvious example, where civil law and legislation stand as the literal rule of law, even if those laws can be both the product and means of sustaining normative violence against underrepresented or marginalised groups or individuals. Apartheid, ghettoisation, punitive immigration law, geographical relocation and removal, and treaty violation, all bear the hallmarks of legitimacy when effectively legislated by and for the benefit of a dominant political culture, while the violent material consequences of that legislation remain wholly inexcusable and problematic in the extreme. Applying the Dionysian model to Tom's violent encounter reduces the underlying complexity of the scene to that of a drunken barroom brawl (of which there are several in Owens's novels), when the context of the scene is far more nuanced. As such, the appellation 'game codified' violence should be applied with caution, since it is extremely difficult to differentiate between visible and underlying ideological positions. To consider literary expressions of violence as an extension of discourse by

³⁸³ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 67.

other means is less restrictive and allows for the explication of episodic violence without recourse to a zero-sum argument. Taylor's model is certainly useful when attempting to pick apart the multiple modes of violence to be found Owens's work, particularly in his analysis of private and group orchestrated violence, but where caution should be exercised is in trying to locate episodes of violence outside of an ideological discourse.

The most telling aspect of this scene is how Tom appears to momentarily rise up out of his known reality. The incorporeal voice that calls for further violence to be inflicted upon him, the weirdly insubstantial spirit deer that wanders into the conflict, the sudden analeptic vision of his deceased uncle all take Tom away from the action and bestow an unexpected partial clarity. What had been buried—his uncle, his relationship with the town, and the significance of the surrounding landscape—is suddenly made manifest. Here the literal violence of the scene is displaced by a more complex symbolic violence that prevents simplistic binary oppositions from standing, with Tom forced to experience the attendant side effects of confronting the raw 'ideological kernel' of his reality.³⁸⁴ In this sense Forks resembles a type of traditional Turnerian frontier, complete with renegade Indians, a signifier of material progress in the Honeycutt Mine, and a prototypical wilderness, but also an example of Owens's uninterrupted frontier since it is demonstrably a place where 'peoples with different culturally expressed identities meet and deal with each other'.³⁸⁵ Episodes and atmospheres of violent confrontation between characters and their worlds are the chief means through which Owens unearths the systemic violence that constructs containing

³⁸⁴ Žižek, *Interrogating The Real*, p. 229.

³⁸⁵ William Cronon highlights both the literal and figurative role the wilderness played in shaping popular conceptions of the frontier and the rugged individualism of the American character. See Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness', pp. 69-90.

binary oppositions, and thereby calls attention to the usefulness of his multivocal, hyper-contested, uninterrupted frontier.

Violence in Owens's Provincial Borderland

It is this dynamic relationship between literal outbursts of violence and underlying systemic violence that informs Owens's choice of provincial settings as compressed microcosm of the US that better throw into sharp relief questions of identity, containment, and dominance. 'There was only one town on the road, and that was where the road ended' remarks Tom Joseph, upon returning to his small home town of Forks in *Wolfsong*.³⁸⁶ More than reflecting what is a familiar landscape for Owens, who grew up hunting and fishing in the forests and wetlands of Mississippi and California, the provincial town, with its outlying borders and boundaries, form a reimagined, destabilised frontier. Away from the more cosmopolitan pretence of the metropolis, the provincial working class towns of Owens's novels still retain some of the rough edges of the frontier town of popular imagination, with a host of petty crooks, corrupt officials, and spectral Native presences intruding into the settled, supposedly secure space of the American cultural heartland. Where the provincial setting was once 'ground for a certain comfort and even a certain reassurance' in the 1950s, by the second half of the twentieth century it had become awkwardly detached from its counterparts, the metropolis, and the 'temptingly in-between place' of urban suburbia.³⁸⁷ Tom goes on to describe the experience of living in California as comparable to that of being in an x-ray machine, his presence ill-defined and transparent, as if he was a spectral non-entity:

³⁸⁶ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 17.

³⁸⁷ Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 199; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), p. 281.

This damp, darker world didn't have anything to do with the one he'd left in California, or much to do with what was closer, as close as Seattle or any of the white cities. As he walked, he felt his body becoming heavier, more solid, as if he'd stepped out of one of those x-ray machines that made everything a shadowy silhouette of bones.³⁸⁸

Exploring this further, Tom comments on how, as a student at the University of California at Santa Barbara, he had become intimately and unsettlingly aware of the violent legacy upon which the university had been built:

They built that campus on top of an old Indian burial ground. Sacred ground. Nobody else seemed to notice it, but I could feel those people there all the time. They didn't want anybody there, and they made people ill. People were sick all the time and, they didn't understand why.³⁸⁹

Tom's initial spectral x-ray non-presence and his nascent appreciation of sacred space is an important framing metaphor that establishes a central motif of *nostos*, or *homecoming* in the novel. The returning Native is a common narrative device in twentieth century Native American literature and the question of home is complicated by underlying anxiety of what 'home' constitutes in a captured land. The burial ground of the university establishes a point of contrast with the Native cemetery discussed earlier, as does the unwillingness to acknowledge the presence of those buried beneath the university campus that return in the form of a pervasive sickness, the cause of which people do not understand. Tom's sense of *nostos* is therefore overshadowed and complicated by his reference to a 'damp, darker world' and the unhappy dead buried beneath the venerated halls of the University of California. For Tom, *home* does not connote a fond affection for the town, and is merely reflective of the fact that it is more substantive than his former student life in California had been. Forks, then, is more corporeal, yet still Tom struggles to articulate it as *home* in any definitive sense. It is simply where the road ends and his story begins.

³⁸⁸ Owens, *Wolfsong*, pp. 23-24.

³⁸⁹ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 64.

Rather than functioning principally as a site of reassuring provincialism, the image of the provincial setting presented by Owens is haunted by uncertain autonomy and simmering multicultural insecurity. Importantly, this is a condition that can only be mitigated by an increasing appreciation and respect for the surrounding landscape. Tom disappears into the mountains at the end of the novel, his presence even shifting between human and non-human forms, at times falling to ‘all fours’ as he flees from his armed pursuers. This suggests a fundamental spiritual connection to the mountain that has provided his people with an identity and location for their origin stories.³⁹⁰ The dark, damp world that had confronted him at the start of the novel has by this point been transformed into an all-encompassing natural amphitheatre, with Tom at the centre, the mountains stretching out on all sides, ‘beyond his vision to the east and west, north and south.’³⁹¹ Lee Schweninger notes that *Wolfsong* ‘recounts a confrontation in American’s war against the environment’ in which ‘we destroy not only the literal, physical land but we also destroy the fundamental spiritual connection to it.’³⁹² Considering this, Tom engages in recovering that connection, dismissing the ennui that had plagued him upon his initial return to Forks.

What is often most shocking about violence in Owens’s fiction is the extent to which undercurrents of normative, casualised violence pass by unchallenged within the provincial setting. In his appraisal of postmodern complications arising from the changing condition of America’s provincial heartland, Fredric Jameson claims that the small provincial town of the 1950s –in many ways the definitive provincial ideal— was a powerful emotive allegory for America’s place in the outside world. He notes that the popular conception of the provincial town projects itself as ‘contented’ and

³⁹⁰ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 222.

³⁹¹ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 248.

³⁹² Schweninger, ‘Landscape and Cultural Identity’, p. 94.

‘secure in the sense of its radical difference from other populations and cultures [...] insulated from their vicissitudes and from the flaws in human nature so palpably acted out in their violent histories’.³⁹³ In this regard, the provincial locale came to represent the contrived, highly idealised, politically conservative fantasy that had once underpinned the Puritan vision of the New Jerusalem and the Winthropian City on the Hill. It is also resonant of a more deeply engrained doctrine of a transcendent frontier violence that now lies buried beneath the marble facades of University campuses and other municipal footprints. Signifying an idyllic, longed-for haven of white privilege sufficiently removed from the libertarian excesses of the metropolis and wider international community, the provincial town is a timeless, unchanging, broadly conservative vision of what America should aspire to be. Characterised as an emotive symbol of nostalgic intransigence, the small town is where one must ‘stay put’ or else run the risk of being categorised as a vagrant or troublemaker. Essentially anti-modernist in its conception, the provincial town is recalled as somehow resistant to the forces of modernity, while at the same time it is always threatened by the spectre of the ghost town, or the possibility of being absorbed by the unrelenting expansion of faceless suburbia. By the eighth and ninth decades of the twentieth century, the undercurrents of isolationism and exceptionalism that had driven the provincialising and expansionist process of the nineteenth century and the political rhetoric of the twentieth right through to the post-war period had been transformed by the pervasive influences of globalisation, brand capital, and commodification. One side-effect of this process was to reduce the supposedly quaint individualism and provincial autonomy of the small town—once the preserve of an aspirant and allegorical conservative idealism—to that of cookie-cutter ubiquity. This in turn invites a reading of static

³⁹³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 281.

provincial USA as a site of vulnerability marked by a perceived decline in traditional (dominant) cultural practices, as well as the increasing visibility of the racialised Other as political entity. Where Jameson alludes to the status of the provincial town as a metaphor for radical difference to other populations and cultures, as a contemporary idiom for America's place in the world the image is now far more complicated than a simple reductionist binary of 'us versus them' will allow.³⁹⁴ The notion that terrible things should not happen in small rural and provincial towns is played out to great effect in several of Owen's novels, although *The Sharpest Sight* offers a particularly unsettling example. Responding to the death of a homeless man the local police officer, Mundo Morales, considers the sequence of events and cold indifference that could have led to the murder:

Every kid in the country would want to take a potshot at a new car, or maybe ping a twenty-two slug off a new tractor. So the kids would take a few shots. Then they'd see a flatcar or boxcar with a couple of hobos or maybe one sitting there dangling his feet off the side watching the river. If one of the hobos had a red cap on he'd show up very well.

'Fucking hobos,' one of the kids might say because he'd heard his dad talk about how worthless hobos were. 'Bet you can't hit one of those sonsabitches,' another kid would say, and that's how it could have happened. Afterwards, the kids would probably throw the rifle in the flooding river and run like hell for home. Nobody would ever know. Those kids would grow up together and never tell anyone. It was possible that he was wrong, that another rail tramp had done it. Maybe there'd been an argument over something. But the tramps seldom carried anything as valuable as a gun. And a 'bo never had anything worth being killed for except his life. The image of kids with a rifle depressed Mundo. The country was that kind of place, ass-deep in blood secrets.³⁹⁵

The casualisation of violence perpetrated against a nameless vagrant is suggestive of another form of spectral semi-presence that intrudes into the white, middle class

³⁹⁴ Paul Arthur Cantor, *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture: Liberty Vs. Authority in American Film and TV* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012), p. 91. See also Murphy, pp. 196-198. It is also noteworthy that US politicians have frequently invoked the 'small town morals, big city ambitions' mantra when campaigning for political office. Sarah Palin, former darling of the Tea Party and one time Republican Vice Presidential nominee, frequently and enthusiastically cited Wasilla, the small Alaskan town of which she was Mayor, as being central in the formulation of her all-American mores; the others being family, faith, and flag, and the title of her 2010 autobiography.

³⁹⁵ Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*, p. 35.

provincial idiom. Again the result is violence, but Mundo imagines it is children committing this crime, children expressing a pathological hatred for the homeless man who fleetingly passes through *their* home town. It is also worth pausing here to consider the function of literary violence as a continuation of discourse by other means. As I have already suggested, literary violence cannot and should not be dismissed as stupid or pointless violence, especially when that appears to be most obvious conclusion, but must always be taken as a marker for what is unseen or unspoken. Why should the homeless man die? The answer lies in his mode of transport—the boxcar, an image that immediately brings to mind one of Owens’s literary idols, John Steinbeck, and his archetypal wandering vagrants as a symbol for a dispossessed labouring class forever shunted from town to town.³⁹⁶ Mundo reflects how the country is ‘ass-deep in blood secrets’, an expression that alludes to the bloody and largely unspoken legacy of frontier. Only here the focus is drawn to the casualised murder of a man whose death is considered of such little import that nobody expects to solve the case. All Mundo has is a corpse and speculation. What he knows is that the man died because he was only ever a partial presence that momentarily registered within the boundary of the town.

Like the nameless vagrant in *The Sharpest Sight*, Tom Josephs (*Wolfsong*) is a *returning* citizen, but more significantly is a figure defined in large part by his own experience of transculturation.³⁹⁷ He neither feels fully at home in Forks, nor does he feel any sense of attachment to California. Gradually, however, he begins to recover a profound respect for the wilderness landscape that surrounds the town, as evidence by

³⁹⁶ Owens has published two monographs on Steinbeck as well as numerous articles and chapters.

³⁹⁷ The process by which individuals are detached, for a variety of reasons, from a distinct cultural group and then enter a new, ‘web of social relations that constitute another society’ and are in turn influenced by the attendant customs and traditions of that culture or society. Fixico, p. 163.

his adoption of his late uncle's environmentalism. Forks, the provincial setting of *Wolfsong* is an indisputably hard place to eke out a living, with many of the town's inhabitants dependent on an increasingly defunct logging industry. A notoriously demanding and dangerous job, logging has transformed many of the town's inhabitants into the human equivalent of the rugged landscape in which they live; a Thoreauvian mechanism that resurrects the memory of the classical frontier in backwater 'anywhere' America. However, the industry is at the point of collapse, all the valuable and easily reached cedar having been felled, leaving only wisps of timber high on the bluffs, only accessible by helicopter. Having stripped the valleys and low mountain flanks of timber, the Honeycutt Copper Company is now building an open cast mine that threatens to devastate the environment while promising to provide respite to the town's ailing economy. The destruction and oppression of the natural world is indicative of a culture that habitually oppresses difference, be it race, gender or otherwise. The callousness of the Honeycutt Company reflects this cynical exploitation of both human and nonhuman worlds.

Within this threatened natural space, Jim Joseph, an old Stehemish Indian man has spent weeks living in the woods taking pot shots at the heavy machinery used by the construction crew to clear a road through the forest.³⁹⁸ In an attempt to coax the old man down from his impromptu sniper's nest, the work's foreman calls out to him, at first jovially, asking the old man to 'come on down' with the promise of a free beer and a pardon. But he becomes increasingly exasperated by the old man's defiance,

³⁹⁸ Although referred to as the Stehemish, a fictional construction, throughout the novel, it is evident that Owens is drawing on Snohomish hunting and fishing traditions. Lee Schwenger has observed that: 'it is clear that Owens himself took care to learn about Salish culture in writing *Wolfsong* for at the heart of the novel is a particular physical and cultural landscape that is Snohomish.' He acknowledges that the 'coastal Salish—like Northwest Coast Indians in general—recognize a critical, reciprocal relationship between the human and non-human community.' Schwenger, 'Landscape and Cultural Identity', p. 97.

betraying a shift in tone, by degrees more sinister and threatening: ‘This ain’t cowboys and Injuns [...] We can get Taylor’s hounds, and you know you cain’t get away from them hounds, old man, just like you cain’t stop this here road.’³⁹⁹

That Owens chooses to open his novel with an old Indian’s vain attempts to divert the machinery of progress and development immediately brings to mind the trope of the vanishing Indian whose natural habitat is relentlessly being destroyed and exploited. The fact that the Stehemish Mountain is being levelled to create the eyesore that is an open strip mine echoes an all-too-real problem faced by indigenous communities today, as industries rush to exploit untapped natural resources held on reservation land. Patricia Nelson Limerick has remarked that the idea of the West, a landscape once synonymous with rude good health imbued with powerful restorative qualities is now frequently cast as an ‘ailing entity in need of healing’ and it is with a similar act of wounding effect that Owens chooses to open his novel.⁴⁰⁰ The provocative image of an old man firing at the large Caterpillar vehicles is highly suggestive of futility and desperation in the face of unrelenting corporate shortsightedness. The foreman’s mocking reference to cowboys and Indians reveals underlying racial tensions, reinforcing his supposed dominance in the scene with an additional threat of violence should the old man choose to remain in the tree line disrupting progress. Later, having moved away from the construction site and retreated deeper into the forest, the old man remarks inwardly to himself that, ‘in the old days, a man might be thrown away by the people. Today, it seemed sometimes that the whole world was being thrown away by the whites.’⁴⁰¹ His sentiment evokes the powerful

³⁹⁹ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 3.

⁴⁰⁰ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Remedies for a New West: Healing Landscapes, Histories, and Cultures* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), p. 2.

⁴⁰¹ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 6.

sense of unrelenting, almost gleeful destruction of the natural environment that features in Owens's novels, while *Wolfsong* unsentimentally tackles the 'issues of deforestation and mining schemes affecting a small mostly Native American community in the Pacific Northwest'.⁴⁰² Here Owens depicts multiple different cultures, Native, non-Native, corporate, working class, and entrepreneurial (in the form of local businessman J.D. Tobin), actively confronting each other against the backdrop of a rapidly changing environment. Echoing the social commentary of his literary hero John Steinbeck, Owens's literature stands as 'resistance literature' that deals with 'Native Americans and mixedbloods, whose issues include those associated with poverty, "brown collar" labor, the social and physical environment, and "otherness"'.⁴⁰³

Despite the obvious threat to the provincial character of the town and the environment, the presence of the Honeycutt Copper Company is heralded by many as a necessary evil that must be tolerated, even celebrated, if the town's longevity is to be assured. When old Jim Joseph confronts the machinery of progress his actions, while initially successful in delaying construction in the short-term, are ultimately thwarted, and it will fall to his nephew, Tom, to follow through on his mission. When Tom finally does strike a serious blow to Honeycutt, it is J.D. who pays the ultimate price and is swept away in a torrent of water when Tom detonates charges laid at the foundation of a water storage tower close to the mine development. In each case, whenever a member of the Joseph family attempts to frustrate the development of the Honeycutt mine the corporation remains notably faceless and unaffected. By the end of the novel it is J.D. and not the Honeycutt Company who pays most dearly, even

⁴⁰² Ron Welburn, 'Wolfsong by Louis Owens', review, *MELUS*, 19.3 (1994), 139-141 (p. 139).

⁴⁰³ Kilpatrick, *Louis Owens*, p. 8.

though Tom never intended to kill him, but merely to destroy the foreman's offices and site supplies at the mine development. This error, above all else, leads to the final manhunt that closes the novel, with Tom running for his life through the mountains. In this instance the price of resistance simply adds to the cost of progress.

