FROM GHOST DANCE TO GRASS DANCE:
PERFORMANCE AND POSTINDIAN RESISTANCE IN
AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

My project examines the ways American Indian authors have adopted, resisted, revised, or rejected the figures of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre in their constructions of Native identity. I argue that the ongoing shifts in literary representations of these two events illustrate paradigm shifts in the ways Native authors define and construct their ethnicity. I begin with an examination of the first novel written by an American Indian woman: Muscogee author S. Alice Callahan’s recently re-released *Wynema: A Child of the Forest* (1891), a text written only months after the massacre occurred. Highlighting the tensions in this early narrative, I suggest that Callahan’s novel presents an emerging possibility of resistance in its strong reaction to the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre even as it relies heavily on the repressive myth of the “vanishing Indian.” I next examine the canonization of two texts that include the most frequently cited retellings of the massacre and its aftermath—Dakota author Charles Eastman’s *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916) and Lakota Nicholas Black Elk’s as-told-to *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). I contend that the subsequent readings of these two accounts, rather than the accounts themselves, lay out a model through which the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee come to stand not for Native resistance but instead for the erasure of Native peoples and cultures.
The second section of my dissertation analyzes how late twentieth-century American Indian authors have either appropriated, revised, or rejected the dominant images of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee in order to define contemporary Native identities. I first look at Spokane/Coeur d’Alene author Sherman Alexie’s body of poetry and fiction to investigate how Alexie—whose own ancestors did not participate in the Ghost Dance—employs dominant images of the Ghost Dance to construct pan-tribal resistance. I next analyze how Dakota author Susan Power—whose tribal ancestors were both participants in the Ghost Dance and victims of the Wounded Knee massacre—uncouples dance from tragedy by focusing instead on the Grass Dance, a war dance historically used to promulgate tribal memory of heroism and resistance. This project, then, expands the study of ethnic representation and tribal identity in American Indian literature by highlighting how Native writers transform dominant images of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre into new tribal stories of survival and resistance.
For Edna May:

"Tetley"
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CHAPTER 1
THE SPECTRE OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE:
AN INTRODUCTION

When I first drafted this introduction, I began with an archetypal opening of
the sort that characterizes so many of the hundreds of books written in the past 111
years on the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre. My text went something like this:

On December 28, 1890, during a bitter Dakota winter,
the 7th regiment of the U.S. cavalry killed an
estimated three hundred unarmed Lakota. Known
first as “The Battle of Wounded Knee Creek,” and,
later, and more appropriately, as “The Wounded Knee
massacre,” this incident on the Pine Ridge
Reservation in South Dakota has long been hailed by
both Native and non-Native peoples as a defining
moment in the long and troubled history between the
U.S. government and the indigenous inhabitants of the
land now called the United States of America.

However, when I returned to this draft and tried to move forward I saw the
impossibility of such an opening, since the repetition of this narrative in Native
history and literature is exactly the phenomenon my project wraps itself around.
Such patterns of repetition endlessly rewrite the same limiting stories of not only
Wounded Knee, but of Native identities as a whole. Annishinabe theorist Gerald
Vizenor calls these simulacrums of history the “simulations” of “manifest manners,”
“racist notions and misnomers sustained in archives and lexicons as ‘authentic’
representations of indians cultures”(xii). As Vizenor explains, the simulations of
Indian identities constructed in the stories of dominant culture necessitate “the absence of real natives—the contrivance of the other in the course of dominance” (vii). The purpose of my work is not to reinscribe such absences by once again telling the story of the “tragic primitive” (Vizenor xii), but to interrogate how such stories are created and utilized by Native authors. To do so, I examine the disparate ways in which images of the Wounded Knee massacre and of the 1890 Lakota Ghost Dance,² which has long been associated with the Wounded Knee massacre, function as signifiers of Indian identity in American Indian literature.

While I will recap the history of the Ghost Dance and The Wounded Knee massacre in this introduction, I start my analysis with an acknowledgement of the often problematic and limiting ways Wounded Knee narratives have functioned in the realm of the dominant imaginary: Wounded Knee, quite simply, has long been figured as the “end” of Native history and, correspondingly, the Ghost Dance has been figured as the cause of that end. In this tidy version of history, Indians not only vanish but also become conveniently responsible for their own sad, yet seemingly inevitable demise, as we see in this excerpt from a 1950s Ghost Dance history that bills itself as one of the first books to tell the “Indians’ side” of the story:

This book is about a dance—a strange dance practiced by Indian men and women [. . .] in the vain belief that it would restore them and their deceased ancestors to a fast-disappearing way of life. Because the weird ritual involved supplication to the spirits of Indian dead, it was known to white men as “the ghost dance.” Whites also came to know it as the Dance of Death for it inspired Indians to die fighting for their hopeless dream of a better life in a world of spirits.

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Thus this book is also the story of a war, a clash in which Indian dreamers were as earmarked for doom as characters in a classic Greek tragedy. In many ways the last major American Indian uprising, known as the Sioux Ghost Dance War of 1890-91, was one of the most dramatic conflicts since the Crusades. [...] It marked the final desperate attempt of Indian tribes in the United States to throw off the yoke of the white man’s domination. Moreover, it put an end to the frontier of the old West. [...] The outcome was perhaps an inevitable step in the juggernaut advance of our so-called civilization.

(Miller vii)

This myth of inevitability, with its mantra of cause and effect, is one of many in a long line of cultural fictions that the self-proclaimed “American” population—U.S. settlers who at one point or another were all immigrants—told themselves in order to authorize the young country’s genocidal practices of colonization. By fixing the “Battle” of Wounded Knee as an unfortunate, Ghost Dance-induced conclusion to the ugly history of broken treaties, relocation, and starvation that characterized U.S. Indian policy, blame was not only deflected from the U.S. government but was made entirely unnecessary. As a result, Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance, dehistoricized and emptied of complexity, became, for dominant culture, signifiers that explicitly invoked the fictional end of Native cultures while implicitly invoking the triumph of “American” civilization. Within this national fiction actual Native identities are erased and the Indian (or, as Vizenor would aptly say, “indian”) exists only as a product of the American imagination, a noble but abstract symbol of the country’s inevitable forward progress.

While dominant culture continues to perpetuate these nation-building fantasies, Native nations, tribes, and people refute such fictions by not only
surviving, but, in many cases, thriving.\textsuperscript{5} There are more than 300 federally recognized Indian tribes in the lower forty-eight states, and more than 200 Native tribes in Alaska. An estimated 250 tribes are on the list of federally non-recognized tribes, with about 150 of these currently petitioning for federal recognition. In fact, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, the number of people identifying themselves as American Indians and Alaska Natives increased to 2.5 million and, if combined with the number of those who identified as part American Indian in new mixed-race census categories, the entire Native population in the U.S. grew to 4.1 million overall (May 1). These millions of Native people, together with the growing number of Native activists and writers and Native Studies scholars and departments across the U.S., testify not only to the continued existence of Native peoples, but to the vitality of Native cultures in the twenty-first century.

The Wounded Knee massacre was a particularly vicious event in the long and most often ugly history between the U.S. government and American Indian peoples, and, correspondingly, Native references to Wounded Knee can and do signify loss with the same tragic air as do dominant accounts. This is unsurprising, given that an estimated 300 unarmed people were shot down by U.S. soldiers, who, rather than receiving a court marshal, discharge, or reprimand for their part in the massacre of innocent people, were commended for what their commanding officer called “gallant conduct” in battle. (The stunning eighteen as-yet-unreconciled Metels of Honor awarded soldiers who participated in The Wounded Knee massacre remain “the most ever awarded for a single engagement in the history of the U.S.
Army” [Hoxie 697].) Because the stories of dominant culture are seductive and the image of the carnage at Wounded Knee powerful, some Native representations mirror the dominant by translating the Native deaths at Wounded Knee not only into a tragic loss of lives, but into the annihilation of an entire people. Such narratives are more prevalent in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, when the cataclysmic changes experienced by American Indians seemed, to many, to threaten their very survival. In Wynema, for instance, an 1891 novel by Muskogee author S. Alice Callahan that I examine in my second chapter, a Wounded Knee survivor who terms herself “the only one left of my tribe” (Callahan 91) dies with the words, “Not many years will elapse until the Indian will be a people of the past” (Callahan 104). But such mournful rhetoric exemplifies only one of the many representations of Indian identity within this novel and, more importantly, only one position in the diverse array of Wounded Knee representations within American Indian literature.

In fact, while Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance may have primarily signified predetermined loss in dominant culture, they have had multiple and complicated meanings in Native cultures. As historian James Wilson observes:

For Anglo-Americans, the Massacre at Wounded Knee, with its desolate images of twisted Indian corpses frozen into the snow, has become a deeply significant moment. It poignantly represents the end of the ‘frontier,’ the three-century process of continuous expansion that had carried their country from a few tiny trading posts to potentially the most powerful nation on earth. The ‘Indian’ who had barred the way, the Indian who was in some sense the unpossessed, unconquered continent, was finally defeated. Whether child of Eden or the wild beast in
the wilderness, he was, at last, banished to his natural home: the past.

But for Native Americans, the massacre has another layer of meaning. While it is remembered as the last major military confrontation of the ‘Indian Wars,’ it also marks the beginning of a new struggle against—in some ways—an even more destructive and demoralizing enemy. (285)

As Wilson’s analysis suggests and my later chapters will demonstrate, the Wounded Knee massacre and the Ghost Dance have had complex significance in Native cultures throughout the twentieth and now into the twenty-first centuries. An end for dominant culture, Wounded Knee has been anything but that for the majority of Native writers who recognized it as an emblematic but not conclusive moment, one that could encapsulate the struggle, but not the outcome of Native people’s experiences over the next hundred years. Thus, in contemporary American Indian literature, images of Wounded Knee and/or the Ghost Dance resonate instead as sites of rebellion, resistance, or coalition. But while these images are used in innumerable and varied ways by Native authors, their political import has yet to be fully examined by scholars of Native literature. My dissertation does not, then, claim to tell the “true” story of the 1890 Ghost Dance or the Wounded Knee massacre. Instead, I examine how Native authors have rethought and resignified a trope that has significant meaning for both Native and white cultures in the U.S. By necessity, I also examine what literary critics and historians have said about Native-authored Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee narratives, paying particular attention to the voluminous critical response around canonized texts like From the Deep Woods to Civilization and Black Elk Speaks. My intent is 1) to (re)examine the
complicated and diverse ways that Native writers like S. Alice Callahan, Charles Eastman, Nicholas Black Elk, Sherman Alexie, and Susan Power deploy these overdetermined images in the construction of American Indian identity; and, 2) in doing so, to recover alternative and sometimes subversive readings of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre that seem, in some cases, to have been erased like a clock from an Edward Curtis photograph.⁶

Let me circle back now and begin this introduction in a slightly different way by laying out the background to my investigation. I began this project not, as it may seem, by analyzing Wounded Knee narratives, but instead by considering recurrent images in Native literature. The observation that sparked my present work was this basic acknowledgement: dance, in both literal and figurative forms, is a vital symbol in contemporary American Indian literature. Were I a mathematician or hard scientist I would call such a principle a given—dance is a central image in Native literature because it is a central facet of Native life, having, for most if not all Native peoples, traditionally been a form of prayer, of individual and communal healing, of intra- and inter-community interaction, and/or of recreation. But even knowing that this premise is hardly earth shattering, I have never been able to quiet the slight jump in my spirit, the internal nod that occurs each time I encounter another reference to dance. When I teach Native literature, that interest often translates into student reading questions such as, “What is the function of dance in _____?” (fill in your own blank—Ceremony, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Fools Crow, The Grass Dancer, Gardens in the Dunes). But this
seemingly simple question has no simple answer since the meaning of dance changes with the specific conditions surrounding each performance, audience, and participant; the origins and past or present cultural significance of each dance; and the tribal background(s) of each author. The answers to my question, then, are myriad and shifting, and this is nowhere more apparent than when it comes to one of the most frequently referenced dance traditions in twentieth-century literature: the 1890 Ghost Dance.

Whether a central theme, such as in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer* (1996), or a passing reference, such as in Susan Power’s *The Grass Dancer* (1994), the image of the Ghost Dance is everywhere in American Indian literature and, most often, it is paired, with the image of the Wounded Knee massacre. The incredibly diverse meanings of these images rather than their mere ubiquity, however, led me to this study—Native authors invoke the 1890 Ghost Dance and/or the Wounded Knee massacre to signify both loss and renewal, tradition and innovation, transcendence of tribal boundaries, and reinforcement of tribal nationalism. To understand the resonances these references have in tribal literatures and the implications they have for tribal literatures, we must first return to the historic moments, however conditioned and conditional we might view them, from which they arise.

**The Ghost Dance in Historical Context**

Historians most often recognize two Ghost Dances: the 1870 Ghost Dance and the better-known 1890 Ghost Dance, which the Lakota adopted in the months
before the Wounded Knee massacre. Both of these movements originated among the Paiute on the Walker River Reservation in Nevada where two different Paiute healers—Wodziwob (Fish Lake Joe, died c.1920) in the late 1860s and Wovoka (Jack Wilson, c.1858-1932) in 1889—had visions in which they were instructed to bring dance ceremonies back to their people. Historian Alice Kehoe describes the origin of the 1870 religion:

In 1867, an epidemic of typhoid and other diseases killed one-tenth of the Walker River Paiutes. The next spring, in 1868, twenty-five Paiutes, mostly children, died of measles. [...]. Wodziwob had a dream empowering him, he believed, to lead the souls of those who died in the previous months back to their mourning families. [...]. Since Wodziwob had successfully restored dying individuals to life, the Paiutes were receptive to his new claim. He exhorted them to ornament themselves with paint as they usually did for festivals and to dance the common round dance. When the people stopped to rest, Wodziwob fell into a trance. Awakening, he reported that his soul had journeyed over the mountains to the land of the dead, had seen the dead happy in this land, and had extracted promises from the souls to return to their loved ones, perhaps in three or four years. The survivors along Walker River were to be pleased with his news. A local weather doctor, Tavibo [Jack Wilson’s father], admired this wodziwob and helped spread his prophecy.7 (33)

Wovoka, like Wodziwob, reported visiting the spirit world during illness-induced trances where he was told of a circular dance that, when repeated in the proper fashion, would bring back deceased relatives, replenish devastated game populations, and restore traditional lifeways. But while the initial prophecies of Wodziwob and Wovoka sound remarkably similar, there is a central difference: while the better-known 1890 Ghost Dance prophet, Wovoka, as biographer Michael
Hittman describes, “emphasized equality between the races, if not on earth then surely in Heaven” (79), the first Ghost Dance prophet, Wodziwob, foretold the destruction of the whites, exhorting his followers to turn away from all practices and material items introduced by dominant culture. Captain J.M. Lee, who visited the Walker River Reservation in 1869-70, gave the following account of Wodziwob’s prophecy:

In the earlier part of the [eighteen] sixties the whites began to come in and appropriate much of the Indian country in Nevada, and in the usual course it turned out that the medicine-men or prophets were looked to for relief. The most influential [Wodziwob] went up alone into the mountain and there met the Great Spirit. He brought back tidings to the effect that within a few moons there would be a great upheaval or earthquake. All the improvements of the whites—all their houses, their goods, stores, etc.—would remain, but the whites would be swallowed up, while the Indians would be saved and permitted to enjoy the earth and all the fullness thereof. (qtd. in Mooney 63-64)

If one ascribes to the long-spoused rhetoric of cause-and-effect in which the Ghost Dance leads to violence, it would seem that the 1870 Ghost Dance, with its more militant message, would have climaxed in Indian-white conflict. But such was not the case and, in fact, Kehoe contends that:

Wodziwob’s dance was the means of regrouping communities. If it failed to revive dead persons, it did revive the surviving Indians’ determination to forge ways of life compatible with their present circumstances. They worked out new ceremonies, amalgamations of old, borrowed, and newly invented rituals, and made these the center of community life. Much of the ‘1870 Ghost Dance’ religious revival among California Indians was institutionalized into beliefs and practices that continue today. (34)
Although both religious movements are noteworthy, the 1890 Ghost Dance has received by far the most attention due in large part, I would argue, to the fabricated connection between that religious movement and the Wounded Knee massacre, a connection that the existence of the 1870 Ghost Dance threatens in a number of ways. For the tenuous cause-and-effect relationship between the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre to remain viable, a whole web of supporting myths must also be maintained. Among these, for example, are the propositions that 1) the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre are extraordinary, and more importantly, singular events; and 2) the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre are catalysts for the end of an era and a people—as they have been constructed ad infinitum. To maintain the status quo, nineteenth-century American Indian history, with neatly packaged American Indians in tow, must march in a tidy line toward the clearly defined and fully comprehensible end that the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre have come to represent. Such are the stories that dominant culture tells itself.

But what happens to this comfortable narrative if one of these key events, these trigger points, is not the first and only, but rather the second event of its kind? Or, more complicated yet, what happens if the 1890 Ghost Dance is not even the second of two, but rather just the latest in a long line of similar events that are recognizable and accepted facets of many Native cultures (as both Ghost Dance religions are when considered in relation to the many prophet traditions that have been embraced by various American Indian nations throughout history)? My answer would be that the Great Event theory then deflates like a child’s party
balloon—the logic of the narrative falls away. And this deflation raises questions: why would a second, reputedly more pacifistic religious movement lead to a horrendous massacre and the supposed collapse of an entire culture when a previous, more antagonistic movement had no adverse effects? Similarly, why would a religious movement like the 1890 Ghost Dance represent the dying gasp of a people given that prophetic belief systems, such as the 1870 Ghost Dance, for example, have revitalized rather than devastated the people who practiced them? 

Bring the 1870 Ghost Dance into the historical narrative and the tidy cause-and-effect paradigm begins to collapse. Ultimately, the first step toward examining literary representations of the 1890 Ghost Dance, then, especially those that employ this cause-and-effect narrative, is to acknowledge the omissions upon which those representations necessarily rest. So, while my project examines images of the 1890 Ghost Dance because of its marked predominance in American Indian literature and history, at the same time, I recognize the historians’ choices that have caused this imbalance.

Wovoka, The 1890 Ghost Dance Prophet

The prophet of the 1890 Ghost Dance, Wovoka (“The [wood] Cutter”), was born sometime between 1856 and 1863 in western Nevada, which means he would have been in his teens when the first Ghost Dance prophecies were embraced by the Paiute community at Walker Ridge. Wovoka’s father, Numu-tibo’o (“Northern Paiute-White Man,” identified by Mooney as “Tavibo”), is thought to have assisted Wodziwob in the 1870s dance. An established “Weather doctor,” who “mastered
the weather through spiritual aid as healing doctors mastered illnesses” (Kehoe 32), Numu-tibo’o also claimed to be bulletproof. As is common with the Paiute, among whom spiritual abilities are often thought to be inherited, Numu-tibo’o’s son, Wovoka, would later be said to possess both these powers, as well. At some point during Wovoka’s early life, Numu-tibo’o apparently departed for a number of years—perhaps because of his involvement in either the Pyramid Lake War of 1860, the Bannock War of 1878, or the Owens Valley War of 1863 (Hittman 33)—leaving Wovoka and his mother, Tiya, in Mason Valley. Wovoka spent much of his life as a child and young adult working on David and Abigail Wilson’s Mason Valley ranch, where he enjoyed a close relationship with the Wilsons and their two sons. Following the custom of the time, Wovoka took the name of the family on whose ranch he lived and worked and was thereafter widely known as Jack Wilson. His interactions with the Wilsons included extensive exposure to what Hittman calls the family’s “frontier Protestantism” (55), which, together with his father’s Paiute shamanism, is thought to have had significant influence on Wovoka’s later philosophies.

There are differing beliefs about exactly when the second Ghost Dance religion began, and while 1889 is most often cited as the date of the first dance, some scholars suggest that the dancing commenced as early as 1886. The point upon which there is the most agreement, though, is that Wovoka’s “Great Revelation” occurred during a total solar eclipse on New Year’s Day 1889. The earliest recorded story of the events was told to Indian scout Arthur Chapman by James Josephus, a Walker River Reservation Paiute and a captain on the reservation
police force, in 1890: "About three years ago Jack Wilson took his family and went into the [Pine Grove] Mountains to cut wood for Mr. Dave Wilson. One day while at work he heard a great noise which appeared to be above him on the mountain. He laid down his ax and started to go in the direction of the noise, when he fell down dead, and God came and took him to heaven" (qtd. in Mooney 134). Apparently, Wovoka, who had fallen into a fevered coma or trance, regained consciousness just as the solar eclipse ended; many of the Paiutes in the area attributed his awakening to the passing of darkness and return of the sun that signaled the end of the eclipse. Whether or not that was true, Wovoka had undergone an experience that would change his life forever: he reported having conversed with God during his trance and he said he was instructed to bring a prophecy back to the people.

Since Wovoka himself did not write, we have no first-hand account of his prophesy. There are, however, a number of collected accounts and several letters that Wovoka is said to have dictated to various followers who came to him for guidance. Anthropologist James Mooney, who interviewed Wovoka on New Year’s Day, 1892, paraphrases the prophet’s description of his vision:

When about 20 years of age, [Wovoka] married, and continued to work for Mr. Wilson. He had given the dance to his people about four years before, but had received his great revelation about two years previously. On this occasion ‘the sun died’ (was eclipsed) and he fell asleep in the daytime and was taken up to the other world. Here he saw God, with all the people who had died long ago engaged in their oldtime sports and occupations, all happy and forever young. It was a pleasant land and full of game. After showing him all, God told him he must go back and tell his people they must be good and love one another, have no quarreling, and live in peace with the
whites; that they must work, and not lie or steal; that they must put away all the old practices that savored of war; that if they faithfully obeyed his instructions they would at last be reunited with their friends in this other world, where there would be no more death or sickness or old age. He was then given the dance which he was commanded to bring back to his people. By performing this dance at intervals, for five consecutive days each time, they would secure this happiness to themselves and hasten the event.

Finally God gave him control over the elements so that he could make it rain or snow or be dry at will, and appointed him his deputy to take charge of affairs in the west, while ‘Governor Harrison’ [then-U.S. President] would attend to matters in the east, and he, God, would look after the world above. He then returned to earth and began to preach as he was directed, convincing the people by exercising the wonderful powers that had been given him. (Mooney 133-34)

With this prophecy the 1890 Ghost Dance religion began in earnest. And, as happened in the 1870s, word of the new religion quickly circulated to neighboring nations who sent envoys to meet with and learn from Wovoka. These envoys returned to their homes with news of the round dance in which men and women, after purifying themselves and applying sacred red ochre, would join hands and dance clockwise in a circle so that they might receive visions, visit the dead, and ultimately regenerate their world. Among the many visitors who came to the Walker River Reservation to meet Wovoka were documented delegations of Ute, Shoshone, Arapaho, Northern Cheyenne, Bannock, Mohave, Kiowa, Nez Perce, Pawnee, and even Navajo, the latter of whom are known to have rejected the religion (most probably because of their cultural prohibitions against contact with the dead [Kehoe 110]). Wovoka’s prophecies were also shared between tribes, and
thus, less than a year after his great revelation, Native people from California to the Great Plains danced the Ghost Dance in the hope of a better life to come.

The 1890 Lakota Ghost Dance

While people from many different tribes and nations practiced the 1890 Ghost Dance, the Lakota Ghost Dance has received the most attention due to the perceived ties between that particular Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre. Captain George Sword, a member of the Pine Ridge reservation police force, told James Mooney that news of the Ghost Dance originally came to the Oglala Lakota on Pine Ridge through the Arapaho and Shoshone in 1889 (Mooney 181). William Selwyn, then-Pine Ridge postmaster, placed the initial news a year earlier, in 1888, but said that the excitement about the new religion did not blossom until 1889, when letters from newly converted Ghost Dance followers in Utah, Wyoming, Montana, Dakota, and Oklahoma began arriving on Pine Ridge (Mooney 181-82). The buzz of interest led to a council at Pine Ridge, where a number of trusted men were chosen to investigate the claim, among them Good Thunder, Flat Iron, Yellow Breast, and Broken Arm from Pine Ridge, Short Bull and another unnamed man from Rosebud, and Kicking Bear from the Cheyenne River Agency (Mooney 182). When the delegates returned to Pine Ridge in April of 1890, they confirmed the truth of the Ghost Dance stories and testified to the religion’s validity by sharing their own experiences. George Sword repeated some of these stories to Mooney, who found the following so interesting that he quoted it in full rather than paraphrasing, as was his usual fashion:
The people from every tipi send for us to visit them; they are people who died many years ago. Chasing Hawk, who died not long ago, was there and we went to his tipi. He was living with his wife who was killed in war long ago. They live in a buffalo skin tipi—a very large one—and he wanted all his friends to go there to live. A son of Good Thunder, who died in war long ago, was one who also took us to his tipi, so his father saw him. When coming we come to a herd of buffaloes. We killed one and took everything except the four feet, head, and tail, and when we came a little ways from it there was the buffaloes come to life again and went off. This was one of the messiah’s word came to truth. The messiah said, 'I will short your journey when you feel tired of the long ways, if you call upon me.' This we did when we were tired. The night came upon us, we stopped at a place and we called upon the messiah to help us because we were tired of long journey. We went to sleep and in the morning we found ourselves at a great distance from where we stopped. (qtd. in Mooney 183-4)

The suggestion that someone could “short their journey” would have been heartily welcomed not only by the members of the delegation who visited Wovoka, but by nearly all Lakota in 1890, a time when even their daily lives had become trial enough. For the Lakota, Wovoka’s Ghost Dance, with its promise of plenty and hope, could not have arrived at a better moment.

Conditions were dismal on Pine Ridge and the surrounding reservations in the spring of 1890. The government had reneged on the controversial 1889 “agreement,” which had included the promise that ration cuts would not occur when, in accordance with the contract, the “Great Sioux Reservation” was simultaneously divided into smaller, separate reservations and reduced by half. The 1889 agreement came on the heels of a series of treaties that had dramatically altered not only the Sioux Reservation landmass, but Lakota life. The first major
treaty between the U.S. and the Lakota was the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, which "called for peace among the northern tribes, the establishment of roads and military posts, protection for the Indians, and the establishment of [territorial] boundaries" (Hoxie 592). The 1851 treaty created internal division among the Lakota, pitting those who opposed the treaty against those who supported it, a division that has continued to characterize U.S.-Lakota interactions to this day. Prospects seemed to improve with the next major treaty, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which, in recognition of Red Cloud's victory, stated that U.S. troops would vacate the forts along the Bozeman Trail. The treaty also established the "Great Sioux Reservation," guaranteeing that its boundaries would remain intact. An additional provision of the 1868 treaty ensured the sanctity of the pact by maintaining that no part of the agreement could be altered without the signatures of three-fourths of the adult male tribe members, but the final version of the settlement differentiated between the reservation proper, "unceded lands," and "hunting territory," laying the groundwork for later land seizures (Fenelon 17-23).

In 1871, the U.S. government officially ended treaty-making, but the discovery of gold in the most sacred place of the Lakota, Paha Sapa (the Black Hills), led to a purchase attempt. But Paha Sapa was at the very heart of Lakota cosmology and with little debate the answer went out: the Black Hills were not for sale. With the Indian victory at the Battle of Greasy Grass (Little Bighorn) on June 17, 1876, tensions rose even higher between the Lakota and the U.S. government. Using the demise of Custer's regiment as an excuse, the government pushed ahead with its plan to acquire the Black Hills. Despite the fact that Custer had actually
attacked the Indian encampment at Greasy Grass, the government claimed that the
Sioux had gone to war with the U.S. and broken the treaty of 1868. As a result, on
August 15th a law was issued demanding the Lakota “give up all rights to the
Powder River country and the Black Hills” (Brown 297-8). When legal
negotiations failed, the U.S. government “rammed a document through an
unrepresentative gathering and withdrew the Black Hills region from the Great
Sioux Reservation” (Hoxie 593). Then, just when it seemed that no more land could
possibly be taken, another plan was brought to the table in 1888, which would
“carve the Great Sioux Reservation into six smaller reservations, leaving nine
million acres open for settlement” (Brown 428). With much subterfuge the
Washington commission moved from reservation to reservation, coercing,
intimidating, and bribing Lakota to obtain (the appearance of) the needed number of
signatures. On August 3, 1889, there was a final, secret meeting that cemented the
deal, after which Sitting Bull, a Hunkpapa Lakota who had worked assiduously
against the agreement’s passage, told a reporter bitterly, “‘Indians! There are no
Indians left but me!’” (qtd. in Brown 431).

It was not only the loss of their land that brought difficult times to the
Lakota in the late eighteen hundreds, however. While treaty after treaty was being
made with and broken by the U.S. government, a number of other events occurred
that also effected tremendous change among the Lakota: the first transcontinental
railroad was completed in 1869, bringing settlers to the West in unprecedented
numbers; the U.S. issued a referendum requiring that all Lakota report to
reservations by January 31, 1876; large numbers of Cheyenne and Lakota horses
were intentionally killed by the U.S. army; the buffalo herds were systematically destroyed between 1867 and 1883; Lakota cattle were decimated by disease in 1888; and there was a large-scale crop failure on the Dakota reservations in 1890 (Calloway 8-14; Hoxie 592-93; Mooney 187-204). Although each of these events was significant, the decimation of the buffalo had perhaps the largest impact on the Lakota. Dee Brown vividly describes the effects of the U.S. government’s intentional devastation:

White hunters and skinners were everywhere; the stench of rotting carcasses fouled the very wind of the Plains; like the Indian, the great herds were being driven into the ground.

(Of the 3, 700, 000 buffalo destroyed from 1872 through 1874, only 150, 000 were killed by Indians. When a group of concerned Texans asked General Sheridan if something could not be done to stop the white hunters’ wholesale slaughter, he replied: ‘Let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffalo is exterminated, as it is the only way to bring lasting peace and allow civilization to advance.’) (Brown 264-65)

But the Lakota had strength that the U.S. army did not expect; they did not capitulate even after the loss of their most important food source changed their entire way of life. Holdouts like Sitting Bull, Kicking Bear, and Big Foot, whom the government termed “hostiles,” refused to let go their beliefs about land rights, and personal and religious freedom. In response, the war of starvation escalated. Rations, which were to increase substantially as part of the 1889 agreement, were instead cut in half. To compound the lack of food, corruption was rampant on the reservation. Indian agents like the newly appointed and incredibly incompetent Daniel Royer at Pine Ridge were awarded their posts through acts of political
nepotism, and everyone from agents to suppliers to local land owners wanted and got a piece of tribal annuities before they were distributed. Thus the Lakota found that food, clothing, farm implements, and money all fell far short of their owed quantities, yet no one seemed to be accountable for the disparity.

In 1890, amidst this litany of injustice and loss came news of the Ghost Dance, with its promise of enough food for all, of reunions with the many long-mourned dead, and, as Kicking Bear told it, of a world without whites, who had cost the Lakota almost too much to comprehend. Kicking Bear, who visited Wovoka in November of 1889 with the first delegation, had become one of the central proponents of the Ghost Dance, and for many Lakota his testimony brought renewed hope and welcomed possibility. One Bull, a member of the Indian police force at the Standing Rock Agency, recounted Kicking Bear’s message in this way to Indian agent James McLaughlin:

‘My brothers, I bring you the promise of a day in which there will be no white man to lay his hand on the bridle of the Indian’s horse; when the red men of the prairie will rule the world and not be turned from the hunting-grounds by any man. I bring you word from your fathers, the ghosts, that they are now marching to join you, led by the Messiah who came once to live on earth with the white man, but was cast out and killed by them. I have seen the wonders of the spirit-land, and have talked with the ghosts. I traveled far and am sent back with a message to tell you to make ready for the coming of the Messiah and return of the Ghosts in spring.’ (McLaughlin 185)

Kicking Bear’s words highlight the differences between the Lakota version of the 1890 Ghost Dance and that which has been attributed to Wovoka. The Lakota believed the Ghost Dance would result in not only the passive disappearance of non-
believers, but also in the total destruction of the white people. The now-legendary Ghost shirts, specially decorated garments that were said to make the wearer bulletproof, were additions to the original religious philosophy.  

In many ways, the Lakota Ghost Dance strongly resembled the most sacred of all Lakota religious ceremonies, the Sun Dance, which the U.S. government had banned in 1882. Like the Sun Dance, the Lakota Ghost Dance involved a holy center pole around which supplicants danced for a designated series of nights. Participants in the two dances also shared the common expectation that their practice would result in visions and blessings. Some eye-witness accounts of the Lakota Ghost Dance mention, too, participants’ ritual sacrifice of small bits of flesh, which was another aspect of the Sun Dance ceremonials (qtd. in Mooney 289). Clearly, the Lakota made the Ghost Dance their own, altering it in a syncretic fashion so that the new religion melded with many of their previously held beliefs.

The practice of the 1890 Ghost Dance religion attests to the cultural vibrancy of the Lakota. Unlike the Native slumping despairingly over his exhausted horse in the (in)famous “End of the Trail” image so often used to characterize Native people of this period, the Lakota moved forward into their future by adopting and transforming a new religious practice. At the same time, the Lakota Ghost Dance’s resemblance to the outlawed Sun Dance also demonstrates the perseverance of traditional Lakota belief systems and illustrates how the Lakota found ways to overcome governmental restrictions on those practices. Ultimately, then, while the practice of the Lakota Ghost Dance may have proliferated in part because of the difficulties the Sioux Nation faced during this period, the Lakota were not, as Miller
and others have chorused, “Indian dreamers [. . .] as earmarked for doom as characters in a classic Greek tragedy” (Miller vi). They were instead a people of strength and hope looking for new ways to survive an increasingly difficult situation.

The Wounded Knee Massacre

Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, the U.S. government tried to coerce the various bands of Lakota who were still actively travelling outside reservation boundaries to “forsake their wild ways” in favor of a more “civilized” existence, namely a life spent subsistence farming on an inadequate 160-acre allotment with occasional respites for Christian worship. By mid-1890, only a handful of bands remained in defiance of this demand. Among these holdouts were a large number of Indians, somewhere near 3,000, gathered in the badlands of southwestern South Dakota to dance the Ghost Dance at a natural fortress called the Stronghold.

Almost as soon as Ghost Dance gatherings began, reports of a planned “Indian uprising” circulated in connection with the religious practice, which was rumored to be “a war dance” (Coleman 35). Such reports were repeatedly dismissed, however, by experienced officials like Standing Rock Agent James McLaughlin. On June 18, 1890, for example, McLaughlin sent this reply in answer to Indian Commissioner Robert V. Belt’s query about the reported threat:

As far as the Indians of this agency are concerned, there is nothing in either their words or actions that would justify this rumor, and I do not believe that
such an imprudent step is seriously mediated by any of the Sioux. [...] There are, however, a few malcontents here, as at all Sioux agencies who cling tenaciously to the old Indian ways and are slow to accept the better order of things, whose influence is exerted in the wrong direction; and this class of Indians are ever ready to circulate idle rumors and sow dissension, to discourage the more progressive; but only a few of the Sioux could now possibly be united in attempting any overt act against the government, and the removal from among them of a few individuals (the leaders of the disaffection) such as Sitting Bull, Circling Bear, Black Bird, and Circling Hawk of this agency, Spotted Elk (Big Foot) and his lieutenants of Cheyenne River, Crow Dog, and Low Dog of Rosebud, and any of the like ilk of Pine Ridge, would end all trouble and uneasiness in the future. (qtd. in Coleman 35-6)

Of all those named in his letter, the influential Sitting Bull was foremost on McLaughlin’s list in more ways than one, but, as his letter illustrates, McLaughlin’s feeling about Sitting Bull had little to do with the Ghost Dance.20

Sitting Bull, long a respected spiritual leader among the Lakota, had been branded “hostile” by U.S. government officials because of both his considerable prestige and his repeated attempts to halt the treaties that would eventually cost his people most of their land. He had been a thorn in McLaughlin’s side since the first day he arrived at Standing Rock in 1883, and their animosity never abated as seen in a virulent letter McLaughlin sent to the Indian commissioner on October 17, 1890, after Sitting Bull refused the invitation of Bishop Hare (a visiting South Dakota dignitary) to join the Catholic Church:

Sitting Bull is a man of low cunning, devoid of a single manly principle in his nature, or an honorable trait of character, but on the contrary is capable of instigating and inciting others (those who believe in
his promise) to do any amount of mischief. He is a coward and lacks moral courage; he will never lead where there is danger, but is adept in influencing his ignorant henchmen and followers, and there is no knowing what he may direct them to attempt.

Sitting Bull is a polygamist, a libertine, habitual liar, active obstructionist, and a great obstacle in the civilization of these people, and he is totally devoid of any of the nobler traits of character, and so wedded to the old Indian ways and superstitions that it is doubtful if any change for the better will ever come over him at his present age of fifty-six years. (qtd. in Coleman 70)

Sitting Bull, who was well aware of McLaughlin’s escalating desire to arrest him, wisely refused to visit the Standing Rock Agency throughout the summer and fall of 1890. On other fronts, however, Sitting Bull complied with McLaughlin’s wishes by, for example, remaining at his camp on the Grand River when McLaughlin denied his request to visit the Cheyenne River Reservation where the Ghost Dance religion, with Kicking Bear as the central proponent, was quickly gaining followers.

As it turned out, Sitting Bull had no need to visit Cheyenne River to investigate reports of the Ghost Dance since, on October 6, 1890, Kicking Bear came to Sitting Bull’s camp to teach the Ghost Dance to Sitting Bull’s followers. When word reached McLaughlin he immediately sent a detachment of Indian police to remove Kicking Bear from the Standing Rock Reservation, but the police, apparently awed by what they encountered, returned without fulfilling their mission. Kicking Bear eventually left Sitting Bull’s camp on October 15th, after receiving another warning from McLaughlin, but his departure did little to appease the agent—two days later McLaughlin sent a telegram to the commissioner of Indian Affairs in which he again called for Sitting Bull’s arrest. The commissioner
responded by telling McLaughlin to inform Sitting Bull that "any misconduct by
him personally or by others through his inducement or encouragement will be
visited by severe punishment" (qtd. in Coleman 75).

While McLaughlin reported the Ghost Dance to his superiors, calling the
dance "demoralizing, indecent, and disgusting" (qtd. in Coleman 75) and the "latest
Indian absurdity" (qtd. in Coleman 76), he was primarily concerned with the dance
only inasmuch as it helped his campaign for Sitting Bull's arrest. But elsewhere the
popularity of the new dance was causing great fear among more inexperienced
agents, such as Cheyenne River agent Perain P. Palmer and Pine Ridge agent Daniel
Royer, a fear that they passed on to the Indian commissioner in panicked
correspondences. On November 10th, for example, Palmer sent a telegram claiming,
"There is no doubt now that the hostile Indians at the dancing camps are preparing
to defy the authority of the department" (qtd. in Coleman 78). On this same day
Daniel Royer had to be dissuaded from fleeing the agency with his family after
words were exchanged between some of the "friendlies" and "hostiles" (Ghost
Dancers), after which he sent a series of telegrams and letters pleading for
permission to return to Washington so that he might give a report in person. His
first missives, such as this one, focused primarily on his wish to leave Pine Ridge:
"Please grant me the authority to come at once. There is no immediate danger of
any trouble with the Indians committing any depredations" (qtd. in Coleman 88).
When his requests were denied by return telegram, however, Royer's rhetoric
escalated greatly; thus by his fourth message he claimed:
The craze has steadily increased until now it has assumed such proportions both in the numbers and the spirit of adherents that it is entirely beyond the control of the agent and the police force, who are openly defied by the dancers, and as a means of stopping the dances, the agent suggests sending a body of troops sufficient to arrest the leaders the leaders therein and imprison them and disarm the balance of the reservation. (qtd. in Coleman 88)

In the days that followed Royer apparently shut himself in his house and refused to grant interviews. Although there had been no further incidents on the reservation, Royer’s panic, fueled by his imagination and self-imposed isolation, reached a fevered pitch. On November 15th he sent a telegram exclaiming:

The Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy. I have fully informed you that employees and government property at this agency have no protection and are at the mercy of these dancers. Why delay further investigation? We need protection and we need it now. The leaders should be arrested and confined in some military post until the matter is quieted, and this should be done at once. (qtd. in Coleman 88)

Within hours troops were dispatched to the areas where the Ghost Dance had gained the largest numbers of followers. But, despite the imminent arrival of reinforcements, Royer’s fears overcame him and he fled with his family to Rushville, some twenty-five miles south of Pine Ridge. Unfounded or not, Royer’s hysteria was contagious and the families of local traders and other whites followed him later that same night.

The panic of the white settlers and government officials had been fueled by a barrage of incendiary and entirely erroneous news reports warning of an impending “uprising.” On November 17th, the Omaha World Herald, for example, reported
that the Lakota had found a hidden stash of Custer’s rifles and had purchased the “entire stock of ammunition” from the area merchants (qtd. in Coleman 90). During this same period, false reports of battles and massacres circulated wildly, such as the November 22nd telegram the South Dakota governor received informing him that Indians had massacred seven white citizens (Coleman 90). The layering of inaccurate report upon inaccurate report had the chilling effect of steadily increasing the influx of troops and newspaper reporters onto the reservations.

The swelling presence of troops and artillery caused serious concern among the Lakota, who could see no reason for the military’s expansion. Those in closest range of the agencies grew increasingly fearful of their safety, an unease that multiplied tenfold with the November 26th arrival of the Seventh Cavalry. Now led by Colonel James Forsyth, this legendary unit had a long and bitter history with the Lakota, and there were reports among both Indians and whites that some members of the Seventh hoped to exact revenge for Custer’s defeat at Little Bighorn. The Lakota’s apprehensions about the troop buildup were not helped by the continued shortage of rations and supplies; although bitter weather was nearing, not a single piece of clothing had been distributed by any of the agencies. When winter hit the Dakotas in earnest in early December 1890, the Lakota were underclothed, underfed, and in fear for their lives.

As December began, there was a wary standoff between the Lakota and the U.S. Army. Differing opinions abounded as to what, if anything, was about to occur. James McLaughlin, for one, remained unfazed by the hysteria. His statement to reporters during a visit to Bismark on December 11th made his position
clear: “There is no danger of an outbreak and there never has been. Sitting Bull and his followers are still keeping up the Ghost Dance on Grand River, but their wild enthusiasm is rapidly abating” (qtd. in Coleman 179). But McLaughlin’s assurance about the relative calm on the reservation had no effect on his unabated desire for Sitting Bull’s arrest, and the day after this statement, upon finally getting the long-awaited orders, McLaughlin began to plan the Hunkpapa’s capture.

Sitting Bull and his family were asleep in his house when forty-three of McLaughlin’s Indian police arrived to arrest him on the morning of December 14, 1890. The majority of the eyewitness accounts state that Sitting Bull was pulled from his bed by six policemen and dragged naked out into the cold, although the most frequently quoted police narrative, Lone Man’s, details a knock on Sitting Bull’s door followed by a polite exchange after which he clothed himself for the journey to the agency (Brown 437; Coleman 260; Mooney 219). Whichever the case, Sitting Bull was allowed to dress at some point. The additional time meant that angry members of Sitting Bull’s camp had gathered outside his house and were verbally protesting his arrest by the time the police attempted to lead him away. There are a number of conflicting reports about what happened next, some holding that Sitting Bull put up no resistance and some that he adamantly refused to leave, some that he was shot in cold blood and some that he was accidentally wounded when members of his band attacked the arrest party. But no matter what the chain of events, the outcome was the same; within minutes of leaving his house, Sitting Bull, the great spiritual leader of the Hunkpapa, was dead, killed by a bullet from an Indian policeman, just as he had dreamed nearly a year before.\textsuperscript{22}
As news of Sitting Bull’s death was spreading over the newswires, General Nelson Miles headed to the Dakotas to take personal command of the U.S. forces, which he had to this point directed from afar. When reporters at the railway station questioned him about his next move, he gave this statement:

I have been criticized in some quarters for failing to order the military to make a direct attack upon the Indians. Naturally the troops who were assembled near Pine Ridge, Standing Rock, and other points could see no reason why a prompt and early movement on the hostiles should not be made. But while they were lying inactive other troops were being massed at various strategic points so as to completely surround the troublesome Indians. When the time is ripe a movement will be inaugurated. (qtd. in Coleman 218)

Like Sitting Bull’s dream of his own death, General Miles’ prophecy, too, would soon come to pass, although come to pass upon whom was the question—who were these constantly invoked “hostiles”? Indians had been surrendering at the various agencies throughout the troop buildup of the fall and winter, and Sitting Bull’s death merely increased their numbers. By late December 1890, only Short Bull’s, Kicking Bear’s, and Big Foot’s people remained at large. In fact, according to Coleman’s extensive research:

By now there were fewer than seven hundred “hostiles” away from the agencies. Less than a third could be classified as fighting men; in contrast Miles had mustered more than eight thousand troops in the Dakotas. The Ghost Dancers still away from the agencies were even outnumbered by the five hundred Lakota who had been recruited as scouts. The Ghost Dance seemed to be ending just as Miles arrived on the scene. (237)
But grandstanding such as that done by Miles in the train station continued despite such realities, and on December 17th, seven more companies of infantry were called to Pine Ridge.23

At the time of Sitting Bull’s death, Big Foot’s band of Minniconjou Lakota were returning from hunting antelope in the area of the Little Missouri River in North Dakota where they had gone after rumors began to spread that Big Foot’s people, who had recently taken up the Ghost Dance, had become “hostile” (Joseph Horn Cloud, qtd. in Coleman 47). When news of the rumors reached Big Foot, he acted quickly, moving his people out of range of the soldiers to ensure their safety. They spent the rest of the hunting season far out of reach of agency officials. But Big Foot was not inaccessible to other Lakota, and, according to his brother, Frog, messages arrived throughout the late summer and fall from Red Cloud, Little Wound, and others saying, “Big Foot, we want you to come over [to Pine Ridge] with your band at once. We are having a Spirit Dance here, but many soldiers have come and we fear we are going to have trouble so we want you to come and make peace. If you can make peace we will give 100 horses to your band” (Allen 211). Big Foot considered the requests at length and by early December had apparently decided to attempt to broker peace.24 According to Dewey Beard, whose family joined with Big Foot’s band to dance the Ghost Dance, Big Foot told his people, “We have to go to the [Cheyenne River] agency to get some annuities and some blankets and quilts; and when we come back I will see if we can go to the Pine Ridge Agency and make a peace” (qtd. in Coleman 48). They were on their way to Cheyenne River when news of Sitting Bull’s murder reached them. The possibility
of a white war on the Lakota compelled Big Foot to change direction, and he and his band would eventually head for Pine Ridge and what they hoped would be safety.

Big Foot was the central target of the cavalry after Sitting Bull’s death and government scouts were scouring the area in search of him. Well aware of this fact, Big Foot and his people were doing their best to avoid the soldiers as they made their way toward their relatives at Pine Ridge. On December 21st their luck failed and they were detained by Lieutenant Colonel Edwin Sumner, who demanded their surrender and started them on a forced march back to their old camp. But Sumner’s triumph was short lived—a day later Big Foot’s band executed a perfectly planned escape, leaving an embarrassed Sumner to explain the loss of 350 Miniconjou prisoners to General Miles, who was furious. But Big Foot’s success only made Miles more intent on his capture. A week later, on December 28th, Big Foot’s band encountered some of the Seventh Cavalry’s Indian scouts, who assured them of their safety should they turn themselves in to the soldiers. Big Foot, who had by now fallen very ill with pneumonia and begun to hemorrhage, ordered his people to raise a white flag. Shortly after, he surrendered to Major Whitside, the commander of the Seventh Cavalry. Too ill to walk, Big Foot was placed in an ambulance wagon and taken to Wounded Knee Creek. His people had little choice but to follow (Brown 439-43; Coleman 242-70; Mooney 226-29).

Big Foot’s band made camp at Wounded Knee Creek at about four o’clock that evening. Shortly before that Miles received a telegram informing him of the surrender: “Major Whitside reports the capture of Big Foot, 120 men, 250 women and children. Will endeavor to make sure of this. I send another battalion to
reinforce him. Will send them to the railroad at Gordan if you so desire. If I send
them to Omaha, will send part of the 2d Infantry as guards” (qtd. in Coleman 266).
Miles replied, “All right. Use force enough. Congratulations” (qtd. in Coleman
266). By 8:45 that night the Second Battalion under Colonel Forsyth and the First
Artillery under Captain Capron had arrived with Hotchkiss guns in tow (Coleman
266-7). The press, sightseers, and a trader with a wagonload of whiskey also
descended upon the camp hoping to see the final surrender of the “hostiles.”

When Big Foot’s people awoke on December 29, 1890, they were
surrounded by soldiers, including eight cavalry troops, one company of scouts and
four pieces of light artillery. For many of them the night had been uneasy. Paul
High Back would later recall, “We could hear the noise and rattle of iron being
moved around and it made us all very nervous and we could not sleep. [. . .] In the
morning we found that everything had been arranged differently. There was a row
of big guns set up on the hill and we found that they shot bullets very fast” (qtd. in
Coleman 275). A number of the more prominent members of Big Foot’s band had
been kept awake in an interrogation during which they were repeatedly asked to
identify all those who had participated in the Custer battle (Coleman 275). As the
morning dawned the men and boys were called to the center of camp for a council
with Major Forsyth. While the women began to break camp and prepare for the
march to Pine Ridge, the men were ordered to give up their guns. When only a
small number of guns were surrendered, the soldiers began to search the rest of the
Minniconjou camp for additional weapons. The council was tense and the Lakota
disagreed about whether to fully comply with Forsyth’s order since adherence
would leave them virtually defenseless against the surrounding soldiers.

Most histories of the massacre suggest that an inadvertent gunshot was the
triggering force for the soldiers’ attack (Hoxie; Wilson). Some propose a soldier
fired, many that a deaf or deaf-mute man by the name of, variously, Black Fox
(Mooney; Robinson), John Sitting Bull (Miller), or Black Coyote (Brown; Kehoe)
resisted giving up his gun, which then went off accidentally in the struggle. The
eyewitness accounts included in James McGregor’s 1940 book on Wounded Knee
give very different and rarely quoted accounts of the moments, however. I excerpt a
number of their stories here in order to emphasize the difference in these Native
narratives, which, rather than painting the massacre as an accident, imply that it was
a planned and ordered assault:

**Rough Feather** ‘Right near where Big Foot’s tent
was I saw a soldier. He had his gun in his hand, and
in a loud voice made some remarks. So I looked over
at him. [. . .] He was the one that again said
something in a very loud voice. About that time I
heard a noise behind so I looked back. I saw the guns
aimed at us. It sounded much like the sound of
tearing canvas, that was the crash.’ (McGregor 100)

**White Lance** ‘I could see that there was commotion
among the soldiers and I saw on looking back that
they had their guns in position ready to fire. There
were two officers in the center; the one that was
standing to the left gave a command in a loud voice
then we couldn’t see anything for smoke.’ (McGregor
109)

**John Little Finger** ‘Just about the taking knives and
other things way from the women time the soldiers
were going around these camp folks, I noticed that a
line of infantry was standing nearby and had been
commanded to load their guns and at that moment
they gave us to believe that they were going to do

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some shooting, so at that time this infantry began loading their guns I saw that there seemed to commence some trouble. I stepped out and then I struck through their lines to try to get away. Just as I was working from this line, that moment, I heard a white man’s voice at the other end sound something like, ‘hey.’ When that sound was made, it was about the same time that the report of the guns came in one sound. The soldiers commenced to shoot at that moment.’ (McGregor 111-12)

**Afraid of the Enemy** ‘I looked over and saw an officer on a sorrel horse coming around the left end of the camp. I heard him give some command and right after the command it sounded like a lightning crash.’ (McGregor 118)

**Richard Afraid of Hawk** ‘Shortly after all the weapons were gathered down where the infantry surrounded us and the cavalry surrounded the teepees right in between and we noticed some of the officers walk back and surround us. At the same time one of the two heavy guns or cannon were stationed up on this hill, and this officer was walking back and forth where we were surrounded. At the time one of these men that was riding back and forth after giving these commands, we couldn’t understand what he said, but something was said in a loud command and then all at once all the guns were fired.’ (McGregor 122)

**Charley Blue Arm** ‘I do not understand English but was told that one of the officers gave a command. I did not hear a gun before the big crash came from the soldiers. After that I saw many Indians lying dead around the truce flag or white flag that our Chief kept flying all the time, so that the soldiers would know that we were at peace.’ (McGregor 128)

With the first shot a melee broke out and gunfire erupted from all sides. Both Indian and white accounts agree that more than two-thirds of the men in the council circle were killed within the first few minutes of the shooting. While a number of Lakota were locked in hand-to-hand combat with the surrounding soldiers, others
raced both to flee and to reach the tepees where the women and children were.

Brigadier General L.W. Colby described the ensuing scene:

The surviving Indians now started to escape to the bluffs and cannons. The Hotchkiss guns were turned upon them and the battle became really a hunt on the part of the soldiers, the purpose being total extermination. All order and tactics were abandoned, the object being solely to kill Indians, regardless of age or sex. The battle ended only when not a live Indian was in sight. (qtd. in Coleman 310)

During the eight to ten minutes that made up the first assault the soldiers had difficulty aiming the large guns, but as the account of one of the correspondents at the scene details, when the men, women, and children began to escape into the valley the “artillery was called into requisition. [. . . ] Now, with the Indians fleeing, it was easier to reach them. The Gatling and Hotchkiss guns were trained and then began a heavy firing which lasted half an hour [. . . ] It was a war of extermination” (qtd. in Coleman 315).

The soldiers’ hunt for survivors continued throughout the afternoon. According to anthropologist Warren Moorehead, who reported on the massacre, at least twenty-six children under the age of thirteen were killed at Wounded Knee and “four babies were found on the battlefield with crushed skulls, showing that they had been struck on the head with either the butt of a musket or some heavy club” (qtd. in Coleman 317). Morehead also tells what happened to one young boy as he fled for the agency: “A soldier ran swiftly after the little fellow. Upon reaching a convenient distance [the soldier] knelt down and with cruel, deliberate aim shot the child through both hips. The boy lived long enough to be taken to the hospital at
Pine Ridge and tell his story” (qtd. in Coleman 317). There are also stories of survivors being called out of a ravine and told to surrender because the battle was over. “Some of these,” says eyewitness John Little Finger, “left the big ravine of refuge, and they went up on the flat [. . .] [and] sat in a circle up there, and the soldiers were surrounding them [. . .] and [then the soldiers] started to shoot them again” (qtd. in Coleman 318). While a number of fleeing Lakota would later be helped by Native rescue parties such as Black Elk’s (Neihardt 220-21), by nightfall the situation for the remaining survivors would worsen with the onset of a terrible blizzard.

Back at the agency, the Pine Ridge physician, Charles Eastman (Dakota), was overrun with casualties as he, his white fiancée, Elaine Goodale, Mrs. Cook (Episcopalian minister Charles Cook’s wife), and several Lakota turned the chapel and mission into a makeshift hospital (Eastman 109-115). Citing the blizzard, the U.S. government waited three days before sending a detachment out to look for survivors; a number of Lakota, however, including a party led by Short Bull, began searching the battlefield the following day. According to his own account, Short Bull’s party rescued more than forty survivors (Coleman 350). Eyewitness Joseph Horn Cloud named at least 103 Lakota survivors, but the number is probably higher since Horn Cloud’s list was drawn from memory (Coleman 356).

The mass burial of the Miniconjou dead began on December 30th with no service and no attending clergy. The total Lakota death toll will never be certain, but Paddy Starr, the government gravedigger who was paid two dollars a body, claimed to have put 168 bodies into a hastily dug trench; adding to that number
those who were killed while fleeing, those who died at the mission hospital and those who died later, an estimated three hundred Lakota died as a result of the massacre. The twenty-five soldiers who were killed at Wounded Knee, most by their own crossfire, were buried on December 31st at a funeral presided over by the agency minister, Reverend Cook, who was, ironically, Yankton Sioux. On January 15th the remainder of the Lakota came in from the Stronghold and surrendered.

Rationales and Representations

Dominant response to Wounded Knee was emblematic of the United States’ struggle with what was then called “the Indian question.” As a New York World reporter asked on the following day:

Was the killing of Big Foot’s braves on Wounded Knee Creek [. . .] yesterday morning another massacre, like the shooting of Sitting Bull, or was it a remarkable exhibition of savage heroism on the part of the little band of desperate Indians who, finding that their guns and horses were to be taken from them, made a dash for liberty, and fought for their lives until they were either shot down by the troops or had broken through the lines of their captors and escaped? (qtd. in Coleman 341)

While this reporter paints Big Foot’s band in a much more positive light than do many of the more rabid accounts, his question set the stage for the U.S. army investigation that sought, through a court of inquiry, to uncover the “facts” of the events of that late December day. Unfortunately, the inspectors personally interviewed only Colonel Forsyth and his officers. No enlisted men were asked to testify and only two brief Lakota testimonies were officially taken (and these were
witnessed by government officials whose sympathies lay with the U.S.). The officers in Forsyth’s division called Wounded Knee a provoked attack and also repeatedly denied having intentionally harmed women and children. Despite the fact that all evidence and the majority of Indian and civilian accounts stated otherwise, the matter was dropped. But, significantly for this study, the army inquiry would not be the last word. The stories of Wounded Knee would be told again and again, in newspapers and popular magazines, in memoirs of government officials and army correspondents, in U.S. and American Indian histories, and in not only the spoken and written accounts of the survivors and their families, but also in the poetry, fiction, and non-fiction of Native people across the country.

My project moves forward from this moment to consider subsequent representations of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre in American Indian literature. To do so, I begin with an examination of the first novel written by an American Indian woman: Muscogee author S. Alice Callahan’s recently rediscovered, *Wynema: A Child of the Forest* (1891), a text written only months after the massacre occurred. Highlighting the tensions in this early narrative, I argue that Callahan’s turn to Wounded Knee evinces a personal struggle to balance the injustice of the massacre with the privileged narrative of her life, which, like that of her title character, Wynema’s, was a picture of “successful” assimilation. But while I acknowledge that Callahan’s tale relies heavily on the repressive myth of the “vanishing Indian,” I highlight the possibility of resistance in *Wynema*, a possibility stretched and expanded by Callahan’s strong reaction to the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee.
My next chapter examines the canonization of two texts that include the most frequently cited retellings of the massacre and its aftermath—Dakota author Charles Eastman’s *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916) and Lakota Nicholas Black Elk’s as-told-to autobiography *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). By looking at the critical response to these texts and comparing that response to the autobiographies themselves, my third chapter maps the transformation of the Ghost Dance from historical event to literary metaphor. I contend that critical interpretations of these two accounts, rather than the accounts themselves, lay out a model through which the Ghost Dance comes to stand not for Native resistance, but instead for the erasure of Native peoples and cultures. My argument, however, does not merely engage with the ways *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* and *Black Elk Speaks* have been read by dominant culture, but also suggests alternate readings. I conclude that these early textual representations of the 1890 Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee create multiple and conflicting messages about Indian identity: while both Black Elk and Eastman do voice the acquiescence to assimilation emphasized by dominant histories and contemporary critics, their texts, at the same time, also contain previously unexplored emphases on resistance and survival.

Having examined the ways in which the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee have been configured by early American Indian authors, in the second half of my dissertation I turn to Native appropriations, revisions, and/or rejections of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee in the latter half of the twentieth century. I situate these responses as examples of what Annishinaabe theorist Gerald Vizenor has termed the “postindian,” Native strategies of resistance that counter the inaccurate images and
racist practices of dominant culture. To do so, I analyze, in chapters four and five, the writings of two contemporary American Indian authors—Sherman Alexie and Susan Power—whose contrasting narrative strategies, I argue, present opposing examples of twentieth-century Native writers’ representations of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee.

I first look at Spokane/Coeur d’Alene author Sherman Alexie’s body of poetry and fiction to investigate how Alexie—whose own ancestors did not participate in the Ghost Dance—appropriates the Ghost Dance as an explicit metaphor for Native resistance. This chapter illustrates how Alexie employs dominant images of the Ghost Dance to construct Indian identity in a pan-tribal context. Alexie capitalizes on the iconicity of the Ghost Dance, which has historically flattened and contained Native identities, by depicting this trope as a potential impetus for indigenous coalition.

In chapter five, I analyze how Dakota author Susan Power—whose tribal ancestors were both participants in the Ghost Dance and victims of the Wounded Knee massacre—uncouples dance from tragedy by focusing instead on the Grass dance, a war dance that promulgates tribal memory of heroism and resistance. I investigate Power’s transformation of the established colonial modes of discourse surrounding American Indian dance by examining the integral place the Grass dance holds in the cultural cosmologies of two specific characters in her novel *The Grass Dancer*—Pumpkin, a mixed-blood Menominee/Irish Grass dancer, and Harley Wind Soldier, a young Dakota Grass dancer. Most important to my work in this chapter are the ways in which these characters’ understandings of tribal culture inform their
interpretations of dance as a transgressive and subversive cultural performance. I conclude by highlighting Power’s recuperation of the Grass dance as a present-day marker of postindian resistance.

Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that the shifting literary representations of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre mark corresponding shifts in the way Native authors define and construct their ethnicity. This investigation is significant on two levels: first, such work expands the study of ethnic representation and tribal identity in American Indian literature; and second, it highlights the inaccuracy of histories and critical interpretations that link American Indian dance traditions, and most especially the Ghost Dance tradition, with the “end” of Native cultures. Such inaccurate portrayals have historically replaced tribal identities with a parody—a one-dimensional, monolithic “Indian,” usually presented in a stagnant and cartoon-like imitation of “Sioux” (Lakota/Dakota/Nakota) culture. Whether “wild,” “savage,” or “noble,” this monolith has a frightening effect on the political agency of Native peoples: as long as dominant culture continues to misperceive Native peoples, it can continue to deny their cultural and political sovereignty. My project contributes to the revision of such limiting and dangerous depictions of Native identity by highlighting the ways in which Native writers transform dominant images of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre into new tribal and pan-tribal stories of survival and resistance.
NOTES

1 Vizenor makes a political point by italicizing and not capitalizing the word “Indian.” He says the name “Indian [...]” insinuates the obvious simulation and use of colonial dominance. Manifestly, the Indian is an occidental misnomer, an overseas enactment that has no referent to real native cultures or communities” (vii). While a number of Native people, like Vizenor, reject the term “Indian,” others (especially those in reservation communities) continue to use the term on a daily basis as they have all their lives. Still other Native people have purposefully taken the term up, reclaiming “Indian” in much the same way that some members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual communities have recovered the word “queer.” While I respect and, in many ways, agree with Vizenor’s position, I use “Indian,” together with “American Indian” and/or “Native,” throughout my dissertation because these are the terms by which the writers I study most often identify themselves. I acknowledge, however, that any term that refers to the hundreds of indigenous North American nations, tribes, and peoples by a single collective name is by nature false.

2 The present terminology for Wovoka’s belief system comes from the Plains peoples who called the religion the “Ghost Dance” because of its promised return of the dead. The press and many of the white settlers who encountered the religion often used the more derogatory “Messiah Craze,” while Wovoka’s own people, the Paiute (known to themselves as Namu), called the religion “the round dance” (Hoxie 700). See Mooney (153) for a more exhaustive list of the names used by the various tribes that practiced the Ghost Dance.

3 For further evidence of Wounded Knee’s status as marker for the “end” of Native history, one need only glance at the many books on American Indian or Lakota history that conclude either with the 1890 massacre or with the year that follows. To name only a few here: Charles W. Allen’s From Fort Laramie to Wounded Knee: In the West That Was (1997 [1938]); Ralph Andrist’s The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians (1964); Dee Brown’s Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee (1972); George Hyde’s A Sioux Chronicle (1956); John G. Neihardt’s Black Elk Speaks (1974 [1933]); Doane Robinson’s A History of the Dakota Sioux Indians (1967); Robert Utley’s The Last Days of the Sioux Nation (1963) and The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890; and Stanley Vestal’s New Sources of Indian History, 1850-1891: The Ghost Dance and the Prairie Sioux (1934).

4 Read white, Protestant, upper middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.

5 Native people within the U.S. have endured a long and brutal history of government policies and programs—such as the Dawes Allotment Act, Termination, Relocation, and forced sterilization—that have constituted deliberate attempts to obliterate both their people and their cultures. While many nations have
begun to prosper in recent years through careful management of land resources and development of casinos and resorts, the legacy of U.S. oppression has by no means disappeared. Overall, American Indians, especially those on reservations, still face significantly higher poverty rates, death rates, infant mortality rates, alcoholism and fetal alcohol syndrome rates, and suicide rates than other U.S. citizens.

Embracing the philosophy of salvage anthropology, Edward Curtis took a famed series of photographs in the early twentieth century that were intended to document the last days of American Indian tribes in the U.S. Since, of course, Native people were adapting rather than disappearing, Curtis often had to appropriately clothe his models and alter pictures during the development process—such as erasing clocks or other markers of “modern” society—to recreate the desired image of a romantic people fading quietly into the idealized past.

Another significant difference between the two religions is that Wodziwob eventually repudiated the 1870 Ghost Dance while Wovoka maintained his beliefs and interacted with his followers until his death in 1932. Kehoe describes the end of the 1870 movement:

By 1872, fish were scarce, plant foods were not to be had, and Paiute were starving. For four years they had been dancing, hopefully at Wodziwob’s direction. Now he had another dream: Now he saw that what he had supposed were happy souls were only shadows. An owl, a denizen of darkness, mocked him as he gazed at the empty shadows. Wodziwob realized with horror that his prophecy was no more than a cruel trick of the evil witch owl. He confessed his sad illusion to the Paiutes, and they ceased dancing to attract back their loved ones. (33)

While Wodziwob’s revelation ended the 1870s Ghost Dance on the Walker River Reservation, the belief system, which had spread throughout Nevada, Oregon, and California, continued to be practiced by other tribes and was, in many cases, assimilated into existing tribal religions. See also Michael Hittman’s Wovoka and the Ghost Dance (173-4).