This underlying anxiety is perhaps best articulated by Vine Deloria Jr., when he writes that modernity and the drive for expansion perpetrated under a banner of progress and prosperity has a tendency to portray these events as the inevitable dominance of the human over the natural environment:

A variant of manifest destiny is the propensity to judge a society or civilization by its technology and see in society's effort to subdue and control nature the fulfilment of divine intent. This interpretation merely adopts the secular doctrine of cultural evolution and attaches it to theological language. If we factor in the environmental damage created by technology the argument falls flat. In less than two and a half centuries American whites have virtually destroyed a whole continent and large areas of the United States are now almost uninhabitable—even so we seek to 'sacrifice' large rural areas to toxic waste dumps.⁴⁰⁴

Applying Deloria's argument to *Wolfsong*, the dangerous so-called *wilderness* that surrounds Forks assumes the quality of the archetypal frontier dichotomy of savagery versus civilisation, the symbols of that system having been changed to reflect a more contemporary situation. The forests are still inhabited by dangerous Indians, although here the savage threat has been reduced to that of an old man engaged in an act of noble but ultimately futile resistance, while the wilderness landscape is gradually becoming significantly more hazardous owing to the destructive presence of the Honeycutt Copper Company. Even in his final act of defiance Tom can only hope to delay the inevitable development of the mine, while the man who brought Honeycutt to Forks and championed the restorative effect of the copper mine on the local economy lies dead on a mountainside, mud filling his mouth, emphasising the

⁴⁰⁴ Vine Deloria Jr, *God Is Red* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1992), pp. 69-70.

dramatic extent to which he has been silenced. And yet despite Tom's final act of resistance, one cannot escape the conclusion that all of this has been for naught. The mine will be built and the mountain will be irreparably damaged, while those who fought against the mine are now either dead or running wounded, possibly mortally, into the woods, pursued by members of their own community. The irony is, of course, that in attempting to preserve their way of life by accepting the financial lifeline of the mine, the citizens of Forks have ensured that the character of their town will be forever changed and quite possibly lost altogether to the forces of modernity. The very thing that defined them and shaped their culture—the valuable cedar, pines, and hardwoods of the forest—have now all but gone, while the mountain that roots the Stehemish people in the local landscape has been similarly erased in the name of progress. In this instance Deloria's choice of the word 'sacrifice' carries a double meaning, first emphasising the perverse nature of mine development, since the purpose of sacrificing the land is to gain material wealth, capital, and market share, all of which can never replace the rare natural resources that are being violently extracted from the earth. Secondly, as René Girard points out, there is a tendency to assume a causal link between sacrifice and resolution, and what might be more commonly referred to as the *no pain, no gain* sacrificial model.⁴⁰⁵ However, this assumption is wedded to a performative notion of sacrifice borne out by festival behaviours, game playing, and social as well as religious ritual. When applied to real, lived experience, this kind of reciprocity can only be the product of chance and circumstance that is almost impossible to quantify. In other words, such acts of sacrifice represent a form of blind ideological adherence, of the *progress good, resistance bad* variety. The town of Forks

⁴⁰⁵ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The John's Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp.120-125.

should survive, because the town has made a supreme sacrifice to the God of progress, hence Deloria's contention that progress often achieves a theological resonance. Within a broader Euramerican historical context, the natural world is there to be exploited, leading to what William Cronon, Rob Nixon, Shepard Krech III, and others have identified as the basis of wilful anti-environmentalism in the US.

Where frontier calls for a taming of wild country and any indigenous inhabitants therein, Owens's environmentalism and rustic provincial settings portray a landscape under threat of destruction, victimised, and contemptuously treated as a resource ripe for exploitation no matter what the long term consequences of deforestation, strip-mining and the plundering of the natural world. Rob Nixon terms this pathological abuse of the natural world 'slow violence', so called because unlike other more immediate, spectacular forms of violence, systemic long-term neglect and abuse of the environment has been at times interminably slow to manifest and/or wilfully ignored to the point that it simply fails to register.⁴⁰⁶ Even when it does manifest itself in an obvious or otherwise unavoidable fashion, such as an oil spill or the distressing reality of landfills and severe atmospheric pollution, it is too easily dismissed as normative, unfortunate or simply a necessary evil that must be tolerated if the wealthier regions of the world are to continue to prosper and enjoy a higher standard of living than their poorer *developing* neighbours. Nixon writes:

Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁶ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 2011), p. 2.

⁴⁰⁷ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 2.

And it is the same convenient yet perverse logic that underpins transcendent modes of violence: dismissing atrocity as the misguided actions of insubordinate individuals; a momentary lapse in judgement; a necessary evil; or being of such minor importance that it fails to garner any critical attention within the dominant culture. Slow violence, like transcendent violence, has the additional quality of becoming increasingly normative with the passing of time. Nixon's point is that if slow violence is allowed to persist it will only become harder for future generations to articulate, or even *see* the problem; it simply fades into the background noise of normal everyday minutiae. Applying this model to transcendent violence, specifically in relation to the Native or Indigenous subject, the added problem of the vanishing/extinct and wholly inaccessible 'authentic' and unchanging Indian further complicates the issue. As Jace Weaver notes, 'An extinct people do not change' while by relegating the Native subject to an 'increasingly distant past, Amer-Europeans are free to pursue their designs and complete their conquest of an ethnically cleansed America unimpeded', and concludes that 'myths of conquest must conquer other stories'.⁴⁰⁸ Looking to the 'unavoidable realities' of social and economic inequality experienced by many people living on and off reservations across the US, high levels of poverty, hopelessness, and ennui that exacerbate substance abuse, domestic violence, and a generational decline in living standards, can also be drawn beneath the aegis of Nixon's slow violence.⁴⁰⁹

On this very subject Owens has argued that:

The five-centuries-long, deliberate effort to eradicate the original inhabitants of America and fully appropriate that colonized space is still going on today. The Indian is still supposed to be the vanishing American, and his representation in the American media remains unequivocally that. As long as Native Americans who are very much alive today do not look, live, and talk like the anachronistic inventions portrayed in novels and movies, they remain invisible and politically powerless. If they caricature their ancestors by dressing and acting as they are shown to do in films and fiction,

⁴⁰⁸ Weaver, *Other Words*, pp. 20-22.

⁴⁰⁹ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 72.

they become instantly recognizable as cultural artifacts of significance, but only insofar as they serve to inseminate the dominant culture with an original value.⁴¹⁰

Accordingly, long-term and generational poverty and a profound lack of options to escape it are no less forms of murderous violence than killing by wilful neglect and supreme indifference. Furthermore, a broadly conservative unwillingness to even name poverty or cite it as a primary cause for social decline has meant that slow, systemic violence of this kind remains one of the biggest challenges yet to be sufficiently acknowledged. That Owens chooses to ally environmentalism, poverty, rural provincialism, violence, and his own interpretation of frontier, testifies to a rhizomatic interconnectivity between both the metaphysical and the harsh, lived reality of alterity, landscape, and ideology. Small town America becomes the primer for an uninterrupted frontier and exists notably removed from the metropolis, the supposed endgame of frontier if settlement, expansion, and commercialism are the key measures of success.

Later in *Wolfsong*, Tom hikes through the construction site with his older brother, Jimmy. As they approach the site Tom reflects how ‘the mountains had been taken from Indian people by white invaders and had been taken from the invaders by the invaders’ government and made an official wilderness area by government act’.⁴¹¹ It is an interesting inversion of the Euramerican story of frontier and civilised succession that sees the ‘invaders’ as victims in their own story. Tom, recalling his uncle’s words, seizes this opportunity to remark on the irony of the word ‘wilderness’ in American English:

He climbed over the gate and looked again toward the timbered ridge. The mountains had been taken from Indian people by white invaders and had been taken from the invaders by the invaders’ government and made an official wilderness area by government act. He’d read the words of the law. ‘In perpetuity,’ it said, to be

⁴¹⁰ Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, p. 129.

⁴¹¹ Owens, *Wolfsong*, p. 80.

‘untrammelled.’ A half million acres, just a small place. ‘This is a good thing they did,’ Uncle Jim had said, ‘because now maybe they won’t cut all the trees and build roads. But if you think about it, it’s pretty funny. When our people lived here long ago, before the white folks came, there wasn’t any wilderness and there wasn’t any wild animals. There was only the mountains and river, two-leggeds and four-leggeds and underwater people and all the rest. It took white people to make the country and the animals wild. Now they got to make a law saying it’s wild so’s they can protect it from themselves.’⁴¹²

‘Untrammelled’ is a direct reference to the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the subsequent Eastern Wilderness Areas Act (1974) and Endangered American Wilderness Act (1978). When taken together this legislation helped to consolidate the popular perception of the wilderness as a space ‘untrammeled by man’, and one cut in stark contrast to the pressures of mid-twentieth century urbanite existence.⁴¹³ Some of the first wilderness societies that sought to formalise a federal law protecting wilderness spaces in the US, such as the Boone and Crockett Club, saw their role as one of preserving the nation’s wilderness areas against the rise of the automobile, and in this regard presented wilderness as essentially anti-modernist.⁴¹⁴ Prominent amongst their core principles was the idea that in returning to such ‘primeval’ spaces, American families could experience the virtues of an unsullied natural world that stood apart from the rigors and petty commercialism of their busy suburban lives. To recreate in the nation’s unspoilt woodlands and flowering deserts was to ramble through ‘an artefact of time and place’ that had played an important formative role in establishing the resilient archetype of the American frontier character. In carefully choosing their title, organisations like the Boone and Crockett Club aligned themselves with heroes of an uncompromising wilderness, enthusiastically endorsing the popular conception

⁴¹² Owens, *Wolfsong*, pp. 80-81.

⁴¹³ Wilderness Act, Public Law 88-577 (16 US C. 1131-1136) 88th Congress, Second Session September 3, 1964 <http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/documents/publiclaws/PDF/16_USC_1131-1136.pdf> [accessed on 16th June 2014].

⁴¹⁴ George A. Gonzalez, ‘The Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Wilderness Preservation Policy Network’, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 20:4 (2009), 31-52 (p. 36.); Henry Nash Smith offers an excellent analysis of Boone’s legacy and his place in the mythologising of the West in *Virgin Land*, pp. 51-58.

of Boone and his frontier contemporaries as rugged outdoors types who were compelled not by the promise of anything as superficial as wealth, but by a simple 'love of nature, of perfect freedom, and of the adventurous life in the woods.'⁴¹⁵

Significantly, the novel centres not only on the next stage of Indian removal and the final erasure of Indian Country, but on the failing cohesion of the provincial ideal. As Jim suggests, the natural environment upon which the town's Native, mixedblood and non-Native inhabitants depend, is under serious threat having fallen under the aegis of corporate power and obfuscating legalese. In this sense the term 'wilderness' comes to signify that which is not understood, while it also suggests that 'wilderness' is something of a relic that must be preserved. Owens frequently points to Native characters' appreciation of this fact. Wolf, raven, bear, owls, peregrine falcons, marmots, and salmon are all given a magisterial quality that acknowledges difference but does not leave them in obscurity, or otherwise present them as inexplicable. Not wild, not alien, but part of another dimension of a shared existence. Bear dreams, visions, the enigmatic comings and goings of the wolf and coyote are part of the basic fabric of the novel, part of its form, reflecting what is crucially problematic in the world Owens has created: an appreciation of the natural world as human and sacred, not separate, but the same. Only in a world where this is the case can people destroy the one resource that sustains their town. At one moment in the novel Tom recalls the story of how coyote, in a fit of greed and excess, consumed himself, a powerful image that speaks of an insatiable form of feral capitalism. Despite a roll call of more than thirty-six characters, the focus of the novel is narrow and

⁴¹⁵ See The Wilderness Act 1964; Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian*, p. 122; James H. Perkins, qtd in Smith, *Virgin Land*, p. 57.

suffocating, whereas the supposed open range promised by the ‘wilderness’ is fast disappearing.

Conclusion

Central to Owens’s work is the idea that the frontier has not closed, it simply evolved and relocated. Moreover, there remains a problematic tendency to use the term ‘frontier’ as a synonym for expansion *into* new territories be they financial frontiers, technological frontiers or so on, when a more accurate deployment of the term would be to signify a *constantly changing* interaction between cultures. When viewed from this perspective, ‘frontier’, as used in its traditional Turnerian sense, becomes quite unhelpful and restrictive. That the frontier could be closed, as Turner suggests, fits the expansionist narrative and gives the period a gloss of providential inevitability. On the other hand, to suggest that frontier, as a site of cultural exploration, violence and violation has in fact never been closed is to throw the cherished providential narrative into dispute and firmly locate it as the product of a supremacist Euramerican narrative. Furthermore, frontier has always been part of the lexicon of dominance and conquest, while the racialised Other is inculcated with the image of a harsh and unforgiving wilderness that must be subdued and uprooted if expansion and settlement can continue unimpeded. The crux of the issue must be that if the term is to have any meaningful place in conversations about US culture, diversity, origin and future, then it must be seen to endorse cultural pluralism and embrace the other side of the equation, although to do so is to invite a violent confrontation between competing cultural ideologies.

Central to this argument is the claim that frontier manifests both figuratively as an unstable liminal space of contact between different cultures, such as the

conceptual or mythic frontier, and more literally in the physical geographic location where contact takes place. Of course, in myth and works of literary fiction the literal and the figurative are not fixed or mutually exclusive coordinates, just as the idea of frontier as a point of symbolic and geographic division between binaries of known and unknown, wilderness and civilisation, savage and civilised, and so on, remains equally unstable.⁴¹⁶ It is precisely because of this perceived lack of stability, despite attempts on Turner's behalf to provide a sense of prosthetic closure, that Owens sees frontier as such a useful concept in approaching complex and necessarily polymorphic issues of identity, race, class, and Otherness. In Owens, the conceptual frontier has been partially detached from its *closed* Turnerian corollary, becoming instead an intersectional, fluidic cultural space rather than the exclusive preserve of white Euramerican dominance. What we find in the novels of Louis Owens is an intersectional and highly contested space, where different cultures must 'deal with each other', leading to cross-cultural tensions and, not incidentally, multiple episodes of violence. In fact, these episodes of violence mark a crucial point of entry for exploring hidden modes of violence inherent within the dominant discourse.

The Turnerian interpretation of frontier as a formative wilderness, along with the geographic determinism of canonical writers such as Cooper, Thoreau, and Roosevelt is deemphasised in Owens so that it might entertain ideas of frontier and wilderness that can be sufficiently loosened to accommodate diverse subjectivities. Owens celebrates an unbroken, incomplete, uninterrupted frontier as a fundamentally

⁴¹⁶ Part of the long-lasting romanticism of Frederick Jackson Turner that has proven to be most difficult to wean is that of the conflict between civilisation and wilderness, dutifully personified by the pioneer and frontiersman. It would be taking nothing away from that rich and mosaic history to suggest that rather than just a combative desire to push deeper into territory as yet uncharted by Euramerica, these characters were an extension of a far more reified and formulaic process. Billington argues as much, even if there remains a tendency in his book to fall back onto Turnerian ideals when discussing the heritage of the frontier. See Billington, *Westward Expansion*, pp. 649-658.

humanist story, and one ill-suited to notions of closure and inertia. Gerald Vizenor, an author and fellow academic with whom Owens shared a lifelong friendship and professional association has argued that closure, in a literary content, is a peculiarly Euramerican phenomenon, reliant on linear notions of temporality and more emphatic ideological doctrines such as manifest destiny, to say nothing of the role of the Native subject as antagonist in the frontier narrative. In closing the frontier Turner did more than usher in what he and his peers understood as the next inevitable phase of US progress, he consigned the frontier and the violence that it embodied to history. As previously suggested in the second chapter of this thesis, history is necessarily untidy, and any attempt at ideologically motivated closure should inspire a profound sense of unease. For Leslie Marmon Silko this entailed a concerted effort on her behalf to write the violence back into the frontier story and in so doing reminded readers that the bloody work of frontier continues at an ideological level. Similarly, Owens directs readers past the overt incidents of violence in his novels towards the systemic violence that underpins established binary constructions. He uses the instability of roads, rivers, and liminal spaces, together with haunting images of spectrality in various forms, to guide this more complex, multifaceted reading of how people ‘deal with one another’. Far from fundamentally revising the conceptual frontier, Owens is in fact continuing its culturally formative process, unwilling to allow it to remain closed or resigned to a bygone period of white Euramerican history. It is testament to Owens’s playful and ironic sense of humour that he should take as his guiding metaphor a space synonymous with white Euramerican expansion, colonial endeavour and, perhaps most significantly of all, *closure*, and reassert what is perhaps the most useful application of the conceptual frontier: instability and uncertainty, the very same forces

that Turner is at such pains to de-emphasise within his own closed and completed notion of frontier.

Chapter 4

Extreme Violence, Obscene Violence, and Terminal Creeds: Gerald Vizenor's New Frontiers

There has been obvious interaction between *violence* and *violation*, the breaking of some custom or some dignity.⁴¹⁷

Raymond Williams

When one examines the history of American society one notices the great weakness inherent in it. The country was founded in violence. It worships violence and will continue to live violently. Anyone who tries to meet violence with love is crushed, but violence used to meet violence also ends abruptly with meaningless destruction.⁴¹⁸

Vine Deloria Jr.

Nineteenth century frontier politics favored the interests of the railroads and treekillers and agrarian settlers who were promised ownership of the earth. The excitement of the furtrade had passed leaving the tribes to their failing cultural memories and dreams, woodland apostates, while the new voices of the woodland cracked with harsh sounds. Whitemen possessed trees and women and words. Violence eclipsed the solemn promises of woodland tribal celebrants.⁴¹⁹

Gerald Vizenor, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*

This chapter examines the ways in which Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor seeks to transcend the prescriptive boundaries of dominant US cultural discourse and expose instances of systemic institutional violence in his fiction and non-fiction writing. Principle amongst Vizenor's concerns is the imprisonment of the Native subject within semiotic and mythic boundaries, which emerge in his work as monolithic ideological institutions that propagate and rely upon reductive readings of Indigeneity. Against this Vizenor interprets violence as a contagion produced of terminal creeds, his term

⁴¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1976), p. 330.

⁴¹⁸ Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins*, pp. 255-256.

⁴¹⁹ Gerald Vizenor, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1978 and 1990), pp. 7-8. Hereafter I will refer to the novel as *Bearheart*.

for restrictive, unevolving worldviews that mindlessly reproduce the same harmful end product without recourse to change or re-evaluation. But he also uses violence – violent imagery, obscene acts, and disturbing episodes of violent excess - to alert the reader to the inherent systems of violence at play in the terminal creeds of dominant culture. Like Owens and Silko, Vizenor refuses to allow institutional and the everyday normative violence that sustains dominant culture to go unchecked, unchallenged. Unsettling and even comically overblown violent episodes similarly push the limits of propriety and good taste beyond what would normally be expected. As Maureen Keady has said, ‘throughout the book [*Bearheart*], our expectations are thwarted, our notions of morality are violated, and our desire for resolution (or a little compassion) is overruled again and again’.⁴²⁰ In the troubling moral vacuum that Vizenor creates, new insights rush in, marking the prescriptive outer boundaries of what passes as permissible in dominant culture. Here, in the apocalyptic wasteland of his novel *Bearheart* and in the real world case law of Thomas White Hawk, Vizenor refuses to permit the unspeakable violence of dominance to fade into normative behaviour, but rather intervenes with tricksterish verve to ensure that notions of closure and established practices of authority are shown to be the fickle extension of ideologies of dominance and containment.