Hittman goes on to say, “One might even speculate that Tibo’o [Paiute term for whites] were not originally excluded from Wovoka’s ceremonies until a backlash of fear was generated by events on the High Plains” (79-80).

It should be noted, though, that not all accounts of the Ghost Dance align with Hittman’s, Mooney’s and Kehoe’s visions of the movement’s pacifistic nature. According to Paul Bailey, whose book, Wovoka, The Indian Messiah, is one of the four primary sources that Hittman examines most closely, Wovoka prophesized that both non-Indians and Indian skeptics would be destroyed (in Hittman 24-25).
Many scholars, however, connect the Ghost Dances to earlier, similar movements such as the “prophet dances” of the Northwest, community round dances during which participants would also fall into trances and prophesize. James Mooney, for example, in his preeminent monograph *The Ghost Dance Religion*, discusses Shawnee prophet Tenskwatawa, Wanapam shaman and prophet Smollhalla, and Indian shaker churches in the Northwest as possible precursors to the Ghost Dance. For more on these arguments see Leslie Spier’s *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives: The Source of the Ghost Dance*. See also the second part of Alice Beck Kehoe’s *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization* for an excellent overview of the various arguments about Ghost Dance origins.

See Kehoe (113-127) for more on the revitalizing effects the Ghost Dances and other prophet movements had within the Native nations who practiced them. See also Russell Thornton’s *We Shall Live Again*, which argues that both the 1870 and 1890 Ghost Dances “were meant to accomplish demographic revitalization. By joining the movements, tribes might assure their survival by increasing their numbers through returning the dead to life, which was the most fundamental objective of both movements” (xi).

While I believe that the dearth of references to the 1870 Ghost Dance relates strongly to the nation’s need to situate the 1890 Ghost Dance in a certain light, I by no means think such nationalistic desire is the only reason for the informational imbalance. Thornton suggests the following:

Basic descriptions of the 1870 Ghost Dance are limited, in comparison to the 1890 dance, probably because of the time difference between the two and the larger area of the 1890 movement. The 1890 dance also occurred in closer proximity to larger populations of whites, who became aware of it either directly through word-of-mouth or newspaper accounts. Further reasons undoubtedly include the development of anthropology and ethnology as scholarly disciplines and the founding of the Bureau of American Ethnology, both during the late 1800s. Contemporary accounts of the 1890 Ghost Dance were published in scholarly sources, but no contemporary accounts of the 1870 dance are to be found. (11)

Thornton’s theories, which offer several fairly convincing rationales for the informational discrepancies between the two Ghost Dance movements, ultimately underline the importance of simulation in Native history. Other than his allusion to the time difference between the two movements—of which I remain unconvinced given that than twenty years separate the end of the first Ghost Dance from the beginning of the second—each of his hypotheses rests on a different type of printed
media—newspaper, ethnographic, or anthropological “records.” Thus the very different ways in which the two Ghost Dances have been represented by dominant culture in “archives and lexicons” (Vizenor vii) remains, in each of Thornton’s probabilities, the central constructing force behind the surprisingly different depictions of these two religious movements.

12 The dates of Wovoka’s birth are variously given. The most often-cited date, 1856, is based on James Mooney’s interview with the prophet. Later interviews and further genealogical research, however, suggest a number of other possibilities. The range 1856-1863 comes from Hittman (27), who has done the most extensive research on Wovoka to date.

13 This hereditary claim to imperviousness from gunshots appears to be tied to the Ghost Dance shirt tradition, which the Lakota embraced as a part of their Ghost Dance practice. Ghost Dance shirts were painted with symbols that participants, such as Black Elk (Neihardt 206-7), described having seen in their dance-induced trances and were said to keep the wearer safe from harm. Wovoka himself did not include any mention of such shirts in his prophecies and Mooney writes that “[Wovoka] disclaimed all responsibility for the ghost shirt which formed so important a part of the dance costume among the Sioux” (Mooney 134). In fact, when Arthur Chapman asked Wovoka about his powers—such as an incident in which Wovoka was said to have been unscathed after having his brother purposely shoot him—Wovoka apparently said the reports were “only a joke” (qtd. in Hittman 84, 235). See Hittman (220) and Kehoe (36) for a more detailed account of this particular shooting and Hittman (82-88) for an overview of the entire discussion surrounding Ghost Dance shirts and Wovoka’s invulnerability.

14 See Hittman for more about the potential parallels between Christianity and Wovoka’s Ghost Dance philosophy (55-62).

15 Opinions depend on whether a scholar believes Wovoka had one vision or a series of visions. Those who hold with the idea of a series propose, as some of Wovoka’s statements seem to suggest, that the 1889 revelation constituted the central, but not the first, prophecy he received. Wovoka’s interview with Mooney, in which he says [according to Mooney’s paraphrase] that dances were being held before his “great revelation,” is most often cited as evidence for the earlier dates. See Hittman for an overview of the various positions (65).

16 Arthur I. Chapman left San Francisco for the Walker River Reservation on November 28, 1890, under order of Brigadier General John Gibbons, commander of the Military Department of the Pacific. Gibbons wanted Chapman, an Indian scout, to find and interview Wovoka whom he believed was “impersonating Christ.” The Ghost Dance, at this point, was already the subject of much fear and controversy among many settlers and government officials. Chapman’s report, which indicated
that there was nothing to fear, would come too late for the Lakota who were killed at Wounded Knee (Hittman 7-12). See also Arthur I. Chapman. “Report of the Secretary of War” (1891), which is included in its entirety in Hittman (Appendix A, 231-36).

17 The proscribed number of days that the Ghost Dance is to be performed varies from three to five, depending on the account. The number given in this account, five, is a number sacred to the Paiute. The variations tend to correspond with the sacred numbers of the people performing the dance as do the specifications of the accompanying religious system. The pacifistic nature of the Ghost Dance that Wovoka preached, for example, which seemed to be fairly inclusive, was transformed by the Lakota into a belief that all whites and non-believers would be destroyed.

18 See note eleven.

19 While Native dances had been greatly discouraged before 1882, the Indian Office’s release of the “Rules Governing The Court of Indian Offences” was one of the first codified attempts at suppression of dance. The rationale, as Secretary of Interior Henry M. Teller’s report explained, was that such “heathenish dances” were “not social gatherings for the amusement of these people, but, on the contrary, [were] intended to stimulate the warlike passions of the young warriors of the tribe” to commit such atrocities as “theft, murder, and rape” (qtd. in Ellis 137).

20 According to William Coleman, McLaughlin had animosity toward Sitting Bull on a number of accounts. The first was due to Sitting Bull’s influence among the Standing Rock Indian community:

McLaughlin’s prime objective was to turn the
Standing Rock Hunkpapas to agricultural pursuits,
even though he admittedly his annual reports to the
commissioner of Indian Affairs that farming was at
best a marginal pursuit on his reservation. Most of his
charges accepted his directives; but, one man—the
charismatic medicine man, Sitting Bull—stood
between the agent and the realization of his goals.
McLaughlin was not averse to taking strong actions
against anyone who questioned his authority; he
considered any Lakota who questioned him a
candidate for military prison. Sitting Bull was aware
of the agent’s ruthlessness and cleverly sidestepped
confrontation. This infuriated McLaughlin, whose
superiors told him not to arrest Sitting Bull. (67)

McLaughlin’s second problem with Sitting Bull may have centered on a more
personal issue regarding McLaughlin’s wife, who was half Lakota.
Mrs. McLaughlin and her son had toured with Sitting Bull when he joined Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show in 1885. Sitting Bull had been the star attraction on that tour and Cody had expected him to return for the 1886 season, but Sitting Bull refused due to his concern that another government land-grab attempt was in the making. Cody had apparently already engaged McLaughlin’s wife as an interpreter for the 1886 tour. According to Standing Rock interpreter Frank Zahn, Sitting Bull’s refusal nixed those plans and “ended Mrs. McLaughlin’s brilliant dreams of traveling in Europe. She could not forgive Sitting Bull for this disappointment. She was bitter against him and influenced her husband. Mr. McLaughlin denied Sitting Bull all privileges after this. Bitterness grew on both sides that never ended” (qtd. in Coleman 68).

All of this was compounded by Sitting Bull’s refusal to convert to Christianity, his comparison of McLaughlin to a “jealous woman,” and his interventions in the 1888 land negotiations where, according to Stanley Vestal, “It was Sitting Bull, not [McLaughlin as the agent later boasted], who saved those millions of acres and dollars for his people” (qtd. in Coleman 69).

21 The Custer battle would be a specter invoked again and again during the troop build-up that preceded the Wounded Knee massacre and cries of “Remember Custer!” were said to be heard throughout the violence of that day.

22 Six policemen were killed or mortally wounded in the ensuing altercation and at least seven members of Sitting Bull’s band were killed. One of these was Sitting Bull’s son, Crow Foot, who was in his mid-teens. Surprisingly, the accounts of Crow Foot’s death are one of the only places where all the eyewitness accounts align—he was found hiding in Big Foot’s house and, after pleading for his life, was shot point-blank by members of the Indian police force. See Coleman (197-224) for an excellent collection of all the eyewitness accounts of the events leading to Sitting Bull’s death.

23 Many have attributed the massive build up of troops and the ever-escalating military rhetoric of “defense” to General Miles’ political ambitions. A contemporary of Miles’, Brigadier General Wesley Merritt, even had the temerity to suggest such a thing at a press conference immediately following Sitting Bull’s death. He said, “[...] I have maintained from the first that an Indian insurrection at the approach of winter, when the braves were in need of food and forage, was an improbable thing. These Indians, despite all reports to the contrary, are poorly armed” (qtd. in Coleman 225). When a reporter followed up by asking, “General, what does this concentration of troops from the South mean?” Merritt’s answer was cutting: “It is not for me to say; but it is pretty well understood in army circles that private ambitions have had more or less to do with the present Indian situation” (qtd. in Coleman 225-26).

Coleman’s research suggests that the “flamboyant Miles, an Indian fighter and an adroit politician, [...] skillfully manipulated the press by selecting his most
pessimistic intelligence reports” (53) in order to gain larger appropriations for the army and set the stage for his political career.

24 Charlotte Black Elk, an authority on Lakota history and culture explains:
   We have a position called ‘The Keeper of the White Wing.’ The Trumpeter Swan is the bird of the north, its message is reconciliation: you have to throw away everything that’s finished its time and then go forward clean again. And so the wing of the Trumpeter Swan signified this office. Big Foot was that person among our people. (Wilson 284)

25 Colby was sympathetic to the Lakota and, in fact, adopted one of the children left orphaned by the massacre. Renée Sansom Flood’s Lost Bird of Wounded Knee details the life of Colby’s adopted daughter and her subsequent sexual abuse at the hands of Colby, her supposed benefactor.
CHAPTER 2

SHADOWS OF WOUNDED KNEE:
IMAGINED INDIANS IN S. ALICE CALLAHAN’S
WYNEMA: A CHILD OF THE FOREST

I begin this chapter with Gerald Vizenor’s haunting question—“What did it mean to be the first generation to hear the stories of the past, bear the horrors of the moment, and write the future? What were tribal identities at the turn of the last century?” (51). Using this question as a springboard, I ask: what can we learn from texts written at the turn of the century? Or, more precisely in terms of my project, what can we learn from texts written as the 1890 Ghost Dance spread from Nevada to the heart of the Dakotas? Or from texts written in the coldest months of winter as the papers flooded with sensationalized accounts of the Wounded Knee massacre? Looking at one such text, my second chapter considers Muscogee (Creek)1 author S. Alice Callahan’s novel, Wynema: A Child of the Forest, which was first published in spring of 1891, less than six months after the Wounded Knee massacre.

Examining this early textual representation of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre, I conclude that Wynema creates multiple and conflicting messages about Indian identity: while Callahan presents Wounded Knee as a signifier of loss, thus participating in the creation of the Wounded Knee trope in ways that eyewitness narratives like From the Deep Woods to Civilization and Black Elk Speaks largely resist, she, at the same time, presents a defense of the Ghost Dance
that challenges the underlying dominant ideology of her own narrative. Ultimately, Callahan's depictions of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre reflect her own indeterminate position as an affluent mixed-blood Native woman in the late nineteenth century. Thus I contend that an analysis of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee images in Wynema expands our understanding of the tensions and hope that underlie Native visions of American Indian identities in this difficult period of Native history.

**Muscogee Writer, Christian Teacher: S. Alice Callahan in History**

S. Alice Callahan's *Wynema: A Child of the Forest*, believed to be the first novel written by an American Indian woman, was only recently republished (1997) after having been lost from the public eye for more than a hundred years. From the outset the book received very little press. One of the only known publication announcements was printed on June 6, 1891, in *Our Brother in Red*, a Methodist journal associated with the high school at which Callahan taught:

*Wynema: A Child of the Forest*, is the title of a book just received. It is published by H.E. Smith & Co., of Chicago, and is on sale at C.B. Gilmore's book store. The author, Miss Alice Callahan, is a teacher in Harrell's Institute and a Creek Indian by birth. She is an intelligent, Christian lady and we look forward with pleasure to the time when our other duties will permit us to read the book. It is certainly cheap at 25 cents per copy. (qtd. in Van Dyke, "An Introduction" 123)

According to A. Lavonne Brown Ruoff, who was instrumental in bringing *Wynema* back into print, this "left-handed compliment was one of the only notices the book
received. Newspapers in Oklahoma and Chicago, where Wynema was published, ignored the book” (Wynema xvii). The text was apparently not mentioned again until 1911, when an obituary notice announcing the death of Alice Callahan’s father, Captain Samuel Benton Callahan, mistakenly attributed Wynema, which the paper called “Ne-ma,” to him (Foreman 306), noting the book “had a great run for a year or so, after it was placed on the market” (Van Dyke, “An Introduction” 123). Callahan’s novel was then apparently forgotten until Carolyn Thomas Foreman stumbled upon the account of Samuel Callahan’s death while researching Oklahoma writers. Armed with the knowledge of the text’s existence, Foreman eventually unearthed one of the few remaining copies of Wynema, which was then housed in the Library of Congress. She published an article on her research in the 1955 Chronicles of Oklahoma, after which the novel again returned to obscurity until Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., and James W. Parins listed it in their 1981 Bibliography of Native American Writers, 1772-1924. Rayna Green next mentioned the text in her 1984 anthology of Native women writers, That’s What She Said (Van Dyke, “An Introduction” 123). Even with these notices, however, Callahan’s book remained largely unknown and, subsequently, Mourning Dove’s Cogewea (1927) was still widely thought to be the first novel written by an American Indian woman. Limited scholarly awareness of Wynema’s existence was compounded by the book’s lack of availability, since Carolyn Foreman’s article, the primary means by which scholars heard of Callahan’s novel, cites a Library of Congress manuscript that was
apparently misplaced some time after Foreman discovered it. Despite such
difficulties, the full text of *Wynema* was eventually recovered and brought to
publication by Ruoff.

Like *Wynema*’s publication history, the story of Callahan’s life has been
somewhat obscured over time, especially in comparison to that of an author like
Charles Eastman, whose two popular volumes of autobiography, *Indian Boyhood*
(1902) and *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916), left a traceable, if
romanticized, record of the events of his early life. Born in Sulphur Springs, Texas,
on January 1, 1868, Callahan came to adulthood in a world that was poles apart
from that of either Black Elk or Eastman, who would have been, respectively, only
five and ten years her senior. Whereas these two Sioux² men experienced
traditional nineteenth-century Plains Indian childhoods that included riding, hunting,
and schooling in tribal customs—as Eastman documents in *Indian Boyhood* and
Black Elk recounts to John Neihardt in *Black Elk Speaks*—Callahan grew up in
what has been called the “Muscogee aristocracy,” a contingent of mixed-blood
Muscogee families whose wealth and political power gave them status in both
Native and non-Native communities (Ruoff, *Wynema* xv).

The existence of such an aristocracy and the striking difference between
Callahan’s childhood in comparison to Black Elk’s and Eastman’s is at least
partially explained by the Muscogee’s and Lakota’s disparate histories of contact.
The Muscogee’s original tribal lands were situated in the present states of Alabama
and Georgia, where their ties go back hundreds of years.³ First contact between the
Muscogee and the Europeans occurred during Hernando de Soto’s expedition in
1540, and, according to historian Michael Green, “by 1700 the Creeks [Muscogee] were in direct and frequent contact with the Spanish in Florida, the French in Louisiana, and the British in Carolina” (18). This contact initially led to a period of unparalleled prosperity and political strength for the Muscogee as the loose affiliation of tribes that had been the Creek Confederacy increased in size and number. At the same time, the traditional practice of subsistence hunting gave way, for many Muscogee, to the lucrative practice of trading hides and captives for European goods such as horses, guns, iron and steel utensils, and cotton cloth (Debo 26-36; Donald Green 19-23; Michael Green 18-25). The influx of French and British traders onto tribal lands led to more than just trade relationships, however, as hunters, trappers, and merchants married into established Muscogee families. 

Alice Callahan’s father, Samuel, listed on tribal rolls as one-eighth Muscogee, was the child of one such marriage.

The son of Amanda Doyle (Muscogee) and James Oliver Callahan (Irish), Samuel was born in 1833, three years before the U.S. policy of Indian removal compelled the Muscogee to embark on a forced march from, in the case of Samuel’s family, Eufaula, Alabama, to Indian Territory. More than 14,000 Muscogee traveled the 800 plus miles to Indian Territory, over 3,500 were buried along the trail, and an estimated forty percent of the entire Muscogee population died during or just after removal (Donald Green 40-49). Like thousands of Muscogee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee who were made to leave their traditional homelands, Samuel’s father died from the hardships of the journey.
After removal, Samuel’s family settled in Sulphur Springs where he attended public school. He would later study at McKenzie College in Clarksville, Texas, until, in 1856, he returned home to edit the *Sulphur Springs Gazette* (Van Dyke, “S. Alice Callahan” 47-48; Ruoff, *Wynema* xiii-xv). Within two years of his return, Samuel married Sarah Elizabeth McAllester, the daughter of Reverend William Thornberg, a Methodist minister in Sulphur Springs (Ruoff, *Wynema* xiii-xiv, note 2). During the ensuing years Samuel lived primarily in the tribal capital of Okmulgee, where he became a successful merchant, cattle rancher, and politician. Among his many positions Samuel was clerk of the Muscogee House of Kings, clerk of the Muscogee Nation’s Supreme Court, a justice of the court, executive secretary to three principal chiefs, tribal delegate to Washington, editor of the *Muscogee Indian Journal*, and superintendent of the Wealaka Boarding School Board (Ruoff, *Wynema* xiv-xv). Between these various posts and his business dealings in cattle and commerce, Samuel was a man of material wealth and political power by the time his daughter, Alice Callahan, was born in 1868.6

As one of eight children born to prosperous parents, Alice undoubtedly lived a life of comparative privilege. This affluence, a product of the long history of Muscogee-white relations, was in direct opposition to the life experiences of many other Native peoples, such as the Santee and the Lakota, the tribes to which Eastman and Black Elk respectively belonged. While the Plains tribes, like the Muscogee, had long been trading with whites for horses, weapons, and material goods, the effects of such contact had, at this point in time, made fewer inroads on the cultural lives of the nations of the western Plains. In 1868, the same year Alice Callahan
was born into a family that, in many ways, had a vested interest in conforming to and upholding the material mores of the dominant culture, Eastman’s and Black Elk’s families, along with other Plains peoples, were adhering to more traditional ways of life, hunting the last of the buffalo herds—which had been systematically decimated in accordance with U.S. government policy designed “to reduce the Indians to the verge of starvation” (Wilson 275)—and battling the U.S. government in attempts to stem white encroachment onto Plains Indian lands.⁷

The Lakota’s history of contact was very different from that of the Muscogee, which provides at least a partial explanation for the disparity between the two nations’ acculturation levels in the mid-nineteenth century. As agrarian, semi-sedentary peoples who lived nearer the East coast, the Muscogee were more immediately affected by the influx of Europeans and thus had considerably closer and more prolonged relationships with the settlers than did the Indian nations of the West. By contrast, the Lakota, a seasonally migrant, Plains-based people, did not experience this sort of extended, direct interaction with European immigrants until the early nineteen hundreds.⁸ For Callahan, Eastman, and Black Elk, these tribal variances led to vastly different childhood experiences. While Alice grew up with the trappings of wealth, Eastman and Black Elk grew up not only without such possessions, but also without even the same definitions of wealth, given traditional Lakota and Santee cosmologies that emphasize communal ownership and shared resources.⁹ Despite such early differences, Eastman and Callahan, however, had
some similar experiences in terms of their schooling and, by the time the three came to adulthood, Eastman, Black Elk, and Callahan would each embrace Christianity to one degree or another.

Callahan apparently lived in Sulphur Springs until some time around 1886 when she left the town of her birth for a teaching position in Okmulgee, Indian Territory. In late 1887 through June 1888 she attended the Wesleyan Female Institute in Staunton, Virginia, a liberal arts institute that, according to Ruoff, was most likely the basis for Keithly College (xvi). In February of 1891, just a few months after papers filled with accounts of the Wounded Knee massacre, Callahan took a position at the Harrell International Institute, a private Methodist high school for both Indian and white children, where she taught classes and edited Harrell’s journal, Our Brother in Red (Ruoff, Wynema, xvi). That same year Callahan, at only twenty-three years old, published Wynema. A year after Wynema’s debut, Callahan moved to the Wealaka Mission School where teachers’ reports bear her name from September 6, 1892 to May 20, 1893 (Foreman 311). In February of 1893, she wrote a letter to a friend in which she noted that her father, who was then superintendent of Wealaka, was encouraging her to finish her schooling. Callahan agreed with her father’s recommendation, saying:

I think it best to go there [Wesleyan Female Institute] to finish as I have begun there. I am studying on my French & Mathematics, preparing if I go back I shall study nothing but languages & literature & Mathematics. I finished Latin but I shall study it again. . . . When I finish I am going to build up a school of my own. (qtd. in a letter from Lulu Todd to Ruby Fears, January 7, 1894, in Foreman 312)
Although Callahan was planning to complete her degree, instead, as she explains in a letter dated December 7, 1983, she found herself “back in Harrell [International Institute] again” because “Miss Simmons has been so very sick and Mrs. Brewer was in such sore need of a teacher that I felt it my duty to come—felt it after Mr. Brewer sent for me several times and wrote me a very urgent summons” (qtd. in Foreman 313). Callahan clearly saw her return to Harrell as only a temporary delay in her plans to continue her education. An attack of pleurisy on December 26, 1893, however, was to stop Callahan from ever returning to Staunton and fulfilling her dream of opening a school. After a short and painful illness, she died on January 7, 1894, at the age of only twenty-six.

A “Dream of the Happy Hunting-Grounds”: The Introduction to *Wynema*

While we have no insight into Callahan’s writing process, we do have the product of her labor, *Wynema*, which, even a hundred years after its initial publication, presents readers with much to ponder. The short novel spans approximately twenty years, from the 1870s to the early 1890s, as it follows the title character, Wynema, a young Muscogee girl, from early childhood to the first years of her marriage. In many ways Wynema presents a case study in assimilation: when readers first encounter her, she lives in “an obscure place, miles from the nearest trading point” (Callahan 1) and sixteen miles from the nearest mission while, by the time the novel closes, she has become a teacher at Hope Seminary, a Christian mission school. During this time Wynema, as Eastman would say, moves “from the
deep woods to civilization,” becoming fluent in English, embracing dominant dress and attitudes, adopting Christianity and, ultimately, marrying a white husband. She is, in the end, a Native heroine made in Callahan’s own image.

Though her story serves as the text’s title and narrative frame, Wynema is arguably not the novel’s central character, an honor that goes instead to Genevieve Weir, a young, white Methodist teacher who moves to Wynema’s reservation to set up a school. Genevieve, whom Creek scholar Craig Womack dryly calls “civilization made flesh” (122), arrives in Indian Territory at some point in the 1870s. The narrator explains that following Wynema’s petition for a school, “[T]he cry rang out in the great Methodist assembly; ‘A woman to teach among the Indians in the territory. Who will go?’” (Callahan 4). This call, which is both a request from Wynema and a summons from a decidedly Christian god, is answered by Genevieve, “one from the sunny Southland—a young lady, intelligent and pretty, endowed with the graces of heart and head, and surrounded by the luxuries of a Southern home” (Callahan 4). After founding a school in Wynema’s village, Genevieve becomes not only Wynema’s teacher, but also her role model and confidant. The ensuing events follow a conventionally romantic plot, leading Genevieve into the arms of Gerald Keithly (another of the book’s saintly white folks), the superintendent of a nearby Methodist mission, and Wynema into the arms of Genevieve’s brother, Robin Weir. Romantic entanglements do not, however, preclude political or social involvement in Callahan’s text. And so the author, who was herself a member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in Muscogee
(Ruoff, *Wynema* xxxvii), laces her love stories with the ongoing debates of the day, including the issues of allotment, suffrage, temperance, and, by the end of the text, the massacre at Wounded Knee.

Such issues are not apparent, however, in the thickly romantic descriptions with which Callahan opens her novel. Most striking about *Wynema*’s initial passages is that Callahan’s depiction of her heroine’s village bears no resemblance to any past or present Muscogee community, even though most other cultural references in the book—such as the busk or Green Corn Dance, the making of traditional foods such as *sofki*, and the healing/purifying rituals—are clear allusions to Muscogee traditions. Essentially, Callahan’s introduction hearkens, in terms of Muscogee history, to a precontact past that existed only in her imagination:

> in an obscure place, miles from the nearest trading point, in a tepee [sic], dwelt the parents of our heroine when she first saw the light. All around and about them stood the tepees of their people, and surrounding the village of tents was the great, dark, cool forest in which the men, the ‘bucks,’ spent many hours of the day in hunting, or fishing in the river that flowed peacefully along in the midst of the wood. On many a quiet tramp beside her father, did this little savage go, for she was the only child, and the idol of her parents’ hearts. [. . .]

> Ah, happy, peaceable Indians! Here you may dream of the happy hunting-grounds beyond, little thinking of the rough, white hand that will soon shatter your dream and scatter the dreams.

> Here is a home like unto the one your forefathers owned before the form of the white man came upon the scene and changed your quiet habitations into places of business and strife. (Callahan 1)
As both Ruoff and Womack point out with differing degrees of sympathy to Callahan’s portrait, the Muscogee never lived in teepees and, in fact, by this time, which, according to the events in the book would have been the 1870s, had established thriving towns that would have been similar to or more developed than those of the white readers to whom *Wynema* was undoubtedly aimed. In apologetic explanation, Ruoff situates *Wynema*’s opening and Callahan’s generally “melodramatic style” as typical of the nineteenth-century romantic tradition (*Wynema* xxvii). She mediates her criticism of the novel’s aesthetic value, however, by suggesting that Callahan’s bucolic introduction, with its “description of the Muscogees’ Edenic life” (*Wynema* xxv), would have destabilized the prevailing assumption among whites at the time—that assimilation and “civilization” uplifted a desolate and “savage” people.

Craig Womack, on the other hand, finds little to laud in *Wynema*, which he terms “a decidedly ‘un-Creek’ novel” (111). Of the first passage, Womack says:

> In the novel’s opening scene, in fact in the first sentence, in a scene striking for both its pastoral romanticism and its simultaneous use of words such as ‘buck’ and ‘savage,’ Callahan reports of Creek life in ‘teepees.’ What interests me here is not merely that Callahan’s depiction is grossly inaccurate, not that she gets it wrong. I am struck by how wrong she gets it, and by the fact that she has to be purposefully, not accidentally, misrepresenting culture. As Ruoff points out, Callahan spent a very limited time actually living in Creek country. [...] Yet even one month in Creek country, much less several months teaching Creek children and dealing with Creek families, would be enough to reveal that Creeks do not live in teepees. This has to be intentional misrepresentation. What do we make of this author, then, who is purposefully writing to satisfy white stereotypes? (115-6)
Womack does not ask this question rhetorically, however; instead he provides a fairly concrete, although rather harsh, answer: “Creek authors, like authors from any other nation, are capable of writing lousy books” (116). And, while I admire Womack’s work, I must say that in the case of *Wynema*, I disagree. Not so much in terms of his aesthetic judgement—I doubt if even the kindest critic would call *Wynema* a beautifully written book—but in terms of his quick and limiting answer to his own compelling question. As I will with Eastman’s and Black Elk’s narratives in my next chapter, I suggest that with Callahan’s book, too, we must look beyond first impressions to recognize the context of the novel, to situate writer, audience, and text in their layered and complicated rhetorical moments.

Womack’s rejection of *Wynema* is based on the sort of literary nationalism called for by noted Dakota theorist Elizabeth Cook-Lynn—contextualized, tribal-specific criticism to be undertaken by Native writers about Native literature. Womack, a Creek scholar examining Creek authors from and for a tribal perspective, explains that such “literary analysis […] pays attention to nationalism” (120), asking, among other important questions, “In what ways does the novel record Creek history, create a sense of place on Creek land, advance Creek culture, or strengthen Creek autonomy? How deeply is it engaged in things Creek?” (120-21). These grounded, tribally specific concerns represent some of the most significant questions that can and should be asked of Native literature today; but, as Womack himself acknowledges, they are not the only questions that can be asked of a piece. And in the case of *Wynema*, I would venture to say they are not necessarily
the most productive questions to ask considering the era in which the text was written. While the novel may fail Womack's litmus test, it nevertheless has much to offer scholars of Native literature, since it answers Vizenor's pressing question—"What did it mean to be the first generation to hear the stories of the past, bear the horrors of the moment, and write to the future? What were tribal identities at the turn of the last century?" (51)—by presenting a rare, first-hand window into the way one Native woman writer imagines tribal identities at the turn of the last century. 

Wynema's representations of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee are significant as well, because while there are numerous historical narratives and accounts from the popular press about these two events, there are, to my knowledge, no other literary representations from the nineteenth-century. Despite my belief in Wynema's value as a historical document, however, my intent is not to dismiss Womack's criticism out of hand—Callahan's assimilationist rhetoric and overt Christian ideology are troubling. But while I acknowledge this problem, I suggest that Callahan's depictions of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee challenge, at least in some instances, the staunchly conservative rhetoric of Wynema's earlier chapters. To fully understand the narrative shift, we must first briefly examine some representative moments from the initial half of the text.

**Proselytizing Teachers and a Pedagogy of Dumplings:**
**Narrative Tension in the Early Chapters of Wynema**

Throughout Wynema, Callahan tends to idealize dominant norms such as western education, which she portrays as inherently tied to a Eurocentric Christian
cosmology. That Callahan presents such a missionary mentality should not be surprising considering that, even while Christianity was and still is controversial among the Muscogee as a whole, the missionary fervor was so entrenched among certain factions of the Nation that tribal envoys were sent out from Okmulgee, the Muscogee capital, to share the “light” of Christianity with other Native peoples. In 1874, for example, Baptist missionary Rev. John McIntosh went on an expedition to preach to the Native peoples of the Southwest, and, according to historian Angie Debo, at least until the time of her study in 1941, the Muscogee “never ceased their missionary work among the southwestern tribes” (208-9). But although Callahan’s evangelistic zeal permeates *Wynema*, I contend that her Christianity is challenged, and at times even undermined, by her attempts to address the U.S. government’s oppression of Native peoples. Callahan’s most conservative rhetoric is espoused by Genevieve Weir, the white heroine whose views and actions exemplify some of the more disturbing aspects of Christianity and who, to some degree, seems to be more Callahan’s alter ego than is Wynema.

Early in *Wynema*, Genevieve, like Callahan, writes a letter to a friend saying that she “intend[s] to teach the ancient and modern languages and higher mathematics” (Callahan 9) to her pupils. But Genevieve’s first days in Wynema’s community are consumed not by the struggle of a non-Muscogee speaker trying to teach reading, writing, or arithmetic to Muscogee children, but, instead, by her personal struggle over how to introduce and eventually convert her students to her faith:
Genevieve Weir stood at her desk in the Indian school-house, reflecting: How shall I make them understand that it is God’s word that I am reading and God to whom I am talking? She deliberated earnestly.

[. . . .]