I begin by outlining several of the more prominent boundaries that Vizenor approaches and transgresses in his 1978 debut novel *Darkness in Saint Louis* *Bearheart*, later republished as *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990). The second half of the chapter then examines how Vizenor resists containment in both his fiction and non-fiction writing, looking to his response to real-life violent tragedy

⁴²⁰ Maureen Keady, ‘Walking Backwards into the Fourth World: Survival of the Fittest in “Bearheart”’, *American Indian Quarterly*, 9.1 (1985), 61-65 (p. 61).

while working as a reporter for the *Minneapolis Tribune*, a concern characterised in his fiction by violence, violation, and extreme sexual encounters. This, I argue, is evident in Vizenor's response to the case of Thomas White Hawk, a young Dakota man who faced the death penalty in 1968 for the murder of a wealthy Vermillion jeweller and the rape of his wife. These early interventions and acts of advocacy laid the groundwork for Vizenor's subsequent literary production, most notably the ground breaking *Bearheart*. The reading that I present is that Vizenor does not permit violence and tragedy to restrict discourse, but endeavours to expand existing discourse and to create novel, imaginative opportunities for the transgression of prescriptive boundaries.

Vizenor's novel is notable for the depiction of a particularly arresting, even controversial brand of graphic sex and violence, so much so that he initially struggled to find a publisher willing to take a chance on such an apparently bizarre work of fiction. 'I think the people probably threw it away', says Vizenor, in interview with Louis Owens, 'they probably read it and thought "Holy shit," because it's not anything they would expect on an Indian theme'.⁴²¹ Vizenor's willingness to deliver a manuscript that deliberately fell outside of what publishers expected to see in an Indian novel is a fitting prologue to the work that would follow. Speaking at a conference at the University of Geneva in 2011, Vizenor used the example of D'Arcy McNickle's landmark 1936 novel *The Surrounded* to illustrate the fraught relationship that often exists between publishers and Native American writers.⁴²² McNickle's novel, originally entitled *The Hungry Generations*, went through multiple redrafts and

⁴²¹ Vizenor qtd by Louis Owens in his afterword to *Bearheart*, p. 247.

⁴²² Fourth Annual Geneva Native Studies One-Day Masterclass held at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, 18th March 2011. Vizenor was referring to Louis Owens's original research on the publishing history surrounding McNickle's novel. See also Owens, *Other Destinies*, pp. 60-62.

resubmissions following publishers' (there were several) insistence that the author make sufficient changes to bring the novel back within the bounds of what they felt the public expected to see in a story about a young Indian man 'wandering between two generations, two cultures'.⁴²³ Vizenor's difficulties in securing a publisher for his first major novel suggests that while some publishers continued to adhere to the same assumptions, Vizenor was committed to delivering a novel that put those assumptions to the test. It is useful then to consider one of Vizenor's many authorial positions to be that of a boundary transgressor, in the sense that he frequently seeks to subvert, satirise and problematise institutions which determine what passes as normative and what is otherwise transgressive. Vizenor's long-time association with the impious figure of the tribal trickster is well documented, with a substantial body of criticism dedicated to his trickster hermeneutics, most notably Kimberley Blaeser's *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* and A. Robert Lee's *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald Vizenor*. There are also numerous chapters, journal articles and of course Vizenor's own commentary. Vizenor's methodology falls within the parameters of these trickster strategies, but does not necessarily have to be thought of purely in those terms.⁴²⁴ Crucially, he uses violence to rebalance and problematise the mythology of dominance through the intervention of tribal imagination and Native fantasy.

⁴²³ Owens, *Other Destinies*, p. 60.

⁴²⁴ Kristina Fagan warns against the overindulgence of trickster stories, claiming that the 'tide seems to have turned against trickster criticism in recent years' having reached its pinnacle in the late 1980s and 1990s as mainstream literary criticism, searching for a way to respond to the new wave of Native writers finding critical success at that time, embraced trickster theory as a one-size-fits-all way of reading Native texts. The result, Fagan claims, is that trickster theory strayed too often into cliché, lending itself to a popular trend that placed prescriptive demands on Native artists who were expected to perform trickster in one form or another. Kristina Fagan, 'What's Wrong with the Trickster', in *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations* ed. by Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 3-20 (p. 13).

Readers approaching *Bearheart* for the first time might ask why there is so much violent imagery, and whether the author is simply emphasising the dark, troubling reality of a society in catastrophic economic freefall, as per the subject of his novel. The graphic portrayal of zoophilia (sexual fixation on animals), rape, and the routine contemplation and fulfilment of torture, murder, and stylised execution, prompted the critic Kenneth Lincoln to characterise the novel as one ‘spiced with stale metaphors, crude sex, occult crows, evil whites, and desperately clever Indians’.⁴²⁵ For Lincoln, it is a literary conceit that struggles to offer much beyond a libidinal sideshow, which runs the risk of distracting the reader from the finer points of the novel. Alan R. Velie, however, acknowledges the originality of Vizenor’s use of graphic sex and violence, referring to *Bearheart* as a ‘strange’ and ‘bizarre’ book that is ‘quite different from other Indian novels’ and one best approached with some familiarity with Anishinaabe and other Native American cultural traditions.⁴²⁶ As a starting point, however, readers should then refrain from reading violence in Vizenor simply as a sensational or unsophisticated symbolically *flat* event, but instead consider that Vizenor’s use of violence expresses a distinctively performative quality that channels multiple cultural traditions while moving away from the trappings of the realist novel, accepting nothing is sacred or out of bounds regardless of how surreal or upsetting that might be.

Commenting on the effect of ethnographic surrealism, the anthropologist James Clifford notes that ‘when the “coefficient of weirdness” floats free from the “coefficient of reality,” the result is a new sort of exoticism. The strangeness that’s produced does not inhere in the culture or world of the peoples represented. This

⁴²⁵ Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi’n Humor: Bicultural Plays in Native American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 155.

⁴²⁶ Velie, *Four American Indian Literary Masters*, pp. 131-132.

exoticism is different from earlier varieties—romantic, Orientalist, and poetic—for what has become irreducibly curious is no longer the other but the cultural description itself.⁴²⁷ We can apply a similar analysis to the extremes of violence found in Vizenor’s work, noting that the abrupt strangeness and unexpected appearance of violence may very well be part of a larger process whereby the reader is given little choice but to acknowledge and engage with the awkward presence of sex and violence. It is an alienating effect that Vizenor will use to powerful effect throughout the novel, concluding with a violent, disturbing sexual encounter and Proude Cedarfair’s exit into the fourth world.

Indeed, a familiarity with Anishinaabe tribal trickster stories is helpful in decoding some of the more violent and ‘bizarre’ events presented in the novel. Such stories offer a unique challenge to reductive terms like ‘bestiality’ which impose a restrictive and distinctly Euramerican value-judgement on the novel that fails to comprehend a layering of complex Native American aesthetic sensibilities. Discussing the novel’s initial reception, Vizenor explains how people were very much fixated on the question of bestiality in the novel:

Well, it’s literature. It’s like a good Native story. It’s a good myth, humans and animals have relationships, have children who are mixed bears and mixed wolves and beavers and all kinds of things. You see, that’s myth, that is not worth considering. So then I challenge it by saying, well, what exactly is the problem between humans and animals? And it ends up being only sexual, because the obscene indulgence in domestic pets is something to worry about rather than the sexuality of it.⁴²⁸

It is for these reasons that Velie refuses to dismiss the violence of *Bearheart* as cheap spectacle. Instead, he recognises that the combination of violence, fantasy, explicit sex and humour constitute significant parts of longstanding Native and non-Native literary

⁴²⁷ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 151.

⁴²⁸ Vizenor, in interview with John Lloyd Purdy in John Lloyd Purdy, *Writing Indian, Native Conversations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), p. 127.

traditions. In the latter, such high profile non-Native practitioners as Defoe and Henry James are examples, to which the names of Shakespeare, Jonson or Marlowe might just as easily be added given that violent spectacle frequently blends with tragic disenchantment, humour, disgust, and the temporary suspension of morality on the Early Modern stage.⁴²⁹ While Vizenor's claim that 'it's literature' will satisfy some, his response raises the additional question of why realism seems to be the default approach of mainstream publishing in the twentieth century towards Native American literature. Vizenor argues that his work does not conform to established definitions, and more importantly, just because a text contains complex references to Native traditions and tribal stories does not mean that such references qualify it as a realist novel. Considering this, the faux stoicism employed by photographer Edward Curtis, who posed his Native portraits with a strained formality that reinforced the popular image of the stoic Native American, deconstructed as *Fugitive Poses* by Vizenor, also comes to mind with the mainstream striving to reproduce a predetermined simulated Indianness that complemented notions of a definable, historically frozen and subordinate Native subject. Challenging this, Vizenor is clear in his approach: 'I'm doing survivance' he says, 'not victimry', and referring to what he sees as the dominant mainstream approach to Native literatures, adds 'the secure narrative right now is victimry'.⁴³⁰

When placed in a wider intertextual context that acknowledges traditional Native American literary heritage as well as significant changes in the literary *avant-*

⁴²⁹ Velie also notes that the non-realist watershed of the 1970s into which Vizenor can be loosely inserted, saw writers like Calvino and Vonnegut reject the realist literature-as-representation arguments of the previous century, embracing instead the idiomatic possibilities of the post-modern novel, while simultaneously drawing on the legacies of Faulkner, Steinbeck, James, and Hemingway, all of whom present violence as part of the everyday order of things and not a spectacle that operates outside or beyond the confines of normative experience. See Velie, *Four American Indian Literary Masters*, pp. 134-135.

⁴³⁰ Purdy, *Writing Indian*, p. 128

garde of the time, simplistic readings that deemphasise the web of complex myths, traditional tales and autobiographic experience that inform Vizenor's use of violence as little more than a sideshow attraction, become inadequate in describing the aesthetic complexity of his novel. Velie's final point is that *Bearheart*, like many other postmodern novels, 'incorporates generous amounts of bad art' and borrows heavily from popular culture.⁴³¹ This should give readers and critics pause when reaching for a realist interpretation, and helps to explain Lincoln's initial discomfort, since Vizenor's violent imagery sometimes strays into the realm of the kitsch. Bringing so called 'high' and 'low' art together with traditional stories, myths and experiences is an act of cultural levelling.

Reviewing the novel in 1981, A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff acknowledges the important confluence of Native stories and literary archetypes that inform Vizenor's more arresting scenes and images, noting that where the author uses 'animal-husband tales,' such as the one exemplified by Lilith Mae, the 'mistress of two boxers', who shares a sexual relationship with two stray dogs that she rescued from a reservation, he does so to 'emphasize the relationship between man and animal,' and to highlight the importance of human-animal metamorphosis in a wider nativist (see Anishinaabe) tradition.⁴³² On this very point, Vizenor has said that Lilith Mae's sexual relationship with her dogs should not be read as 'pornographic, obscene, or bestial', since when considered from a Native perspective animals are not considered subordinate to humans in terms of their evolutionary status.⁴³³ Patricia Linton takes this idea further still, arguing in line with Arnold Krupat that the postmodern, anti-humanist rejection

⁴³¹ Velie, *Four American Indian Literary Masters*, p. 136.

⁴³²A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff, Review, *MELUS*, 8.1 (1981), 69-71 (p. 70); Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 78.

⁴³³ Gerald Vizenor, qtd in Patricia Linton, 'The "Person" in Postmodern Fiction: Gibson, Le Guin, and Vizenor', *Studies in American Indian Literature*, Series 2, 5.3 (1993), 3-11, 4.

of a singular individual subject is only seen as novel and new when viewed from outside Native American and other Indigenous cultural traditions:

Postmodern fiction presses the boundaries of personhood not only by decentering the idea of identity or individuality, but can also be suggesting that personhood is not exclusively human. It is important to recognize, however, that this perception is only postmodern when viewed within the continuum of the dominant Western traditions of literature. Set within a broader framework, one that gives due attention to other cultural perspectives—notably, Native American traditions—an inclusive concept of personhood is not postmodern at all but actually pre-modern.⁴³⁴

Furthermore, inter-species sexual encounters like these are considered obscene and mostly illegal in mainstream US society; this then makes for a disruptive and transgressive point of contact between Native and non-Native cultures. But Vizenor does not want to leave the reader with a strange tale of bestiality, but again and again uses these unusual and provocative scenes to generate further discussion and points of narrative transgression.

For example, the totemic transformative link between human and animal is memorably explored through the central protagonist of the novel, the cedar shaman Proude Cedarfair, who routinely transforms into bear avatars, or speaks as a bear in his visions, using his bear voice to assert his magical powers. He seamlessly flits between human and non-human subjectivities, continuing an oral and literary tradition that reaches back into multiple tribal cultures, and which found a mainstream audience with the publication of N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn*. In Vizenor's novel the shifting boundaries of human/non-human offer a striking environmental point about the decline of the ecosphere and the humanitarian cost of a bloated consumerist society. At the midpoint of the novel, as the circus pilgrims continue towards Iowa and Council Bluffs, they encounter a vast mob of

⁴³⁴ Linton, 'The "Person" in Postmodern Fiction', p.4.

‘whitecripples’ with various disabilities, injuries, and physical deformities.⁴³⁵ At this point the narrator intervenes, describing the catastrophic events that followed the end of gasoline, and the end of the petrochemical era:

First the fish died, the oceans turned sour, and then birds dropped in flight over cities, but it was not until thousands of children were born in the distorted shapes of evil animals that the government cautioned the chemical manufacturers. Millions of people had lost parts of their bodies to malignant neoplasms from cosmetics and chemical poisons in the air and food.⁴³⁶

As James H. Cox notes, in this passage Vizenor echoes Revelation 8-9, which describes the cataclysmic End of Days. In the Biblical account the opening of the seventh seal brings forth plague and fiery death, which sweep across the land laying claim to a third of all creation and ending in darkness and woe.⁴³⁷ Revelation also speaks of how those who do ‘not repent of their murders of their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts’ are left behind to join dark armies of the Horsemen.⁴³⁸ The deformed figures that the pilgrims encounter on the road to Council Bluffs are, in Cox’s analysis, a symbol of final judgement imposed on Euramerica. The whitecripples are ‘reaping the violence sowed by their ancestors’, ironically becoming the victims of the same expansionist doctrine with which their ancestors had proclaimed a divine right and moral obligation to seize Indigenous lands and subjugate Indigenous peoples. Vizenor notes the ‘tragic miseries of a chemical civilization are denied in manifest manners, and tragic wisdom is consumed in the esthetic ruins of movies and television’.⁴³⁹ In this sense, the whitecripples have been doomed to live and die by their dogmatic adherence to *terminal creeds* –intractable world views and ‘self-definitions of all sorts’ that resist all forms of change with potentially

⁴³⁵ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 151, 145.

⁴³⁶ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 146.

⁴³⁷ Cox, *Muting White Noise*, pp. 116-117; Revelation 8-9, *Holy Bible*.

⁴³⁸ Revelation 9:21.

⁴³⁹ Gerald Vizenor, ‘Native American Indian Literature: Critical Metaphors of the Ghost Dance’, *World Literature Today*, 66.2 (1992), 223-227 (p. 223).

catastrophic consequences – in this instance represented by religious scripture.⁴⁴⁰ Allied with this is the additional ecological and economic revelation that unswerving allegiance to terminal creeds ultimately ends in human death and ecological devastation, be it Christian dogma or an economic system driven by a monolithic yet finite oil economy. Faith, then, or at least blind faith, is equated with blind devotion to terminal creeds, and with it the ritualistic practices designed to enshrine the self-regulating logic of those terminal creeds in the public consciousness. Cox also suggests that in revisiting and reimagining the end of days in this way, the whitecripples become the ‘children of Manifest Destiny’ and a warning to those who subscribe to myths of dominance. Vizenor is not, he goes on to say, swapping crude positions of *bad* white for *good* Indian, since that would be to simply reverse the very form of moral absolutism that he seeks to critique. *Good* and *Evil*, the moralistic stock-in-trade of scripture, must be delegitimized so that groups and individuals do not fall into the terminal trap of imposing a relative and purely subjective judgement that inevitably leads to exclusion, violence, prejudice, and death.⁴⁴¹ This is oddly reminiscent of De Sade’s obscene and sacrilegious rejection of moral absolutes, in which everything is permissible. Out of the relativistic *mêlée* he creates, the individual must formulate his/her own limits which resist a generalised definition of social morality that empowers one group at the expense of another.

In this village of the damned the human population, specifically the children, are described as evil animals, although it is unclear if this is indeed meant to be read strictly as metaphor. Or whether, in Vizenor’s shifting semiotic landscape, the children have literally been transformed into evil animals – the terrible endpoint of a terminal

⁴⁴⁰ Kathryn Hume, ‘Gerald Vizenor on Imagination’, in *The Native American Renaissance*, ed. by Velie and Lee, pp. 129-143 (p. 129).

⁴⁴¹ Cox, *Muting White Noise*, pp. 116-117.

creed and biblical cataclysm in which human beings are *reduced* to craven animalistic forms. This highlights a point of collision between different Native and Non-Native worldviews, with the pilgrims functioning as an inter-species confederacy, including bear and crow spirits. The other, a violent mob in which to be equated with the animal kingdom, even metaphorically, carries with it a sense of inferiority and malignancy. At one point Big Foot enters into a debate with fellow pilgrims Doctor Wilde and Justice Pardone as to whether or not the cripples had merely stalled in their evolution from animal to human, or if they are the tragic by-product of the chemical and cosmetic age. Wilde dismisses them as ‘simple cases of poisoned genes’.⁴⁴² ‘Cripples are cripples from the chemicals their parents and grandparents drank and smoked and ate’ says Doctor Wilde, noting how animals are not ‘evil or disgusting’, whereas an animal face on a human, or at least *these* humans, goes beyond the carnivalesque abandonment of social mores and becomes instead a grotesque parade of the living dead.⁴⁴³ It is an interesting inversion of the undead Indian, with the whitecripples now becoming the literal representation of the violent contamination of the ecosphere and dehumanising policies of Euramerican dominance. Offering his final judgement on the debate, Proude says: ‘we become our memories and what we believe [...] we become the terminal creeds we speak. Our words limit the animals we would become . . . soaring through words from memories and visions. We are all incomplete . . . imperfect. Lost limbs and lost visions stand with the same phantoms’.⁴⁴⁴ In Proude’s estimation the whitecripples become a site of multiple discourses all of which centre on the question of terminal creeds. Yes, he seems to say, these people have lost their way in their own evolutionary development, but that in part was due to an overreliance

⁴⁴² Vizenor, *Bearheart*, pp. 146-147.

⁴⁴³ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 147.

⁴⁴⁴ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 147.

on absolute myths such as manifest destiny and the horrendous consequences of unchecked irresponsible industrialisation. Crucially, no one person or culture is complete, and like an amputee who still senses the presence of his phantom limb, all people are searching for that which remains partially remembered and partially imagined. The humanitarian costs of terminal creeds are laid bare, but at the same time Proude acknowledges that the whitecripples are neither 'good' nor 'evil' but rather incomplete people searching for meaning in a world which for them has lost its bearing in the collapse of the oil economy.