‘I shall begin the exercises with the reading of the Word, and prayer, at any rate, and perhaps they will understand by my expression and attitude,’ she determined at length, calling the school to order. She read a portion of the fourteenth chapter of St. John—that sweet, comforting gospel—then clasping her hands and raising her eyes, she uttered a simple prayer to the ‘all-Father,’ asking that he open the hearts of the children, that they might be enabled to understand His word; and that He give her such great love for her dusky pupils, that her only desire be in dividing this Word among them. The pupils understood no word of it, but the tone went straight to each one’s heart and found lodgment there. (Callahan 6)

Passages such as this suggest that Womack is at least partly correct when he claims “Callahan’s novel is more interesting as an assimilationist and Christian supremacist tract than it is as a Creek novel” (116). I agree that these overtones are clear: even with limited awareness of her own cultural biases, Genevieve—and by extension Callahan—unquestionably comprehends the connection between language and culture in this scene. “The Word,” which is alternately both the English language and Christian doctrine, is the means by which Genevieve plans to inculcate not just academic lessons, but an entire cosmology. Genevieve is, in this case, engaging in perhaps the most classic form of colonization, which theorists like Ashis Nandy describe as the process of “coloniz[ing] minds in addition to bodies” by “releas[ing] forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all” (qtd. in Gandhi 15-16). As the embodiment of such a force, Genevieve effects a pedagogy not of education, but rather, as Nandy suggests, of indoctrination. And
given that she is undoubtedly the character with whom readers are meant to empathize, vignettes of this sort suggest that Callahan invites or, indeed, even expects her audience to identify with Genevieve’s goals and, correspondingly, with the aims of the colonial project (e.g., assimilation, Christianization, deracination, etc.). But while this sort of overtly assimilationist rhetoric plays a large part in Callahan’s work, I believe it is merely one aspect of a more complicated picture, as we see when Genevieve’s prejudices are highlighted only a scene later.

Genevieve’s immersion into Muscogee culture is marked by moments when her cultural expectations clash with the customs and beliefs of the Native people among whom she lives. The first indication of this disjunction revolves around a significant cultural marker—food. In a somewhat didactic chapter entitled “Some Indian Dishes,” Genevieve encounters a number of “Indian dainties,” including blue dumplings, which she finds “tough and tasteless” (Callahan 10) and “softe,” which the narrator explains “is rather palatable when fresh, but as is remarkable, the Indians, as a general thing, prefer it after it has soured and smells more like a swill-barrel than anything else” (Callahan 11). The vehemence of Genevieve’s distaste for these traditional Muscogee dishes and the narrator’s negative descriptions are only weakly countered with the subsequent narrative caveat: “We of this age are constantly talking and thinking of ways and means by which to improve our cookery to suit poor digestive organs. How we would hold up our hands in horror at the idea of placing blue dumplings on our tables! And yet, we are a much more dyspeptic people than the ‘blue dumpling’ eaters” (Callahan 11). Both Womack and Ruoff examine and dismiss this scene as indicative of Callahan’s own
ambivalence about Muscogee culture: Ruoff notes, “Although Callahan is careful to
defend the tribe’s tastes and customs, sometimes her depictions of Genevieve’s
repulsion are more convincing than her justifications” (xxv); while Womack
comments that in the book’s “general trashing of Creek cooking [...] the apology
just barely exceeds the revulsion” (111). 14

Most interesting to me about Callahan’s discussion of food is that her thick
descriptions exist at all in a text with such a seemingly straightforward alignment to
a dominant ideology. And as ambivalent as the tone might be, Callahan’s detailed
explanation of ingredients and step-by-step cooking instructions mark an attempt to
teach the reader about Muscogee culture. One example of this is when Wynema, in
heavy dialect, explains how to make her beloved blue dumplings: “It is meal beat
from corn, beat fine, and it is beans with the meal. Shell the beans an’ burn the
shells of it, an’ put it in the meal, an’ put the beans in an’ wet it an’ put it in a shuck,
an’ tie the shuck so tight it won’t spill out an’ put it in the water an’ boil it”
(Callahan 10). Much like Ella Cara Deloria’s Waterlily, one of perhaps the best-
known combinations of ethnography and fiction in American Indian literature,
Callahan provides her readers with a window into Muscogee society. While, as
twenty-first century readers, we may not approve of the manner in which Callahan
describes Muscogee culture, such references nevertheless demonstrate her
investment in that culture by introducing dominant audiences to important
Muscogee traditions.

Put aside discussions of food, and Wynema is still a more multi-faceted text
than it might first appear. Most notably, the novel serves as both a reflection of the
author’s Christian ideals and a vehicle through which those ideals can be shown to fail. And that failure is nowhere more apparent than when the narrative unexpectedly turns to the events surrounding the Wounded Knee massacre, which, as Ruoff notes, “is such an abrupt departure from the earlier romance plot that it was probably added to an almost complete novel” (*Wynema* xxvi). I suggest that Callahan’s extended meditation on Wounded Knee arises, in part, because the physical and cultural distance between the Plains peoples and the Muscogee makes the massacre a safer vehicle for commentary than events closer to home; *Wynema*’s turn to Wounded Knee enables Callahan to criticize Christian hypocrisy and U.S. government Indian policy without having to take a difficult stance on the attitudes that circumscribe her own life. Thus, as I will show, only months after the massacre occurred, Wounded Knee already has become a synecdoche for the larger drama of Native-white relations—the single event bearing the weight of any number of conflicts, broken promises, and Native deaths that came before it. A closer look at Callahan’s representation of the massacre brings this relationship to light.

"Turmoil With the Indians": Callahan’s Wounded Knee

By the time Callahan introduces the problems in the Dakotas most of *Wynema*’s narrative tensions have been resolved: Genevieve has left her conservative, anti-feminist, Indian-hating beau, Maurice Mauran, and recognized her feelings for fellow missionary and teacher Gerald Keithly, and *Wynema* has agreed to marry Genevieve’s brother Robin Weir, who “had fallen desperately in love with ‘the little Indian,’ as he termed her before he knew her” (Callahan 60). In
the realm of Callahan’s novel, all things are right with the world. Just when the requisite “Dear reader, I married him,” is expected, however, attention shifts, instead, to the then-current events in the Plains.

Callahan’s narrative jump is an interesting one, and, while no letters or journals exist to provide concrete explanations for the change in her story line, we can make some educated guesses. The first and clearest rationale for tacking what amounts to a new story onto an already resolved novel is, as Ruoff suggests, timing: Big Foot’s peoples were massacred on December 29, 1890; while Wynema’s exact publication date is uncertain, the publisher’s preface, dated April 1, 1891 and Our Brother in Red’s June 6, 1891 announcement of the text’s publication leave a space of only four to five months between the massacre and Wynema’s debut. Given these dates, it is safe to say that the first section of Wynema must have been either complete or near completion when the events on Pine Ridge spurred Callahan to expand her novel. During the winter and the spring of 1891, Callahan was teaching at the Harrell International Institute and editing Harrell’s journal. At the same time, like millions of others across the country, she was undoubtedly reading reports about the incidents at Pine Ridge. Wounded Knee was, after all, a media event. With news accounts of the Ghost Dance increasing exponentially, white anxieties running high, and the largest number of federal troops amassed since the Civil War, the press was in place and ready when the massacre occurred—Callahan could hardly have avoided news of the massacre even if she had tried. On one hand, then, Callahan’s fictional account of the events, which would have been composed in the scant hours during which she was not teaching, grading, editing, or caring for
children, is a response to writing and living at a certain historical moment. But, while Callahan's depiction of Wounded Knee is undoubtedly a reaction to the disturbing events on Pine Ridge, it is also a moment of significant narrative action, a moment when Callahan as author and as Native writer, fleetingly steps away from the pre-scripted conventions of the western romance and assimilation narrative to tell a different story, one that uses Native characters to tell Native history. And, whether perceived as successful or not, Callahan's depiction of the conflict moves beyond the lurid journalistic accounts that focus on dead Lakota bodies by giving voices, faces, and stories to those who died and, perhaps most significantly, by acknowledging the presence of women at Wounded Knee.

Callahan begins the section on Wounded Knee by addressing the media reports surrounding the Ghost Dance. Ever aware of her white audience, she puts her defense of the Lakota people into the mouths of characters other than Wynema and Genevieve. The first instance of this displacement occurs in the chapter entitled "Turmoil With the Indians," which finds Wynema and Genevieve now married with young children.

"Turmoil With the Indians" begins with the entrance of Genevieve's husband, Gerald Keithly, who disturbs the bucolic familial scene by bringing up the possibility that "the Indians living on the reservation in Dakota are in trouble" (Callahan 71). His subsequent comment, however—"I fear, if their requests are not granted, the white settlers will have to suffer for it" (Callahan 71)—mediates the initial suggestion of sympathy by implying that the ultimate victims of Indian problems are not the Indians themselves, but whites. Under the guise of concern,
Gerald’s observation invokes the specter of Indian hostility that was the dominant discourse of the period. But Gerald’s fears, and thus the fears of all those who invoked such a specter in the months before and after Wounded Knee, are immediately challenged by Genevieve’s mother, Mrs. Weir, who has joined her children in Oklahoma in the intervening years. She asks, “‘But what is the cause of the disturbance? I know there must be some serious cause, for the Indians have never gone on the war-path, or even troubled their white neighbors, without abundant cause’” (Callahan 71). Mrs. Weir’s query undercuts Gerald’s suggestion of Indian hostility by intimating, instead, that whites rather than Indians are the actual hostile parties not only in this instance, but in the entire history of Indian-white conflicts in the U.S.

This then-radical criticism—one of the first unambiguous defenses of Native people that Callahan presents—is reinforced a few lines later when Gerald reads aloud:

Here is what the papers say: ‘A dispatch from Sisseton, South Dakota, says that the twelve thousand Indians on the Sisseton and Wahpeton reservations are on the verge of starving at the opening of winter, because of the Government’s failure to furnish subsistence. The Interior Department has authorized the expenditure of $2,000 for the relief of the red men, but on this small sum of money over two thousand men, women, and children must live for a period of over six months of rigorous weather. Their chiefs and most able-bodied men have petitioned the government to send them aid; ‘for,’ they say, ‘if they do not get some help there will be great suffering and actual starvation.’ [and Gerald continues] ‘Another paper says, ‘the Indians of the Northwest have the Messiah craze and are dancing themselves to death—dancing the ghost dance. [. . .] If the United States army would kill a few thousand or so of the dancing Indians there would be no more trouble.’ (Callahan 72-73)
These two excerpts present very different rationales for the problems: the first lays culpability squarely at the feet of the U.S. government, while the second invokes the Ghost Dance as a signifier of Native savagery, marking the dance itself as the cause of the here-unspecified trouble. In addition, the second editorial—with its suggestion that the Lakota are "dancing themselves to death"—also effectively eliminates U.S. government accountability for future Indian deaths by implying that such an end is inevitable. Ultimately, as Callahan no doubt intends, the factual detail in the first article, with its specific account of the Lakota's problems and its reference to the presence of women and children, brings the callous hostility of the second into stark relief. This reading would have been especially true for contemporary audiences of the time who, given the recent headlines about the Wounded Knee massacre, would have been well aware that the hostile editorial foreshadows the later events of the novel. When examined together, then, these articles and the characters' reactions to them highlight Callahan's argument about the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee: by focusing on the severity of the Lakota's difficulties and the vehemence of the calls for bloodshed in the popular press, she debunks the theory that the Lakota Ghost Dance "caused" the deaths of 300 Miniconjous at Wounded Knee. Thus, Callahan depicts the Wounded Knee massacre in more complicated ways than the single, simplistic narrative of cause and effect that comes to dominate later histories.

In an unusual move for a text largely given over to white voices, Callahan follows these first articles with a Native-authored defense of the Ghost Dance.
After Gerald finishes reading the newspapers aloud, Genevieve appeals, "'Some one should answer that, Gerald'" (Callahan 73). Previously in Callahan's text the 'someone' who steps up to bat in such instances has always been white (usually either Genevieve herself or, more frequently, Gerald, who seems to have every answer in the case of "the Indian question"), but in an about face—"'And someone has, dear'" (Callahan 73)—the response to the oppression of Native peoples is finally given by an Indian, "Old Masse—Hadjo," an Indian newspaper editorialist.

Hadjo responds quite differently than any other Native person in Callahan's book up to this point. While hotly contested issues, such as the misallocation of Native annuities and allotment, are addressed in earlier sections of *Wynema*, their intricacy, prior to the inclusion of Hadjo's voice, has been portrayed as beyond the ken of Native people. In the conversation surrounding funds misallocation, for example, Wynema's father, Choe Harjo, asks,

"Gerald Keithly, where is the money these poor Indians should have had on their head-right long ago? [. . . .] My people here are in destitute circumstances, some of them wanting the necessaries of life, and have been anxiously looking forward to this payment. John Darrel, the merchant of Samilla, came through here last week and told me that the delegates whom we sent to represent us at Washington had acted treacherously and that we would get no money. He gave Mihia [Genevieve] some papers, and she tried to explain it all to me but I cannot understand it exactly.' (Callahan 30)

Choe no doubt refers to the 1889 scandal over land payments in which the Muscogee were paid $10,000 out of a $2,280,857 dollar settlement from the U.S. government for land that had been ceded in error (Debo 348-50; Ruoff, *Wynema* 73)
Tribal reaction was strong and immediate, and throughout the summer and fall of that year the Muscogee Daily Phoenix carried daily coverage of the issues including “reports, summaries of investigations, letters to the editor, and explanations from the accused on the misuse of per capita funds” (Ruoff, Wynema xxxix). The Muscogee worked through both the tribal and the U.S. government systems to try to reach a solution, and while the truth did not unfold immediately, the barrage of attention in the Muscogee media suggests that most Muscogee, unlike Callahan’s Choe, were well aware of the nuances of the situation.

Choe’s childlike puzzlement and difficulty comprehending the mishandling of tribal monies is matched by his daughter’s naiveté when she and Genevieve discuss allotment. Within this scene, Genevieve, rather than Gerald Keithly, embodies the voice of wisdom in the allotment debate. Wynema, in contrast, parrots the dominant pro-allotment arguments when she “earnestly” puzzles:

‘But I don’t see how dividing our lands can materially damage us [. . .]. We should have our own homes, and contrary to ruining our fortunes I think it would mend them. See! This is the way I see the matter. If I am wrong, correct me. There are so many idle, shiftless Indians who do nothing but hunt and fish; then there are others who are industrious and enterprising; so long as our land remains whole, in common, these lazy Indians will never make a move toward cultivating it; and the industrious Indians and ‘squaaw men’ [white men married to Indian women] will enclose as much as they can for their own use. Thus the land will be unequally divided, the lazy Indians getting nothing because they will not exert themselves to do so; while, if the lands are allotted, do you not think that these idle Indians, knowing the land to be their own would have pride enough to cultivate their land and build up their homes? It seems so to me.’ (Callahan 50-51)
Genevieve counters Wynema’s pro-allotment speech with her own (equally disturbing) logic: arguing first that “the western tribes [were not] sufficiently tutored in the school of civilization to become citizens of the United States, subject to its laws and punishments” (Callahan 52); and second, that the “poor, ignorant, improvident, short-sighted Indians would be persuaded and threatened into selling their homes, piece by piece [to whites] until finally they would be homeless outcasts” (Callahan 52). At the close of Genevieve’s speech, Wynema recognizes the error of her pro-allotment sentiments, exclaiming: “Oh, I am so sorry, dear Mihia—so sorry I was so foolish! Pray, forgive me! It is always the way with me, and I dare say I should be one of the first to sell myself out of house and home” (Callahan 52-53). Both Choe and Wynema are infantalized in these passages, but Choe’s character—no doubt, according to the novel’s logic, because of his full-blood, pagan identity—seems entirely incapable of sophisticated thought. Wynema, on the other hand, redeemed by her Christianity, her quick grasp of English, and her allegiance to assimilation, eventually comprehends the explanations of her white patroness. But regardless of their differences, the conversations are classic examples of the paternalistic rhetoric of the day since, in each case, Callahan portrays the politics of Indian life as better understood by whites. The editorial attributed to Hadjo, however, breaks this unsettling narrative pattern.

Gerald reads Masse Hadjo’s letter from an unnamed newspaper and, whether the piece was written or, as is more likely, quoted verbatim by Callahan, Hadjo’s letter represents one of the few moments in the text where a Native person takes a
strong and reasoned stance on Native issues. For the remainder of *Wynema*, as Stijaati Thlaako, (one of Craig Womack’s alter egos), points out humorously, “No matter how you figger it, there’s more white Methodist talk than Indian talk or Creek talk” (126). This imbalance is at least briefly remedied by Hadjo’s impassioned defense of the Ghost Dance.

Hadjo uses Christianity as a point of reference for an audience obviously assumed to be both white and Christian. He first berates the editoralist who suggests that “the United States army [should] kill a few thousand or so of the dancing Indians” (Callahan 73), and then goes on, in a noteworthy move, to contest the general legitimacy of Christian practices. Hadjo says:

The Indians have never taken kindly to the Christian religion as preached and practiced by the whites. Do you know why this is the case? Because the Good Father of all has given us a better religion—a religion that is all good and no bad—a religion that is adapted to our wants. You say if we are good, obey the ten commandments and never sin any more, we may be permitted eventually to sit upon a white rock and sing praises to God forevemore, and look down upon our heavenly fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers in hell. It won’t do. The code of morals practiced by the white race will not compare with the morals of the Indians. We pay no lawyers or preachers, but we have not one-tenth part of the crime that you do. If our Messiah does come, we will not try to force you into our belief. We will never burn innocent women at the stake, or pull men to pieces with horses because they refuse to join with us in our ghost dances. [. . .] You are anxious to get hold of our Messiah so you can put him in irons. This you may do—in fact you may crucify him as you did that other one—but you cannot convert the Indians to the Christian religion until you contaminate them with the blood of the white man. The white man’s hell is repulsive to the Indian nature,
and if the white man’s hell suits you, keep it. I think there will be white rogues enough to fill it. (Callahan 73-74)

Writing scant months after Wounded Knee, Callahan makes many significant authorial decisions, and among them is her inclusion of this polemic attack on her own religion. While Hadjo’s rhetoric is less bloodthirsty than that of the white editorialist he confronts, his opinions challenge the very core of the Christian cosmology that undergirds most of Wynema.¹⁵

Hadjo’s claim marks one of the key moments in which the assimilationist narrative of the text fractures. While better-known accounts of the period, such as Charles Eastman’s, validate the Ghost Dance by placing it on a comparable level with Christianity, Callahan, with her inclusion of Hadjo’s vehement speech, presents not only an attack on the history and foundation of Christian beliefs, but a claim for the Ghost Dance as a “better religion.” Better in aim, better in outcome, better suited for Indian wants and needs, the Ghost Dance, according to Hadjo, has no parallel in Western religious history—quite a radical commentary for a nineteenth-century Christian Muscogee woman to include in a book so obviously aimed at dominant audiences of the period. Speaking of Charles Eastman, Vizenor sympathetically describes Native authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as “carrying the burdens of the manifest manners of discoveries, the presence of antiselves, and the duplicities of assimilation policies, tribal ironies and counter simulations” (48). I place Alice Callahan among those who carry such burdens, and suggest that if Wynema and Genevieve, with their dominant-identified lives, represent Callahan’s public self as Christian teacher, then perhaps Hadjo...
represents what Vizenor would call her “antiself,” the repressed Native voice that compels Callahan to authorize a denunciation of her own religion so that she might tell the story of Wounded Knee.

Though Hadjo’s indictment of Christianity is glossed over by Genevieve—whose response to his article is “Just think, the poor things are starving to death and are praying to their Messiah to relieve them, as nobody on earth will. And because of this white people want to kill them” (Callahan 74)—the fact remains that Callahan, despite her allegiance to Christianity, never questions the legitimacy of the Ghost Dance. Instead, *Wynema* validates the Native religion and emphasizes the threat of white hostility, turning dominant rhetoric on its head and thereby extricating the Ghost Dance from the violence to follow. By the next chapter, however, the conversations about the Ghost Dance fall away and the text returns to a Christian conservatism as the story turns to the days just before the Wounded Knee massacre.

Once the stage has been set by the discussion of the newspaper editorials, *Wynema* moves from Oklahoma to South Dakota with a very thin and obviously hurriedly added explanation: Carl Peterson, a minor white character courting one of Genevieve’s sisters, has at some point in the past “toiled five years among the Sioux Indians [...] spreading the gospel” (Callahan 35). Thus, upon hearing the news of the tensions, Carl feels compelled to journey to Pine Ridge in order to dissuade his “people, the Sioux, [who] are about to go on the war path” (Callahan 74). Wynema’s husband, Robin Weir, refuses to let Carl undertake the dangerous mission alone and, in the next scene, the two are in South Dakota. Once there, Carl
pleads with his old friends, saying, “Go into the reservation and surrender your firearms [. . .] Place yourselves in a submissive attitude and the government will protect you” (Callahan 80). Wildfire, the central speaker in the encounter, recounts the litany of deaths and broken promises that lead him to reject Carl’s pleas. He ends his statement with this speech:

‘You speak of my wife and children. Ah, well you may. It is for them I resist, for them I shall battle, and for them I shall die, if need be—that my sons not grow up the oppressed wards of a mighty nation—the paltry beggars to whom the pitiful sum of one cent is doled out when the whole vast country is theirs by right of inheritance. Tell me, you who are wiser—are learned in the arts and sciences of all times—tell me, is it right for one nation to drive another off and usurp their land, take away their money, and even their liberty? Say, is it right? Ah, you cannot answer, for you dare not answer, yes. And again, is it right for the nation who have [sic] been trampled upon, whose land, whose property, whose liberty, whose everything but life, have been taken away, to meekly submit and still bow their heads for the yoke? [. . .] No, no, my friend. You are kind, and you mean well, but you can never understand these things as I do. You have never been oppressed.’ (Callahan 85)

The dialogue leads to an impasse between Wildfire and Carl and a philosophical divide among the group of Lakota with whom Carl speaks: while Wildfire and the younger warriors will not, or as Wildfire explains, cannot trust the promises of a government that has misled them time and time again, the older men, persuaded by Carl’s entreaties, agree to return to the reservation. Great Eye, the leader of the second group, explains his reasoning, saying:

‘i feel and know all that my friend Wildfire has said, [. . .] but while I feel that we have been mistreated by our agents, yes, and by the great Government, I can
see that resistance means death to us. We must submit to military authority or die. I believe that the soldiers will deal more honestly with us than our agents have; and I think that, now the United States Government has been shown so plainly and forcibly how we are constantly suffering at the hands of its agents, it will provide against future cruelties. We have only to go back to the reservation, surrender our fire-arms, and we are taken into governmental care and protection.’ (Callahan 82)

Great Eye’s tone resonates with inevitability, and the massacre of the “hostiles” who align themselves with Wildfire and his unflinching stance that “Cowards alone surrender” (Callahan 83), seems assured. The irony of this passage is that in the actual history of Wounded Knee, Great Eye and his cohorts, who represent the “friendlies,” would have turned themselves in only to be killed as Big Foot and his people were, while Wildfire’s “hostiles,” like those still at the Stronghold when the massacre occurred, would have lived. But such is not the case with Callahan’s version of the account, which, although sympathetic to the Lakota, mirrors the inaccuracies of the popular press. Louis Owens points out that such an inevitable demise is the lot of textual American Indians, who are “the epic and tragic hero[es]” (18) of American literature. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the second half of Wynema, where Callahan, despite her own Native heritage, can imagine for the Lakota, as Owens would say, “no other destiny, no other plot.”

Callahan’s limiting depiction of Indian identities is further illustrated by the fact that neither the Ghost Dance nor more traditional Lakota spirituality appears to exist among the Native people she depicts. In fact, by the time Carl and Robin arrive on the (unspecified) reservation in Dakota, every echo of Masse Hadjo’s
argument seems to have faded away. Thus, after Wildfire renounces U.S. government oppression, instead of invoking the Ghost Dance or *Wakantanka*, the Lakota’s higher power, he asks Carl to “Pray to your Father that He look mercifully down on His poor savages and guide them out of their troubles” (Callahan 85).

Wildfire’s use of the word “your” implies a recognized difference between the two men’s belief systems, but such difference collapses when “the Indians with one accord joined [Carl] and closed with a fervent ‘Amen’” (Callahan 85). The Christian rhetoric continues as, in an exchange heavy with symbolism, Wildfire gives Carl a precious belt that had been made for him by his mother, and Carl gives Wildfire a final quotation from “the Bible you love to hear so well. [. . . ]

‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay’” (Callahan 85-86). When Wildfire willingly presents “his best friend” (Callahan 86), the white missionary, with his treasured possession—another obvious suggestion of imminent cultural demise—and Carl calls for divine retribution, Callahan, to use a colloquial phrase, “gets to have it both ways.” Through an identification with Carl, the “friend of the Indian,” Callahan and her readers can sympathize with the plight of the Lakota and criticize U.S. government Indian policy while keeping their allegiances—to Christianity, to dominant culture, to “progress and civilization”—intact. And if the figure of Carl offers dominant readers a point of identification, his words offer them something even more valuable—the promise of absolution—by placing the onus of retribution not on the individual reader, but squarely in the hands of the Christian God.

Carl does not get the novel’s last word, however, and, in a turn that makes the question of identification especially visible, the narrative shifts from Carl and
Robin’s perspective to the perspective of two Lakota, Wildfire and his wife Miscona, as they prepare for and then die in the Wounded Knee massacre.

Although historically inaccurate, Wynema’s subsequent Wounded Knee narrative is radically different than most other stories about the massacre because of its focus on gender—women are central to both the overall plot and the outcome of the massacre. Despite the fact that a majority of the victims at Wounded Knee were female, histories of the massacre focus primarily on the actions of white soldiers and Lakota men. The women, who were breaking camp when the shooting began in the council circle, are merely sidebars in most dominant chronicles of the event. Unlike Sitting Bull, Kicking Bear, and Big Foot, or later, Charles Eastman and Black Elk, the Miniconjou women at Wounded Knee Creek are the subjects of few stories beyond the tales of flight and death that circumscribe their histories. In the narratives that circulate about the massacre, such as From the Deep Woods to Civilization and Black Elk Speaks, for example, women are invoked, like the specter of Wounded Knee itself, as symbols of loss, and are described more fully in death—bodies bloodied, cold, and wrapped around children—than in life. In light of such limited representations, Callahan’s narrative, which presents Lakota women outside the traditional historical boundaries of Wounded Knee narratives, has the potential to offer a refreshingly different perspective. But while Callahan’s impulse towards inclusion is laudable, her depictions, as I will show, are ultimately disquieting.

In the initial scenes of the chapter on Wounded Knee, entitled “Civilization or Savage Barbarity,” a group of “about forty” Lakota women leave the reservation to rejoin their husbands among the “defiant Indians” (Callahan 88). The women run
sixteen miles “rapidly and joyfully” “on a mission of love” likened to Paul Revere’s ride only to be killed in the Wounded Knee massacre the very next day (Callahan 88). Callahan’s description of the massacre, which is almost entirely inaccurate, is as follows:

It was reported by scouts sent for that purpose, to the commander of the troops stationed on the reservation, that the Indians were plotting war and were planning to surround them on the following day. So the general sent a detachment to meet the ‘hostiles,’ and surprise them, and to capture all unharmed if possible. But, instead of this, the Indians were slaughtered like cattle, shot down like dogs. Surprised at the sudden apparition of white soldiers drawn up in a line of battle, when they supposed the soldiers to be in their camps miles distant, their presence of mind deserted them, and it was with difficulty that Wildfire rallied his forces. To add to this consternation, on turning about toward his camps, he beheld the women who had followed them to battle [. . . .] It was useless to motion them back, for on they came, their faces speaking with noiseless eloquence. ‘We have lived with you; we will die with you.’ Up they rushed into the line of battle where they more unfitted the men for fighting.

‘Good and Gracious Father, Miscona! You have lost the battle for me,’ groaned the chieftain.

‘It is a lost cause. You will die and I will die by your side, my husband,’ she replied resolutely. [. . . .]

‘Indians, I command you to go into the reservation quietly or, by God, you die here in your tracks!’ shouted the commander.

‘We shall die, then’ shouted Wildfire in return; ‘but we will never enter the reservation alive!’ [. . . .]

The command was, ‘No quarter! Kill them every one.’ (Callahan 89)

From a modern perspective, Callahan’s Wounded Knee narrative is rather horrifying—it revives the specter of Indian hostility that the novel earlier laid to
rest, and paints the soldiers’ attack as well-disciplined, the Lakota defense as 
incompetent, and Lakota women as mitigating factors in the outcome of the 
massacre.17 My questions about this penultimate textual moment mirror Womack’s 
commentary on Wynema’s opening scene—“What interests me here is not merely 
that Callahan’s depiction is grossly inaccurate, not that she gets it wrong. I am 
struck by how wrong she gets it [. . .] What do we make of this author, then, who is 
purposefully writing to satisfy white stereotypes?” (Womack 115-6). And just what 
are we to make of Callahan’s account? The pattern of events is almost 
unrecognizable to anyone who knows the history of Wounded Knee. But writing 
only a few months after the massacre amidst a welter of wildly contradictory news 
reports, Callahan could not have known the actual details of the massacre, especially 
given that none of the Lakota eyewitness accounts had made it to print at that time. 
So the question then becomes, why this story? Why these depictions of tribal 
identities?

In at least one case the answer seems obvious—Callahan’s emphasis on the 
women’s presence at the battle no doubt connects to her own feminism, which is 
foregrounded in the discussions of suffrage that occur throughout the text. But to 
address this emphasis adequately we must recognize that the feminist aspects of 
Callahan’s text, at least as they have been evinced by Wynema, tend to erase the 
cultural differences of women’s experiences. For example, Womack correctly 
points out that Wynema’s espousal of women’s rights, with its commentary about 
Muscogee women “waiting for [their] more civilized white sisters to gain liberty” 
(Callahan 45) before they themselves pursue it, indicates that Wynema
has been so thoroughly brainwashed that she fails to see she has erased at least half [her] culture. Creek traditional culture involves a delicate balance of women and men wherein clan is based on matrilineal descent and town membership on one’s mother’s town. [...] It seems to me that any suffragist viewpoint that Wynema might express has been stripped of any real power, since she is simply reliant on white women to formulate her consciousness.

(117-18)

As I will show, Callahan’s representation of Lakota women suggests that she continues to have difficulty representing Native women in her text. Even as, in the second half of Wynema, Callahan attempts to grant her female American Indian characters agency, she seems unable to imagine them as fully realized human beings.

The first images of the Lakota arise when Carl and Robin meet with the group of warriors who are “dressed in their savage costumes, with war-paint and feathers in abundance” (Callahan 80). Wildfire, with his “dark eyes,” “stalwart frame,” and “attitude and expression [that] betokened the greatest determination and earnestness” (Callahan 81), is the only character depicted in any detail. While these descriptions are admittedly both stereotypical and vague, they seem strikingly detailed in comparison to later depictions of the women. Wildfire’s wife, “the fair Miscona, [who] cl[jings] to her husband with the tenderness of despair” (Callahan 86) at the conclusion of his conversation with Carl, is the first Lakota woman to enter the narrative. Distraught over Wildfire’s decision to resist the whites, Miscona pleads:

‘Oh, Wildfire, my dear husband, go with me to the reservation. Here we can live happily and peacefully.
with our children and among our people. If you stay here you will be killed, and what happiness could your devoted wife ever expect to have? When I left my father’s tepee [sic] to go with you, you promised to love me and take care of me always. But you will not be fulfilling your promise if you leave me to make my way to the reservation while you remain here.’ (Callahan 86-87)

Miscon’s tragic speech, which is that of a classic romantic heroine, bears little resemblance to what one might expect from a traditional Lakota woman. To name only a few discrepancies, the wife of a Lakota warrior would hardly argue publicly against his fulfilling his tribal duty and would have left her mother’s, rather than her father’s teepee, to join her husband, since within Lakota tradition the familial lodge is a woman’s possession. Moreover, the implicit patriarchal dynamic of Miscon’s tearful appeal is based on a white, rather than Lakota, view of marriage. As M. Annette Jaimes and Theresa Halsey explain:

The context of native social life was radically different from that which prevailed (and prevails) in European and Euro-derived cultures. […] Among the Lakota, men owned nothing but their clothing, a horse for hunting, weapons and spiritual items; homes, furnishings, and the like were the property of their wives. All a Lakota woman needed to do in order to divorce her husband was to set his meager personal possessions outside the door of their lodge, an action against which he had no appeal under traditional laws. (318)

But despite whatever power she may have held in a conventional Lakota relationship, in the context of Callahan’s novel, Miscon fails to sway Wildfire from his decision—he takes her to the reservation and departs for the “hostile” camp. (Whether his adamancy is due to Miscon’s clear breach of Lakota etiquette or to
the saccharine nature of her entreaties, we shall never know.) The next chapter opens as Miscona and some thirty other women secretly leave the reservation to rejoin their husbands.

The women's flight from the reservation to the "rebel" camp and their subsequent presence at the massacre undoubtedly fulfills Callahan's need to disrupt a narrative of war that likely seemed to her, to quote an earlier description, "too masculinely one-sided" (Callahan 75). But of what does such a disruption consist? And, in the end, do these women function as anything other than one-dimensional manifestations of Callahan's rather whitewashed feminism? Neither Ruoff nor Womack, in the only two substantial commentaries on Wynema to date, addresses these questions in their work. Ruoff admires Callahan's feminist concerns, calling her a "woman word warrior" (Wynema xliii), but does not interrogate, or even allude to the presence of these Lakota women in the narrative. And Womack, in his usual style, declares that he has decided "not even to mention the god-awful depictions of Sioux people in the book's artificially tacked-on ending" (121). But to ignore these women is to miss the full story that Callahan tells about American Indian identities.