The chapter concludes with the horrific gang rape and murder of Little Big Mouse, who is torn limb from limb and consumed by the cannibal children of manifest destiny. Little Big Mouse, a benign shamanistic character who is bewitched by the material and spiritual world, appears to sacrifice herself to the cannibal horde, proclaiming them to be beautiful before disrobing and allowing the mob to engulf her in an orgy of sexual violence. The danger inherent in the mob is that it operates as a single unit, thoughtlessly consuming anything possessing natural beauty and innocence. The temptation here is to suggest that the mob is rampant consumerism personified as a monstrous organism to which Little Big Mouse sacrifices her perfect body in the hope that her sacrifice might complete it. Proude attempts to break up the attack by roaring with his bear voice four times, but 'the animal lust of the cripples had turned to evil fire'.⁴⁴⁵ Pilgrim traveller Sun Bear Sun similarly tries to intervene, only to see the lusting cripples attack Little Big Mouse with their 'beaks' and 'snouts', with what remained of their humanity now completely overcome by crude animal instinct. Having devoured her, the whitecripples then carry away 'parts of her never

⁴⁴⁵ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 151.

known to their own imperfect bodies' to 'keep for magic power'.⁴⁴⁶ The blurring of lines between animal, human, and spiritual all play out in this short chapter, while all of the characters are shown to be both multifaceted and incomplete, functioning as a check to crude essentialism that moves beyond the limits imposed by terminal creeds. The insatiable greed of the whitecripples for Little Big Mouse and her Native identity also points to the violent acquisition of Indigenous culture, with the whitecripples destroying what they deemed so desirable so that they could have some small piece of what they desired without ever appreciating the consequences of their actions.

Considering the complexity and intertextual richness of the scene, simplistic readings of violence and terms like 'bestiality' are insufficient in accessing Vizenor's critique of terminal creeds and the violence of dominance. Like the killing of Little Big Mouse, describing the relationship between Lilith Mae and her mongrel lovers as a crude and unnecessary self-indulgent violent spectacle imposes a distinctly Westernised interpretation of events that effectively overrides any attempt at a closer reading that acknowledges different layers of meaning encoded in these scenes and relationships. The reaction at the time of publication was that the author must be 'sick' to have produced such a book, completely missing the fun/comic aspects of the novel.⁴⁴⁷ 'The comic', Vizenor points out with reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*, 'is communal', a shared experience in which the plot should be ridiculous rather than succumb to pity and fear, or in Vizenor's case, victimry.⁴⁴⁸ Survival in the context of Vizenor's work is 'achieved primarily through the vehicles of story and humor' in which the real survivors are those who can adapt, sometimes at tremendous personal

⁴⁴⁶ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 151.

⁴⁴⁷ Purdy, *Writing Indian*, p. 127.

⁴⁴⁸ Purdy, *Writing Indian*, p. 128.

pain, to the changing world around them, and not always successfully.⁴⁴⁹ On this point, it is noteworthy that in his dedication to D'Arcy McNickle in the 1989 edited collection *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian literatures*, Vizenor includes quotes from Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday and Wolfgang Iser, all of which emphasise the necessity of a malleable world view that embraces cultural change. The Silko quote is taken from a scene towards the end of her 1977 breakout novel *Ceremony*, in which Betonie, the principle medicine man of the story, asserts the need for tribal people to 'create new ceremonies' in the face of white European 'power', which similarly demands a commitment to accept a degree of change. Only then can they survive.⁴⁵⁰ N. Scott Momaday is represented via a quote from *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, which echoes Betonie's insistence on change with the metaphor of a journey describing three important truths: 'a landscape that is incomparable, a time that is gone forever, and the human spirit which endures'.⁴⁵¹ Here change and permanence are seen to co-exist as an integral and complementary part of the enduring human spirit, with each reinforcing the other. It is, significantly, an eco-centric perspective that elides antonymic extremes without fixating on any one position. Vizenor then completes his dedication with the quote from Iser, which extracts the reader from the fictive world of the novel altogether and offers instead a poststructuralist perspective on the discursive role of literary representation:

Representation as aesthetic semblance indicates the presence of the inaccessible. Literature reflects life under conditions that are either not available in the empirical world or are denied by it. Consequently literature turns life into a storehouse from which it draws its material in order to stage that which in life appeared to have been sealed off from access.⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁹ Kimberley Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), p. 63.

⁴⁵⁰ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 126.

⁴⁵¹ N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1969), p. 4.

⁴⁵² Wolfgang Iser, qtd in Vizenor, ed, *Narrative Chance*, p. v.

When read as one extended thought, Vizenor's bricolage unites the importance of accepting change as part of one's cultural longevity along with an abiding suspicion of terminal creeds. Connecting these ideas is the curious role of literary representation, partly ceremonial, partly ecstatic, in that it can evoke the special quality of what is unspoken or inaccessible in the empirical world. Vizenor's relationship with the work of Derrida, Lacan, and Baudrillard would suggest that such concrete formulations should be discouraged, but as Elaine Jahner has said, Vizenor has 'sensed the dangers of relativism, of living in a universe of shifting, purely arbitrary signs' with Vizenor then looking to metaphor, as a site of contingent yet evolving diachronic relationships between signs as a way of navigating this difficult metaphysical landscape.⁴⁵³ Observing these significant facets of Vizenor's work pushes the novel beyond the limited critical scope of the literary mainstream and into the field of mythic verism, for which Vizenor offers the following explanation:

Verisimilitude is the appearance of realities; mythic verism is discourse, a critical concordance of narrative voices, and narrative realism that is more than mimesis or a measure of what is believed to be natural in the world.⁴⁵⁴

Vizenor's definition establishes the idea that in mixing myth with a polyphony of narrative voices (multiple points of view expressed as multiple subjective (re)-tellings) mythic verism operates primarily as a discourse, and is therefore open to the addition of other voices, including that of the reader's. This non-hieratic approach similarly embraces the figure of the tribal trickster, whose perverse anti-conventionalist antics frequently inform Vizenor's work. He notes that the 'trickster is real in those who imagine the narrative' and who actively include their voice as one of multiple

⁴⁵³ Elaine Jahner, 'Allies in the Word Wars: Vizenor's Uses of Contemporary Critical Theory', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 9.2 (1985), 64-69 (p. 66).

⁴⁵⁴ Gerald Vizenor, 'Trickster Discourse', p. 190.

‘narrative voices’.⁴⁵⁵ Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the trickster resists signification, often combining obscene acts of violence with humour, often sexual in nature, with the presence of obscene acts destabilising literary conventions and reader’s expectations.⁴⁵⁶ Given trickster’s predilection for obscenity and extreme acts of violence, sometimes directed against himself, it follows that when encountered in the novel such acts should not be taken literally. Like Owens, Vizenor uses violence as a trigger for examining systemic and otherwise invisible modes of violence produced by and in the service of dominant culture. Citing Lacan, Vizenor notes how the French psychoanalyst warned against clinging to the illusion that the ‘signifier answers to the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatsoever,’ a thought which Vizenor continues, noting how ‘The trickster sign wanders between narrative voices and comic chance in oral presentations’.⁴⁵⁷ Vizenor argues that the trickster vacillates between different worlds and different sign-systems, all the time subject to the forces of chance and entropy without articulating any particular fidelity or loyalty other than his own appetites. Vizenor’s choice of the verb ‘wander’ is purposefully nonchalant and noncommittal, since trickster goes wherever his fancy takes him. As I have already suggested, it is then necessary when reading Vizenor to avoid relying on a strictly representational analysis, if for no other reason than he repeatedly and vociferously states his opposition to such an approach.

It is a problem that Kim Blaeser explores in *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*, in which she identifies the significant semiotic and cross-cultural

⁴⁵⁵ Vizenor, ‘Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games’, in *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse in Native American Indian Literatures*, ed. by Gerald Vizenor (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), pp. 187-211(p, 188).

⁴⁵⁶ Velie and Lee, *Four American Indian Literary Masters*, p. 132.

⁴⁵⁷ Vizenor, ‘Trickster Discourse’ p, 189.

obstacles writers like Vizenor face when attempting to transpose, translate, and/or re-imagine aspects of orality into the written mode. Sidner Larson draws a similar conclusion when he writes:

Vizenor's work suggests it is time to investigate the implications of the future to balance the considerations of the past, and he perceives a postmodern form of oral tradition as a necessary element. This emphasis on older forms also suggests that 'survivance' means survival in the most basic sense. If we can accept that the increasingly common ethnic warfare is a glimpse of our own future, we can begin to understand how technology and theory may soon take a backseat to 'survivance' and his conflation of survival and existence in a tribal-style 'we'.⁴⁵⁸

In shifting between written and oral literary traditions as a means of survival in a hostile (dominant) cultural environment, some fundamental quality of the oral tradition is cross fertilised into the written form, leading to a literary style that is uniquely Vizenor's and often quite perplexing to readers unfamiliar with the author's Anishinaabe source material. Vizenor notes that in linking to a tribal past and overriding the narratives of dominance it is necessary to:

Leave the wilderness at last to the hunters and wordies, leave him the cultural inventions of his time, leave him on the reservations he invented for the tribes. Leave him there in peace. Remember me with the animals in the mirrors, remember me at war with the wordies, the sound of our new stories in the cities.⁴⁵⁹

A recurring motif in Vizenor's work, the war on words (word wars) is an attack on the language and narratives of dominance. One side of Vizenor's tricksterish approach to the production and study of literature is that alternatives modes of expression must be found, and that the language of dominance must be ridiculed, rejected, reconstituted at every opportunity. Robert Brener remarks that 'clearly language is corrupted by the propagation of legends which do not jibe with the facts of history, and a corrupt terminology continues the further debasement of historical understanding', meaning that every effort should be made to extricate and destabilise the relationship between

⁴⁵⁸ Larson, pp. 45-46.

⁴⁵⁹ Gerald Vizenor, *Dead Voices: Natural Agonies in the New World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 136.

myth and the assurances of supremacy it offers to dominant culture.⁴⁶⁰ When Vizenor writes the ‘sound of our new stories in the cities’ it is an example of that riposte, of reclaiming conquered space with the power of Indigenous continuance expressed in the form of stories, just as the ‘animals in the mirrors’ offer an alternative means of self-reflection to that of dominant culture, off-setting the human against different shades of non-human/spiritual. Without those stories there would only be silence:

Our death would be silence, but the bear in the mirror was my chance to be remembered in the ear not the eye. The first sight of me as a bear in the mirror was the wild scent. I could see me in the sound and stories of the remembered bear. We were in the ear and not the eye.⁴⁶¹

Considering the significance of language play in Vizenor as a means of combating narratives of dominance and prescriptive readings of Indigeneity, it is important, as Blaeser has said, that Vizenor’s controversial imagery should be read predominantly as a transgressive act. Deployed as an integral part of a larger critical epistemology, this approach seeks to engage the active participation of the reader to riddle through these surprising constructions and frustrate attempts to easily categorise language and the novel proper in terms of genre, style, or canon. Blaeser underlines this point, stating that ‘one of the most frequently criticized aspects of Vizenor’s writing stems from his blatant violation of the “polite” limits of language,’ placing a particular emphasis on his ‘relentless transgression of verbal mores regarding the graphic description of sex and violence’.⁴⁶² And herein lies an important distinction: Vizenor’s literary oeuvre is seldom going to leave the reader unmolested in his or her worldview, and the use of violence and graphic sexual encounters like those depicted in *Bearheart*

⁴⁶⁰ Robert Brener, ‘American Myth: Old, New, Yet Untold’, in *Native American Perspectives on Literature and History*, ed. by Alan R. Velie (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), pp. 63-75 (p. 64).

⁴⁶¹ Vizenor, *Dead Voices*, pp. 136-138.

⁴⁶² Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor*, p. 184.

constitute a significant part of that approach.⁴⁶³ The trickster's pathological disregard for social niceties, institutional expectations, taste, and so on, cohere as a deliberate violation of 'the rules of grammar and the rules of society'.⁴⁶⁴ This includes those rules that describe what constitutes acceptable behaviour, even in the loose morality of a crumbling society, as is the case in *Bearheart*. 'Harsh laughter,' writes Louis Owens, 'is the matrix out of which Vizenor's fiction arises' and it is a literary device employed by Vizenor to purposefully destabilise the cultural coordinates of a given literary setting and a secure footing in any particular extra-textual context.⁴⁶⁵ This forces the reader to imagine alternative situations in which they must struggle to understand the multiple world views that constitute the boundaries of Vizenor's fictional worlds. These features—beguiling intertextual prose-style, boundary-crossing, contextual infidelity—have prompted critics to define Vizenor's work as postmodernist. He retreats from structuralism and advocates a playful distrust and disregard for established institutional rules, such as those prescribed by canon and genre. This is true also for the simulated figure of the Indian.

Elaine Jahner tackles this postmodernist and poststructuralist terrain tracing the influences and trajectories of N. Scott Momaday's work, specifically *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), an unconventional text that blends different artistic forms such as drawing and painting, with poetry, prose, history, myth and legend. Jahner's essay is useful here in understanding the critical and creative climate in which Vizenor's work would emerge. And it is equally important to recognise that Vizenor

⁴⁶³ Clara Sue Kidwell and Alan Velie note that the term 'world view' derives from anthropology, with the added distinction that it 'expresses the idea of a specific way of seeing oneself in relation to all other things in the environment'. Clara Sue Kidwell and Alan Velie, *Native American Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 14.

⁴⁶⁴ Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor*, p. 182.

⁴⁶⁵ Owens, *Other Destinies*, p. 225.

frequently cites Momaday as the breakthrough Native artist. Jahner's argument is that Momaday's novel, and more generally his critical authorial epistemology, seeks to engage with fragmented tribal experience of the past through acts of imaginative performance. Accordingly, Momaday is able to connect aspects of orality that have survived the transition into the written word, matching his experiences of space, landscape, myth and language with historic cultural fragments that survive in the cultural unconsciousness. Engaging with the cultural historiography of twentieth century Mexican poet and author Carlos Fuentes, the Lacanian frameworks of Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism, Jahner argues that through his literary production Momaday is able to function as a 'receiver' or mediator, transcending oral and written literary traditions and creating new dialogic spaces in hybridic modes of literature in which the subject/protagonist is no longer bound by form or canonical expectations. More significantly, in 'remaining so close to personal experiences gained in definite times and place' Momaday 'forges a link with the past that is indisputably part of his own living and responsible creative imagination' in which the 'past becomes instinctively present through these sensually explicit sets of associations that been woven through time'.⁴⁶⁶ It is a bold claim that points to nothing less than a revolutionary creative practice on Momaday's behalf. However, for those who warn that imagination can also be a terminal creed, Robert Silberman offers this additional qualifier:

In the face of imposed world-views-including a racism bolstered by a supposedly 'objective' positivism-the emphasis on imagination is not simply a last-ditch line of defence but a political act, an insistence on spiritual freedom and independence from control, in spite of material oppression.' Expression or assertion of subjectivity then becomes an act of defiance in which one takes back one modus of control. The assertion of subjectivity is a refusal to be simply an object, controlled by others through a kind of analytical imperialism. Too often 'getting serious' or 'being realistic' means simply 'forget your position and accept mine'; to resist such

⁴⁶⁶ Elaine Jahner, 'Metalanguages', in Vizenor, *Narrative Chance*, pp. 155-185 (p. 162).

‘seriousness’ through playfulness is an understandable survival tactic, even if the repeated emphasis on imagination, myth, play and the like inevitably testifies to the considerable power of the opposition.⁴⁶⁷

In formulating her thesis, Jahner points to the common ground that exists between Momaday’s boundary crossing literary hybridity and Carlos Fuentes’s assertion that ‘the future can only be a creative community if it belongs to a shared past’ and as such, establishing continuity with the past through art and fiction is a vital and necessary step.⁴⁶⁸ As writers and artists approach boundaries of cultural and philosophical homogeneity, where different world views come into close contact with each other, they must come to terms with the fact that such world views have distinct limits that had previously remained untested. It is at once shocking and liberating. Responding to Derrida, Jahner notes that:

Simply because border exists, people are compelled to think about it, and that awareness motives a questioning that moves with and through space defined by the linguistic/conceptual terrain in which we exist. Such questioning, more popularly known as deconstruction, moves one closer and closer to the limits of our philosophical homelands.⁴⁶⁹

The refusal to succumb to the limitations of philosophical and/or paradigmatic boundaries of history and culture, conscious/unconscious, symbolic/imaginary, conquest and containment, was and remains a primary motivator behind the new postmodern directions that emerged in twentieth century Native American literature. For Vizenor, this revolutionary sentiment finds expression in his refusal to impose an artificial sense of closure in his fiction, and his willingness to embrace a promiscuous tricksterish approach to the novel more generally. *Bearheart* ends with Proud Cedarfair walking backwards into the fourth world while becoming a totemic bear, an act which twice suspends any attempt at final closure. The figure of the clown is of

⁴⁶⁷ Robert Silberman, ‘Gerald Vizenor and “Harold of Orange”’: from Word Cinemas to Real Cinema’, *American Indian Quarterly*, 9.1 (1985), 4-21 (p. 13).

⁴⁶⁸ Jahner, ‘Metalanguages’ p. 161.

⁴⁶⁹ Jahner, ‘Metalanguages’ p. 169.

vital importance in tribal religious life, in which contrarian clowns do everything backwards, such as walking, riding, and speaking backwards. Velie notes that tribal clowns would say ‘goodbye’ when entering a room, and ‘hello’ when leaving. He goes on to say that such ritualistic inversions and rule-breaking ‘allow tribal members to flout the rules through surrogates’, who were ‘irresponsible, amoral figures who mocked everything sacred with impunity to the delight of the rest of the community which remained obedient and orderly’.⁴⁷⁰ More than just reversing out of one reality and into another, this is then a highly symbolic act which in the words of Double Saint, one of several pilgrims seeking renewal in Vizenor’s apocalyptic novel, aligns the human experience with the those of birds and animals, unifying a world of totemic relationships:

Walking forward but seeing backward. . . Seeing in time what we invent in passing. . . Birds and animals see behind their motion. Place and time lives in them not between them. Place is not an invention of time, place is a state of mind, place is no notched measuring stick from memories here to there . . .⁴⁷¹

Confronting and transcending boundaries of time and place, and moving past them requires an imaginative leap into the cultural unconscious where, as Jahner has said, writers like Momaday and Fuentes can imagine a way past those boundaries, opening the door to the rediscovery of the fragmented experiences of the past and the creation of new Native American literary agency that speaks in concert with the past, present and future. Double Saint is similarly probing the limits of one reality while seeking to transcend to another. Fuentes’s assertion in ‘Remember the Future’, the principle essay cited by Jahner, is that future is partly a dialogue with the past in which the echoes of the past are partly distinguishable in the shadows and artefacts of culture.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ Velie, ‘Gerald Vizenor’s Indian Gothic’, p. 81.

⁴⁷¹ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 238.

⁴⁷² See Carlos Fuentes, ‘Remember the Future’, *Salmagundi*, No. 68/69 (1985-1986), 333-352.

To draw meaning out of those shadows of the past requires the artist to establish an imaginative link. In *The Man Made of Words*, Momaday offers this evocative description of the transcendent power of the human voice and the oral tradition:

In the history of the world nothing has been more powerful than that ancient and irresistible tradition of *vox humana*. That tradition is especially and above all the seat of the imagination, and the imagination is a kind of divine blindness in which we see not with our eyes but with our minds and souls, in which we dream the world and our being into it.⁴⁷³

‘The energy in orality is dialogic. It draws life [...] from movement between words and implied realities’ writes Kimberly Blaeser.⁴⁷⁴ In tribal storytelling traditions the telling of stories is a communal practice that brings the individual back into harmony with the larger group. It is, according to Paula Gunn Allen, a vital tradition that ‘heals itself and the tribal web by adapting to the flow of the present while never relinquishing its connection to the past’ which fits Momaday’s notion of dialogic imagination.⁴⁷⁵ In Native American literature this important function of orality has long been considered a unique qualifying feature, and one that in the view of Gerald Vizenor and Elaine Jahner finds ample footing in the postmodern idiom. Discussing this, Vizenor has said that the active relationship between the listener and the storyteller (in Vizenor’s vernacular *storier*) is primarily that of discourse and noticeably quite different to that of the static binary positions of a speaker who speaks and listener who passively listens. This, he argues, produces a discourse between ‘the listener, the implied author, the narrator, and the events that took place (that are called upon), the characters. . . . We imagine it by telling and by listening’.⁴⁷⁶ It is a view long espoused by luminaries like Momaday and Silko, both of whom have experimented with different fusions of prose styles, voices, and narrative positions in

⁴⁷³ Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, p. 81.

⁴⁷⁴ Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor*, p. 27.

⁴⁷⁵ Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 45.

⁴⁷⁶ Vizenor, qtd in Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor*, p. 25.

The Way to Rainy Mountain and *Storyteller*.⁴⁷⁷ Elsewhere, in Silko's *Ceremony* Betonie, Tayo, and Silko herself all share in a healing ceremony, which as Bril de Ramirez has said, weave together the 'verbal webs that reinscribe the old words, the old stories, the old ways into revisions that provide new ways of seeing, understanding, and interpreting a world for which the old ways are no longer sufficient'.⁴⁷⁸ Together these varied subject positions resist singular or closed categorisations, giving way instead to a pluralistic *active* discourse. Just as Double Saint begins to intersect between a range of different cultural experiences, some Native, some noticeably romantic and transcendent, the path ahead at least seems clear. That is to say that only through an uninhibited dialogue with past experience is it possible to move beyond the boundaries of understanding.

Complicating the monocultural myths of dominance and cultural supremacy are for Vizenor an essential undertaking. Looking to 'real-life incidents from tribal life', Vizenor writes of the 'continuing tragedies wrought by the systemic abuse of word power, and in so doing identifies the contemporary rhetorical disguises of manifest destiny (which he labels 'manifest manners'), and unmasks tribal simulations and other unlikely threats to tribal continuance'.⁴⁷⁹ A steadfast suspicion of institutional knowledge and totality in thought, along with those who place too much stock in the trustworthiness of the archive underlies Vizenor's narrative, and can be found elsewhere in his historical accounts which blend with historical events, lived experiences, myth and metaphor.⁴⁸⁰ Moreover, Vizenor is 'suspicious of the strategies

⁴⁷⁷ Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*; Silko, *Storyteller*.

⁴⁷⁸ Susan Berry Bril de Ramirez, 'Storytellers and Their Listener-Readers in Silko's "Storytelling" and "Storyteller"', *American Indian Quarterly*, 21.3 (1997), 333-357 (p. 333).

⁴⁷⁹ Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor*, p. 11.

⁴⁸⁰ In his reading of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, James Clifford argues that a crucial yet 'submerged' emphasis in Said's thesis is his 'restless suspicion of totality' and it is with a similar distrust of established historical discourse that Vizenor seeks to complicate the familiar established narrative, be it historical, anthropological, sociological, or otherwise. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 273.

of realism as a fictional mode, with its objective, positivist analogues in criticism,' preferring to employ 'an analytical framework that is open rather than authoritative' and in which 'language opens up infinite possibilities to imagine'.⁴⁸¹ Removing the so called disguises of manifest destiny and exposing its violent legacy are very much at the heart of Vizenor's work. To achieve this Vizenor creates fictive landscapes in which violence can operate as a comic, creative, and frequently obscene source of invention that allows the reader to imagine something novel and new that exists outside the parameters of conventional understanding. Kidwell and Velie note that the telling of sacred stories in tribal cultures is a means of 'ordering the world, or restoring it if it has been damaged', and in alluding to Native mythologies and sacred stories Vizenor similarly aligns his novel with the restorative powers of imagic (oral/literary) creation.⁴⁸²

Vizenor consistently seeks to transcend those limitations, rejecting the status of a tragic victim so readily applied to tribal subjectivities and establish new imaginary frontiers in which the Native subject can counter the reifying gaze of dominant US myth and culture. Commenting on Vizenor's lifelong interest in the discursive power of language, metaphor and imagination, Katherine Hume observes that:

Gerald Vizenor writes so frequently about imagination that his comments now seem too familiar to arouse notice. He praises imagination for rewriting history and unpleasant experience and for contributing to tribal 'survivance,' a state that rejects victimization narratives. He upholds imagination as necessary to avoiding 'terminal creeds,' by which he means limited self-definitions of all sorts.⁴⁸³

The ability to imaginatively transcend the revered 'static definitions' and limitations of perverse expansionist allegories and terminal creeds such as manifest destiny, or the exclusionary reductive logic of nationalism and nation building, are for Vizenor

⁴⁸¹Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, p. 169.

⁴⁸² Kidwell and Velie, *Native American Studies*, p. 106.

⁴⁸³ Hume, 'Gerald Vizenor on Imagination', p. 129.

essential in ensuring the long-term good health and diverse continuation of tribal cultures.⁴⁸⁴ That he so frequently writes about the vital creative role of imagination, as Hume suggests, should serve as a useful reminder of what compels Vizenor to confront the symbolic monuments of US colonial and post-colonial dominance. In *The People Named the Chippewa*, he draws a critical distinction between what he sees as the often conflicting epistememes of Indigeneity and academic practice:

Traditional tribal people imagine their social patterns and places on the earth, whereas anthropologists and historians invent tribal cultures and end mythic time. The differences between tribal imagination and social scientific invention are determined in world views: imagination is a state of being, a measure of personal courage; the invention of cultures is a material achievement through objective methodologies. To imagine the world is to be in the world; to invent the world with academic predictions is to separate human experiences from the world, a secular transcendence and denial of chance and mortalities.⁴⁸⁵

Here Vizenor separates the imaginative act of locating oneself ‘in the world’ and the academic practice of inventing the world according to certain ‘academic predictions’ that force artificial points of separation between human experiences, or what he refers to as an act of ‘secular transcendence and a denial of chance and mortalities’. The play of chance should also not be understated, not least because it is a common feature of tribal trickster stories from which Vizenor takes literary cues, and because it embraces the creative energies of imagination and the unlimited possibility offered by it. Blaeser notes how responding to the misrepresentations of history, Vizenor ‘creates a place in historical telling for imagination’ that permits contested visions of history to co-exist, overlap, and conflict with each other.⁴⁸⁶ The anxiety here is that academic practices,

⁴⁸⁴ Owens, *Other Destinies*, p. 231. Alan R. Velie notes that Vizenor ‘borrows the idea of terminal creeds from Eric Hoffer’s remarks about true believers’. See Velie and Lee, *Four American Indian Masters*, p. 130; Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951).

⁴⁸⁵ Gerald Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 27.

⁴⁸⁶ Blaeser, ‘The New “Frontier”’, p. 48.

particularly anthropology and the social sciences, impose restrictions on chance and imagination, seeking instead an unattainable ‘whole truth’.⁴⁸⁷ ‘Social science’ he writes, ‘is never comic, never a chance and never tragic in the end’ but rather ‘strains to discover the “whole truth” or the invented truth in theories and models; these “whole truth” models imposed on tribal experiences are *hypotragedies*, abnormal tragedies in this instance. They have no comic imagination, no artistic intent, no communal signification of mythic verism’.⁴⁸⁸ Again Vizenor’s contention and one shared by Krupat and Owens’s uninterrupted frontier, is that new ethnocritical discourse must seek to obtain a convergence that does not prioritise or place in a hierarchy any one particular cultural experience, or enclose that experience within the limited confines of *identity*. Rather allow for the interplay of multiple discourses and learn to ‘live another form of life’.⁴⁸⁹

The interplay of chance and creativity is illustrated in *Bearheart* in a memorable chapter where the pilgrims encounter a monstrous serial killer known as the Evil Gambler; who wagers the lives of the pilgrims in a complicated game of chance where each player bets the manner of their death against their freedom. As the Evil Gambler explains the rules of the game he offers the following insight into its larger significance:

‘What holds us together now is what held the nation together for two centuries,’ wheezed the evil gambler as he knocked down the four directions. ‘The constitutional government and the political organizations were deceptive games of evil...Personal games became public programs. National games that preserved and protected the causes of evil ...What happens between us when the game ends is what happened to the government when the political games were exposed ... nothing! Nothing but the loss of faith among gambling fools. Nothing but chance. Fools and the games with

⁴⁸⁷ Vizenor, *Narrative Chance*, p. 11.

⁴⁸⁸ Vizenor, *Narrative Chance*, p. 11.

⁴⁸⁹ Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, p. 185; Talal Asad, qtd in Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, p. 185.

their fantasies that living is more than death and evil is less than goodness ... Winning and losing.⁴⁹⁰

The scene plays out as a reminder that chance too can function as a terminal creed, and that traditional stories need to be treated with the same tricksterish impiety as any other institution. Crucially, the traditional story of the trickster and the Evil Gambler survives here in another form – the Monarch of Gasoline, with Proude on hand to win the day and remind the pilgrims that the best they can do to survive in this world is to not play the game according to the rules set down by the Evil Gambler. They must learn to transcend the fixed limitations of the game in order to survive. Velie claims that Vizenor's novel is a reimagining of the melodramatic frontier gothic, and that Proude's victory over the Evil Gambler is a form of showdown, in which the classic racialised binaries of good and evil are reversed, with Proude achieving victory over the Evil Gambler.⁴⁹¹ Earlier, the Evil Gambler explains where he learned his abhorrent skills in administering torture and death:

I learned about slow torture from the government and private business . . . Thousands of people have died the slow death from disfiguring cancers because the government failed to protect the public. The government tortured people and sanctioned killing. There was nothing to hold back the public urge to cause death. The worst part of the government killing people is the indifference. No one even watches or cares. Death comes without knowing or seeing evil. [...] when the government is the teacher there is no struggle with evil, just a slow unnoticed death.⁴⁹²

⁴⁹⁰ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 132. The Evil Gambler's obscene game derives from the popular Chippewa *Plate Game* described by Frances Densmore as a form of dice or game of chance that bears resemblance to the "plum-stone game" of the Plains tribes. The Plate Game calls for the use of a small, shallow wooden bowl and several small wooden figures carved from bone. Players then place the figures in the bowl and perform a toss, the objective being to complete each toss with a number of the figures in an uppermost or standing position. The figurines can be carved into a number of different formations and representations, with each figure counting for a pre-determined number of points. The position of each figure after each toss is also significant. Densmore notes that 'The keeping of the entire score is complicated'. Bets can be made on the odds for standing figures after each toss. See Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Customs* (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1979), p. 115-116. Vizenor tells and re-tells the story of Naanabocho, the trickster and the Evil Gambler multiple times in his literary and academic work, including Gerald Vizenor, ed., *Summer in the Spring: Anishinaabe Lyric Poems and Stories* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), pp. 100-131, and again in his autobiography *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 185-186, having researched traditional Anishinaabe stories throughout his career.

⁴⁹¹ Velie, 'Gerald Vizenor's Indian Gothic', pp. 82-83.

⁴⁹² Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 127.

One explanation for the recurrent violent scenes in the novel is, as Blaeser suggests, that such depictions describe the ‘torture unleashed on tribal people when the gasoline runs out,’ and that through these scenes Vizenor destroys the ‘buffer zone of organized society in the novel’.⁴⁹³ Keady notes that despite his obvious power, the Evil Gambler is entirely ‘enmeshed in his past and the material world’, and his attempt to cling to the power offered by material wealth is thwarted because Proude is willing to risk everything, including the fundamental capitalist terminal creed of materialism.⁴⁹⁴ Accordingly, society must be re-set and life re-ordered according to the primacy of basic survival needs. Within the confines of this newly re-ordered existence the fragile limits of civilisation and the terminal creeds that had previously given it form and structure are utterly obliterated, ‘unmasking all rules’ and encouraging the reader to ‘relinquish their moral props and to reevaluate things on their own merits’.⁴⁹⁵ In his essay ‘Double Others’ Vizenor further interrogates the deeply problematic legacy of colonising rhetoric, quoting Homi K. Bhabha’s uncompromising reading of nation and nationalism. Bhabha claims that ‘nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor’.⁴⁹⁶ It is a provocative statement that echoes Vizenor’s own profound distrust of any crudely nationalistic absolute myth that exclusively promotes the benign supremacy of one dominant culture at the cost of all others. Nation, in the dominant sense of the word, is achieved through expansion, appropriation, and erasure. Early in the novel the narrator notes how:

Nineteenth century frontier politics favoured the interests of the railroads and treekillers and agrarian settlers who were promised ownership of the earth. The

⁴⁹³ Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor*, p. 185.

⁴⁹⁴ Keady, ‘Walking Backwards’, p. 63

⁴⁹⁵ Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor*, p. 185.

⁴⁹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, qtd in Gerald Vizenor, *Shadow Distance: A Gerald Vizenor Reader* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 164.

excitement of the furtrade had passed leaving the tribes to their failing cultural memories and dreams, woodland apostates, while the new voices of the woodland cracked with harsh sounds. Whitemen possessed trees and women and words. Violence eclipsed the solemn promises of woodland tribal celebrants.⁴⁹⁷

The language of dominance and expansion translates the destructive energies of that loss into self-aggrandising metaphors of progress, often with overtures of providence and divine intervention, giving acts of violence a transcendent gloss. More than simply advocating a commitment to the revolutionary promise of unrestrained imagination, however, Vizenor's literary output frequently crosses and violates the tentative borders of fiction and non-fiction, blending reportage with tribal visions; French post-structuralist theory with trickster hermeneutics; and the beguiling potential of mythogenesis (myth-making) and metaphor to generate new signs and meanings with which to destabilise the supposed legitimacy of absolute myth, particularly where it pertains to the systemic and institutionalised violence of US hegemony.

Crashing through these boundaries of certainty/uncertainty is often violent, since, as Žižek reminds us, exposing the limitations of one's guiding ideologies is to confront raw uncertainty and abjection. As discussed in earlier chapters, ideology is a 'fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our "reality"' and masks 'some insupportable, real, impossible kernel'.⁴⁹⁸ The defiant act of challenging the veracity of cherished fantasy-constructs like those enshrined in manifest destiny or the formative myths of the West and frontier, by proposing alternative tribal fantasies, is typically an event accompanied by acts of violence as the dominant, overriding fantasy-construction begins to fall away. As such violence is seen as a necessary although unfortunate aspect of the dialectic, as two or more competing ideologies thought to be antithetical to each other seek to assert their dominance. In that moment

⁴⁹⁷ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (London: Verso, 1989), p. 45.

of their coming together the boundaries separating cultures are briefly revealed. Considering this, it is important to recognise that imaginative intervention is not somehow immune to the influence of terminal creeds, as Robert Silberman has argued:

Imagination can be a terminal creed too, although in the face of imposed world-views-including a racism bolstered by a supposedly 'objective' positivism-the emphasis on imagination is not simply a last-ditch line of defense but a political act, an insistence on spiritual freedom and independence from control, in spite of material oppression. The assertion of subjectivity is a refusal to be simply an object, controlled by others through a kind of analytical imperialism. Too often 'getting serious' or 'being realistic' means simply to 'forget your position and accept mine'; to resist such 'seriousness' through playfulness is an understandable survival tactic, even if the repeated emphasis on imagination, myth, play and the like inevitably testifies to the considerable power of the opposition.⁴⁹⁹

The benefits of imaginative intervention are seen to outweigh any possible side effects, for the simple reason that a playful, tricksterish imagination has the potential to outpace what has gone before and has the additional quality of being to laugh at itself. Vizenor does not offer this as a universal solution, when to do so would contradict the idea of a free imaginative agency. Rather his imaginative worlds can tolerate contradiction.

Institutionalised Violence and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in *Bearheart*

Bearheart offers an illustrative case in point. The novel begins by introducing the idea that violence should not be permitted to overwhelm events, but instead can eventually give way to a much larger discussion: in this instance, the story-within-a-story of *The Heirship Chronicles*, written and then hidden at the Washington D.C. offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) by the titular protagonist Louis Bearheart. The novel opens against the backdrop of the 1972 American Indian Movement (AIM) takeover of the Washington D.C. headquarters of the BIA, which ended with violent scenes and the theft and destruction of many thousands of BIA documents related to on-going

⁴⁹⁹ Silberman, 'Gerald Vizenor and "Harold of Orange"', p. 13.

legal complaints and claims between the BIA, US Federal Government and Native American tribes. The exact details of what happened during the occupation remain a point of contention between the US Federal Government and AIM, but the back-story behind the AIM occupation of the BIA headquarters in Washington, D.C., is important in contextualising the events depicted in the opening chapter of the novel. The BIA occupation was not a pre-planned strategy, but rather a reactive one born out of frustration at the Nixon Government's refusal to engage with AIM and address their grievances, and a series of practical mishaps and miscommunications that saw the protestors under resourced and exhausted at the end of a long, demanding journey. Whilst trying to secure better lodgings in the city, AIM eventually found themselves in the BIA auditorium waiting to learn if their request for an impromptu audience with government representatives had been accepted. As they waited they received notice that no such meeting would take place and that their request had been rejected. According to Russell Means, responding to this the AIM leadership refused to leave the building, and after some oratorical flourishes for which he was famed, Means rechristened the BIA HQ the Native American Embassy. Dennis Banks, however, remembers events slightly differently, and while he does credit Means with an inspirational speech on the second day of the occupation that led to the founding of the American Indian Embassy, his version of events sees a more protracted process whereby the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Louis Bruce, attempted to mediate between the AIM occupiers and his superior, the Assistant Secretary for the Interior, Harrison Loesch, about whom both Banks and Means are emphatically critical in his dealing with the occupation. In any case, responding to growing unrest at the BIA HQ Commissioner Louis Bruce was called as a possible intermediary. When he arrived he was sympathetic to the needs and wishes of the protestors, but by his own admission

had no real power to secure the kind of high level government access AIM demanded. Loesch had also formally rebuked Bruce and forbade him from giving assistance of any kind to AIM. Bruce refused to follow Loesch's orders and a few hours later he was relieved of his position as Commissioner, although he remained to support the occupation.⁵⁰⁰

In the first edition of the novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, a low level BIA administrator, Bearheart, finds himself trapped in his office as AIM activists ransack the premises, at which point he encounters Songidee Migwan - Fearless Feather - a young female activist who discovers Bearheart and sets about admonishing him for what she presumes is his collusion with the BIA.⁵⁰¹ 'We have occupied this building' she proclaims, 'in the name of the tribes and the trail of broken treaties' and 'the government will answer all of our demands or else we have come here to die together for freedom'.⁵⁰² Bearheart, however, is not so easily swayed, dismissing Songidee Migwan as an activist blowhard, ruthlessly teasing her as a fake for wearing plastic regalia and dyed chicken feathers, before he finally reveals the existence of *The Heirship Chronicles*, a work of his own creation, which he has hidden in a secret alcove behind a BIA bulletin board. In the same edition Bearheart goes on to describe the basic plot of *The Heirship Chronicles* during his confrontation with Songidee Migwan:

⁵⁰⁰ Russell Means, *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means with Marvin J. Wolf* (New York: St. Martin Griffin, 1995), p. 231; Dennis Banks, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), p. 134; Paul Chatt Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like A Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996), pp. 149-168. For further discussion of the Trail of Broken Treaties and events at BIA Washington Headquarters see chapter 10 of Vine Deloria, Jr., *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1974).