The chapter on Wounded Knee begins with a description of an unnamed woman who appears to be Miscona: a "dark figure with a babe in her arms," the woman "creeps stealthily from a tent into the dark night" (Callahan 88) as she takes the road to the rebel camp. The women who slip out to follow her are, similarly, "dark figures, some with papoose, some without" (Callahan 88). After meeting at "the outskirts of the reservation," the women band together, and become, finally, a
group of “dark figures, running, sliding, and falling along the dark road [. . .] [who] will not be known to the world” (Callahan 88). Despite the central role that Callahan claims the Lakota women play in the battle, these few images are the only descriptions that appear in the text. By their actions, these women no doubt speak to Callahan’s beliefs about women’s agency—instead of docilely accepting their husbands’ orders, Callahan’s female characters come together to choose their own destinies. But what is excluded from Callahan’s narrative—the women’s physical representations—is equally if not more compelling than what is included—their escape from the reservation and eventual deaths.

I am struck by the almost complete lack of descriptive images of these women and, ultimately, by the unknowable absence they represent in Wynema. The narrator’s claim that the women “will not be known to the world” highlights this absence in a number of ways. First and most obviously, the comment foreshadows the women’s impending demise, suggesting that their deaths will silence their stories. At the same time, though, Callahan’s act of storytelling self-consciously proves that reading incorrect: she is in the process of telling the very tale that is ostensibly lost to the world. These first two implications are, I would argue, intentional, but another meaning lies just beneath the surface of Callahan’s comment and, most probably, beneath the surface of her consciousness, as well: Callahan’s claim for the inaccessibility, for the erasure of the women’s stories actually describes her own narrative failure—Callahan, in the end, is the one who finds it impossible, even in a fiction of her own creation, to tell these Native women’s stories to the world. Sans faces, sans personalities, and except for Miscona’s
hyperbolic entreaties, sans voice, Lakota women are doubly other in the mythic terrain of Callahan’s Dakota. Their only trait is darkness, which as an undifferentiated and slightly eminous marker of race, subsumes every other facet of their identity. Unrecognizable in face and in body, and animalistic in movement, the traditional Lakota women of Callahan’s text are, finally, unimaginable to her. Callahan’s depictions (or lack thereof) of the men and women at Wounded Knee, then, speak not of the Lakota, but of her own politics and social status as an assimilated, Christian, mixed-blood woman from the Muscogee aristocracy, so far removed from the lifestyles of the Lakota that she apparently finds their representation impossible. Thus, she transforms the men, whom she initially marks as “savage,” into Christians, and the women, whom, as we have seen, are entirely obscured by race, into faceless actresses in the drama of her imagination.

Only two Lakota women break out of this narrative abyss—Miscona and Chikena, an old woman found wandering the field after the battle. Miscona, as we have already seen, epitomizes the classic romantic heroine by following her husband into battle where, predictably, the two die in each other’s arms, “free at last” (Callahan 90). Chikena, an old Lakota woman who survives the battle, is a remnant of the living past, a veritable Ishi who deems herself “the only one left of my tribe” (Callahan 91). Despite such tragic implications, however, all do not die on the battlefield, and Chikena becomes a savior of sorts, rescuing a “little papoose sleeping sweetly between” (Callahan 91) the dead bodies of Wildfire and Miscona, and two other babies. When Carl Peterson arrives the day after the battle, he discovers Chikena guarding both the babies and the dead. Wraithlike, Chikena,
much like the other women in Callahan’s narrative, is a “dark form,” who “glid[es]” over the battlefield, “administering to the wants of the dying” and “watch[ing] to see that nothing came near her beloved dead” (Callahan 90). She stresses the fact that she is “all alone in the world” (Callahan 91), and recounts a litany of deaths before making any mention of the babies’ survival, which, as I will show in my next chapter, is contrary to both Eastman’s and Black Elk’s eyewitness narratives. Chikena’s account of the babies’ discovery is also heavy with overtones of cultural loss. She says:

‘When day broke I went out among the dead, washed their wounds and ministered to their wants as I could; and so I have been doing since. On my rounds I found three papooses, about three months old, all wrapped up snugly in their dead mothers’ bosoms. I took them, wrapped them in the blankets of the ones they will never know, and yonder they lie, sleeping sweetly.’ (Callahan 92)

While for Eastman and Black Elk, the image of the child will mean continuity, for Callahan the message is clearly mixed. The babies, although blissfully ignorant of their fate, seem bound for a future away from “the ones they will never know” and, thus, outside the boundaries of their own culture. Rather than symbolizing Lakota survival they seem, for Callahan, to bolster Chikena’s mournful claim to be the last of her tribe. The “inevitability” of the Lakota’s disappearance is thus writ large in the novel, marking Wynema as the earliest literary representation that weds Wounded Knee to the myth of the vanishing Indian.

But not all Indians vanish in Wynema, and while Lakota futures are bleak, Wynema, her child, and the three adopted babies flourish. And it is in the image of
these children that I find the novel’s final, and undoubtedly most interesting commentary. Were I to be completely optimistic I would say that Callahan encodes a story of cultural survival into her account of the massacre. While I do not entirely believe that claim, I will say that Callahan’s outrage over Wounded Knee ultimately turns the perfect picture of assimilation into something decidedly more complicated. Such an argument rests on the commonly acknowledged fissure between (what seems to have been) the originally intended conclusion of *Wynema* and the present ending. The first “ending” occurs after the dénouement represented by Wynema and Genevieve’s return from their visit to Genevieve’s home. At this point in the text, Wynema is engaged to Genevieve’s brother and Genevieve is free of attachments, having broken off her relationship with the distastefully conservative Maurice Mauran during the trip. Before leaving, Genevieve rejects Gerald’s suit, but upon her return, in what has all the earmarks of a final scene, she accepts his proposal of marriage. And with the words, “And so Gerald Keithly won his heart’s desire” (Callahan 70), the section, and, very possibly, the original draft of the text, ends. So to what degree then, one might ask, could the awkwardly appended addition of an elegiac Wounded Knee narrative change the argument of the text? I believe by a great deal.

In what I mark as the initial ending of *Wynema*, Genevieve and Gerald loom largest in the narrative, and Wynema, with her impending marriage to Robin Weir—whom Womack’s twentieth-century Wynema calls “a white geek [. . . ] who later would be Tonto to Batman” (Callahan 128)—fades into the background. The easy containment of Wynema in this first version no doubt relates to the complete
success of Genevieve’s and Gerald’s attempts to assimilate her, which her impending marriage to Robin, with its inherent promise of mixed-blood children, epitomizes. The appended ending, however, ruptures the neat progression of civilization by giving Wynema what her union with Robin could never bear: a full-blood child. This twist brings Masse Hadjo’s comment to mind—“[Y]ou cannot convert the Indians to the Christian religion until you contaminate them with the blood of the white man” (Callahan 74)—since the “contamination” of Indian blood as represented by Wynema’s marriage, is temporarily nullified.¹⁹ And, although the bitter realities of Indian adoption undermine this scenario, they are (somewhat) mediated in Callahan’s fictional world by Wynema’s ability to speak Lakota and by Chikena’s presence in Wynema’s household, which present the possibility, however unintended, for Wynema’s adopted child to retain a connection to her Lakota culture. By implication then, the vanishing Indian of the first ending, as represented by Wynema, is, with the second, succeeded by another generation of full bloods who at least have the potential to reclaim their culture.

Callahan also reestablishes Wynema’s own Native identity in the additional section of the novel. While Genevieve and Gerald vow their love just before the introduction of the problems in Dakota, Wynema, having apparently forgotten all issues of annuities and allotments, thinks only of Robin, her husband-to-be, with “sentimental sighs and [suggestively] pale cheeks” (Callahan 67). At the end of the existing novel, however, Wynema’s interest in Native issues returns and she becomes recognizably Indian. One example of this lies in her surprising ability to speak Lakota, which enables her to translate for Chikena and, thus, to both hear and
voice the Indians’ side of Wounded Knee. And another is in Chikena’s own
response to Wynema, which is seen in a strange exchange that occurs in the next-to-
last chapter:

‘When are you coming to Keithly College, to see the
papoose?’ Carl asked Chikena one day, as the family
had all collected in the pleasant parlor of Hope
Seminary. [. . . ]

‘Not yet,’ she replied. ‘I love Wynema, for
she seems like my own people to me. You are all
very kind to me, but you are not Indian. We are
coming to see the papoose, for Wynema wants one of
her own.’ (Callahan 99)

Chikena’s answer to Carl’s question, which is a bit incomprehensible, is made even
more so by the inclusion of the total nonsequitur about Wynema. There is no prior
material to explain Chikena’s comment, since her question opens the chapter, and
neither is there context for it in the following passage in which Carl parcels out the
three rescued babies like candy—“‘Gerald wants one, and I shall keep one, and if
she wishes [Wynema] may have one’” (Callahan 99). While it makes perfect sense
that Chikena, a Lakota who lived through Wounded Knee, would not be entirely
comfortable among whites, her affinity for Wynema, as another Indian, is
unexpected in a novel that has so strongly associated Wynema with dominant
mores. In many ways, Chikena’s claim to kinship serves to remind the audience
that Wynema is not, after all, white. And her words are perhaps a timely reminder
since, prior to the section on Wounded Knee, they may have been hard put to
differentiate Wynema from Genevieve.

Chikena’s insistence on Wynema’s Indian identity is reiterated in her
deathbed speech, which occurs in the novel’s concluding chapter:
"I see the prosperous, happy land of the Indians. Ah, Sitting Bull, beloved chief, it is the land to which you promised to lead us. There, wandering through the cool forests or beside the running streams we may rest our wearied bodies and feast our hungry souls. Farewell! Wynema, thou child of the forest, make haste and seek with me the happy-hunting grounds of our fathers, for not many years of oppression can your people stand. Not many years will elapse until the Indian will be a people of the past. Ah, my people! My people! God give us rest and peace!" (Callahan 104-5)

To contextualize Chikena’s final speech, however, we must consider it in conjunction with the prophecy that Wildfire’s good friend Carl Peterson presents at the conclusion of the previous chapter. He says:

‘I often think with a shudder [ . . . ] of the terrible retribution in store for our Government on account of its treachery and cruelty to the Indians. [ . . . ] It will surely be visited with troubles and sorrows and afflictions, as it has afflicted and troubled the poor, untutored savage. There will be wars and pestilence, anarchies and open rebellions. The subjects of the Government will rise up in defiance of the ‘authorities that be.’ Oh, it will be trouble—trouble! Let us pray, my brothers and sisters, that God will open the eyes of the Congress and people of the United States that they change their conduct toward the despised red race, and thus avert the evil sure to come upon us if they persist in their present treatment of the Indians.’ (Callahan 102)

I contend that, together, these descriptions paint a picture of the future that strongly resembles the underlying beliefs of the Lakota Ghost Dance. Carl’s vision, with its potential for an apocalyptic overthrow of the U.S. government, recalls the prophesy foretelling the violent destruction of whites (although Carl, unlike the Lakota, exempts sympathetic whites such as he, Genevieve, and Gerald from such an
equation by placing the onus of responsibility on the legislative structure rather than on specific people or groups). Chikena’s final words, on the other hand, evoke the trances of the Ghost dancers, in which they would visit the promised land of plenty and see their dead relatives. The last few sentences of Chikena’s speech, however, are far from Ghost Dance prophecy, since she predicts the ultimate devastation rather than renewal of Native people. And amid all of this confusion stands Wynema, who despite her Christianity, her espousal of assimilationist ideology, and her white husband, is still Indian, and thus, still bound to the destiny of all Native people as Chikena reminds us.

So, where then are we left at the end of Wynema? The narrator offers a glimpse into the future of the three Lakota orphans after Chikena’s death: the two boys, adopted by Genevieve and Carl, become, respectively, a doctor and missionary with white names—Methven Keithly and Clark Peterson—and appropriately assimilated aims; Wynema’s charge, named Miscona after her dead mother, becomes, more opaquely, a “famous musician and wise woman” (Callahan 104), presenting at least the possibility of an Indian-identified life. And the question of Native futures as a whole is raised and dropped with a coy, “Why prolong this book into the future, when the present is so fair?” (Callahan 104). What can we learn from this account, which vacillates from nostalgia for a past that never existed, to Christian propaganda, to a polemic defense of Native people, to a prediction of their demise? Perhaps the only definite conclusion is that, unsurprisingly for a woman of her era and situation, Callahan wrote a book full of contradictions: she details important Muscogee traditions while depicting the Muscogee in teepees,
underplays the intelligence and activism of Native people while calling for their just
treatment, defends Native religious traditions while professing Christianity,
recognizes the presence of Lakota women at Wounded Knee while distorting their
images, and calls for Native insurrection while foretelling their cultural annihilation.
As the first novel written by an American Indian woman, *Wynema* is clearly not the
ground-breaking work that many might want it to be, but it is rather, like so many
firsts in a genre, a beginning. Janice Acoose (Cree-Métis) suggests that “[An] author’s first act of resistance manifests itself in the construction of her text. As so
many previously colonized writers [. . .] maintain, the act of writing is a political act
that can encourage de-colonization” (qtd. in Angus 29); and such, I would argue, is
the case with Callahan’s text. But Acoose speaks of late twentieth-century writers;
in applying her ideas to *Wynema*, I emphasize Accose’s use of the term “encourage”
and thus suggest an *emerging possibility* of resistance in the text, a possibility
stretched and expanded by Callahan’s strong reaction to the 1890 massacre at
Wounded Knee.

And it is Callahan’s depictions of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee that,
after all, bring me to study *Wynema* in the context of my project. Most significant
to my work is the fact that Callahan, even within her romantic stereotypes, stilted
plot lines, and vanishing (or “now you see ‘em, now you don’t”) Lakota, still
presents the story of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee differently than do most
dominant accounts. Like Black Elk and Eastman, as I will show in my next chapter,
Callahan debunks the cause-and-effect narrative that ties the Ghost Dance to the
Wounded Knee Massacre, confronting and dismissing any suggestion that Ghost
Dance-induced hostility played a part in the violence. She also, in a very unusual move, foregrounds the living presence of women at the massacre, which neither of the more canonical authors fully represents. And, even with Callahan’s failure to coherently imagine Lakota identities, her inclusion of women’s stories—or more aptly, her attempt to acknowledge that such stories exist—should ideally highlight their absence elsewhere and bring much-needed critical attention to such narratives.

But not all aspects of *Wynema* are cause for celebration. The tensions inherent in Callahan’s narrative, such as those highlighted by Craig Womack, are the tensions inherent in her life as a mixed-breed, acculturated Muscogee woman whose identification with dominant cultural mores impeded her understanding of the rich and complex nature of Indian identities. In light of those tensions, I would argue that her turn to Wounded Knee evinces a personal struggle to balance the injustice of the massacre with the romance of her original story and the privileged narrative of her life, which, like Wynema’s, was a picture of “successful” assimilation. So Callahan weaves a tale that relies heavily on the repressive myth of the “vanishing Indian,” which characterizes so many Wounded Knee accounts, in order to reconcile the irreconcilable—that the dominant Western cosmology to which she ascribes is largely responsible for the dehumanization and subsequent murder of people who are, on some level, “like” her, as Chikena’s final claim on Wynema underlines. The myth of inevitability offers Callahan indispensable distance from such a frightening possibility, allowing her to differentiate between her own life as an acculturated, successful, nineteenth-century Muscogee woman, and the lives of the “savage” Indians of the Plains, who, as Chikena intones on her
deathbed, are soon to be “a people of the past.” Callahan’s depictions of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre demonstrate not just her outrage and fear over the events at Pine Ridge, but also her struggle to imagine all the aspects of Native identity. It is my hope that such a recognition can lead us to approach this lesser-studied tribal narrative with eyes open not just to its failures, which I admit are many, but also to the ways in which its uneven depictions of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee massacre illuminate the complexity of tribal identities at the turn of the last century.
NOTES

1 The Creek Nation now officially uses the name “Muscogee (Creek) Nation.” Historians have more commonly called the Muscogee, “Creek,” a name that English traders applied to most Native peoples living along the Chattahoochee and Flint rivers in what is now central Georgia and Alabama. Neither term is entirely accurate, since the Muscogee constituted a large portion, but not all the peoples who fell under the designation of “Creek.” Joel Martin offers an excellent overview of the history and politics of these names in Sacred Revolt: The Muskogees’ Struggle for a New World (6-13).

2 Much in the way the term “Creek” is a colonial misnomer (or “manifest manner”) for the Muscogee, so is the designation “Sioux” an inaccurate referent for a large number of linguistically and culturally affiliated, but still separate, tribes. The Lakota or Teton are western tribes and, like the Muscogee, are by far the largest of the three Siouan language groups. Because of their relative numbers, the term Lakota is often used to refer to all three tribes—the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota—in the same way that Muscogee is now used as the referent for all peoples formerly known as Creek. While I use Lakota when talking in broader historical terms, such a designation would be incorrect when referring to only Black Elk and Eastman since Eastman is Dakota (Santee). I will, therefore, whenever possible, refer to Eastman and Black Elk by their specific tribal affiliations—Dakota and/or Santee and Lakota and/or Oglala—but, at times, such as in this case, I use the term Sioux for brevity.

The Lakota actually include the Oglala (Black Elk’s band), the Hunkpapa, the Sicango or Brulé, the Miniconjou, the Sans Arc, the Two Kettle, and the Sihasapa or Blackfeet (who are Blackfeet Lakota, not the Blackfeet tribe in the Northwest). The Dakota or Santee are eastern tribes and include the Mdewakanton (Eastman’s band), Wahpetons, Yankton, and Yanktonai divisions.

3 The Muscogee’s own creation stories say that the people came out of the earth somewhere in the West, whereupon they moved East “on a quest to discover the origin of the sun,” eventually reaching the Atlantic Ocean and turning back to settle near the Chattahoochee River (Womack 26). These incredibly detailed oral histories are retold in a number of places, including Craig Womack’s Red on Red, Louis Oliver’s Chasers of the Sun, Angie Debo’s The Road to Disappearance, Michael Green’s The Politics of Indian Removal and Martin’s Sacred Revolt.

4 Unions between Muscogee women and European men did not necessarily disrupt tribal culture since Muscogee clan affiliations pass from mother to child, and the mother’s oldest brother, rather than the father, is traditionally
responsible for passing on cultural traditions. In fact, Craig Womack and others point out that such intermarriage often resulted in European assimilation into the lives and cultures of the Muscogee, an occurrence not often discussed in the histories of the period, which tend to focus primarily on Muscogee assimilation into the dominant culture.

5 In “Samuel Benton Callahan,” the appendix to Foreman’s article, Samuel’s wife is described as “Sara Elizabeth Thornberg, a daughter of a Methodist minister, Rev. Wm. Thornberg” (my emphasis, 314). I follow Ruoff’s lead in calling her McAllester as this information comes from Samuel and Sarah’s marriage certificate. See note two of Ruoff’s introduction for a more extensive explanation of the various discrepancies in the Callahan family’s names and birthdates.

6 Despite the fact that Samuel and his family were relocated due to the U.S. policy of Indian removal and that Samuel later became prominent in Muscogee politics, he is initially identified in Angie Debo’s landmark text, The Road to Disappearance, as “Samuel Benton Callahan, a white man with a very little Creek blood” (158). The context of Debo’s comment makes the reference even more interesting because she identifies Samuel as the man the Southern Muscogee chose to represent them in the Confederate Congress. Debo qualifies that choice by saying that Samuel “joined [the Muscogee] in 1858,” which is the year Samuel moved from Sulphur Springs, Texas, to Okmulgee, Indian Territory. Her implication—that Samuel was an outsider who had little to do with the Muscogee Nation prior to his move—is belied by his history.

Debo’s comment brings to the fore the questions of authenticity that circulate with even more frequency than usual around affluent and/or acculturated mixed-, or as Vizenor would say, “cross-blood” Native peoples like Samuel and his daughter Alice. Craig Womack’s chapter on Wynema, for example, is fraught with such questions and implications. While debates over identity are commonplace in Native Studies, I find them intriguing in this case because of Callahan’s position (for now at least) as the first female Native novelist. Both Callahan and her publishers identify her as Native; the publisher’s preface reads:

In offering “Wynema” for your perusal, reader, the publishers have no apologies to offer for what literary critics may term the crudeness or the incompleteness of the work. The fact that an Indian, one of the oppressed, desires to plead her cause at a tribunal where judge and jury are chosen from among the oppressors is our warrant for publishing this little volume. (ix)

Unfortunately, regardless of her self-identification, Callahan’s position as an acculturated cross-blood leaves space for others to question the authenticity of
her Native identity. Such challenges and debates emphasize both the fluidity of identity categories and the oppressive legacy of blood quantum laws.

7 The signing of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie marked an especially significant moment in this battle, since the treaty, which closed the Bozeman Trail and protected Lakota land from settlers and fortune hunters, signified a temporary victory for the Lakota Nation.

8 James Wilson notes that although “no one knows when the northern Plains peoples first encountered Europeans,” the first verified contact had occurred by at least 1680 (262). Looking at the broad picture, Calloway explains: French, British, Canadian, and Spanish traders preceded Lewis and Clark into Indian villages on the plains. With most of their needs supplied by buffalo, Plains Indians initially were able to maintain a measure of independence in their dealings with European traders. Northwest Company trader Charles Mackenzie, on the upper Missouri at about the time Louis and Clark passed by, complained that beaver were plentiful there but the Indians refused to take the trouble of trapping them. They told him they would be happy to hunt beaver if they could do so in the same way they hunted buffalo, from horseback, “but they considered the operation of searching for them in the bowels of the earth, to satisfy the avarice of the Whites, not only troublesome, but very degrading.” When Mackenzie pointed out that more northerly tribes were industrious and friendly to the whites, one chief responded angrily: “We are no Slaves!” Indians called the shots on the Great Plains in the early nineteenth century, and whites relied on them as allies and as traders. (5)

9 According to Lavonne Ruoff, Muscogee of the Callahan’s social and economic class were:

rich in gold or stock and in control of Muscogee politics. Black slaves tilled their land and herded their cattle while they rode in carriages. To adorn their homes, they shipped pianos and mahogany furniture up the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers. “When their women bought a new dress the whole bolt of cloth was taken to make sure that no other woman secured a similar pattern.” […] They owned trading houses in the towns, operated great farms, and, most of all, joined in the recent development of the ranching industry. (Wynema xv-xvi)
While Ruoff's tone is somewhat pejorative, as if affluence is necessarily aligned with decadence, this passage gives a good sense of the unusual status of this group of Muscogee, a status that was rare both among the larger Muscogee population and among Native peoples as a whole at this point in U.S. history.

Womack identifies as Creek rather than Muscogee; I follow his lead when referring to him and/or his work.

In a meeting of Ohio State University's American Indian literature reading group, Professor Marlene Longenecker suggested that perhaps Wynema was purposely written to be an "Indian" rather than a Muscogee novel. If this were the case then Callahan's reference to "teepee Indians," rather than being "wrong," could be read as the intentional invocation of a "universal" Indian identity. While such a claim is weakened by Callahan's frequent allusions to specific Muscogee cultural traditions, the reading does offer a potential explanation for some of the text's cultural inaccuracies, such as that of Wynema's opening paragraph.

See Cook-Lynn's "The American Indian Fiction Writers: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, the Third World, and First Nation Sovereignty" for an overview of her arguments about nationalism, sovereignty, and American Indian literature.

See also Womack's brief discussion of the history of Muscogee Christianity (121-22) and Homer Noley's First White Frost: Native Americans and United Methodism, which Womack references.

Although not discussed by either Ruoff or Womack, the narrator's alignment to dominant culture is another marker of Callahan's cultural ambivalence—as evidenced in this scene by the "we," within which the narrator groups both herself and the reading audience, but not the "blue dumpling eaters" (the Muscogee).

Hadjio's editorial is also the only direct textual reference to mixed-blood identity. His argument, which naturalizes a connection between full-blood identity and Native religion, is belied by the character of Wynema who is both Christian and full blood. The editorial's disdain for miscegenation must have resonated with Callahan, given her mixed Irish/Muscogee heritage, but there is no evident textual response other than the inclusion of the argument itself.

Callahan's failure to challenge the legitimacy of this "pagan" religion is rather remarkable considering Callahan's overt Christianity. Her response is very different from, for example, a writer like Eastman who (inaccurately) disparages the Ghost Dance as "a religious craze [. . .] foreign to the Indian philosophy" in From the Deep Woods to Civilization (92). Possible rationales for Callahan's
unusual tolerance might be the Ghost Dance’s similarity to Christianity and its distance from Callahan’s own world.

17 Ruoff’s comment on this scene is: “Inevitably, Wildfire, his wife, and his followers die in a battle, the details of which correspond to what happens at Wounded Knee” (Wynema xlii, emphasis mine). I am unsure what correlations Ruoff might see other than, perhaps, the large number of Lakota deaths, which occur in both Callahan’s account and the historical records.

18 As with all of Callahan’s heroines, though, their choices reinscribe a conventional domestic ideal—the women disobey their husbands only because they would rather die than live without them.

19 Referring to Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday’s concept of blood memory, Chadwick Allen discusses the ways in which American Indian writers “defy attempts by legislatures and others to quantify contemporary indigenous identities for their own ends, to inscribe indigenous identities as a number always less than that of the generations that came safely before, as a number moving inevitably toward zero” (111). Callahan’s narrative, however imperfectly, presents one such imaginative act.
CHAPTER 3

RETHINKING THE CANON:
COMPLICATING REPRESENTATIONS OF
THE GHOST DANCE AND THE WOUNDED KNEE MASSACRE IN
FROM THE DEEP WOODS TO CIVILIZATION AND BLACK ELK SPEAKS

While S. Alice Callahan’s *Wynema: A Child of the Forest* would be the first novel that contained stories of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre, it was by no means the final account of these events. These infamous incidents have been the subject of innumerable tragic retellings, from turgid contemporary newspaper accounts of frozen Indian bodies to Dee Brown’s mournful 1970 bestseller, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. Such textual representations have transformed two separate historical events, the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee Massacre, into a single symbol of loss, which has become a central signifier of American Indian identity in the stories of dominant culture. In this chapter, I interrogate such naturalized, monolithic representations by pairing my investigation of Callahan’s lesser-studied representation of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre with an examination of the two most canonized retellings of the events of that period—Dakota author Charles Eastman’s *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, published in 1916, and Lakota Nicholas Black Elk’s as-told-to *Black Elk Speaks*, published in 1932. With the juxtaposition of these two chapters, I contrast the single version of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee presented in
dominant accounts with the varied nature of Native responses. Because of the long-standing popularity of *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* and *Black Elk Speaks*, I also consider how the critical response to these texts has shaped the ways in which we read Eastman’s and Black Elk’s Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee narratives. Moreover, by comparing these literary texts with the critical responses they have engendered, I analyze the transformation of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre from historical events to literary trope, contending that certain types of critical readings have laid out the model through which these events come to stand not for Native resistance, but rather for the erasure of Native peoples and cultures.

The intersections between Eastman’s and Black Elk’s works can, in many ways, be said to begin with the similar experiences of their early lives. Eastman (Ohíyésa), a Minnesota Santee born in 1858, was among a number of Santee forced to flee the U.S. for Canada following “the Sioux Uprising of 1862,” a battle in which the Santee rose up against white settlers as a result of, among other things, late annuity payments, tribal factionalism, and corrupt government programs (Wilson 14-17). A young child at the time of the family’s flight, Eastman came to adolescence believing that his father, Many Lightnings (Ite Wakanhi Ota), had been executed for his role in the battle. For the next eleven years Eastman was raised by his uncle and paternal grandmother, who brought him up as a traditional Santee: he became a skilled horseman, hunter, and warrior, and he learned the mores
and expectations of Dakota religion. All this changed, however, when Many
Lightnings, now calling himself Jacob Eastman, reappeared following three years in
prison during which he had converted to Christianity. In 1873, at the age of fifteen,
Eastman left Canada to return with his father to a homestead in Flandreau, South
Dakota.1 Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota born five years after Eastman in 1863, also
fled to Canada with his family; in Black Elk’s case, the family flight was
precipitated not by the Sioux uprising, but by the death of the Oglala leader Crazy
Horse in 1877. The family spent three years in Canada, where they and other Oglala
sought refuge from U.S. soldiers (DeMallie, Sixth Grandfather 6). Black Elk’s
return to South Dakota at sixteen, however, marks a sharp divergence in the two
men’s cultural histories: while Eastman went south with his father to pursue
Christianity, education, and eventually a degree in medicine from Boston
University, Black Elk returned to the land of his birth to eventually reveal a Thunder
vision that marked his first step toward becoming a Lakota holy man.2 These
seemingly disparate choices would appear to lead in opposite directions, but as luck,
or the increasigly small world of the late nineteenth-century Sioux would have it,
both men were on the Pine Ridge Reservation just miles away from Wounded Knee
Creek on December 29, 1890, when the massacre occurred—Eastman as the
agency’s new physician and Black Elk as a traditional healer and Ghost Dancer. It
is with this coincidence of geography that their literary histories converge.
Receptions, Reversals, and the Whims of Readers:
Critical Response to *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* and *Black Elk Speaks*

The critical receptions of *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* and *Black Elk Speaks* say as much about dominant culture’s expectations about American Indian identity as they do about the texts themselves. Charles Eastman, for example, was a writer whose construction and performance of Native identity spoke to audiences of his time. He published a remarkable ten books during his career, from his acclaimed first text, *Indian Boyhood* (1902), which offers an idyllic view of what Eastman called “the thrilling wild life” of his childhood, to his treatise on the cultural and spiritual aspects of Native cosmology, *The Soul of the Indian: An Interpretation* (1911), to handbooks such as *Indian Scout Talks: A Guide for Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls* (1914). The contemporary popularity of Eastman’s books can undoubtedly be attributed to his careful rhetoric: although he sometimes castigates the hypocrisy of the dominant culture, the majority of his texts present an overlying story of a romantic and idealized Indian “saved” from a life of “savagery” by an acceptance of the cultural mores of modern society. During the sixteen years during which Eastman published, images of the mythic Western past were wildly popular both in and outside the U.S., as evidenced by the continued appeal of dime westerns and touring performance troupes such as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Representations of Native lifeways titillated readers who were fascinated with the myth of the American West and books such as *Indian Boyhood* were fuel for that fire of nostalgia. Written in the already-familiar model of conversion narratives,
Eastman's most popular books—*Indian Boyhood* and *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*—map a linear path from the darkness of paganism to the shining lights of Christianity and, subsequently, civilization. This comfortable story delighted the white Christian readers who made up the bulk of Eastman's audience—here was a Native writer whose sentiments appeared to legitimate not only their own lives, but also the entire doctrine of manifest destiny. Early response would be different, however, for *Black Elk Speaks*.

Published sixteen years after Eastman's best-selling book, Black Elk's astold-to story of his life did not speak to contemporary readers as *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* had done. Initial reviews were positive: the *New Republic* hailed the text as "important," the *Boston Transcript* called it "uniquely thrilling," and the *Saturday Review of Literature* claimed it was a book "of great psychological and pathological interest" (71; 2; 551). But despite such accolades, *Black Elk Speaks* was remaindered for forty-five cents a copy within a year of its publication. There is no clear-cut reason for the disparity between the positive contemporary critical response and the ensuing public disinterest, but as with Eastman, the culture of the period provides some insight. Much changed in the U.S. between the 1916 publication of *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* and the 1932 publication of *Black Elk Speaks*: the era of the Wild West show ended, World War I occurred, the Great Depression followed on the heels of the 1929 stock market crash, and substantial demographic shifts in U.S. population resulted in large-scale
urbanization and industrialization. The massive social and political upheavals that destabilized America’s understanding of itself as a nation also affected the tastes of the reading public. American Indian narratives such as *Black Elk Speaks* were no longer in vogue, and the popular audiences that had embraced *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* overlooked *Black Elk Speaks*, turning from the unsettling aspects of the American past to focus on the uncertainties of the present.