⁵⁰¹ Gerald Vizenor, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (Saint Paul, MN: Truck Press, 1978), p. x.

⁵⁰² Vizenor, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, p. x.

Cedarfair ha ha ha haaaa. Spiritual and material travels without oil through sex and violence, time and evil. Soaring in sacred cedar memories on the winter solstice from the old desert pueblos [...] Travels through terminal creeds and social deeds escaping from evil into the fourth world where bears speak the secret languages of saints.⁵⁰³

This opening section of the novel represents the only major point of variance across the two editions. In the later edition, Vizenor more directly incorporates this last exchange into a sexual prelude:

Listen, ha ha ha haaaa.

Harder old bear.

Proude Cedarfair and our terminal creeds.

Harder old bear.

Proud Cedarfair and the evil gambler.

Harder old bear.

*Proud Cedarfair on the winter solstice.*⁵⁰⁴

Proude Cedarfair is described as a transcendent character who travels ‘*through* [my emphasis] sex and violence, time and evil’; in other words, he is not inhibited or redirected in his course by the awful events and extreme acts of violence that he encounters. He will not allow himself to be caught in the trap of static thinking, but is able to exceed the limits of victimry and tragedy inscribed upon him by the dominant culture in a moment of ecstatic revelation. He is, in this sense, uniquely equipped to survive in the post-apocalyptic world of the novel, with Bearheart’s story simultaneously operating as a metaphor for change and adaptability in the face of seemingly insurmountable political and ideological opposition. Blaeser notes how in Vizenor’s work survivors share many interchangeable characteristics. The most significant of which is the ability to adjust, ‘examine, question, shift, stretch, bend, change, grow, juggle, balance, and sometimes duck—for surviving doesn’t necessarily

⁵⁰³ Vizenor, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, p. xiv.

⁵⁰⁴ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. xiv.

mean winning’.⁵⁰⁵ Blaeser concludes that ‘Survival in Vizenor’s accounts is not an end but a constant delicate balancing, achieved primarily through the vehicles of story and humor’.⁵⁰⁶ Bearheart and Proude Cedarfair refuse to be classified and defined either by academic practice, militant activism, or the condition of being objectified as a tragic racialised minority.

In the midst of the violent ransacking of the Washington BIA Headquarters, Bearheart initiates a new narrative that transports the reader into the doubly-imagined space – first the BIA occupied office, and then the interior landscape of the story-within-a-story. This narrative shift is given further ecstatic signification by Bearheart’s utterance of the refrain ‘ha ha ha haaaa’ and the ensuing sexual encounter between Bearheart and Songidee Migwan, emphasising the moment of creative release and intersubjective union.⁵⁰⁷ According to Frances Densmore, the refrain ‘ha ha ha haaaa’ can be traced to the *midé* tradition, whereas Vizenor notes that the expression ‘*he hi hi hi*, is the sound of the feeling of the power of the sacred spirit of the *midewiwin*. A *midewiwin* song is completed with the syllables *ho ho ho ho*’.⁵⁰⁸ As a form of restorative medicine, the origin of the *midewiwin* as described as a transformative act in which a dead child is resurrected by the healing intervention of a *gichimakwa*, or great bear, who performs a ritualistic healing song that ends with the refrain ‘*whay, ho, ho ho,*’ repeated four times, at which point the deceased child quivers and returns to life.⁵⁰⁹ Bearheart’s use of this chant, echoed throughout the novel in various formulations, reminds the reader

⁵⁰⁵ Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor*, p. 63.

⁵⁰⁶ Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor*, p. 63.

⁵⁰⁷ Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. xiv.

⁵⁰⁸ Vizenor, *Summer in the Spring*, p. 147. Densmore defines ‘the principle idea of the Midewiwin is that life is prolonged by right living, and by the use of herbs which are intended for this purpose by the Mide manido’, in Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, p. 87. Vizenor offers a more detailed account of the Midewiwin origin story in *Summer in the Spring*, pp. 89-92.

⁵⁰⁹ Vizenor, *Summer in the Spring*, p. 91.

that Bearheart is engaged in a moment of both creation and restoration, culminating in the shift to the story-within-a-story.

Central to the linguistic and physical exchange between Bearheart and Songidee Migwan is the need to acknowledge the reality of words, and how rather than destroying BIA records, Songidee Migwan and her peers should be interrogating the language of dominance – the very foundation of what Vizenor calls the Word Wars. Accordingly, physical violence and militant confrontation is all for naught if the language of dominance and the ideologies that underpin that lexicon are not also challenged and uprooted. In *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*, Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior recall how ‘the looting and trashing [of the BIA building] was so widespread, so deliberate, that it pointed to a hatred on the part of many Indians for the documents; records that must be destroyed because of what they and the building that housed them represented’.⁵¹⁰ In the final days of the occupation Bobbie Kilberg, a White House aide who had acted as a go-between during the occupation, spotted an object that stood out amongst the debris. It was a typewriter that, unlike most of the office equipment on display, had not been smashed to pieces or otherwise daubed with paint. Instead ‘someone had carefully twisted each of the typewriter’s forty-four keys beyond repair’.⁵¹¹ It was an act of considered vandalism that signified a deliberate ‘consuming’ anger.⁵¹² She would later call it ‘Patient Fury’ in an article for the *Washington Post*.⁵¹³ Words - the power of

⁵¹⁰ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 162.

⁵¹¹ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 166-167.

⁵¹² Russell Means recalls a similar incident at the BIA offices where upon entering the Commissioner’s top floor office he was confronted with the scene of an Indian elder holding axe, having recently chopped the Commissioner’s mahogany desk in half. According to Means the man ‘just looked up at me and smiled,’ before confessing that he had been ‘waiting all my life to do this’. Russell Means, qtd in Rex Weyler, *Blood of the Land: The Government and Corporate War Against First Nations* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1992), p. 51.

⁵¹³ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 167.

words to control and destroy, and conversely to liberate and inspire – are targeted in each twisted key of the BIA typewriter, at once a symbol for the invisible hand of creeping bureaucratic violence, and ironically enough, also a means of opposing it. The deliberate mutilation of the keys is a powerful metaphor for institutional violence, and the frustrations of those who attempt to challenge it. The typewriter, so often the iconic yet over overlooked mechanism of the everyday bureaucratic process is singled out for a deliberate, patient attack. Like the unidentified person or persons who carefully rendered the typewriter useless, Songidee Migwan's anger is targeted at the various organs of government, through which it exercises its power. It is precisely against this directional violence that Bearheart takes aim, compelling him to challenge Songidee Migwan's reactionary militancy.

In his analysis of this section of the novel Chris B. Teuton argues that the bureaucratic violence that the BIA had imposed upon Native people inspired the looting and wanton destruction of the BIA building.⁵¹⁴ Unable to draw the Nixon government into a meaningful debate about Indigenous issues, the AIM activists targeted whatever symbols of government authority that they could. Maps of the US hanging in the offices were redrawn to show the entirety of North America as a unified swathe of Indian land, just as the BIA building itself was renamed the American Indian Embassy by the activists. Reinscribing the names and designations of Federal property can also be seen as the inverse of the broken typewriter; one a palimpsest invigorated as a symbol of Native political presence and sovereignty, the other a strident image that seeks to articulate a mass of conflicting ideas and frustrations. Kim Blaeser similarly claims that Vizenor chooses to highlight the stupidity of the destruction of

⁵¹⁴ Christopher B. Teuton, *Deep Waters: The Textual Continuum in American Indian Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), p. 96.

BIA property, having become frustrated by AIM's apparent willingness to embrace the simulated or invented clichés of Indian (mis)representation, as evidenced by Bearheart's disdain for Songidee Migwan's simulated attire.⁵¹⁵ Taking Songidee Migwan into the second imaginative world of *The Heirship Chronicles* is meant to serve as a lesson, while neatly foreshadowing the end of the novel where Proude Cedarfair and Inawa Biwide walk backwards into the fourth world and into a new realm of creative potentialities. Bearheart's point is that unless the language of domination is addressed, the same ideological problems will persist, regardless of how many BIA documents are burned or typewriters are destroyed. Only by affecting a change in the language can systemic change be achieved. Where the AIM occupation ended with the poignant image of a meticulously tortured typewriter, the same occupation in *Bearheart* ends with a new text, a new story-within-a-story that transports the reader into an imaginative world where founding myths and language of dominance can be tested.

However, Vizenor's creative response to terminal creeds and institutionalised violence is not restricted to his fiction. Looking to earlier events that helped shape Vizenor's literary output while working as a 'muckraking political journalist' and Native advocate in the 1960s and 70s, his fascination and anger with institutional prejudice and violence is quite clear, and particularly evident in his response to the cases of Jake White, Thomas White Hawk, and Cora Katherine Sheppo.⁵¹⁶ Vizenor's innovative examination of these cases offer an illustrative prologue to what will follow

⁵¹⁵ Dennis Banks and Russell Means were both non-traditional, and for a time in their early part of their evolution into AIM activists and before AIM came into existence, neither embraced a traditional lifestyle. The beads, bangles, eagle bones, and dyed turkey feathers were all designed to signify savagery, keying into the fictions and mythologies produced by a dominant culture. In other words they embraced an aesthetic set of prescribed values that in Vizenor's mind represented a major factor in the problems that plagued the lives of Native people. Smith and Warrior, *Like A Hurricane*, pp. 149-168.

⁵¹⁶ Louis Owens, afterword in Vizenor, *Bearheart*, p. 247.

in his later literary work, in which the mythic infrastructure of a dominant US culture can be exposed as the extension of an often harmful, supremacist and largely exclusionary ideology.

Institutionalised Violence in the Case of Thomas White Hawk

Early in his career while reporting for the *Minneapolis Tribune*, Vizenor encountered several disturbing cases involving young Native men and women that similarly tested the limits of understanding in confronting tragic circumstances. Most notable are the cases involving the death of Dane Michael White, a thirteen-year-old tribal runaway who was found hanged in his cell after being held in police custody for six weeks on a ‘nominal charge of public school truancy’, and that of Thomas White Hawk, who was initially sentenced to death following a conviction for rape and premeditated murder, despite evidence of diminished responsibility and long-term mental health issues.⁵¹⁷ Elsewhere Vizenor has responded to the case of Cora Katherine Sheppo, who murdered her infant grandson believing him to be possessed by demons, and who would spend what remained of her life in a mental health institution after she was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Connecting these cases are highly visible acts of violence – murder, rape, sexual abuse, deprivation, neglect - that having passed through Vizenor’s creative process draw attention to other, hitherto underexposed discourses centering on experiences of systemic and institutional violence that had remained unspeakable outside of Native communities.

A significant case is that of Thomas White Hawk, both in terms of Vizenor’s long-term association with the case, and its formative influence in shaping Vizenor’s profound suspicion of institutionalised authority and absolute myth. It is a well

⁵¹⁷ Gerald Vizenor, *Literary Chance: Essays on Native American Survivance* (València: Universitat de València, 2007), p. 87.

documented case and one that has been a subject of considerable interest amongst scholars concerned with Vizenor's development as an author and literary theorist.⁵¹⁸ Such is the significance of the White Hawk case that Vizenor authored a pamphlet circulated at the time calling for further inquiry into the troubled life of the defendant and an examination of the reasons given for the handing down of such an extreme sentence, especially considering White Hawk's mental health record and troubled past. This pamphlet would later form the basis of chapters detailing the case in *Crossbloods: Bone Courts, Bingo, and Other Reports* (1976), and *Word Arrows: Indians and Whites in the New Fur Trade* (1978), and appears again in Vizenor's autobiography *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors* (1990), as well as a number of other less prominent instances throughout his literary and academic work. That Vizenor returns to the story of Thomas White Hawk throughout his career attests not only to his abiding interest and commitment to the case, but also to its significance as an illustrative example of historic miscarriages of justice in dealings with Native Americans, and a reluctance on behalf of the dominant culture to recognise the spectre of unspoken institutionalised violence in the lives of those most affected by it. For Arnold Krupat, Robert Silberman and A. Robert Lee it represents a striking example of how Vizenor's professional life, his politics and his characteristic rebelliousness complement a distinct literary style that is difficult to categorise as strictly fiction or non-fiction, foreshadowing his later fascination with the anti-representational possibilities offered by the postmodern novel.⁵¹⁹ It is also a trial that clearly affected Vizenor at an important point in his development as a major mixedblood and Native

⁵¹⁸ See Rodney Simard 'Coffee House Discourse', *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 5.3 (1993), 1-2 (p. 1); Deborah Madsen, *Understanding Gerald Vizenor* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), pp. 58-59.

⁵¹⁹ See Krupat, *Red Matters*; A. Robert Lee, ed., *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald Vizenor* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 2000).

American voice in the late 1960s, and continues to serve as an example of how Vizenor's work strives to step outside of institutional limitations and occupy the discursive zone of trickster, where institutional limitations and prejudices can at least be identified if not challenged through acts of creative intervention and interference.

Thomas White Hawk was a nineteen year old Dakota man and pre-med student sentenced to die in the electric chair for the March 1967 killing of James A. Yeado, and the rape of his wife.⁵²⁰ Yeado was a white jeweller from Vermillion. It might seem like a fairly open-and-shut case of 'murder in post colonial America' in which two young men planned to kidnap and rob a wealthy jeweller at gun point, with terrible and tragic consequences.⁵²¹ However, through Vizenor's re-telling of the hearing and the imaginative narratorial intervention, of the kind that characterises the revised accounts found in Vizenor's *Crossbloods: Bone Courts, Bingo, and Other Reports* (1976) and *Wordarrows: Indians and Whites in the New Fur Trade* (1978), this apparently open-and-shut case grows in complexity. Judicial limitations were tested and negligent oversights highlighted in which the fierce ironies of White Hawk's life are teased to the surface so that they might be included in the public record. According to the account given by White Hawk at the time of sentencing, given his mental state at the time when he committed the murder, Yeado's death should be considered accidental. However, despite claims that he had not been in his right mind at the time of the murder, the prosecution quickly established a case of premeditated murder. His assumed guilt and the ensuing death sentence had a swift formality that had only been briefly challenged earlier in the proceedings when White Hawk submitted a plea of

⁵²⁰ Vizenor provides a detailed account of events surrounding the sentencing of Thomas White Hawk in *Crossbloods: Bone Courts, Bingo, and Other Reports* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), pp. 101-155.

⁵²¹ Lee, *Loosening the Seams*, p. 251.

not guilty by reason of insanity, which he later withdrew. His accomplice in the crime, William Winford Stands, was eventually charged with the lesser crime of grand larceny despite White Hawk's claims of his complicity. Vizenor's interest, however, focused on the failure of the court and other public institutions called by the prosecution to give White Hawk a fair trial, properly examine his mental health, and see him as something other than a homicidal Indian.⁵²²

How readers respond when confronted with tragedy or acts of shocking violence can provide a valuable opportunity to gauge not only what passes as the normative and socially sanctioned response, but also to examine the timeline of causation leading up to the moment of tragic revelation. To acknowledge something as tragic then is to locate it somewhere close to the limit of what would normally be expected or tolerated, as something uniquely terrible that requires a special effort on behalf of the reader or observer to comprehend it. To move beyond that outer boundary and transcend the limits of understanding becomes a wilful act of imagination. When actions go beyond what can be contained within the normative parameters prescribed by the dominant institutions of society, placing tremendous pressure on the reader to comprehend and then qualify shifting moral abstractions and supposedly concrete signs like *Indian* or *America*, alternative or previously obscured discourses can begin to emerge. Given the striking efficiency with which violent, often tragic events can expose the raw outer limits of certain social and institutional frameworks, those events can prove useful in tracing those out boundaries so that they may be crossed or interrogated. This, in turn, demonstrates the limits of human resistance to authoritarian

⁵²² Vizenor, *Crossbloods*, p. 143.

power offering a rare glimpse at the underlying power structures that govern dominant social institutions such as law, medicine, education, and public welfare.

The central argument of this thesis has followed a similar path, arguing that literary violence can operate at multiple discursive levels, including that of discourse, and therefore is not restricted simply to a structural or prescriptive role as something that takes place merely to help the narrative along, but represents an important juncture between binaries of *spoken/unspoken*, *explicable/inexplicable*, *visible/invisible* and *savage/civilised*. The case of Thomas White Hawk is then significant for many reasons, not least because it provides a snapshot of Vizenor's critical approach to violence guided by a pronounced suspicion of institutional authority and power. The interplay of a tricksterish omniscient narrator, who returns throughout his work with journalistic, academic and advocate personae, produces a retelling of the story using the accounts and court records of the time that catches the court in an act of injustice, in the same moment that it is seeking justice for James Yeado and his wife. It does not, however, excuse the crimes committed, nor does it diminish the suffering of White Hawk's victims, but it does demonstrate how institutionalised systemic violence – in this instance the underlying prejudice hardwired into the dominant institutions of the day – must be identified and challenged if the Native subject is to receive a fair trial. This is clearly something quite different from journalism or fiction. Winona Stevenson draws together Vizenor's various responses to the case under the collective title of 'advocacy literature' in that it 'seeks to sway public opinion against the execution of Thomas White Hawk'.⁵²³ In interview Vizenor has claimed that his purpose at the time was primarily to oppose capital punishment on moral-humanist grounds, and to 'save

⁵²³Winona Stevenson, 'Suppressive Narrator and Multiple Narratees in Gerald Vizenor's "Thomas White Hawk"', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Series 2, 5.3 (1993), 36-42 (p. 36).

this kid's life,' adding, 'it is part of the [American Civil Liberties Union] philosophy that the state doesn't have the right, but the state has no right to kill any Indian and never has for any reason, and this is a constitutional issue. My interest was to show this, not to put myself in as the noble rescuer'.⁵²⁴ Vizenor's activism is one that does not seek to celebrate itself, but rather facilitate and expose systemic injustices, a position which he extends to his fiction.

As troubling as these cases are, however, Vizenor's point is that they should not be reduced to tragic stand-alone events, but should be read as symptomatic of historic and on-going institutional violence and habitual discrimination. Through his writing, and in particular the imaginative intervention of his narrator, who is able to explicate the 'complex and extreme personal history and actions of Thomas White Hawk', Vizenor seeks to re-locate these cases in a larger, more inclusive context that acknowledges historic instances of routine institutional bias and systemic violence exercised against Native American and other marginalised groups.⁵²⁵ When approached in this way, the appalling tragedy that came to surround the lives of Dane Michael White and Thomas White Hawk can begin to trace the outer ideological limits of dominant social, legal, and economic discourse. If left untested and without the benefit of additional contextual information, the anxiety is that cases like these will only reinforce prevailing institutional prejudices. When these and similar cases came to trial, be it in a court of law or more speculatively in the court of public opinion, they were typically framed within the purview of the dominant culture which had the effect of filtering out information that might challenge deeply held essentialised convictions concerning the Native subject that had been codified into legal practice. It is a problem

⁵²⁴ Gerald Vizenor, "'I Defy Analysis": A Conversation with Gerald Vizenor', *Studies in American Indian Literatures, Series 2*, 5.3 (1993), 43-51 (p. 44).

⁵²⁵ Stevenson, 'Suppressive Narrator and Multiple Narratees', p. 36.

that Vine Deloria, Jr. acknowledges when he writes that ‘everywhere an Indian turns he is deluged with offers of assistance’ but ‘rarely does anyone ask an Indian what he thinks about the modern world’.⁵²⁶ In the case of Thomas White Hawk his life and experiences were, at least initially, similarly left unexamined.

Tragic qualities of events like these and the violence they engender, whether lifted directly from reality or described in a work of fiction, can provide a valuable opportunity to probe the limits of meaning and understanding, be that the abstract limit of public morality, or the institutional exercise of law, public welfare, education and, in the case of Thomas White Hawk, psychiatric diagnosis. On a larger scale, such an approach also interrogates the colonial mindset. After the guilty verdict against White Hawk was announced, carrying with it a sentence of death, Vizenor vociferously supported a successful campaign to commute the death sentence and challenge the court’s treatment of the accused. Importantly, the argument for commutation centred on a failure to address serious long-term mental health issues that had afflicted White Hawk since early adolescence, and which had been given short shrift by mental health professionals deemed to have little to no experience working with Native Americans. This lack of a nuanced understanding of Native American life and culture, as well as the manifold social issues facing Native American youth in mid-twentieth century America, was presented on appeal as amounting to incompetency and oversight. In addition to this there was also a lingering suspicion that White Hawk’s confession had been coerced while in police custody and a legal debate as to whether the sentence of

⁵²⁶ Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins*, p. 225.

death was ‘more severe than was proper under the law’.⁵²⁷ When taken together there was sufficient grounds to launch an appeal and challenge the death sentence.

The case was characterised by a cold disregard for contextual information that might have helped humanize White Hawk in the eyes of the jury, possibly leading to a more balanced verdict in lieu of capital punishment.⁵²⁸ The rejection and notable absence of that information is significant since it supports the argument put forward at the time of appeal that Native American voices and sociohistorical experiences had been largely omitted in the case of White Hawk. By treating the case of Thomas White Hawk as a standalone tragedy, and by refusing to broaden the examination to consider significant contextual details from his life, Vizenor’s charge is that those experiences are effectively rendered invisible when they might offer some form of explanation as to how a bright, pre-medical student who had been held up as an example of a ‘good’ Indian making his way in white society, should suddenly find himself accused of rape and first degree murder.

Rather than asserting unchecked opinion in his retelling of the White Hawk case as recounted in *Crossbloods*, Vizenor’s narratorial omniscience mixes reportage, flashback, and the imagined interior monologue of White Hawk with comments given by the judge and local press. It is an imaginative act that succeeds in creating a hybridic experiment in prose in which pertinent elements of White Hawk’s life that had previously been omitted from the court proceedings could be heard in a more

⁵²⁷ Gerald Vizenor, *Wordarrows: Indians and Whites in the New Fur Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), p. 150.

⁵²⁸ Thomas James White Hawk, Appellant, v. Herman Solem, Warden, South Dakota State Penitentiary, Appellee, 693 F.2d 825 (8th Cir. 1982), U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit - 693 F.2d 825 (8th Cir. 1982), Submitted Sept. 16, 1982. Decided Dec. 3, 1982.
<<http://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/693/825/230541/>> [accessed 27th March 2015].

meaningful context, and delivered with a tricksterish journalistic style.⁵²⁹ ‘So much of the Native world is unnameable. Violence, silence, and the unnameable’, writes Vizenor, commenting on the case and the need to counter that silence with provocative statements of enduring presence and cultural vitality.⁵³⁰ Beyond this, however, and perhaps more importantly, the work illustrates the need for foremost institutions to recognise within themselves a supremacist and exclusionary logic that marks the outer boundary of its influence in the notable absence of Other voices and experiences. For as Toni Morrison has said, ‘certain absences are so stressed [that] they arrest us with their intentionality and purpose, like neighbourhoods that are defined by the population held away from them’.⁵³¹ The notable absence and even dismissal of important contextual details about White Hawk’s case, coupled with the court’s willingness to hand down a sentence that went beyond what would have typically been expected under state law, provides a sobering glance at the self-regulating, violent logic of dominant institutions.

Vizenor’s imaginative interventions echo the tragic endgame threatening to overwhelm Native presence in a famous quote from Momaday that Vizenor often cites: ‘we are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. [...] The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined’.⁵³² The tragedy to which Momaday alludes is here re-negotiated, with Vizenor’s narrator

⁵²⁹Stevenson, p. 36; A. Robert Lee notes that ‘As with all of his writing, one might call him [Vizenor] an experimentalist’ suggesting that the reader should be continually wary of shifts in tone and style that seek to *perform* the role of non-fiction or reportage. Elizabeth Blair makes a similar point, commenting how Vizenor begins *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, *The Heirs of Columbus* and *The Trickster of Liberty* with quotes from Octavio Paz, Milan Kundera and Julia Kristeva, all of which point towards an enduring fascination with the possibilities offered by postmodern modes of writing, in which language supersedes reality, making it a particularly useful ally when seeking to disrupt attempts to confine Native subjectivities within the language of dominance. See Lee, *Loosening the Seams*, p. 64; Elizabeth Blair, ‘Text as Trickster: Postmodern Language Games in Gerald Vizenor’s *Bearheart*’, *MELUS*, 20.4 (1995), 75-90 (pp. 76).

⁵³⁰ Vizenor, qtd in Madsen, *Understanding Gerald Vizenor*, p. 58.

⁵³¹ Toni Morrison qtd in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 284.

⁵³² N. Scott Momaday, qtd in Vizenor, *Word Arrows*, p. vi.

intervening to ensure that White Hawk does not go unimagined and unacknowledged. Momaday is, of course, referring in a much more general sense to the importance of literary and artistic production in the imagining and re-imagining of Native subjectivities, cultures and experiences, but in the case of White Hawk that act of imaginative intervention assumes a vital role in explicating a life that had been reduced in the collective mind of the court to one of wasted potential and crude racial stereotypes. Observing this development in Vizenor's writing, Silberman notes that:

Vizenor's early work was marked by a split arising from a journalistic style that seemed uncomfortable with its supposed neutrality, both because of its passion and because Vizenor's voice seemed unable to attune itself to the bland formulations of journalistic 'objectivity'; it was always being intruded upon-in wonderful ways-by a sensitive, poetic strain that shaped itself into images, by a passionate, polemical side that led to fierce ironies, slashing statements.⁵³³

That Vizenor would support White Hawk's case given the gravity of the crime seems odd, were it not for his desire to draw attention to socio-historical circumstances that had irrecoverably shaped White Hawk's formative years. Elsewhere, A. Robert Lee offers a summary of Vizenor's interest in the case, noting that 'the story of Thomas White Hawk is made compelling, not because White Hawk did not commit the crime, but because he did'.⁵³⁴ Vizenor does not attempt to excuse the heinous nature of the crime, but in his role of 'narrative mediator' he allows the multiple different discourses that have come together in the figure of Thomas White Hawk to be made manifest to the larger jury of his readership.⁵³⁵ It is an attempt to not only humanise White Hawk and resist the lazy monikers of *savage* and *crazy Indian* propounded by local media, but to show that White Hawk was a victim of systemic and institutionalised violence

⁵³³ Silberman, 'Gerald Vizenor and "Harold of Orange"', p. 14.

⁵³⁴ Lee, *Loosening the Seams*, p. 251.

⁵³⁵ Juana Maria Rodriguez, 'Gerald Vizenor's Shadow Plays: Narrative Mediations and Multiplicities of Power', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, series 2, 5.3 (1993), 23-30 (p. 23).

that had followed him throughout his life, culminating in the violent denouement of Thursday 23rd March 1967.

In *Wordarrows* Vizenor similarly extends the White Hawk case to form part of a series of reported experiences in the second half of the book, counterbalancing an opening section that deals with stories and literary interventions like those seen in *Crossbloods*, as well as personal anecdote lifted from his personal and professional life. Again, imaginative intervention, fiction and reportage collude and collide, producing a hybridic style that places Native voices on an equal footing to those of the dominant legal order. Recalling White Hawk's appeal, Vizenor describes the testimony given by Ronald Libertus who, representing 'various urban tribal organizations', spoke of the endemic 'racial inequities in the legal system' and proclaimed that 'we should never under any circumstances execute a minority person' given the inhumane excesses of capital punishment.⁵³⁶ Later, Clement Beaulieu, in this instance operating as Vizenor's journalistic *Minneapolis Tribune* persona, explains that:

Tom [White Hawk] was involved in a conflict of his own identity, his own unconscious life of Indian identity and his pursuit and involvement in the demands and expectations of the dominant white society [...] I saw it in myself. I saw it in many other Indian people and felt that it was a precedent that I wanted to address my energy to in terms of writing, that is, I wanted to make a statement that a great many Indian people in this country suffer from this same conflict, in the sense of cultural schizophrenia. . . . The very society which creates the sickness in which Indians have had to live. . . . is the very society which now every day becomes the doctor. . . . a man cannot be condemned by an institution of that dominant culture which has actually led to the problems he has to live with. . . .⁵³⁷

This is not an attempt to generate sympathy for a murderer, but to recognise that White Hawk's crimes form part of a much more complex system of institutional violence that had proved instrumental in formulating both a guilty verdict and the eventual

⁵³⁶ Vizenor, *Wordarrows*, p. 153

⁵³⁷ Vizenor, *Wordarrows*, p. 154.

commutation of the death sentence. As Beaulieu says, ‘a man cannot be condemned by an institution of that dominant culture which has actually led to the problems he has to live with’ drawing the reader’s attention to White Hawk’s confused cultural identity and systemic institutional prejudice. The highly emotional complaint running through these accounts is that institutions of the dominant culture are administered in such a way that Native subjectivities and experiences are routinely subjugated, and that legal recourse is similarly inhibited at the point of appeal if the self-regulating mechanisms of those institutions are permitted to go unchecked. White Hawk’s case is then read as symptomatic of a pervasive institutional ‘sickness’, born of a dominant culture and supremacist ideology.

Juana Maria Rodriguez, one of Vizenor’s former students, summarises the diverse institutional coordinates of White Hawk’s life:

The texts that comprise the case of Thomas White Hawk can be explored in several ways, such as the means by which the multiple subject of White Hawk acts, reacts, and is acted upon within an interwoven system of power relations. Power within this context consists of both individual and institutional power. In this case, institutional power extends to encompass the reservation, the courts, fosterage and guardian systems, educational systems, prisons, churches, families, and psychiatric institutions. Also important are the ways in which the story of this multiple subject is written, negotiated, and inscribed by a multitude of discursive systems, including psychiatry, law, feminism, and an American Indian national liberation movement, as well as the ways in which different narrative styles Vizenor employs illuminate and shadow elements of the story.⁵³⁸

The institutions of fosterage, education, prison, and so on, have all come to envelop and define White Hawk’s life, and then at the time of his sentencing White Hawk once again found himself defined by psychiatric and legal institutions which suppressed his own unique subjectivity in favour of a more uniform institutional definition. Vizenor

⁵³⁸ Rodriguez, ‘Gerald Vizenor’s Shadow Plays’, pp. 23-30.

then used the tragic and violent circumstances surrounding the case to test the limits of those definitions, revealing a troubling but familiar pattern.⁵³⁹

The initial psychiatric assessment, for instance, recorded that White Hawk suffered from a ‘personality disorder’ of a vague ‘passive aggressive type,’ which is then loosely defined as a ‘tendency to be dependent [...] in a sense that they feel that other people should do everything for them,’ adding that ‘this has nothing to do really with our social standards or *our cultural norms*’.⁵⁴⁰ Vizenor’s use of italics emphasise the collective and exclusionary pronoun phrase ‘our cultural norms’ which in its original usage located White Hawk as Other and a cultural outsider. The racist stereotype of the lazy, ‘dependent’ Indian can also be detected in the medical diagnosis. In italicising the speaker’s report, Vizenor’s omniscient narrator provocatively intervenes in the legal proceedings to highlight an instance of institutional bias that went unchallenged at the time.⁵⁴¹ It is a stark reminder of the pervasive influence of power as it operates across and through the authority invested in public institutions and at the point where different institutions interconnect, with each compounding a gross oversight that in the case of Thomas White Hawk would initially send him to Death Row.

The oversight of the judiciary system captured in the White Hawk case was all too familiar to those like Vizenor who had worked as an advocate for Native Rights,

⁵³⁹ Wilcomb E. Washburn notes how the testimony of Harry Saslow, a clinical psychologist at the Albuquerque Boarding School, heard before the Robert Kennedy subcommittee on Indian Education in 1968, spoke of the ‘depersonalization and impersonalization of Indian boarding schools’ of a kind similar to what was experienced by Thomas White Hawk. In particular, he found that depression was the ‘most pervasive problem amongst students. Native children passing through such institutions were, in Saslow’s judgement, felt to be adversely affected by an insidious and contradictory education policy that outwardly sought to make their way in the world and yet offers no meaningful ‘attractions’ or ‘provision’ beyond depriving Native children of traditional cultures that might sustain them. The Native child is then ‘caught between two cultures and knows not enough about either’. See Washburn, pp. 220-223.

⁵⁴⁰ Vizenor, *Crossbloods*, pp. 130-131.

⁵⁴¹ Rodriguez, ‘Gerald Vizenor’s Shadow Plays’, pp. 23-30.

but to those who had supported the death sentence the successful appeal seemed like an injustice. This disparity in opinion was in large part the crux of the problem faced by those arguing against the death penalty in the White Hawk case. Important contextual details had been left out, or left unnamed as Vizenor suggests, overwhelmed by the abhorrent violence of the crime. Raised in foster care, and shunted between institutions, Vizenor's claim is that White Hawk was, from an early age, caught between conflicting Native, non-Native and some vehemently anti-Native worlds, leading to a schizophrenic break where a young Thomas White Hawk was unable to locate himself within one culture or another. He was, in Vizenor's language, afflicted by the condition of being a 'White Indian' and whose formative years had been marked by an attempt to naturalise him as white Euramerican, echoing the colonising policies of termination and correctional education that featured so prominently in White Hawk's immediate past.

Vizenor's use of the term 'schizophrenia' to describe such a division can be traced back to Foucault, who Vizenor often quotes on the subject of power and the cultural construction of schizophrenia. Writing about his experience working as an orderly at Homewood Hospital, Vizenor quotes this from Foucault's *Mental Illness and Psychology*:

The contemporary world makes schizophrenia possible, not because events render it inhuman and abstract, but because our culture reads the world in such a way that man himself cannot recognize himself in it [...] Only the real conflict of the conditions of existence may serve as a structural model for the paradoxes of the schizophrenic world.⁵⁴²

It is a sentiment at work in Vizenor's criticism of White Hawk's death sentence. Revisiting Vizenor's original essay written in defence of White Hawk 'Why Must

⁵⁴² Vizenor, *Interior Landscapes*, p. 181.

Thomas White Hawk Die?’ Krupat notes that having successfully—or so it seemed—passed through several institutions that had sought to create in Thomas White Hawk a model Indian, his crime only served to emphasise the extent to which, in Vizenor’s words, he had become a ‘cultural schizophrenic’ whose unconscious was a ‘burden of the past’.⁵⁴³ White Hawk’s personal experience then becomes a ‘microcosm of the larger historical Native American experience’ and one that resonated with advocates like Vizenor who had seen the effects of the same policies and institutional violence many times before.⁵⁴⁴ In reading the case of Thomas White Hawk, both A. Robert Lee and Juana Maria Rodriguez point to Foucault’s assertion that power is not a ‘general system or domination exerted by one group over another’, rather it is multifaceted and multi-relational, a ‘complex strategical situation in a particular society’ that operates across groups, sometimes in open defiance of the perceived wisdom of the time, and therefore the life experiences of White Hawk can and should be read as prologue and not merely dismissed as anecdote without legal bearing.⁵⁴⁵ In Vizenor, those hidden seams of institutional power need to be teased to the surface, whether in the form of a biased but institutionally legitimate psychiatric report, or in the language of dominance and the day-to-day language of the court. What is not being said is here essential in the defence of Thomas White Hawk.

Vizenor’s reaction to the White Hawk case finds similar expression in his account of the trial of Cora Katherine Sheppo in *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories* (1984). In a chapter entitled ‘The Shaman and Terminal Creeds’ Vizenor provides an account of Cora Katherine Sheppo, a forty-two year-old

⁵⁴³ Krupat, *Red Matters*, p. 106; Vizenor, cited in Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters*, p. 106

⁵⁴⁴ Stevenson, ‘Suppressive Narrator’, p. 38.

⁵⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), pp. 92-93.

Anishinaabe woman who smothered her grandchild believing him to be a demon or otherwise possessed by demons. As local authorities investigated the murder two competing narratives began to emerge, although only the official medical analysis of her mental health was taken into final consideration of her guilt or innocence by way of diminished responsibility. The second or alternative narrative that punctuates Vizenor's telling of the story is that in place of, or in addition to a medical diagnosis of schizophrenia and delusional behaviour there should be an appreciation of the wider cultural context of the event in addition to an examination of tribal shamanic traditions. Like the White Hawk case, Sheppo's actions are treated as a tragic standalone event, with the psychiatric diagnosis playing a signature role in the judgement of the court. Carl Malmquist, the consultant psychiatrist who interviewed Sheppo over a period of several hours when she was detained in jail, made it perfectly clear in his evaluation of the case that he had 'no qualifications or background pertaining to Indian religious practices' and that he was 'not acquainted with any contemporary religious ceremonies which require infant sacrifice'.⁵⁴⁶ Unlike the White Hawk case, however, the court quickly identified a previously undiagnosed schizophrenic disorder, to which Vizenor adds the following clinical definition:

According to definitions in a psychiatric lexicon [...] a person has 'disturbances of thought, mood, and behavior . . . alterations of concept formation that may lead to misinterpretation of reality' . . . with the 'presence of grandiose *delusions*, often associated with *hallucinations*'.⁵⁴⁷

Vizenor draws parallels between the experiences of the shaman and that of a schizophrenic: visions, voices, powerful supernatural presences and forces, and relativistic shifts in time. One of the underlying messages of the story is that state officials and medical authorities were unable to see past their own terminal creeds and

⁵⁴⁶ Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa*, p. 147.