If we trace the critical histories of *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* and *Black Elk Speaks* from the thirties to the sixties, we find continued disparity between the two texts’ receptions: as Charles Eastman’s texts fell out of print, the Neihardt/Black Elk collaboration rose to prominence. Neihardt talks about *Black Elk Speaks*’ publication history in the 1972 preface, where he explains, “A generation passed; but the book refused to die. Somehow a copy found its way to Zurich, Switzerland and was appreciated by a group of German scholars, including the late Carl Jung [. . . .]. The news of the book reached America and found some friendly appreciators. Copies were obtainable only in rare book stores and sold at premium prices” (“The Book” 229). When *Black Elk Speaks* was reissued as a paperback in 1961, it became an underground classic among counter-culture readers. Interestingly, it was Dee Brown, author of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, who then catapulted *Black Elk Speaks* into widespread public attention. In April of 1971, Brown and a ninety-year-old Neihardt appeared on the *Dick Cavett Show*, where Brown lauded *Black Elk Speaks* as “the finest book in existence on the
American Indian” (McCluskey 232). From this point on, the text steadily gained both critical and popular appeal, leading to American Indian author and activist Vine Deloria, Jr.’s famed (or some would say, infamous) introduction to the 1977 edition, which calls *Black Elk Speaks* the “North American Bible for all tribes” (xiii).⁵

While *Black Elk Speaks* became a touchstone for Native and non-Native readers alike, interest in Charles Eastman’s work waned. By the mid-thirties all of Eastman’s texts had fallen out of print; and while his books have slowly returned to circulation, his literary reputation has never again matched that of his early years as an author.⁶ Eric Peterson describes Eastman’s present reception this way: “As for [Eastman’s] own writings, the children’s stories seem overly sentimental now, the highly subjective adult works perhaps outdated as well. Only *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, with its eyewitness account of the events leading up to and through the massacre at Wounded Knee, retains its power” (164). Peterson’s estimation of *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*’s merit typifies that of most literary scholars, and this regard has placed the book alongside *Black Elk Speaks* in the ranks of the U.S. literary canon. Because of this status and because Black Elk and Eastman have been among the handful of recognized American Indian authors of their era, excerpts from both books have been incorporated into a large number of American
literature anthologies; thus *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* and *Black Elk Speaks* have done a fair amount of cultural work in terms of constructing popular understandings of Indian identity.

What, then, is this understanding? What images of American Indian identity do these two texts present? Or perhaps a better question might be, what kind of Indian identities have they been permitted to represent? As Peterson’s comment and a quick glance at almost any literary anthology reveal, Eastman’s “The Ghost Dance War” and Black Elk’s “The Butchering at Wounded Knee” are by far the most excerpted sections of their respective autobiographies. This repetition suggests that both books have been canonized, at least in part, because of their first-hand accounts of the Wounded Knee massacre, which provide editors, critics, and readers with the favored Indian of the public imagination—the dead Indian. Lest I overstate my case, let me say that audience expectations regarding Native identities are not entirely stagnant, since the aforementioned disparities between the two texts’ public appeals denote shifts in the consumptive desires of the reading public; accordingly, Eastman’s romantic tales of “traditional” Native life, with their emphasis on education and assimilation, gratified early twentieth-century audiences, but not readers caught in the turmoil of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, who gravitated instead toward Black Elk’s clear condemnation of U.S. imperialism. But, while the texts have different public and critical appeals, they are nevertheless perceived as having similar foci—the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee
Massacre. As I will illustrate, however, critical reaction to both *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* and *Black Elk Speaks* has coincided, not with each author’s multivalent historical descriptions of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre, but with dominant society’s perceptions about those two events, a discrepancy which suggests that tragic depictions of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre are as much a product of critical expectation as they are of authorial construction.

**Assimilation, Resistance, and the Tension of Representation in Charles Eastman’s *From the Deep Woods to Civilization***

In recent years the larger body of Charles Eastman’s work has been criticized on two counts: first, because of the collaborative nature of his writing and, second, because of the perceived assimilationist rhetoric of his politics. There has been continued debate surrounding the former issue and questions remain over just how much the editing of his wife, Elaine Goodale, influenced her husband’s writing.

In *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, Eastman publicly acknowledges Goodale’s contributions to his texts, saying, “The present is the eighth [book] that I have done, always with the devoted cooperation of my wife. Although but one book, ‘Wigwam Evenings,’ [sic] bears both our names, we have worked together, she in the little leisure remaining to the mother of six children and I in the intervals of lecturing and other employment” (185-86). Goodale’s own description of her editorial role appears in her memoir, *Sister to the Sioux*, where she explains, “In an
hour of comparative leisure I had urged him to write down his recollections of the wild life, which I carefully edited and placed with St. Nichoias [a magazine]. From this small beginning grew Indian Boyhood and eight other books of Indian lore, upon all of which I collaborated more or less” (173).

Critics fall into two camps on the issue. On one side are scholars such as H. David Brumble, III, who argues that Goodale “did nothing more than copy-edit her husband’s finished manuscripts” (Annotated 55), while on another are critics such as Raymond Wilson, Eastman’s biographer, who finds Goodale’s contention that Eastman’s essays came to her as “rough drafts in pencil and scratch paper” more credible (131, 164). While many cite Eastman’s publication history as positive proof of Goodale’s importance to Eastman’s work—i.e., his marital separation corresponds with the end of his literary career—there is no extant record of the Eastman/Goodale collaboration, and thus, no definitive answer to this question. Those who find Eastman’s politics troubling, however, would prefer to assume more rather than less editorial intrusion, as Eastman’s perceived alignment with social Darwinism and assimilation could then be attributed to the yearnings of his Anglo American wife.

Eastman’s political positions seem, in retrospect, at times incredibly misguided. Perhaps the most radical example is his championing of the 1887 Dawes Severalty Act, which threatened tribal identity and led to yet another large-scale loss of land for Native peoples. Such political stances combined with
Eastman’s educational successes to make him, according to H. David Brumble, III, something of an American Indian poster boy whose life would be used as “rather famous proof that an individual Indian could compete with Americans” (American Indian 150). In the tradition of Horatio Alger, Eastman’s success could be held up as an example of possibility and progress, a story of successful assimilation. His most popular books were often read in this framework, as we see in the comments of a New York Times reviewer, who praised Eastman upon the publication of From the Deep Woods to Civilization by saying the author “never failed to see the wise judgment that lay behind his old father’s choice of civilized ways” (Peterson 174). This assessment of Eastman’s autobiography was seconded by The North American Review, which claimed that “in less than half a lifetime” Eastman had “traversed the whole path from savagery to civilization” (Peterson 174). During his lifetime, however, Eastman called himself “an acculturated Sioux,” thus emphasizing his bicultural identity (Wilson 189). Critics have frequently disagreed with Eastman’s self-identification, condemning him as a writer whose “role as an apologist superseded his conviction that the Sioux had a viable perspective” (Peterson 174).

As the most commonly excerpted piece of his work, Eastman’s chapter “The Ghost Dance War” in From the Deep Woods to Civilization, plays a key role in the controversy over the “true” nature of Eastman’s personal and political identity. The longest and most detailed chapter of Eastman’s autobiography, “The Ghost Dance War” presents an account of the events that preceded and followed the Wounded
Knee massacre. Readily apparent on the surface of the chapter is Eastman’s noticeable detachment, exemplified in his restrained and often-quoted depiction of his emotions after the search for survivors of the Wounded Knee massacre: “All this was a severe ordeal for one who had so lately put all his faith in the Christian love and lofty ideals of the white man. Yet I passed no hasty judgment, and was thankful that I might be of some service and relieve even a small part of the suffering” (Deep Woods 114). Like everything about Eastman, though, both this quotation and his story as a whole are more complex and contradictory than might appear upon first reading, as my experiences teaching this text have underlined.

When I teach From the Deep Woods to Civilization, my students, who are ordinarily encountering Eastman for the first time, often respond to this passage with some level of dismay (i.e., “He ‘passed no hasty judgment’? Are you kidding me?”). Rather than being horrified by Eastman’s descriptions of his experiences, they initially respond most strongly to his measured tone—as have so many critics before them—aligning Eastman with the faceless and unproblematically evil soldiers manning the Hotchkiss guns, and relegating the whole lot of them to a distant place nowhere near the modern, enlightened reader. In my experience, this sort of initial distancing is common among the mostly young, mostly non-Native readers at my university. And so I encourage my students to voice their initial responses, letting the condemnation run its course before I, or better yet, one of them, begins to point to the flaws in a logic that so easily tosses From the Deep
Woods to Civilization into the dustbin of outdated texts. I might ask, “Is that all that’s here?” or one of my students might begin to worry the loose threads of such a hastily woven tapestry of meaning. Together, we pull out the inconsistencies in Eastman’s seemingly measured narrative.

As my students and I discuss, calling Eastman an assimilationist makes a certain amount of sense in terms of some of his rhetoric. For example, when we perform close readings of key passages in From the Deep Woods to Civilization, we find that Eastman valorizes “civilization”—read whiteness and Christianity—with an enthusiasm that undoubtedly thrilled his contemporary Anglo audience as much as it horrifies his present critics:

[M]y eyes were opened intelligently to the greatness of Christian civilization, the ideal civilization, as it unfolded itself before my eyes. [...] There must be no more warfare within our borders; we must quit the forest trail for the breaking-plow, since the pastoral life was the next thing for the Indian. I renounced finally my bow and arrows for the spade and the pen; I took off my soft moccasins and put on the heavy and clumsy but durable shoes. Every day of my life I put into use every English word that I knew, and for the first time permitted myself to think and act as a white man. (Deep Woods 57-58)

My students frequently cite this passage as a moment in which Eastman’s sentiments align with his measured tone in describing the Wounded Knee Massacre—in this argument, his fairly unemotional depiction of the massacre thus illustrates his success at attaining his goal “to think and act like a white man.” I agree with this reading, as have many critics before me, and think it holds especially
true when we examine these sections in isolation from the rest of the text. In this particular passage, Eastman publicly forsakes what, for white audiences, would be icons of Indian identity: a Native religious cosmology, an emphasis on warfare, and the perennial markers of a bow, arrow and moccasins. Significantly, however, this conversion, in which Eastman rejects the markers of Indian identity, is embedded within a number of other stories that highlight the difficulty of such a rejection, which we discover when we take the whole text into consideration.

A close reading of From the Deep Woods to Civilization suggests that Eastman, like many other bicultural writers, continues to move uneasily between dominant/non-dominant perspectives long after he trades his “bow and arrows for the spade and pen.” One of the more apparent examples of this fluctuation emerges from Eastman’s description of his educational history, where, despite the supposed marks of assimilation—his demeanor and accomplishments—he displays a perspective that is recognizably indigenous in its sympathy. When Eastman first enters a classroom he is mocked as “the long-haired boy” (Deep Woods 23). Within a short time, however, this “insult” no longer applies: Eastman cuts his hair and adopts white clothes, eschewing the overt markers of Native identity to become a model—read Anglicized—student who actively pursues formal education as a means by which to succeed within the dominant culture. By 1877, when Eastman situates his epiphanic embrace of Anglo culture, he has already spent substantial time within the educational system, first attending school near where his father lived
in Flandreau, South Dakota, then leaving for two years of mission school at the
Santee agency in Nebraska, and, most recently, completing his first year at Beloit
College in Wisconsin. But despite all the shifts in his appearance and surroundings,
Eastman’s descriptions offer a markedly Indian perspective. When describing his
arrival at Beloit College, for instance, Eastman frames his account with Native
history. He situates the narrative in time by highlighting the scant three months
since the Custer battle, and he situates the narrative spatially by emphasizing a
Native presence that predates Beloit’s construction: “The college grounds covered
the site of an ancient village of mound-builders, which showed to great advantage
on the neat campus” (Deep Woods 52). Similarly, Eastman uses Native history as a
situational marker when he tells the story of his search for work after his first year at
Beloit in the summer of 1877. He says, “as I walked, I recalled the troubles of that
great chief of the Sac and Fox tribe, Black Hawk, who had some dispute with
President Lincoln about this very region” (Deep Woods 56). Immediately following
this reverie, he finds a farm, inquires about work, and is met with the hostile
answer—“Oho! [Y]ou can not work the New Ulm game on me. I don’t think you
can reproduce the Fort Dearborn massacre on this farm” (Deep Woods 57). Both
Eastman’s reverie and the farmer’s verbal attack highlight the layered and conflicted
history of Native-White relations in the U.S., pointing to the impossibility of a
simple erasure of those tensions even as Eastman’s more overt rhetoric seems to
suggest that such an erasure is easily accomplished. These complexities vanish,
however, when Eastman is read as merely an assimilationist, since critical attention
then tends to focus entirely on his various odes to civilization. A more detailed
examination reveals the disjunctions, the fault lines where conversion narrative and
tribal stories collide. These fault lines, the jagged and shifting spaces where cultures
meet, clash or coalesce in what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “borderlands” and Mary
Louise Pratt calls “contact zones,” provide insight into Eastman’s position as a
writer whose life and work move between seemingly irreconcilable sites of
understanding. 9

Slippages between dominant and indigenous narratives increase as we
examine Eastman’s confrontation further. The farmer’s exclamation—“[Y]ou can
not work the New Ulm game on me”—invokes not just general Native-White
hostilities, but Eastman’s specific familial background. The New Ulm conflict,
known, too, as the “Sioux Uprising of 1862,” was, as I mentioned earlier, the reason
for Eastman’s relocation to Canada at four years of age. The New Ulm conflict was
also, in many ways, the first of a series of events that brought Eastman to the
farmer’s door. Eastman was separated from his father, Many Lightnings, because of
his father’s alleged participation in the battle, for which Many Lightnings was
sentenced to hang in Mankato, Minnesota, along with 303 other Indians. Many
Lightnings instead spent three years in the federal penitentiary, where he converted
to Christianity and took the name Jacob Eastman following President Lincoln’s
commutation of his sentence. 10 Ultimately, this conflict, which the farmer invokes
as a slur, plays a significant role in Eastman’s conversion to Christianity and his subsequent pursuit of education. Whether actual or fabricated, the inclusion of this twist of fate underlines Eastman’s intrinsic connection to Native history. While he might dress and speak like a white man, Eastman cannot elide, or, more precisely—given that the textual reproduction of this coincidence is on some level an editorial choice—does not desire to elide his ties to an indigenous history that is at odds with that of the dominant culture. In the interstices of Eastman’s conversion narrative, then, is an alternate story, a tribal narrative that cannot be completely contained by his critics’ or even his own claims for his total assimilation.

Eastman writes nothing of the apparently coincidental nature of the farmer’s comments and, instead, goes on to describe the conclusion of his search with two sentences: “I kept on my way until I found another farmer to whom I made haste to present my letter [of introduction from the Beloit College president]. For him I worked all summer, and as treaties were kept on both sides, there was no trouble” (Deep Woods 56). This enigmatic description of Eastman’s summer is puzzling given that it leads, in the next sentence, to the story of his conversion, which begins, “It was here and now that my eyes were opened intelligently to the greatness of Christian civilization, the ideal civilization [. . .]” (Deep Woods 57). There is, in fact, a strange absence of any transitional material that might explain how one farmer’s open hostility and another’s seeming tolerance leads Eastman to recognize what he depicts as the intrinsic superiority of dominant culture. In the end, one of
the most striking things about the entire surrounding vignette is that it stands in direct contradiction to Eastman’s recognition of “the greatness of Christian civilization.” Rather than an epiphanic turning point, Eastman’s story frames his conversion as a tentative and conditional cease-fire, thus making his subsequent embrace of “Christian civilization” difficult to take at face value.

My aim here is not to deny, but to contextualize the often-explicit assimilationist rhetoric of Eastman’s work. The evident internal conflicts within his narratives offer a rich site for investigations, pointing to the liminal nature of both his texts and his life. Much of this complexity is lost, however, when Eastman’s writing is dismissed as being simply, to quote one critic, “characteristic of the Indian who has become educated and writes about his youth for a white audience” (Powers 147). Eastman was, undeniably, a border figure with a stake in two disparate and often-conflicting cultures. During the eighty-one years of his life, from 1858 to 1939, he experienced social and cultural changes too radical for most readers to comprehend; his texts, mediated and problematic as they may be, provide us with an invaluable window into that upheaval. Thus we lose precious cultural insight if we reject Eastman’s writing in its entirety, and we risk the same if we value only his report of the Wounded Knee massacre. This limited critical focus negates Eastman’s contribution as a pioneer of Native literature, substituting in its stead
another dominant narrative of loss; superseded by the narrative of Wounded Knee, Eastman’s complete story is contained as effectively as were those who died in the snow on that bitter December day in 1890.

Such containment leads to incomplete readings of Eastman’s work. As my analysis will show, even his account of the Wounded Knee aftermath—the section of *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* that has garnered so much critical attention—ultimately reveals a more complicated story than has been previously supposed. In contrast to what one might expect, Eastman’s approbation of dominant culture is matched by his condemnation of the same, as we see when we return to his story of Wounded Knee: “Fully three miles from the scene of the massacre we found the body of a woman […] and from this point on we found them scattered along as they had been relentlessly hunted down and slaughtered while fleeing for their lives. Some of our people discovered relatives or friends among the dead, and there was much wailing and mourning” (*Deep Woods* 111). Set a few pages before his measured “Yet I passed no hasty judgment,” this passage presents a more emotional narrative. Eastman’s emphasis on the three-mile distance between the battlefield and the last body, for example, works in tandem with his vivid word choice—“relentlessly,” “slaughtered”—to situate the U.S. Cavalry as the aggressor and the Lakota people as victim. Significantly, Eastman also offers a vision of grief that is in direct contrast to common stereotypes of the “savage” Indian who is inevitably hostile, male, and without visible relatives. In Eastman’s story, each lost
life is recognized and lamented by those left behind. Thus, regardless of the later disclaimer, judgment is passed and blame is laid squarely at the door of Eastman’s then employer—the U.S. government.

Eastman also provides insight into the events leading up to the massacre, as his chapter title, “The Ghost Dance War,” suggests. Much has been made of the connection between the Ghost Dance religion and the Wounded Knee massacre, with most dominant accounts, as I indicated in my introduction, positing a cause-and-effect relationship between the two events. Despite his chapter title, Eastman’s recollections refute such a one-to-one correspondence, thus aligning his testimony with that of many other Native eyewitnesses whose accounts refuse such a conflation of extremes.

“The Ghost Dance War” begins with Eastman’s musings on the new religion, which he calls a “religious craze [. . .] foreign to the Indian philosophy” (Deep Woods 92). These thoughts, however, are not the first, but the third description of the Ghost Dance that occurs in the text. The two earlier accounts, which precede the more frequently excerpted section of Eastman’s narrative, provide the key to Eastman’s later depiction of the Wounded Knee massacre. The first two observations are recounted in the previous chapter, “A Doctor Among the Indians,” where Eastman describes his arrival at the Pine Ridge Reservation and his early days as the agency physician. In this section of the text, the head of the Indian police force, Captain George Sword, calls on Eastman shortly after his arrival on the
Pine Ridge Reservation. During his visit, Sword gives the history of the Ghost Dance, emphasizing the religion’s Christian aspects. He explains to Eastman that the Ghost Dance “has been rapidly gaining converts in many of the camps. [. . .] The agent says that the Great Father in Washington wishes it stopped. I fear the people will not stop. I fear trouble, kola’” (Deep Woods 84). Sword’s fears are clearly not of the Ghost Dancers, but of U.S. aggression toward the dancers.

Eastman’s next guest, identified as “the agent,” “a new man and a political appointee” (clearly Pine Ridge Reservation Indian Agent Daniel Royer, known to the Lakota as “Young Man Afraid of Indians”), validates Sword’s apprehension regarding government intervention. Royer’s sentiments about the Ghost Dance, which contrast sharply with George Sword’s, are worth quoting in full:

‘I tell you, doctor, [. . .] I am mighty glad you came here at just this time. We have a most difficult situation to handle, but those men down in Washington don’t seem to realize the facts. If I had my way, I would have had troops here before this. [. . .] This Ghost dance craze is the worst thing that has ever taken hold of the Indian race. It is going like wild fire among the tribes, and right here and now the people are beginning to defy my authority, and my Indian police seem to be powerless. I expect every employee on the agency to do his or her best to avert an outbreak.’ (Deep Woods 84-85)

Lest a reader sympathize with Royer’s panic, Eastman counters this assessment just a few pages later with yet another conversation between himself and Captain Sword, where Eastman asks “incredulously,” “Do [the dancers] really mean mischief?” (Deep Woods 88). Sword’s answer—“They say not, and that all they ask is to be
let alone. They say the white man is not disturbed when he goes to church”’ (Deep Woods 88)—undercuts Royer’s demonization of the Ghost Dance by comparing the Native religion with Christianity. Such a comparison has two functions: first, it legitimates the Ghost Dance as a valid religion, thereby suggesting that its followers should have been afforded the same respect as that given to the Christian churchgoers who make up the bulk of Eastman’s audience; and second, it implicitly invokes the Bill of Rights, which guarantees that all men should be free to worship as they see fit, making Royer’s sentiments not only unreasonable, but un-American.

In his more famous chapter, “The Ghost Dance War,” Eastman restates these sentiments, writing that the Ghost Dance “in itself was scarcely a source of danger, and one might almost as well call upon the army to suppress Billy Sunday [a nineteenth-century evangelist] and his hysterical followers” (Deep Woods 99). While Eastman is clearly not a Ghost Dance proponent, his commentary reaffirms the Ghost Dancers’ right to their religion by highlighting the ludicrous nature of the claims against them. With this series of exchanges, then, Eastman shifts responsibility for the Wounded Knee massacre from the Ghost Dancers to the government officials. The significance of this move cannot be overstated, since Eastman’s implicit criticism of Agent Royer challenges the cause-and-effect paradigm that regulates Wounded Knee narratives in the dominant culture. I would argue that once the “cause” of the Ghost Dance is emptied of credibility, then the
Wounded Knee massacre stands revealed, not as the consequence of an Indian “uprising,” but as an overt act of violence on the part of the U.S. government.

My point here is that our readings of Native texts often overlook resistance, such as that found in Eastman’s descriptions of the Ghost Dance, by focusing on the stories of loss that meet our readerly expectations. Neither the Ghost Dance nor the Lakota “vanished” with Wounded Knee. But when we erase the complexity of a text like From the Deep Woods to Civilization, we become complicit in the perpetuation of such myths, thereby participating in what Anishinabe theorist Gerald Vizenor calls “manifest manners,” the actions and attitudes by which dominant culture continues to colonize the Native other. Vizenor himself reclaims Eastman’s narratives, denouncing those who call the writer “assimilationist” and offering this series of questions in place of their criticisms:

Eastman was an outstanding student, and he learned to use metaphors as the simulations of survivance. He celebrated peace and the romance of tribal stories to overcome the morose remembrance of the Wounded Knee Massacre. Could there have been a wiser resistance literature or simulation of survivance at the time? What did it mean to be the first generation to hear the stories of the past, bear the horrors of the moment, and write the future? What were tribal identities at the turn of the last century? (51)

In response to H. David Brumble III’s charge that Eastman “saw himself as an embodiment of Social Darwinist notions about the evolution of the races” (qtd. in Vizenor 49), Vizenor reads Eastman’s romantic recreation of “the thrilling wild life” of his childhood as a subtle form of resistance, perhaps the only practical response
to the times during which Eastman wrote. In this reading, Eastman’s stance becomes a matter of survival, of endurance, a strategy that Vizenor terms “survivance.” Rather than berating Eastman for his assimilationist stances, Vizenor asks critics to contextualize and interrogate not only Eastman but all Native writers of this period as products of their time. I pair my reading of *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* with a reading of *Black Elk Speaks* as a way to enact Vizenor’s suggestions.

Rereading *Black Elk Speaks*: Survival and Resistance in Black Elk’s Representations of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee Massacre

*Black Elk Speaks* has been dismissed for much the same reason as *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*—cultural mediation—but Black Elk’s story has undoubtedly been the cause of a great deal more spilled ink and the focus of many more angry voices. At the heart of the matter stand issues central to both American Indian studies and multicultural studies: whose text is this anyway? Whose story is being told? Whose voice is it that has been so lauded and so condemned? Critics like William K. Powers, an anthropologist, have emphatically answered those questions with one name—John G. Neihardt. Powers calls much of *Black Elk Speaks* “the fabrication of a white man,” saying: “Essentially, in *Black Elk Speaks* and other books written by white men for a white audience, the ideas, plots, persons, and situations [. . .] have been constructed to conform to the expectations of a white audience” (148). Once again I want to examine these charges with a return
to the classroom, to my mostly Anglo, mostly midwestern students who often believe, upon reading _Black Elk Speaks_, that they have found an “authentic” American Indian voice. Until I ask the unsettling question, “Look at the cover, at the preface, what do they say about the book?” Forty pairs of eyes take in the picture of the mystical, antlered Indian and the equally mystical words: “As told through John G. Neihardt.” In a recent American literature class, a student answered that question by recalling the words of Vine Deloria, Jr., who asks in regard to Neihardt’s potential editorial intrusion, “Can it matter?” (Neihardt, _Black Elk Speaks_ xiv). My answer to Deloria’s rhetorical question, which my students come to know over the course of our discussions about the text, is that it does matter; it matters a great deal, in fact, especially because this particular book has been one of the most, if not _the_ most, widely read of any Native texts for the past thirty years. But just as with Eastman’s work, I suggest that we need to interrogate the text and contexts of the book at hand before we can come to any conclusions about how such interventions affect meaning. Luckily, our contextual information about the Black Elk /Neihardt collaboration is much more detailed than that of the assumed collaboration between Eastman and his wife, since Raymond J. DeMallie’s _The Sixth Grandfather_ (1985) presents the stenographic transcripts of the Black Elk/Neihardt interviews along with detailed explanatory notes. After giving my students excerpts of DeMallie’s work, then, I bring them back to _Black Elk Speaks_ and ask again, “What’s here? What can we find in this book?” These questions have
at least two sets of answers, one based on Neihardt’s text and one based on DeMallie’s expansion of that text, but even with this additional contextual information, the critical controversy surrounding *Black Elk Speaks*’ mediation is no more resolved than it is for *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*.

As William Powers points out, one of the things present in *Black Elk Speaks* is clear-cut mediation: most of the war imagery has been excerpted from Black Elk’s vision and the beginning and end of the text are entirely Neihardt’s creation, something that Neihardt freely admitted throughout his life.¹² Until the publication of Sally McClusky’s influential 1972 article, “*Black Elk Speaks*: and So Does John Neihardt,” however, Neihardt’s claims of authorship went almost unheard. The 1932 *Book Review Digest*, for example, lists the author of *Black Elk Speaks* as “Black Elk, Oglala Indian” (32). In fact, the most-cited section of *Black Elk Speaks*, the last three paragraphs of its elegiac conclusion, is entirely Neihardt’s creation. In this moving passage, Black Elk (read Neihardt) speaks of Wounded Knee and Lakota culture with lyric finality:

And so it was all over.
I did not know then how much was ended.
When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died [at Wounded Knee] in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.
And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth,—you see me now as a pitiful old man who

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has done nothing, for the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead. (Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* 270)

So ends *Black Elk Speaks*—and Dee Brown’s incredibly influential history, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, and the *Wall Street Journal* review of Brown’s text. Add a plethora of other books and articles including, to my astonishment, the latest text on the massacre, William S. Coleman’s *Voices of Wounded Knee* (2000), which not only concludes with Neihardt’s words, but also cites them in the epigraph and introduction for good measure. The selective repetition of this particular passage is especially disturbing given its implicit message, which autobiography theorist G. Thomas Couser describes in no uncertain terms: “To end the narrative so *conclusively* with the Battle of Wounded Knee is the literary equivalent of killing off the survivors; it is a subtle but insidious form of cultural genocide. The effect is to encourage white readers to indulge in an uncomplicated pathos at the demise of a noble way of life rather than to compel them to contemplate its survival in assimilated forms” (85). For Couser and others, then, Neihardt’s editing almost irretrievably compromises Black Elk’s narrative.

Such harsh condemnation is hardly universal, however; although scholars like Powers and Couser have criticized Neihardt’s editorial decisions, others find the book laudable. Michael Castro, for one, emphasizes the syncretic nature of *Black Elk Speaks*’ inception, suggesting that “the project was agreed upon by both men, and in a very real sense it had been initiated by Black Elk himself when he proposed
to teach Neihardt, whom he knew to be a writer, ‘the secrets of the Other World’” (84). The story goes that Black Elk appeared to have been waiting for Neihardt on the day of their first meeting, and much has been made of the immediate bond between the two men. Neihardt spoke of this bond in a letter to his friend, Julius T. House, dated June 3, 1931:

A strange thing happened often while I was talking with Black Elk. Over and over he seemed to be quoting from my poems, and sometimes I quoted some of my stuff to him which when translated into Sioux could not retain much of its literary character, but the old man immediately recognized the ideas as his own. There was an uncanny merging of consciousness between the old fellow and myself. (DeMallie, “Lakota Legacy” 116)

Neihardt felt so strongly about his connection to Black Elk that he postponed his then-current project “to write the complete life of Black Elk, for it would be a revelation of the Indian consciousness from the depths” (qtd. in Castro 84). But while Neihardt put aside the epic poem he was writing, he did not put aside the poem’s focus—Wounded Knee and the “demise” of Lakota culture—and it is this focus that has, in one way or another, driven most of the scholarly work on Black Elk Speaks. Sally McCluskey’s interview with Neihardt indicates that Black Elk Speaks’ mournful conclusion is a literary device; according to McCluskey, Black Elk “did not particularly want to talk about ‘old times’ or the ‘Messiah Craze’ [the Ghost Dance]” (McCluskey 235). Neihardt overcame Black Elk’s initial resistance,
however, and so was able to record Black Elk’s experiences as a Ghost Dancer and an observer of the massacre along with Black Elk’s recollections of his great vision and his early life.

In many ways, Neihardt’s rendering of the Wounded Knee massacre as the pivotal moment in *Black Elk Speaks* is not surprising given that he went to the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1930 to collect background material on the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee for his epic poem *The Cycle of the West*. Neihardt arrived at Pine Ridge with his son Sigurd in hopes of finding Lakota who could give firsthand accounts of both the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre. An Indian agent suggested that Neihardt meet with Black Elk, and their subsequent conversation led to the series of 1931 interviews that would become *Black Elk Speaks*. After leaving Pine Ridge and reviewing the stenographic notes of their dialogue, Neihardt returned to his original vision, “purposely end[ing] Black Elk’s story with the Battle of Wounded Knee [because] it was the most dramatic point” (McCluskey 239). As Couser points out, Neihardt’s over-determined conclusion has reinforced the myth of the vanishing Indian in rather frightening ways, which, by this point, have been discussed at length by other critics.14

But Black Elk’s story, like Eastman’s, is too complicated to be explained by an either/or reading. Consequently, while there is loss in both *Black Elk Speaks* and the interview transcripts, as suggested by the continual replication of Neihardt’s conclusion and as might be expected given the grim realities of late nineteenth-
century Lakota history, there is also testimony to what Vizenor would call
survivance. My examination of this often-contradictory narrative, then, will
concentrate, as with Eastman’s text, on the oft-excerpted depiction of the Ghost
Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre, arguing that Black Elk’s account contains
a distinctive focus on survival despite critical accounts to the contrary.

My reading begins not with Black Elk’s depiction of Wounded Knee, but
with his interesting and less-studied representation of the Ghost Dance. From the
outset Black Elk’s account—a lengthy description of both his beliefs about the
religion and the specifics of the accompanying dance practice—differs markedly
from Eastman’s, since Black Elk’s serious contemplation of the Ghost Dance belies
Eastman’s portrayal of Ghost Dancers as hysterical religious adherents. On some
level this disparity might be a question of audience; they are two very different men
in two very different rhetorical situations: Black Elk tells an oral story in the
company of a number of his Lakota contemporaries, while Eastman writes his
narrative for a largely white audience. Regardless of their audiences, though, both
men separate the Ghost Dance from the Wounded Knee massacre: Eastman by
highlighting the religion’s similarity to charismatic versions of Christianity, and
Black Elk, on the opposite end of the spectrum, by depicting the Ghost Dance as
entirely in keeping with Lakota cultural norms.

As a Ghost Dancer himself, Black Elk offers an inside perspective on the
religion, beginning with his first encounter with the Paiute prophet Wovoka’s
teachings in the fall of 1889. In Neihardt’s text, Black Elk greets initial reports of
the dance with doubt similar to Eastman’s: “It was hard to believe; and when I first
heard of it, I thought it was only foolish talk that somebody started somewhere”
(Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks 232). This disbelief rings hollow when coming from
Black Elk, however, who in 1889 was a wicasa wakan (a medicine man) in a culture
where dreams and visions are not only credible but necessary occurrences. Not
surprisingly, a look at the transcripts shows the remark to be one of Neihardt’s
additions, more likely mirroring the emotions Neihardt anticipated of Black Elk
Speaks’ white readers than Black Elk’s own. In the transcribed conversation Black
Elk says, “I did not go over there, I just heard of it, that’s all” (DeMallie, Sixth
Grandfather 257). He then goes on to explain, however, that his hesitation at
joining the dancers is rooted not in skepticism, but in apprehensive belief: “At first
when I heard this [the details of the Ghost Dance religion] I was bothered, because
my vision was nearly like it and it looked as though my vision were really coming
ture and that if I helped, probably with my power that I had I could make the tree
bloom and that would get my people back into that sacred hoop again where they
would prosper” (DeMallie, Sixth Grandfather 257). According to Black Elk, then,
the Ghost Dance is not an anomaly as Eastman suggests, but, like Black Elk’s
vision, a characteristic extension of pre-existing Lakota beliefs.

Black Elk’s descriptions of both his original vision and the Ghost Dance
religion situate their regenerative possibility in direct opposition to dominant
culture. Unsurprisingly, Neihardt mediates this opposition with careful editing. Black Elk’s vision, for example, as I have mentioned, contains war imagery that Neihardt excised from *Black Elk Speaks*. In the complete vision of Black Elk’s youth, the six grandfathers (the Lakota powers representing each of the sacred directions), give him a series of gifts, including the “soldier weed of destruction,” an herb that had the power to kill anything it touched (DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* 135-37). According to Black Elk, this herb, which he chose not to use, would have saved the Lakota by bringing violent death to their enemies. The Ghost Dance presents much the same threat in Black Elk’s estimation, which is undoubtedly why its potentially destructive implications were also excised from *Black Elk Speaks*.¹⁵ Black Elk describes the Ghost Dance philosophy twice in the transcripts. The first description comes second-hand: “These people told me that there were men who had actually seen the Messiah and that he had given them these things. They should put this paint on and have a ghost dance, and in doing this they would save themselves, that there is another world coming—a world just for the Indians, that in time the world would come and crush out all the whites” (emphasis added; DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* 257). In the second Ghost Dance description, Black Elk relates his thoughts after becoming a Ghost Dance participant: “[l]t occurred to me that in my vision [the vision of Black Elk’s childhood] I had seen beautiful things and in the center of the earth I had seen everything and perhaps this land of my vision was where the people were going [in the Ghost Dance prophecy] and that we would
disappoint the white race and only my people would live” (emphasis added; DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* 260). Neihardt tempers both of these accounts by altering their final sentences. Specifically, in *Black Elk Speaks*, the whites (Wasichus) “disappear” rather than getting crushed (232), and the Lakota “live and prosper where no Wasichus were or ever could be” (241) as opposed to being the “only” people to live. With minimal editing, then, Neihardt constructs a benign Ghost Dance, one that would be infinitely more palatable to an Anglo audience than Black Elk’s own.

Also excised from *Black Elk Speaks* are Black Elk’s references to the Ghost Dance religion’s ongoing potential, which set Black Elk’s description even further apart from most dominant narratives. In Neihardt’s edited version, the Ghost Dance ends with the Wounded Knee Massacre—the “death” of the Ghost Dance paralleling the “death” of Lakota culture. This definitive conclusion does not occur in Black Elk’s story, however, as we see when Black Elk details his visions, which were common to those who danced the Ghost Dance. Over the course of the four-day dance some participants would fall into trances after which, like Black Elk, they would recount their visions. Black Elk tells Neihardt of experiencing several such visions. He ends his first description by commenting, “All the people there were eager to hear of what I had to say and they all gathered around me. Lots of these people are still alive. These visions I have told people they still remember” (DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* 264). This reference to the living memory of the
Ghost Dance is, of course, omitted from *Black Elk Speaks* because it would weaken the text’s neat linearity: Ghost Dancers and Ghost Dance visions cannot be alive and well in the 1930s if they died, as the text suggests, with the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre. But Black Elk is concerned with more than Ghost Dance memories, as we see when he elaborates on the content of his vision: “I went to the sixth village in the vision because in the flaming rainbow of the first vision I had seen six grandfathers. [. . .] This village might represent six generations from the first and perhaps in the sixth generation the tree will bloom as in my vision” (DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* 265). In a startling move, Black Elk suggests that his 1890 vision has the potential for future efficacy. Together, these two descriptions establish that, for Black Elk, the Ghost Dance religion was entirely separate from Wounded Knee, existing not as an isolated, tragic, historical event, but as a potentially viable belief system that, as Black Elk speaks to John G. Neihardt in 1931, continues to hold the possibility of a cultural renaissance.

Black Elk’s surprising intimation regarding the future value of his Ghost Dance vision is still only one aspect of Black Elk’s nuanced story. There are also several instances in *Black Elk Speaks* where Black Elk questions the strength of his belief in the Ghost Dance religion, but such questions ultimately validate the religion in much the same fashion as did his belief. He mentions having underlying doubts, for example, when he describes heading out with a small group of warriors after trouble broke out at Wounded Knee:
When it was getting light, a war party went out and I went along; but this time I took a gun with me. When I started out the day before to Wounded Knee, I took only my sacred bow, which was not made to shoot with; because I was a little in doubt about the Wanekia [Messiah] religion at that time, and I did not really want to kill anybody because of it.

But I did not feel like that any more. After what I had seen over there, I wanted revenge; I wanted to kill. (Neihardt, _Black Elk Speaks_ 264)

In terms of my argument regarding the complexity of Black Elk’s Ghost Dance account, I read his doubt of the Ghost Dance religion to be just as affirming as his profession of continued belief. In both instances Black Elk seriously contemplates the Ghost Dance and in both he clearly separates his experience as a Ghost Dancer from his experience during the aftermath of Wounded Knee. For me, then, Black Elk’s shifting perspective attests to the layered and shifting nature of his life, suggesting that his account cannot and should not be contained by monolithic readings that subsume these two very different historical events under a single tragic representation.

In order to fully extricate Black Elk’s depiction of the Ghost Dance from his depiction of Wounded Knee, I turn, finally, to his account of the events surrounding the massacre. Upon reading the next-to-last chapter of _Black Elk Speaks_—“The Butchering at Wounded Knee”—most readers have a certain level of conscious expectation, an expectation underlined by Black Elk’s repeated premonition that “something terrible was going to happen” (Neihardt, _Black Elk Speaks_ 254-55). This inherent narrative tension is heightened by Black Elk’s first encounter with an
observer of the massacre, who cries, "'Hey-hey-hey! They have murdered them!'"

(Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* 256). As Black Elk and his party ride toward the scene of the killing, then, an explicit description of violence seems inevitable, especially given most readers’ knowledge of popularized accounts of the Wounded Knee massacre; that is not, however, to be the case. Instead, the first encounter Black Elk recounts is with a group of survivors:

[... ] just below the head of the dry gulch, there were some women and children who were huddled under a clay bank, and some cavalrymen were there pointing guns at them. [... ] Then I rode over the ridge and the others after me, and we were crying: 'Take courage! It is time to fight!' The soldiers who were guarding our relatives shot at us and then ran away fast [... ] We got our relatives and sent them across the ridge to the northwest where they would be safe. (Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* 257-58)

When we put aside our readerly expectations, then, and examine the events in the order in which they are presented, we see that the first image is not of loss, but of the preservation of Lakota life. The transcripts in DeMallie’s text reveal the same focus, the only difference being that in his unedited version, Black Elk’s party finds and rescues a wounded man by the name of Little Finger before they reach the gulch and confront the soldiers (DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* 273), thus adding one more name to the list of those saved.

After securing the safety of the group of women and children, Black Elk relates his party’s next discovery: “We found a little baby, lying all alone near the
head of the gulch. I could not pick her up just then, but I got her later and some of my people adopted her. I just wrapped her up tighter in a shawl that was around her and left her there. It was a safe place, and I had other work to do” (Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* 258). The emphasis here, I would argue, is on continuity, as the break in the chronology of the story underlines—a child is saved and then sheltered by the tribe. DeMallie’s transcripts contain this same emphasis, although they reveal that Black Elk was actually much more direct: “At the head of the gulch, I saw a baby all alone. It was adopted by my wife’s father. Its name was Blue Whirlwind. I was going to pick her up but I left her for she was in a safe place” (DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* 273). The unedited version, while shorter and less embellished, further highlights cultural continuity by naming the baby and her eventual guardians—she is a child with a specific future and specific tribal connections. And note that this second affirmation of Lakota *life* precedes any description of death in both Neihardt’s and DeMallie’s versions of Black Elk’s story. Ultimately, the anticipated depiction of the massacre comprises only seven sentences of the entire chapter. Black Elk’s emphasis on resistance and survival, then, is clearly at odds with popular understandings of the massacre, which tend to continually reinscribe the story of the broken hoop and annihilated culture with which John G. Neihardt closes *Black Elk Speaks*.

The discrepancy between Black Elk’s focus on survival and the predominant critical focus on loss becomes even more evident when Neihardt’s editorial
decisions are taken into account, which makes it worthwhile here to compare the
depiction of the Wounded Knee aftermath in *Black Elk Speaks* to that in *The Sixth
Grandfather*. The short section in Neihardt’s text is rich in horrific detail:

We followed down along the dry gulch, and what we
saw was terrible. Dead and wounded women and
children and little babies were scattered all along
where they had been trying to run away. The soldiers
had followed along the gulch, as they ran, and
murdered them in there. Sometimes they were in
heaps because they had huddled together, and some
were scattered all along. Sometimes bunches of them
had been killed and torn to pieces where the wagon
guns hit them. I saw a little baby trying to suck its
mother, but she was bloody and dead. (Nethardt,
*Black Elk Speaks* 259)

The interview transcripts, however, offer a somewhat different account:

I wanted to see the place where Big Foot and his
people got killed and as I followed down the draw I
could see men and women lying dead all along there.
Soldiers and Indians afterwards were here and there
[Then as I got nearer there were more of them lying
there.] [sic] Right at the beginning of the draw there
were many Indians and there were more soldiers
further down.

This was a good day—the sun was shining. In
the evening it began to snow. The day was cold even
though it was sunny. That night snow covered us and
we all died from the cold. As I went down toward the
village, I could see the children dying all over—it was
just a sight. I did not get as far as Big Foot’s body
though. (DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* 275)

While both versions recount the massacre’s horror, Neihardt’s editing heightens the
drama. He inserts references to blood and draws specific images, such as that of the
baby, to bring the magnitude of the battle home to a predominantly Anglo 1930s
audience. Even more interesting than Neihardt’s additions, however, are his deletions. Black Elk’s version of his experience destabilizes popular stories of Wounded Knee not only by naming survivors (and thus negating the possibility of a total annihilation of Native peoples), but also by describing the bodies of soldiers next to those of Indians, something that Neihardt omits in his attempt to shape Black Elk’s story for white readers. Histories of Wounded Knee number the 7th Cavalry’s losses at around twenty-five men, most of whom were caught in the cross fire from their own company’s guns; but popular images of the massacre review only the faces and bodies of dead Lakota, as I find when I turn again to The Voices of Wounded Knee, the latest book on Wounded Knee, with its jacket photo of Anglo soldiers guarding a wagon full of frozen Indian bodies. This story of Lakota death is represented in the Black Elk transcripts, but it is not the only story told. History, as Black Elk tells it, is complicated, messy, and full of contradictions—while Wounded Knee was, without a doubt, a horrific massacre, there were dead on both sides, just as there were survivors. By acknowledging this reality, Black Elk refuses to relegate the massacre to the realm of myth, where its function as a symbol can override its resonance as actual lived experience.

The most telling difference between popular accounts of the Wounded Knee massacre and Black Elk’s version of the events, however, lies in Black Elk’s final comment about his later life, which Neihardt omits from Black Elk Speaks. In the Black Elk/Neihardt transcripts, Black Elk’s description of the events surrounding
the Wounded Knee massacre concludes when Black Elk and his party arrive at Pine Ridge on January 15, 1891, the day before their official surrender. Black Elk Speaks follows that chronology up to Black Elk’s arrival, at which point the two accounts sharply diverge; while Black Elk Speaks then relates Neihardt’s famed elegy about the broken hoop, the interview transcripts end with the following statement: “Two years later I was married” (DeMallie, Sixth Grandfather 282). Rather than relating the story of an annihilated people, Black Elk finishes his narrative with a symbolic beginning. In a fascinating parallel, Charles Eastman’s account of the massacre concludes with this same image: “In March, all being quiet, Miss Goodale decided to send in her resignation and go East to visit her relatives, and our wedding day was set for the following June” (Deep Woods 115). That each man enters into marriage should be no surprise given the cultural expectations regarding marriage and children in both Lakota and Anglo culture at the turn of the century, but that both Black Elk and Eastman end their accounts of the Wounded Knee massacre by reporting their respective wedding plans does beg analysis, especially in light of these passages’ ultimate import to the two texts’ critical reception.

Nicholas Black Elk and Charles Eastman bear witness to a dark moment in American Indian history, but it was not the final moment, as so many readings of their work urge us to believe. How can we read their odd juxtapositions of death and life, of endings and beginnings? One response is to ignore them, as Neihardt did with his editing of Black Elk’s story or as innumerable critics have done in their
analyses of Eastman. But such revisions bring only temporary satisfaction—a square peg may seem to fit a round hole if the corners are sawn off, but only from a distance. In the same way, Black Elk’s and Eastman’s stories may be ideologically contained within the expected and acceptable Wounded Knee narrative, but the fit is imperfect if one looks closely. Vizenor calls these sorts of surgically revised histories “the surveillance and domination of tribes in literature,” which produce “the absence of the tribal real” (4). Considering the nature of such simulacra, the “tribal real,” as Vizenor implies elsewhere, is perhaps too optimistic a term, given the long series of dominant replications that stand, like a funhouse mirror, between the “real” and its representation in popular culture. I, too, acknowledge the impossibility of recovering some fictional tribal narrative in the form of an untainted—read “pre-contact” in all its infinite romance—“real.” I want to suggest, however, that in the case of these two famous Wounded Knee narratives, we can practice more responsible reading strategies by recognizing the places in which these stories both exceed and fall short of their historically neat interpretations. Such recognitions not only expand our understanding of the ways in which American Indian authors construct identity in the early twentieth century, but they also are first steps in the breakdown of the monolithic stereotypes under which actual Native identities are subsumed. And who knows what stories we might recover if we let go of preconceived expectation and instead approach each text with
Vizenor’s open-ended question: “What did it mean to be the first generation to hear the stories of the past, bear the horrors of the moment, and write the future?” (51).
NOTES

1 Frances Karttunen contends that Eastman’s time in Canada and his subsequent life in the U.S. were, for Eastman, almost insurmountably different: “Ohiyesa’s personal memories of childhood began just at the time of total break with white society. The rest of his life would be shaped by the need to integrate life as he led it from the age of four to fifteen with all that came afterward” (138).

2 It is important to note that Black Elk did not adhere to traditional Lakota cosmology for his entire life, or, at least he did not adhere solely to such beliefs, since he spent much of his adult life as an active Catholic. The “true” status of Black Elk’s faith has been the subject of ongoing and often heated exchange over the past decade. Clyde Holler’s chapter on “The Search for the Historical Black Elk” gives an excellent overview of the major players in this debate (1-38).

3 Eastman’s books include nine published under his own name—Indian Boyhood (1902), Red Hunters and Animal People (1904), Old Indian Days (1907), The Soul of the Indian: An Interpretation (1911), Indian Child Life (1913), Indian Scout Talks: A Guide for Boy Scouts and Campfire Girls (1914), The Indian To-day: The Past and Future of the First Americans (1915), From the Deep Woods to Civilization (1916), Indian Heroes and Great Chieftains (1918)—and one bearing both his and his wife’s, Elaine Goodale’s, names—Wigwam Evenings: Sioux Folktales Retold (1909).

4 Perhaps even more fascinating, it was John Neihardt’s poetry that first interested Dee Brown in American Indian history. Brown discusses Neihardt’s impact on his work in “The Power of John Neihardt,” the opening essay of A Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt (1984). He says, “The culmination of Neihardt’s influence was Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, his voice being mixed in with the voices of many Indians who spoke in poetic prose while I wrote the book” (10). Brown ends the essay, as he did his book, with the broken hoop speech that Neihardt penned for the ending of Black Elk Speaks. While perhaps this is a fitting end for an essay honoring Neihardt (since he, rather than Black Elk, actually did write the words), it still underlines the endless cycle of repetition and simulation that surround references to Wounded Knee.

5 Deloria’s introduction, which is quoted in innumerable articles, has come to stand for a certain position in the ongoing debates about the authenticity of Black Elk Speaks. The debate itself has been such a cottage industry that Carl Silvo uses it to illustrate how texts are canonized and disciplines constituted. He explains:

I contend that this controversy, this ‘problem’ with Black Elk Speaks and the pejorative value judgments which accompany it, functions as a necessary
and inevitable factor in the book’s inclusion within the canon of American literature and its legitimization as an object of scholarly study. This is due to the disciplinary nature of literary studies as a discursive practice, a practice that depends upon the existence of such problems in order to function. (139)


7 Elaine Goodale went by the name Elaine Goodale Eastman after her marriage in March 1891. To avoid confusion, I refer to her as Goodale throughout this chapter.

8 By breaking reservation land into allotments of 160 acres or less per Indian, the Dawes Act attempted to mandate that American Indians adopt the doctrine of American individualism and private property. The price for full citizenship, which was what the act offered to those who accepted allotment, was incredibly high. Between 1887 and 1934, when the Indian Reorganization Act ushered in a new policy, Native peoples lost over two-thirds of their land (approximately 100 million acres).

9 In her seminal text, Borderlands/La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa describes borderlands as both physical and psychological spaces, saying, “[T]he lifeblood of two worlds merg[e] to form a third culture—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (3). While Anzaldúa’s theory grows out of her thoughts regarding the specific social and physical geography of the U.S./Mexican border, it also applies to the social, psychological and physical borders of U.S./reservation land.

Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the “contact zone” addresses similar, although somewhat more fluid interactions. She says that contact zones “refer to the social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34). I am attracted to Pratt’s term because of its portable nature—it applies to situations and power relations in any and all settings, and recognizes the importance of interactions between and among various non-dominant groups rather than privileging encounters between dominant/non-dominant groups. The strength of Pratt’s theory—its encompassing range—can also be its downfall, however, as it elides the distinct
differences between a purely social contact zone and a contact zone that has actual contested geography at its center. Thus Native nationalists, such as Dakota theorist Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, might see Pratt’s theory as a threat to Native sovereignty. As Cook-Lynn explains, “The indigenous view of the world—that the very origins of a people are specifically tribal (nationalistic) and rooted in a specific geography (place), that mythology (soul) and geography (land) are inseparable, that even language is rooted in a specific place—make [other] considerations antagonistic to the kind of discourse on nationalism desired by American Indian intellectuals” (88).

10 Lincoln commuted all but forty of the 303 death sentences, including those of Eastman’s two brothers, who were imprisoned along with his father. For more on this see the first chapter of Raymond Wilson’s Ohiyesa: Charles Eastman, Santee Sioux.

11 Black Elk Speaks is based on a series of interviews that Neihardt conducted from May 9 through May 29, 1931, at Black Elk’s home on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The interviews were often communal in nature, with other Lakota men joining the group and adding their versions of certain stories as they were told. Raymond DeMallie describes the interview process in detail:

Black Elk would make a statement in Lakota, which his son Ben then translated into English. Ben spoke the idiomatic ‘Indian English’ typical of the time—a dialect that had arisen out of the need for Indian students in off-reservation boarding schools, coming from many tribes and speaking many different languages, to communicate with one another in English. Neihardt would repeat Ben’s translation, rephrasing it for clarity in more standard English. When necessary, the sentence was repeated to Black Elk in Lakota for further clarification. As each sentence came forth in revised form from Neihardt’s repetition, [Neihardt’s daughter] Enid wrote it down in shorthand. [. . .] What was written down was not, strictly speaking, a verbatim record of Black Elk’s words, but a rephrasing in comprehensible English. While this could sometimes be one or two steps removed from the old man’s actual words, in the long run it was likely to generate fewer misunderstandings and to be more faithful to the intended meaning than a strictly verbatim recording. In a sense, Neihardt was already ‘writing’ Black Elk’s story by rephrasing his words in English. (32)
In the winter of 1944, Neihardt returned to Pine Ridge, conducting a second set of interviews, this time with both Black Elk and Eagle Elk, another older Oglala Lakota man, which provided the basis for Neihardt's 1951 novel, *When the Tree Flowered: An Authentic Tale of the Old Sioux World*.

12 Neihardt's most frequently cited explanation of his editorial position is quoted in Sally McCluskey:

> And I think he knew, I was the tool—no, the medium—he needed for what he wanted to get said. And my attitude toward what he has said to me is one of religious obligation.

> But it is absurd to suppose that the use of the first person singular is not a literary device, by which I mean that Black Elk did not sit and tell me his story in chronological order. At times considerable editing was necessary, but it was always worth the editing. The beginning and endings are mine; they are what he would have said if he had been able. At times I changed a word, a sentence, sometimes created a paragraph. And the translation—or rather the *transformation*—of what was given me was expressed so that it could be understood by the white world.

(238-39)

13 Despite Coleman's problematic reiteration of *Black Elk Speak*’s conclusion, *Voices of Wounded Knee* is one of the best available resources on the events surrounding the massacre.

14 The significance of Neihardt’s editorial decisions has been discussed by H. David Brumble III, G. Thomas Couer, Arnold Krupat, Sally McCluskey, and DeMallie himself, among others.

15 The nature of the Ghost Dance religion changed as it swept east from the Paiutes, and the Lakota version of the Ghost Dance, to which Black Elk adhered, was more aggressive than earlier forms of the prophecy. James Mooney explains this phenomenon in his seminal text, *The Ghost Dance Religion*:

> The great underlying principle of the Ghost dance doctrine is that the time will come when the whole Indian race, living and dead, will be reunited upon a regenerated earth, to live a life of aboriginal happiness, forever free from death, disease, and misery. On this foundation each tribe has built a
structure from its own mythology, and each apostle and believer has filled in the details according to his own mental capacity or ideas of happiness, with such additions as come to him in the trance. (139)

16 In DeMallie’s *The Sixth Grandfather*, the first person Black Elk encounters says: “Hey, hey son, the people that are coming are fired upon, I know it” (272).

17 There is a fascinating parallel here with Eastman’s account. While looking for survivors of the massacre, Eastman explains, “Among them I found a baby of about a year old warmly wrapped and entirely unhurt. I brought her in, and she was afterward adopted and educated by an army officer” (113). The difference between the placing of the children speaks to the differences in Eastman’s and Black Elk’s positions in relation to Lakota and Anglo cultures.

18 Significantly the paragraph on Wounded Knee is immediately followed by Black Elk’s discovery of two little boys who had been “killing soldiers all by themselves” (Neihardt 259), further emphasizing Lakota resistance rather than Lakota annihilation.
CHAPTER 4

“DANCING THAT WAY, THINGS BEGAN TO CHANGE”: THE GHOST DANCE AS PAN-TRIBAL METAPHOR IN THE TEXTS OF SHERMAN ALEXIE

[T]here are serious and notable distinctions in the comparison of tribal identities in the past century. Those tribal men and women who heard oral stories and then wrote their stories would not bear the same sources of consciousness as postindian warriors of simulation who are heard and written about by others.—Gerald Vizenor, Manifest Manners

When laying out his theories about Indian identity, Gerald Vizenor differentiates between early generations of Native authors who would have had access to tribal stories in traditional settings and later generations of writers who, as the twentieth century wore on, would necessarily have had different “sources of consciousness” (55). The multigenerational split to which Vizenor refers parallels the divisions in my own study, which moves from foundational representations of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre as seen in Wynema, From the Deep Woods to Civilization, and Black Elk Speaks, to late twentieth-century representations, in which contemporary Native writers appropriate, revise, and/or reject the complex legacies of these historical events. With this cross section of images, my project highlights the non-linear and incredibly multiplicitous array of Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee representations in American Indian literature, demonstrating 1) that the 1890 Lakota Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee
massacre are key cultural icons, images around which Native writers construct American Indian identities at both ends of the twentieth century, and 2) that the meaning and resonance of these images in contemporary Native texts are, like the Indian identities they represent, vastly different for each author. Rather than the static equations of dominant representations, in which Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance always already equal loss, Native representations, as I will show, correspond to the disparate histories and goals of each author.

Acknowledging the complex nature of their worlds and their work, Vizenor has termed American Indian writers throughout the twentieth century “postindian,” explaining that “[p]ostindians are the new storiers of conversions and survivance, the tricky observance of native stories in the associated context of postmodernity” (viii). Contrasting postindians with “indians,” who are “ironic primitive[s] with no cultural antecedent” (x), Vizenor concludes that postindians are Native people whose actions or words in some way counter the inaccurate images and racist practices of dominant culture. The postindian is, therefore, not bound by time—Lakota author Luther Standing Bear, one of the first graduates of the Carlisle Indian school, for example, is, for Vizenor, a “postindian warrior” (xiv)—but by action, attitude, and understanding. Postindian warriors fight dominant outlooks and activities with anger, with irony, with humor, and, sometimes, with pens, “encounter[ing] their enemies with the same courage in literature as their ancestors once evinced on horses” (Vizenor 4). In the next two chapters of my study, I examine the texts of postindian writers from the late twentieth century, looking at
how these writers respond to the static, tragic visions that bind the Ghost Dance to Wounded Knee in dominant representations of the two events. While such responses are myriad in recent American Indian literature, I focus on the work of two specific Native writers—Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene) and Susan Power (Dakota)—whose contrasting narrative strategies illustrate the wide range in twentieth-century Native writers’ representations of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee. In this, the first of these chapters, I will analyze representative pieces from Sherman Alexie’s body of poetry and fiction to investigate how Alexie—whose own ancestors did not participate in the Ghost Dance—appropriates the Ghost Dance as an explicit metaphor for Native resistance. Ultimately, I contend that Alexie capitalizes on the iconicity of the Ghost Dance, which has historically flattened and contained Native identities, by depicting this trope as a potential impetus for indigenous coalition.

**Fact Meets Fiction: Sherman Alexie in Context**

novels—Reservation Blues (1995) and Indian Killer (1996)—and two books of short stories—The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993) and The Toughest Indian in the World (2000). His editorials, articles, and creative works have also appeared in a wide range of periodicals, including The New York Times Book Review, The New York Times Sunday Magazine, Ploughshares, The Kenyon Review, Esquire, Seattle Weekly, Left Bank, and The Village Voice. In addition, Alexie has collaborated on an album, the “soundtrack” to Reservation Blues, with Colville singer Jim Boyd, written and co-produced Smoke Signals in 1998, the first feature film to be made by an all-Indian crew, and participated in a nationally televised panel on race relations with then-President Bill Clinton. One of the most sought after Native speakers in the country, Alexie, who kiddingly calls himself the “Indian du jour,” is a rarity in the literary world—a writer who has over a million books in print. As interviewer Hillel Italie describes him, “Alexie has a business card, an office, an office assistant, a fan club, a Web site, a schedule board. He’s a bad boy in nice clothes” (2). And Alexie’s fame is more than matched by his literary acclaim. In 1992, the New York Times Book Review called Alexie “one of the lyric voices of our time” when his first book of poetry, The Business of Fancydancing, (a product of an assignment in his first poetry class), was selected as the “1992 Notable Book of the Year” (Covert 1). The following year his second collection, I Would Steal Horses, won first place in Slipstream Press’s fifth annual chapbook contest. His first novel, Reservation Blues, won the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award, while his first film, Smoke Signals, won the
Audience Award and the Filmmaker’s Trophy at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. He has also won, to name only a few prizes, a Washington State Arts Commission Poetry Award (1991), a National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship (1992), and a Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund Writer’s Award (1994). In 1996 he was named one of *Granta*’s “Best Young American Novelists,” and in 1998 he was the winner of the Taos Heavyweight Poetry Contest, a ten-round competition between two poets patterned after a boxing match.

And heavyweight he is, a literary sensation who is recognized with whispers and waves when he walks down the streets of Seattle, where he currently resides with his wife, Diane (Hidatsa/Ho-Chunk/Potawatomi), and his son, Joseph. But his life has not always been easy. Born hydrocephalic, Alexie underwent surgery at six months old. The doctors informed his parents that their son’s diagnosis was grim—if he survived at all, he would most likely be severely retarded as a result of the surgery. Instead, with perhaps the first example of his flair for ironic reversals, Alexie became a child prodigy. Despite the lingering effects of his illness—recurrent seizures and childhood bedwetting—Alexie was reading at two years old, and, to the joy of many future journalists, had completed Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* by the time he entered kindergarten, and read all of the books in the Wellpinit School Library by the age of twelve. His intelligence did little to help him fit in among his peers, however, and he describes himself as “one of those weak little Indian boys who got the crap kicked out of him by other Indian boys on a daily basis” (Caldwell 57). In eighth grade Alexie transferred from the Spokane tribal
school to Reardon High, a virtually all-white school twenty miles from the reservation, where he shed his long hair and reservation accent to fit in. He comments, "It's funny, all of those qualities that made me a geek on the rez—I was academic, talked a lot, I was ambitious—all this kind of stuff that made me odd on the rez made me popular at the white school" (Torrez 2). On the surface, Alexie's later life seems charmed: he was prom king, the captain of his high school basketball team, he graduated from Washington State University with a degree in American Studies, and he escaped the grinding poverty that characterizes life on so many reservations in the U.S. But listen closely and he tells stories that sound remarkably similar to those of the reservation characters about whom he writes. Like Victor Joseph, a recurring protagonist in Alexie's poetry and short stories, and a central character in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Reservation Blues, and Smoke Signals, Alexie had alcoholic parents who raised five children on $15,000 a year. Alexie inherited his parents' battle with alcoholism, and like Victor and Junior Polatkin, another recurring character in his work, Alexie (also a Junior) describes himself as having been, from the age of eighteen to twenty-three, "one of those Indians upholding our stereotype" (Egan 16). In addition to his early struggles with drinking, Alexie lost his sister Mary in a 1981 fire, and her death is yet another image that haunts his work. He describes his life this way: "I grew up poor in an alcoholic family on an Indian reservation. I think that's about as bad as it gets in this country, and in terms of spiritual, intellectual, and economic distance, I have traveled as far as anybody in this country" (Berry Brill de Ramirez 58).
At present Alexie is a sometimes-controversial figure, who, like so many
other minority writers, has been criticized for the way his characters (mis)represent
the larger Native community. Clyde Bellecourt, a leader in the American Indian
Movement, for example, has complained that Alexie “always seems to write about
family battering, drinking and long-haired, shaggy, dirty Indians” (qtd. in Italie 4).
In his home community, Mikki Samuels, the librarian at the Spokane tribal campus
of Salish-Kootenai College, laughs when asked about Alexie and then answers,
“‘He’s very controversial here. What people on the reservation feel is that he’s
making fun of them. It’s supposed to be fiction, but we all know who he’s writing
about. He has wounded a lot of people. And a lot of people feel he should try to
write something positive’” (qtd. in Egan 16). Just as disturbed by Alexie’s prose,
but for very different reasons, is Spokane scholar Gloria Bird, who in a 1995 review
of Alexie’s first novel, Reservation Blues, comments that, “in the spirit of an Indian
Spike Lee, [the novel] contribute[s] to a portrait of an exaggerated version of
reservation life, one that perpetuates many of the stereotypes of native people and
presents problems for native and non-native readers alike” (47). While Samuels
suggests that Alexie hits too close to home, using fact as the basis for his fiction,
Bird believes that he has strayed too far from reality, “mishmashing Indian cultures
to create a pan-Indian community that is flawed because of its exaggerated ‘Indian’
qualities” (51). Their conflicting claims bring me to the heart of my own analysis.
Revision and the Tension of Representation, or,  
The Reservation of Sherman Alexie’s Mind

The question of Alexie’s representation of Native culture necessarily relates to a study that, like mine, considers Alexie’s use of symbols that are, at their root, not specifically Spokane. Alexie is a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian born into a Salish-speaking tribe that historically fished for salmon, hunted elk, and dug camas bulbs for sustenance. The 155,997-acre Spokane reservation, covered with basalt and pine forests, is a far remove from North and South Dakota, and, particularly, from the arid country in which the Lakota make their home. But for brief moments, in the haunting refrains of Alexie’s work, the two come together. Alexie uses Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee references in myriad ways, ranging from the appropriatory one-line word play in Old Shirts & New Skins—“You can always find me mumbling here / about how I wounded my knee” (Old Shirts 77)—to the revisionary plotline in Indian Killer, which suggests that “maybe the Indian Killer is a product of the Ghost Dance. Maybe ten Indians are Ghost Dancing. Maybe a hundred. [. . .] Maybe this is how the Ghost Dance works” (313). In this chapter, I analyze a number of these moments in Old Shirts & New Skins, First Indian on the Moon, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Reservation Blues, The Summer of Black Widows, and, finally, in Alexie’s most recent novel, Indian Killer, examining how and to what end Alexie deploys images of the 1890 Lakota Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre, and considering the consequences of such deployment.5 Looking at the body of these images, I argue that one can discern a
trajectory in which Alexie’s Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee references progress from historical referents and personal metaphors to politically charged sites of resistance.