⁵⁴⁷ Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa*, p. 147.

introduce unknown elements into their world views, despite some attempts to better understand Sheppo's Native culture and traditions. A. Robert Lee describes the condition as one of 'constant and often exhausting negotiations Native Americans conduct to locate themselves in multiple and mixed cultural histories' which take place in a society 'whose dominant members are fixated by concepts of Indian identity so powerful that they necessarily become one of the more powerful forces with which Native Americans must deal'.⁵⁴⁸ As in the case of Thomas White Hawk, Vizenor's retelling picks out the 'unholy burden' placed on Sheppo as indicative of the kind of ongoing negotiations that ultimately lead to a profound sense of cultural schizophrenia.⁵⁴⁹

Towards the end of the White Hawk chapter in *Crossbloods*, Vizenor's narrator notes that 'While White Hawk was awaiting trial, a white man in Rapid City walked into a court room, shot and killed his wife and her attorney, and wounded the judge. He was not sentenced to capital punishment'.⁵⁵⁰ This is reported almost in passing, like an aside directed off stage to the reader, offering a moment of stark contrast between the public and legal reaction to the White Hawk case and one involving a white man who had committed a similarly abhorrent crime. The narrator does not offer a judgement or express an overt opinion, but the inclusion of this information is sufficient to establish a point of moral relevancy between the two cases. The question that begs to be asked and which is not directly raised by the narrator is obvious, and yet is permitted to linger in the mind of the reader as an incomplete but troubling thought. In a later chapter addressing the death of Bad Heart Bull, Vizenor opens with the following statement: 'Killing Indians was once sanctioned by the

⁵⁴⁸Lee, *Loosening the Seams*, p. 79.

⁵⁴⁹Lee, *Loosening the Seams*, p. 79.

⁵⁵⁰Vizenor, *Crossbloods*, p. 151.

military of this nation. Who can forget the slaughter of tribal people at Mystic River, and Sand Creek, and Wounded Knee in South Dakota'.⁵⁵¹ Although the two chapters are not explicitly connected, it seems a fair assessment to say that the sanctioned killing of Indians is a reality that intersects between the story of Thomas White Hawk, his experience at court, and crimes committed by the unnamed white man who shot his wife and her attorney in open court. In one instance White Hawk's life is forfeit, fulfilling the criteria of a sanctioned legal killing; in the other a murderer is permitted to live.

Vizenor detects a disturbing similarity in the case of teenager Dane White, who took his own life after a six week prolonged stay in police custody during which time he appears to have been effectively forgotten, culminating in an act of tragic self-erasure that mirrors the process of institutionalised erasure to which he had been subjected. Writing in *Literary Chance: Essays on Native American Survivance* (2007), Vizenor invokes Chief Joseph's often quoted vision during a diplomatic visit to Washington D.C. in January 1879. What first appears as a foretelling of events yet to come, with Chief Joseph cast in the role of a tragic seer expressing a truth doomed to repeat itself, is deployed as an opportunity to trace the outer edge of mythic power, where the myths of colonialism and containment supplant Native presence with Native absence. In his evocation Chief Joseph proclaims:

There need be no trouble. Treat all men alike. Give them all the same law [...] I see men of my race treated as outlaws and driven from country to country, or shot down like animals. I know that my race must change. We cannot hold our own with the white men as we are. We only ask an even chance to live as other men live. We ask to be recognized as men. We ask that the same law shall work on all men.⁵⁵²

⁵⁵¹ Vizenor, *Crossbloods*, p. 165.

⁵⁵² Chief Joseph, qtd in Vizenor, *Literary Chance*, pp. 85-86.

As Chief Joseph outlines the manifold problems facing tribal people in the late nineteenth century he emphasises his wish that all men be treated equally under the *same* law; a wish that should have been considered as self-evident in accordance with the Declaration of Independence. In the same essay Vizenor pauses to reflect on the Dane White case he had first encountered back in 1968, noting that ‘almost a century after the emotive entreaty by Chief Joseph’ the ‘lonesome Dakota boy never had a chance to envision liberty or a cause to be an author’.⁵⁵³ The parallel is clear, and Vizenor’s point is not subtle. Dane White had in 1968 been denied what Chief Joseph had declared a universal measure of human dignity – to live and be treated like other men, exercising this right under the same law, and not to be denigrated as a subset of humanity. That the plight of the ‘lonesome Dakota boy’ had been deemed so insignificant that he had been rendered invisible, was evidence enough that Chief Joseph’s vision was just as relevant in 1968 as it had been in 1879. Vizenor’s inclusion of the title ‘author’ in the above statement is particularly significant given that Vizenor frequently looks to the creative and imaginative role of the author as one of supreme responsibility, and that Native people must be the authors of their own experience and actively engaged in a process of *writing back* against a dominant culture that excludes, obscures or misappropriates the experiences of the racialised Other. In the opening line of the essay Vizenor cites the English émigré, Founding Father and ‘literary revolutionary’ Thomas Paine, who wrote in *Common Sense*, ‘it was the cause of America that made me an author’.⁵⁵⁴ For Vizenor, Paine’s revolutionary literary sentiment is one that broadly connects with what he collectively terms ‘timely Native American Indian authors’, including such luminaries as ‘William Apress,

⁵⁵³ Vizenor, *Literary Chance*, p. 87.

⁵⁵⁴ Vizenor, *Literary Chance*, p. 85.

George Copway, Black Elk, Charles Eastman, Luther Standing Bear, and many more contemporary native authors might have written that it was the cause of native sovereignty and continental liberty that made them authors in America'.⁵⁵⁵ In Vizenor's estimation, Paine, Joseph, Apress, Eastman *et al* all located their political agency in the same moment that they found their literary voice. In the Native American context this represents a line of critical inquiry that seeks to resist the forces of postcolonial erasure as much as it seeks to assert Native survivance.

The trope of the Native author as arbiter and activist is one that finds much fertile ground in Vizenor's work and, as Vizenor, A. Robert Lee, Kimberley Blaeser, Elaine Jahner, and many others have pointed out, plants one foot firmly in the traditional trickster stories of the Anishinaabe, and the other in unfettered modes of literary imagination. The principle trickster in Vizenor's work has been the 'imaginative trickster' Anishinaabe figure of *Naanabozho*, and whose impiety and uninhibited spirit has been a useful point of comic and contrarian reference in both Vizenor's fiction and non-fiction.⁵⁵⁶ 'Trickster stories', Vizenor writes, 'overturn the theologies of absolute myths and cultural scapegoats' functioning as a 'comic holotrope [...] an immortal storier in a comic discourse' created out of language to 'liberate the mind by tease and divine caprice'.⁵⁵⁷ The tricksterish resistance to absolute myth is central in examining the function of violence in Vizenor's work. In aligning the voices of 'timely' Native American writers with the humanism and revolutionary spirit of Thomas Paine and Chief Joseph with contemporary Native

⁵⁵⁵ Vizenor, *Literary Chance*, p. 85.

⁵⁵⁶ Owens cites Vizenor's definition of trickster as one distinct from Paul Radin's amoral, asocial, valueless figure, who has no understanding of good and evil, instead describing the woodland trickster of the Anishinaabe as an imaginative force that seeks to restore balance to the world, dismissing terminal creeds with comic verve and 'ecstatic strategies'. Owens, *Other Destinies*, p. 239.

⁵⁵⁷ Vizenor, *Literary Chance*, p. 43-44.

American writers, Vizenor traces a unifying drive to confront the absolute myths of providentially ordained dominance and cultural superiority.

Conclusion

The pessimism of Vizenor's post-oil economy wasteland in *Bearheart*, replete with its Evil Gamblers and Shaman Crows, is at once defused with the opening of the Fourth World at the end of the novel. As with Silko's *Almanac*, the end of the current world promises renewal and an end to hostilities that is welcome and optimistic. At no point in the novel does the reader feel that Proude will succumb to the forces of destruction, after all he is too intelligent, and rooted in another plane of existence to fall into such a trap. He sees violence for what it is – a contagion born of Terminal Creeds, the entirely predictable outcome when people doggedly entrust the entirety of their faith to a single closed world view. The utopian indulgences of the true believer can only be realised at the expense and, one presumes, the destruction of any obvious detractors. That is the world he leaves behind, whose inhabitants are doomed to live and die by their terminal creeds, trapped in their own personal End-of-Days event. Far better to leave all that behind and transcend.

Moreover, it is important to recognise that graphic sex, disturbing scenes of violence and sexualised violence in Vizenor's work act as experiences that can connect to multiple discourses that do not always find articulation while simultaneously tracing the outer limits of normative and institutionalised understanding. Violence and its corollary victimry are not permitted to pass untested in Vizenor's novel, nor in his multiple and diverse professional lives. What unites them is a desire to constantly defy final judgement, or the final closure of diagnosis. To diagnose is to define according to the limits of contemporary understanding, when that assumption should be mediated

by the knowledge that, like the cannibal whitecripples in *Bearheart*, all knowledge is incomplete and the unwillingness to progress from them ultimately results in a closed, unevolving terminal system.

Conclusion

As this thesis demonstrates, the Native American and mixedblood authors Leslie Marmon Silko, Louis Owens, and Gerald Vizenor use literary violence in a variety of ways to interrogate the systemic violence embedded in narratives of dominance. I have argued that one of the primary ways that they achieve this is via a re-examination of the major formative myths that underpin notions of Euramerican cultural exceptionalism. In so doing, they shed light on interrelated issues such as Indigenous sovereignty, mixedblood identity, and the fiercely contested notion of an authentic tribal Real versus a more porous, multifaceted criticism. While these writers represent only a small part of a much larger mass of critical voices that engage with these issues, the readings I have presented focus on the value of violence as a useful literary device for challenging dominant narratives, and for initiating further exploration of the ideological positions that inform them. The critical vocabulary for the study of violence is also understandably complex, but by embracing a cosmopolitan approach with regards to Native and non-Native literary theory and historiography, my intention has been to offer multiple perspectives on what is often a complex and highly politicised subject. Slavoj Žižek, whose theories of violence, ideology, and fantasy feature throughout this project, has been most useful in navigating this disorientating theoretical terrain. Jodi A. Byrd's *Transit of Empire* has provided many informative points of departure into discussions of settler colonialism and the far reaching effects of systemic violence enshrined in US Indian and international policy. Hannah Arendt famously spoke of the banality of evil, and Žižek says much the same of normative violence, which forms part of his critical framework for *talking about* that violence that takes place either just out of shot, or in plain view of a dominant culture that

refuses to acknowledge the violence underpinning global capitalism. To this already richly divergent lexicon of violence I add the terms ‘transcendent violence’ and ‘literary violence’, the first of which describes the ideologically circumscribed violence of dominance, whereby acts of violence committed under banners of national expansion, or the doctrine of manifest destiny are reinscribed as necessary violence, unfortunate violence, or pushed deep down into the collective unconscious of dominant culture. Taking my cue from Vizenor’s concepts of Terminal Creeds and manifest manners, my own contribution has then been to ask again what lies beneath the sanitising veil of dominant discourse. So repressed, it must be recalled, remembered, named, and *put back into* the narratives of dominance so that romantic myths and convenient historical misrepresentations can be properly interrogated. ‘Literary violence’ describes instances where violence is used as a literary device, prompting the reader to look beyond the superficial, surface level reading where violence is felt to be mere spectacle or the end of discourse, and extend their analysis to what is not visible in the dominant narrative discourse and probe the underlying systems of violence that have produced such a violent textual rupture. I argue that this represents a valuable contribution to the study of texts covered in this thesis, but may also add to our broader understanding of violence as a distinct phenomenon in literary studies.

The novels examined in this thesis represent not only a distinct literary response to the connected issues of violence, dominance, and ideologies that seek to contain, define, and oversimplify Native cultural experience, but also complement each other. It is significant that Silko’s masterpiece *Almanac of the Dead* is now experiencing the kind of critical acclaim that it should have received twenty years ago, as concerns over climate change, international conflict, destabilising nation states, and

wildly varying economic instability and inequality have brought the long-held concerns of Indigenous communities onto the international stage. It is therefore a timely text deserving of a timely reading, and while others have acknowledged the horrifying violence of her novel as a critique of late twentieth century capitalism and its cold disregard for the health of the environmental, I add to this discourse by suggesting that Silko's use of violence is a critique in and of itself that demands further examination as the concerns she raises grow in stature and in threat of irreversible consequence.

To better explicate the relationship between public myth and systemic violence, chapter one began by contextualising the different ways that Native and non-Native scholars have engaged with frontier myth, asking how this often fraught relationship affects the utility of frontier as a critical concept. Running parallel with this was a second line of enquiry that seeks to understand how writers like Silko, Owens, and Vizenor, among others, use violence to expose the far reaching, real world consequences produced by narratives of dominance like the mythic construct of frontier and the heavily mythologised West. As this thesis has demonstrated, twentieth century revisionist and Indigenous historiography has worked to complicate and by degrees discredit frontier as a useable concept, while others, most notably Louis Owens, have sought to reclaim frontier as a space for useful dialogic encounter. This does not, however, mark the end of that debate, and while frontier will continue to exist as both a much beloved popular parable of US originary, and a signifier of a brutal, even celebrated form of settler colonialism, it remains a cogent example of how the violence of domination can be reconfigured in mythic form as a transcendent mode of violence, that excuses or otherwise obscures the true human cost of such actions.

As discussed in chapter two, Silko's *Almanac* is a monumental effort to *impoverish* the classical Turnerian frontier that has influenced frontier discourse for more than a century. *Almanac* not only disrupts the conceptual base that has come to define the frontier myth in the national imaginary, but concludes with the promise of an alternative world, centred on Indigenous systems and narrative technologies, that reconnect a beleaguered humanity, footless in a toxic European modernity, to a world beyond this one. It is an idea that returns again in Vizenor's *Bearheart* and obtrudes into the decentred boundaries of Owens's uninterrupted provincial frontier. Silko's novel makes manifest the systemic violence and epistemic horror that otherwise remains unspoken and unspeakable in narratives of dominance. She puts that unspeakable or unspoken violence *back in* so as to confront the reader with a traumatising vision of societal decline built on failing economic and political systems that literally cannibalise the poor. Violence is epidemic in *Almanac*, which is precisely the point of the novel, but Silko also uses violence to make that point unavoidable. The ceaseless, all-pervasive violence of *the destroyers*, the corporate-Capitalistic forces that cheapen life and enable widespread persecution and exploitation of Indigenous and disenfranchised people, has reached a critical tipping point where this systemic undercurrent of violence can no longer sustain itself without simultaneously becoming self-destructive. The zombie-like quality of this endless, mindless consumption, stalks Silko's wasteland, personified by the novel's many monsters, some in uniform in positions of state sanctioned power, and others draining the poor of their life's blood. In her novel violence is a contagion, and trapped in a cycle of violence and consumption the only feasible option remains a system reset, the last chance to reorientate humanity in line with core, Transindigenous beliefs that nurture life and community rather than exploiting the many in the service of the few.

Silko locates her novel in the troubled, violent borderlands of the Southern United States and Northern Mexico, in what reveals itself to be a region in the midst of an undeclared war on Indigeneity and racialised Otherness. Violence pervades the many different strata of society in her novel, ranging from superficial aristocracy, through the ranks of organised, cross-border criminal networks, and down to the destitute victims of late twentieth century capitalism. Ultimately Silko succeeds in producing a postmodern/poststructuralist critique, where the narratives of dominance are countered by an Indigenous worldview still fighting to remain connected to a fragmented past, as personified by the almanac, passed down through multiple generations, and finally from the old woman Yoeme to her twin granddaughters Lecha and Zeta Cazador.

Continuing this thought, chapter three is an examination of Louis Owens's reading of frontier as a space of cultural contact, contestation, and conflict, and how the liminality suggested by this proximal zone of contact not only shares trickster's qualities of rebellion and obscenity, rejecting the simplifying narratives of order and dominance, but can function as a useful space in which to explore questions of identity and difference. The wilderness, so important to Turner's determinism, is similarly challenged and reclaimed as an open space, just as the provincial town, in many ways the end point of the Turnerian frontier process, is shown to be merely an outer marker for an uninterrupted notion of frontier, where different cultures must come together and deal with each other. The location of violence in Owens's novels is also key. Barroom brawls, serial killings, street fights on outlying rural lanes, point towards a fascination in Owens's fiction with the boundaries and pathways between spaces. On the outskirts of the provincial town Owens shows how simplistic cultural binaries fall apart, and as with Silko's novel, the violence required to maintain such arbitrary

positions of dominant/dominated, closed/open, is exposed. Out there on the roads, besides swollen rivers, and primal backwoods haunted by hungering spirits, Owens exposes the ideological circuitry of dominance as being wholly inadequate to the task of containing the Native subject.

The final chapter looks to the work of Gerald Vizenor, whose prolific literary and academic production has secured his status as one of the most important writers currently working in the US. In his breakthrough 1978 novel *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, Vizenor begins to consolidate some of the many discursive threads of his other lives, where he has lived and worked to diagnose and address the systemic violence and terminal creeds of dominant culture, sometimes in an official public capacity, and other times as his trickster alter ego. Like Silko's *Almanac*, *Bearheart* is staged in a world either teetering on the edge of ruin, or fast approaching it. The apocalyptic subtleties of his novel are derivative of a European colonial world view, the economic buttress of Big Oil having collapsed and with it global capitalism. The Indigenous 'clown' characters that drift through this post-industrial landscape must hold on to their spirituality and their connection to nature if they are to survive and pass into the next world. Throughout, Vizenor strives to transcend the prescriptive boundaries of dominant culture while teasing his reader with extreme and obscene modes of violence that reinforce the idea that in his literary landscapes transgression and disobedience are the tools of survival. A master of misdirection, narrative chance and tricksterish tease, Vizenor's fiction, like his literary theory, seeks to disqualify ideas of containment and final definition. His novel appeals to a shamanistic view of trans-species interconnectivity, sometimes with rather surprising consequences as in the case of Lilith Mae, but always to push beyond what are held to be acceptable limits, be they limits of good taste, humour, or dimensional time and space. This resistance

to containment in geographic, intellectual, spiritual, economic or other terms, can be traced back to Vizenor's non-fiction and reportage, where he teases the racialised assumptions of institutional power by moving discussions of the Native subject outside prescriptive boundaries that frequently rely on crude simulations derived from popular culture and mythic constructs. Vizenor asks us to resist notions of closure and treat as suspicious any claims to definite cultural authority or supremacy.

Situating Vizenor as the concluding chapter of this thesis also signals an invitation to further discussions of violence and frontier to unexpected interpretations that move towards a more experimental approach, where literature can take the reader to imaginative places outside of dominative narrative history and criticism. The work of Silko, Owens and Vizenor reflects a multi-layered, rhizomatic understanding of frontier and violence that does not prioritise the experiences of any one group, but rather seeks to expose the extent to which violence is codified, communicated, and justified as transcendent or normative process, through the myths and stories that we tell to ourselves. In returning to the questions that initiated this study, it is important that constructs like frontier and the transcendent modes of violence enshrined therein continue to be scrutinised and reimagined. As Clara Sue Kidwell has said, 'the meaning of the term "frontier" has changed significantly since Turner proclaimed its closing in 1893. Those of us who write Native American history must continue to challenge the idea that frontier is a static boundary. It is constantly changing.'⁵⁵⁸ I would add that what is of crucial importance here is a rigorous dedication to understanding how violence functions in these myths and how artists, writers, and

⁵⁵⁸ Clara Sue Kidwell, 'New Frontiers in Native American History', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 17.3 (1996), 29-30 (p. 30).

other producers of imaginative works of art are well equipped for the task of exposing these perennially harmful systems of violence.

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