In light of the significance of Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee images in Alexie’s later work, it is interesting, and, in fact, rather surprising that his first book, *The Business of Fancydancing*, contains allusions to neither the Ghost Dance nor Wounded Knee. Instead, this eclectic combination of prose and poetry, which according to Alexie, had greater appeal in Indian country than many of his later books (Berry Brill de Ramirez 58), works its magic with images of Crazy Horse in 7-11, of commodity cans, and of reservation boys with basketball dreams. In 1993, the year after the acclaimed debut of his first book, Alexie published two volumes of his already-signature blend of flash fiction and poetry—*Old Shirts & New Skins* and *First Indian on the Moon*—and one book of short stories—*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. While these three books return to the themes and characters of the first, they also include recurrent allusions to the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee in their barrage of rapid-fire images.

*Old Shirts and New Skins*, Alexie’s first book to be published in 1993, is also the first of any of his published texts to include Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee imagery. And while Alexie’s allusions to these two events have slightly less revolutionary potential in *Old Shirts and New Skins* than in some of his later books, his Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee references still unsettle dominant readings of either event. In the prose poem “Vision (2),” for example, the speaker compares
America where “progress or Manifest Destiny” are snake-entwined poles to “my country,” the Spokane reservation on which Alexie grew up. After juxtaposing the two worlds, the speaker comments:

Then again, who am I to talk? In the local newspaper I read this morning that my tribe escaped many of the hardships other Native Americans suffered. By the time the 20th century reached this far west, the war was over. Crazy Horse was gone and the Ghost Dancers were only ghosts. Christopher Columbus was 500 years and 3,000 miles away, fresh from a starring role in the Great American Movie. (Old Shirts 27)

In many ways, the allusion to the Ghost Dance, in tandem with words like “over,” “gone,” and “ghosts,” reiterates the classic Ghost Dance iconography in which the dance marks the “end” of Native cultures. And, although not explicitly cited, Wounded Knee is, nevertheless, invoked along with the Ghost Dance in light of the fact that the “Ghost Dancers” who become “ghosts” are undoubtedly the Minniconjou killed at Wounded Knee Creek. The passage’s somewhat vague wording, however, leaves open the question of whether the newspaper reporter or the narrator performs this stereotypical conflation. The biting “who am I to talk?” suggests the former, but in either case, this repetition of dominant stories about the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee serves as an ironic backdrop for the paper’s inaccurate version of Spokane history, as we see in the final passage.

The last verses of the prose poem leave the nineteenth century behind, leaping from the Ghost Dance, to Christopher Columbus, to a commentary about the ways in which the Columbus story circulates in the U.S. imagination:

I’ve seen that film at the reservation drive-in. If you look closely, you can see an Indian leaning against the back wall. You
won’t find his name among the end credits; you can’t hear his voice or his song.
Extras, we’re all extras. (Old Shirts 27)

The film, which the narrator earlier called the “Great American Movie,” is the dominant version of U.S. history. I myself have seen the edited-for-TV drama several times. It goes something like this: Frontstage: America is “discovered!”; Backstage: Indians, dispossessed of land and voice, are pushed to the outskirts and boundaries, relegated to the “back walls” of their own countries; Frontstage Left: it’s The Last of the Mohicans and Natty Bumppo is sad, sad, sad; Frontstage Right: the Indians dance, “wild and crazy.” (Cue cavalry. Swell strings.); Centerstage: the Indians die. As the credits roll, a voiceover mourns in broken English—the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead—and the last words that Black Elk never spoke erroneously become the single version of Native “history” into which all Native pasts are subsumed. Pretty soon the whole damn thing is the only film on the all-day History Channel movie marathon. And so it is with Alexie’s Spokane narrator, who, with “no money for lunch,” opens the paper only to discover that the history and hardships of his own tribe have apparently been buried at Wounded Knee. In this vignette, then, Alexie’s explicit allusion to the Ghost Dance and implicit allusion to Wounded Knee superimpose the history of the Plains Indians over the history of the Spokane. The resulting imposition highlights the inaccuracy of dominant accounts of Native history and demonstrates the way in which the conflated image of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee becomes symbolic of all Native history.
Specific allusions to Wounded Knee also circulate in *Old Shirts and New Skins*. In “Custer Speaks,” for instance, Alexie presents a monologue in which the (in)famous General George Armstrong Custer, who died in the 1876 Battle of Greasy Grass (Little Bighorn), tells his side of the story. The poem is divided into seven sections in which events from Custer’s life are interspersed with his postmortem commentary. In the third stanza Custer says:

>I see by your eyes what you think of me, of my surprise ride into Black Kettle’s camp on the Washita River. It’s easy to blame me, to call it a massacre. But it was no Sand Creek, no Wounded Knee. Still, call me what you need to call me: the Great Indian Fighter who cut down women and children, ordered them shot as they sought cover, shot them in the back. But I was forced to do that. They attacked us with everything, everyone they had. It was maddening to see an Indian girl pick up a rifle from the blood-soaked snow and fire at my men, at me.

>It doesn’t change anything, make the fight mean less. Just because Black Kettle’s camp was on the reservation doesn’t allow it to be called anything short of victory. They had to be removed to make Kansas, the West, safe. They were barriers to progress. You call it genocide; I call it economics. (*Old Shirts* 36-37)

This offhand reference to Wounded Knee is here embedded in Custer’s reminiscence about Black Kettle and the cavalry massacre that led to the Southern Cheyenne peace chief’s death on November 27, 1868. At the time Custer headed a U.S. cavalry strike force for General Philip Sheridan and in this battle, just as in the Sand Creek massacre that Custer mentions together with Wounded Knee, the cavalry attacked an unsuspecting and unprepared village in the early hours of the morning, killing men, women, and children as a white flag of truce waved above.⁶
would argue that Custer’s (Alexie’s) narrative juxtaposition—which sets Wounded Knee next to the 1868 cavalry attack on Black Kettle’s Washita River encampment, and both of those attacks alongside the 1864 Sand Creek massacre—effectively changes the way that we read Wounded Knee: although still a violent, horrifying event, Wounded Knee, when contextualized, is shown to be one in a long line of attacks rather than the only massacre and the single defining event in Native history. In “Custer Speaks,” then, Wounded Knee, while only an aside, is rehistoricized, and thus effectively removed from the realm of tragic, inevitable aberration. In the case of either of these poems—“Vision (2)” or “Custer Speaks”—allusions to the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee both reiterate and revise dominant images of these historical events: in “Vision (2),” Alexie reproduces, albeit ironically, the ubiquitous rhetoric of Lakota annihilation, using the image of the Ghost Dance as a commentary on the media’s inaccurate representation of Spokane tribal history; while in “Custer Speaks,” Alexie highlights the layered reality of Native history, listing Wounded Knee together with two other U.S. army massacres of Native peoples in a juxtaposition that emphasizes the genocidal nature of all such attacks. While these two examples function very differently from each other, both employ the iconographic images of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee to new ends. Thus in Old Shirts and New Skins, one of Alexie’s earliest published texts, we can already find the seeds of his later, more radical interpretations of these overdetermined images.
Speaking of the way such images circulate in Alexie’s work, Taos Pueblo scholar P. Jane Hafen maintains, “Alexie’s people were not at Sand Creek or Wounded Knee; neither are the Spokane related to Crazy Horse. Yet these are events and figures that have impact upon all Native peoples” (73). As opposed to critics like Gloria Bird, who suggest Alexie’s comparisons inevitably distort and compress Native cultures into a false conglomeration, Hafen effectively argues for the existence of the common ground that such allusions implicitly posit. And although Hafen’s analysis centers on *Old Shirts and New Skins*, her contention could just as soon be applied to any of Alexie’s texts, since each alludes to a non-Spokane tribal history at one point or another. Matt Herman alleges that the question of authenticity, while often posed in the guise of cultural protection, can “leave behind its important capacity as a guardian of cultural and ethnic propriety” and itself become a “cultural hegemony” that “elides attention to social and material conditions” (126-7). While Herman leaves such conditions unspecified, I would argue that in Alexie’s work they are, on one hand, the similar material conditions of poverty and oppression that characterize so many reservations across the country, and, on another, the rise of various kinds of pan-Indianisms, manifestations of the shared, Plains-influenced culture that has arisen as a result of termination and relocation policies, the steady growth of powwows, and the rise of urban Indian centers. Although poverty is not universally felt among Native nations in the U.S. and pan-Indianism is not uniformly accepted as an appropriate form of tribalism by all Native people, these material and social conditions do, perhaps more than any
others, routinely cross tribal boundaries. Therefore, whether such commonalities are dismissed as cultural distortions, as they are by Bird, or accepted as cultural realities, as they are by Hafen, they are, nevertheless, undeniably present within the larger Indian community of the U.S. And that presence underlies and, in many ways, authorizes Alexie’s use of Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee allusions since, as Hafen points out, there is on some level a common Native history in which historical events from one specific tribal history have meaning for contemporary Native people from many different tribal backgrounds. Thus, when Alexie employs and historicizes images of Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance as he begins to Old Shirts and New Skins, he both draws upon and constructs this pan-Indian aesthetic.

In First Indian on the Moon, Alexie’s second book to be published in 1993, Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee metaphors seem, at first glance, to move away from such globalizations and become, instead, intensely personal. Rather than signifying intertribal connection, these events become analogous to the speaker’s own inner conflicts, as “Reservation Mathematics” vividly illustrates:

Mixed-up and mixed-blood
I sometimes hate
the white in me
when I see their cruelty
and I sometimes hate the Indian in me
when I see their weakness

because I understand the cruelty and weakness in me. I belong to both tribes. It’s my personal Wounded Knee, my own Little Bighorn. (First Indian 43)

When analyzing Alexie’s use of treaty discourse in First Indian on the Moon, Chadwick Allen contends that Alexie uses “metaphor in order to represent the ways
in which the political is inseparable from the personal” (74). In “Reservation Mathematics,” Alexie’s Wounded Knee metaphor functions in much the same fashion. Grappling with the difficulties of being “mixed-blood” in the equally striated worlds of the reservation and the dominant U.S., the speaker struggles with a personal conflict rooted in a specific political history: the long and troubled narrative of Indian-white relations in the U.S. In many ways, this conflict is epitomized by the rhetoric of blood quantum, in which the U.S. government attempted to codify (and thus limit) tribal membership, to regulate Native identities and bodies, and, ultimately, to control Native lands by legislating indigeneity into ever-diminishing fractions. It is this layered and difficult history that the speaker invokes, then, when he voices the need for a space of mediation, “a life between / the 3/16 that names me white / and the 13/16 / that names me Indian” (First Indian 43). Experiencing what W.E.B. Du Bois first termed “twoness” and what postcolonial theorists have termed “hybridity,” the speaker finally claims liminality—“I am of both tribes” (First Indian 43). But, as is so often the case within the contact zones of disparate cultures, that liminality is more mournful than celebratory, more fault line than foundation, as evidenced by the metaphors that the speaker uses to describe his dual background: the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn (Greasy Grass) and the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre.

Little Big Horn and Wounded Knee are two historical moments that represent either end of the extreme outcomes of Indian-white conflicts. In the 1876 Battle of Little Big Horn, General George Armstrong Custer and the 215 men in his
cavalry regiment were killed by Indian warriors after attacking the summer
encampment of over 2,000 Lakota and Cheyenne, while in the 1890 Wounded Knee
massacre, which I detailed at length in my introduction, nearly 300 unarmed Lakota
were killed by U.S. soldiers after surrendering to Custer’s old unit, the Seventh
Cavalry. Both battles further intensified the already fraught relationships between
Indians and whites in the U.S. As Alexie no doubt intends, then, these metaphors
remind the reader of the long and bitter history that invariably complicates the
speaker’s claim to “belong to both tribes.” In this analogy, Wounded Knee becomes
the signifier for all wrongs that whites have wrought on Native people and the
speaker’s personal history becomes a metaphor for the entire canvas of Native-white
relations. Rather than erasing Native histories as the metaphor of the massacre did
when employed by the reporter in “Visions (2),” in “Reservation Mathematics” the
Wounded Knee allusion becomes a key image through which the speaker can
understand and describe his personal history.

If “Reservation Mathematics” uses the image of Wounded Knee to represent
the speaker’s interior conflict, moving the massacre from the larger context of
American Indian history to the narrower level of the personal, “Apologies,” another
poem from First Indian on the Moon, reverses that pattern, taking the image of
Wounded Knee from the local level of U.S. history to the global level of world
history, and thereby making the massacre mean very differently. Although their
final commentaries diverge, “Apologies,” like “Reservation Mathematics,” embeds
its allusion to the Wounded Knee massacre in a personal quandary. The poem
details the speaker’s dilemma: an Indian man in love with a white woman tries to reconcile his own history and emotions with the racist hatred and pain the woman’s white father has “been growing since World War II” (First Indian 59). When the father “curses the suggestion that we owe Japan / an apology for Nagasaki and Hiroshima” (First Indian 59), the poet asks “How is it / our own pain becomes feed / for anger, then fear and worst / a desperate logic / that justifies every piece of war?” (First Indian 59). Searching for answers, the speaker turns to two pictures, “[m]emories” that

fall out from the attic
of history: the photograph
of a mummified Vietnamese soldier’s skull
perched like a crazy ass scarecrow

on an American tank in ’66 or ’67
or whenever, this personal monument
designed by kids only minutes away
from high school football games. Of course

there is that other photograph
of another dark-skinned enemy, Bigfoot
the Minniconjou chief, frozen solid
in the snow at Wounded Knee, one hand

reaching toward the camera, a gesture
that would have looked staged today
but in 1876 it meant he died
with questions [. . .] (First Indian 59)

Alexie’s juxtaposition of the mummified head and the frozen body of these two U.S. “enemies” is a powerful commentary on the imperialist nature of U.S. history.

These images point to the dehumanizing nature of war and the fact that dark-skinned people are so often on the wrong end of both the gun and the camera in
such horrifying situations. As a result, Alexie’s most vivid description of Wounded Knee—the detailed picture of Big Foot—represents his most abstract commentary, the picture symbolizing the horror and racism of all war, all hatred rather than acting as a specific commentary on Native history or on the events of 1890.

The universal function of the famous photograph is further emphasized by the fact that Alexie incorrectly attributes Big Foot’s picture and death to 1876. This attribution could be a simple mistake or an example of artistic license, since 1876, the year of Little Bighorn, provides a neater parallel to the “[19]’66 or ’67” of the Vietnam War than does 1890. The error could also mirror the “or whenever” that follows the possible dates of the later picture, a phrase that locates meaning not in the year but in the repetition of the racist and violent action. Such generalizations, while making important commentaries, are also somewhat troubling in that on some level they duplicate what they criticize: suggesting that all oppression, all war, all people of color are somehow interchangeable. As Chicana author Cherrie Moraga writes, “The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppressions” (52). Perhaps Alexie’s collapse of one significant date in American Indian history into another, his “fail[ure] to acknowledge the specificity”—if it is a failure—troubles me because the cultural baggage attached to this particular picture, which I have come across so many times in my research on the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee that I sometimes feel as if it has been imprinted on the back of my eyelids. The image is haunting, which is, no doubt, why Alexie chooses it. But it also is one of the most frequently reproduced
image associated with the massacre, and with that repetition comes the danger of eventual meaninglessness. The camera snaps, a moment is frozen in time, and Big Foot, the Minniconjou leader, the man, disappears. Like the pictures of Geronimo in Leslie Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, Big Foot’s pictures, too, proliferate, none of them accurate, none of them holding the “truth” about the man or the massacre.

Betty Bergland, a scholar of immigrant autobiography, maintains that “photographic images situate memory and subjectivity in time and space, historically and geographically, they provide a meaningful site for examining cultural meanings associated with ethnicity and subjectivity” (83). Her claim would seem to hold true, as well, in Native contexts given that her list contains some of the key concerns of Native literature and culture—memory, history, and geography. But the picture that Alexie describes contains none of these markers. A twisted body in the snow, Big Foot is located neither in time, nor tribal history, nor geography, sacred or otherwise. And although he has a name, the dead figure Alexie describes as “reaching toward the camera” has no more or no less resonance than the nameless skull that serves, for the soldiers in the photograph, as the paradigmatic symbol for all Vietnamese: each photo represents death, each photo represents racism, each photo represents the inhumanity of all war, of any war. I would argue, then, that in this 1890 picture, and again in Alexie’s poem, Big Foot is subsumed by the image of his death, caught in what Vizenor calls “the tragic in the ruins of representation” (83). Thus the Wounded Knee reference in “Apologies,”
while it at first appears to critique the ways in which images circulate and
desensitize, ultimately reinforces, rather than revises the loss that has historically
been associated with dominant images of the massacre.

In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie’s first collection
of short stories and the last of his three major publications in 1993, the image of
Wounded Knee, which was so prominent in his earlier work, falls away. Instead,
the Ghost Dance comes to the fore and is, for the first time, imagined as a site of
future possibility rather than one of historical loss. This shift is best illustrated in
the second story of the collection, “A Drug Called Tradition,” which begins at the
house of the Spokane Reservation’s misfit tribal-storyteller, Thomas-Builds-the-
Fire, during “the second-largest party in reservation history” (*Lone Ranger* 13). At
the party, Victor Joseph, the story’s narrator, and his best friend, Junior Polatkin,
have a whispered conversation about Victor’s “new drug.” Victor and Junior leave
the party to try the drug and are joined a short while later by Thomas, whom Victor
invites, with the laughing comment, “‘Jump in with us. We’re going out to
Benjamin Lake to do this new drug I got. It’ll be very fucking Indian. Spiritual
shit, you know?’” (*Lone Ranger* 14). The boys take the drug and begin to tell
stories about each other, seeing, as the narrator explains, “through some hole in the
wall into another world. A better world” (*Lone Ranger* 14).

The second story the boys tell begins with Junior’s exclamation, “‘Oh, shit,
[...] I can see Thomas dancing’” (*Lone Ranger* 14). And despite the fact that
Thomas states flatly, “‘I don’t dance’” (*Lone Ranger* 14), the narrative moves from
Junior’s vision into Thomas’s first-person account of his dance. The description, like so much of Alexie’s prose, is both painful and beautiful:

They’re all gone, my tribe is gone. Those blankets they gave us, infected with smallpox, have killed us. I’m the last, the very last, and I’m sick, too. So very sick. Hot. My fever burning so hot.

I have to take off my clothes, feel the cold air, splash the water across my bare skin. And dance. I’ll dance a Ghost Dance. I’ll bring them back. Can you hear the drum? I can hear them, and it’s my grandfather and my grandmother singing. Can you hear them?

I dance one step and my sister rises from the ash. I dance another and a buffalo crashes down from the sky onto a log cabin in Nebraska. With every step, an Indian rises. With every other step, a buffalo falls.

I’m growing, too. My blisters heal, my muscles stretch, expand. My tribe dances behind me. At first they are no bigger than children. Then they begin to grow, larger than me, larger than the trees around us. The buffalo come to join us and their hooves shake the earth, knock all the white people from their beds, send their plates crashing to the floor.

We dance in circles growing larger and larger until we are standing at the shore, watching all the ships returning to Europe. All the white hands are waving good-bye and we continue to dance, dance until the ships fall off the horizon, dance until we are so tall and strong that the sun is nearly jealous. We dance that way. (Lone Ranger 17)

There is tremendous movement in Thomas’s vision, which begins with a tragic rhetoric reminiscent of S. Alice Callahan’s Chikena (who was also the “only one left” of her tribe) and ends in a Native utopia where the earth has been rejuvenated.

The disease-infested blankets and the Ghost Dance with which the scene opens suggest that Thomas’s dance occurs sometime in the nineteenth century when several smallpox epidemics swept through the Native populations of the Plains. At that time, the virus, like so many others before it, spread like wildfire among the Indians, who had no previous exposure and hence no immunity. When Alexie’s
own tribe, the Salish, confronted their worst episode of smallpox in 1782, for example, the disease reduced the tribal population by half (Ruby and Brown 29). But on the reservation of Thomas’s imagination his tribe has been reduced by half, and half, and half again, until they have dwindled down to him. Though some might say that Thomas’s hopeless cry—“I’m the last, the very last”—reiterates the dominant image of the “vanishing Indian” a bit too strongly, the refrain is only momentarily true. Thomas moves past this moment of despair and takes decisive action, ultimately changing the course of history with his dance. And, although the Ghost Dance is set in a fleeting and transitory hallucination, rather than in time present of the story, the revisionary potential of the dance is apparent—the whites disappear, the Indian people grow strong, and, with the boys’ next vision, an alternative history is brought into being.

The next vision in the story is Junior’s, and, like Thomas’s, Junior’s story is introduced by another character (in this case Victor) before Junior himself picks up the story and the narrative shifts to his first-person account. Wearing a ribbon shirt and carrying a guitar, Junior leads us into a world where Indians get all the best seats and “white folks [. . .] sit in the back of the theater” (Lone Ranger 18). He tells us: “Even the President of the United States, Mr. Edgar Crazy Horse himself, came to hear me once. I played a song I wrote for his great-grandfather, the famous Lakota warrior who helped us win the war against the whites” (Lone Ranger 18). In Junior’s U.S., the potential of Thomas’s Ghost Dance has come to fruition, the racial balance and population statistics have been reversed, and Crazy Horse is
firmly ensconced as the culture hero and political leader of the nation. This new order of things seems, as Junior says at the close of his vision, "[I]ike a thousand promises come true" (Lone Ranger 19). According to James Cox, in vignettes such as this, Alexie: 

suggests that imagining alternatives to the dominant culture’s narratives of conquest (Columbus’ voyage; the Manifest Destiny conferred by the Christian God on Europe’s children) is a powerful weapon. Imagining alternative histories might not change the present [...], but conceiving of other possibilities, revisioning a history in which Native Americans write Native Americans back into the landscape, will influence the future. As Alexie explains, imagination is one part of the equation for survival. (Cox 58)

In “A Drug Called Tradition,” we see such “revisioning” taking place. Even the story’s title underlines the generative possibilities of the mind by implying that the “spiritual shit” of Victor’s drug is just that, the spirit, practices, and beliefs of his people. When taken into the boy’s bodies, the heady stuff of tradition expands their understanding. And while their experiences are temporary, Thomas’s final commentary—which, significantly, is not a “drug”-induced vision, but a story like those he tells every day—brings such possibility from the realm of vision into the realm of ordinary life. Thomas says:

*It is now.* Three Indian boys are drinking Diet Pepsi and talking out by Benjamin Lake. [...] Although it is the twentieth century and planes are passing overhead, the Indian boys have decided to be real Indians tonight.

They all want to have their vision, want to receive their true names, their adult names. [...] So they decided to build a fire and breathe in that sweet smoke. [...] Maybe they’ll see it in the flames or in the wood. Maybe the smoke will talk in Spokane or English. Maybe the cinder and ashes will rise up.
The boys sit by the fire and breathe, their visions arrive. They are all carried away to the past, to the moment before any of them took their first drink of alcohol.

The boy Thomas throws the beer he is offered into the garbage. The boy Junior throws his whiskey through a window. The boy Victor spills his vodka down the drain.

Then the boys sing. They sing and dance and drum. They steal horses. I can see them. They steal horses. *(Lone Ranger 20-21)*

When Thomas finishes his story, Victor asks, “‘You don’t really believe that shit?’” *(Lone Ranger 21)*. Thomas’s answer, “‘Don’t need to believe anything. It just is’” *(Lone Ranger 21)*, provides a commentary on the entire narrative by dissolving the thin veil between story and vision, between vision and truth, between truth and tradition. Without this dominant veil—which discredits Native beliefs with western, scientific skepticism (e.g., “‘You don’t really believe that shit?’”)—the inextricable, living connections between tradition and personal regeneration can come to the fore, as they do in Thomas’s final story. These ties are especially apparent in Thomas’s vision of the Ghost Dance, in which the performance of a traditional form of ceremony, the act of dance, engenders a whole new world. And much as Thomas’s Ghost Dance vision sits as the very center of Alexie’s story physically, so does the underlying spirit of the Ghost Dance serve as the foundational metaphor for “A Drug Called Tradition.”

In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the Ghost Dance is testimony to the regenerative power of Native cosmologies, which, as Thomas points out, have more potential than belief. Like Thomas’s decision to dance, the boys’ decision “to be real Indians” locates power not in the degree of their belief, which is clearly incomplete—e.g., “*Maybe* they’ll see it in the flames,” “*Maybe* the
smoke will talk”—but in the way they conceive of their own identities. True power, and thus, the true potential for change, envisioned here as the strength to overcome alcoholism, fragmentation, and loss, lies in imaginative acts, in the choice to be, even if only for a night, a “real Indian.” Thus, in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie’s Ghost Dance references signify differently than they have in his earlier texts. Whereas in his previous work both his Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee references signified loss, albeit an often rehistoricized or revised loss, in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, his Ghost Dance allusions take on an entirely new meaning, situating the continuance of Native identities in the imaginative acts of survivance.10

Alexie’s first novel, *Reservation Blues*, which was published in 1995, follows the formation, short-lived success, and eventual disintegration of an all-Indian rock group known as Coyote Springs. The story, which takes place primarily on the Spokane Reservation, is reminiscent of the blues that serve as the organizing metaphor of the book—familiar characters return and through their experiences, the riffs and refrains of reservation life are examined with Alexie’s signature blend of humor and scathing satire. The novel begins with the classic scene of blues mythology: a slight black man stands at the crossroads with a guitar and a worried frown. The man, of course, is Robert Johnson; but in a variation on the well-played theme, the crossroads are not in the Deep South, or in the country outside Chicago,
but are, instead, smack in the heart of the Spokane Reservation. Unsurprisingly, it doesn’t take long for the subject of 1,000 stories, Robert Johnson, to meet Alexie’s favorite reservation storyteller, Thomas Builds-the-Fire.

Thomas sees Johnson alone at the crossroads and although “[t]he entire reservation knew about the black man five minutes after he showed up,” Thomas is the only one with “the courage to stop” (Reservation Blues 3). After picking up Johnson at the crossroads, Thomas drops him off at the base of Wellpinit Mountain, where Johnson hopes to find Big Mom, the reservation’s larger-than-life keeper of tradition. Once Johnson disappears up the mountain in search of salvation, Thomas finds that the blues legend has left his famous guitar in the back of Thomas’s van. “Thomas picked it up, strummed the strings, felt a small pain in the palms of his hand, and heard the first sad note of the reservation blues” (Reservation Blues 9), and so begins Coyote Springs. The balance of Reservation Blues explores the relationships between Thomas, who becomes Coyote Springs’ bass player and lead singer; Victor Joseph, who takes Robert Johnson’s guitar and becomes the band’s lead guitar player; Junior Polatkin, Coyote Springs’ drummer; and Chess and Checkers Warm Water, two Flathead Indian sisters who join the band as singers and keyboard players after Coyote Springs plays at the Tipi Pole Tavern on the Flathead Reservation.

A barrage of rapid-fire allusions punctuates the band’s interactions: there are frequent references to music and musical legends, such as that of the opening scene, there are references to movies and film stars, TV shows and comics, and, as always
in Alexie’s work, there are allusions to history. While many of the historical allusions in *Reservation Blues* come from Spokane history—such as the repeated refrain, “the Indian horses screamed,” which refers to the cries of the 690 horses slaughtered by U.S. Army Colonel George Wright during his 1858 campaign against the Indians of the Inland Pacific Northwest (Ruby 136-7)—Alexie also continues to employ images of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee.

The first of the Wounded Knee references in *Reservation Blues* occurs during a game of basketball that Thomas’s father, Samuel Builds-the-Fire, and his long-time friend Lester FallsApart play with the tribal police. Highlights of the game, which takes place years before, are interspersed with Thomas’s reaction to his alcoholic father, who, in time present of the story, lies passed out on top of Thomas’s kitchen table:

**Tribal Cops—9**
**Samuel & Lester—5**

‘Game point, shithheads,’ the [police] chief said. ‘You two best be getting ready for jail.’

‘Fuck you,’ Samuel said as he stole the ball, drove down the court, and went in for a two-handed, rattle-the-foundations, ratify-a-treaty, abolish-income-tax, close-the-uranium-mines monster dunk.

‘That was for every one of you Indians like you tribal cops,’ Samuel said. ‘That was for all those Indian scouts who helped the U.S. Cavalry. That was for Wounded Knee I and II. For Sand Creek. Hell, that was for both the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X.’ (*Reservation Blues* 117)

While by no means the first time Alexie has named Wounded Knee in his recurrent lists of historical events, Samuel’s comment is the first time that Indians are named as potential participants in, rather than victims of, the massacre. In each of Alexie’s
previous allusions to Wounded Knee, the massacre has embodied the past history and present conflicts of Indian-white relations, whether those conflicts be located on the battlefield or within the emotional and intellectual struggles of Native peoples themselves. In this scene, however, Alexie constructs Indian identity around alliance rather than ethnicity, reminding the reader that, as the narrator in the *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* explains, “[s]haring dark skin doesn’t necessarily make two men brothers” (*Lone Ranger* 178). Consequently, even though the tribal police officers, Wilson and William, whom Samuel and Lester compete against, are “[c]ertifiably one-quarter Spokane Indian” (*Reservation Blues* 103), their Indian identities are erased by their racism and their allegiance to the dominant power structure, leading the narrator to repeatedly call them “big white men.” Samuel’s list situates Wilson’s and William’s misplaced allegiances alongside a series of other such incidents, invoking a history in which Indian people assist whites in the ongoing battle between the two peoples. The reader is reminded, for example, of Native scouts like Philip Wells, who looked on at the massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890, and of Native leaders like Pine Ridge Tribal Chairman Dick Wilson, who colluded with local white officials in a war of intimidation that led to the 1973 standoff between federal authorities and American Indian Movement (AIM) activists at Wounded Knee II.12 Thus, in this example, Alexie’s allusion to the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre emphasizes not the connections among Native peoples’ histories, as it often has in the past, but the very different political stances that have been taken by specific Native people at notable historical moments. And
while my study is primarily concerned with how Alexie uses Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee references to construct Native identities, Alexie’s use of metaphor is clearly much broader in this scene. Samuel’s “Hell, that was for both the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X,” expands the potential for political alliance beyond the boundaries of Indian culture. By positing an affiliation between the tribal police and those who sought to silence the messages of activists like Martin Luther King and Malcom X, Alexie draws a concurrent affiliation among those who resist such oppression. As a result, his Wounded Knee allusion in this vignette suggests the possibility of cross-cultural alliances.

Perhaps the most significant reference in Reservation Blues in terms of my work, however, occurs during a conversation between Chess and Thomas in which, for the first and only time in any of Alexie’s texts, Wounded Knee functions not as an aside or brief allusion, but as a fully articulated story of its own. The conversation takes place as Coyote Springs returns to the Spokane Reservation after winning Seattle’s Tenth Annual Battle of the Bands. During the drive, Chess and Thomas, the only ones awake, discuss the upcoming week: “So,’ Chess asked Thomas as the blue van crossed the reservation border, ‘are you coming to church on Sunday?’” (Reservation Blues 166). Thomas avoids giving an answer until pressed, when he asks, “How can you go to a church that killed so many Indians?” (Reservation Blues 166). Chess, a devout Catholic, argues for the existence of God and for the humanity of Christianity despite the fact that, as she admits, “The
church does have a lot to atone for” (Reservation Blues 166). In response, “Thomas closed his eyes and told Chess this story”:

‘We were both at Wounded Knee when the Ghost Dancers were slaughtered. We were slaughtered at Wounded Knee. I know there were whole different tribes there, no Spokanes or Flatheads, but we were still somehow there. There was a part of every Indian bleeding in the snow. All those soldiers killed us in the name of God, enit? They shouted ‘Jesus Christ’ as they ran their swords through our bellies. Can you feel the pain still, late at night, when you’re trying to sleep, when you’re praying to a God whose name was used to justify the slaughter?

I can see you running like a shadow, just outside the body of an Indian woman who looks like you, until she was shot by an eighteen-year-old white kid from Missouri. He jumps off the horse, falls on her and you, the Indian, the shadow. He cuts and tears with his sword, his hands, his teeth. He ate you both up like he was a coyote. They all ate us like we were mice, rabbits, flightless birds. They ate us whole.’ (Reservation Blues 167-68)

In the context of Chess and Thomas’s conversation, Thomas’s description of Wounded Knee is, perhaps most obviously, a scathing critique of Christianity’s colonial history, in which Christian dogma has been used to justify genocide again and again. Of most interest to me, though, is the way in which Wounded Knee becomes a shared experience for all Native people, and thus, I would argue, an almost “generic” signifier of Native identity. As such, this particular textual moment becomes one of the clearest articulations of the pan-Indian politics that underlies so much of Alexie’s work.

To examine how such pan-Indianism functions in the context of Reservation Blues, I want return to James Cox’s analysis of Alexie. Cox concludes his essay with this argument:
European and Euro-American writers ha[ve] presented their uncontested version of history for hundreds of years. As Louis Owens states in *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, ‘Native cultures—their voices systematically silenced—had no part in the ongoing discourse that evolved over several centuries to define the utterance ‘Indian’ in the language of the invaders’ (*Other 7*). Alexie revises the narratives from the perspective of the invaded, and the cultural conflict becomes a battle of stories, or, more precisely, a battle between storytellers. By telling the same stories over and over again, Euro-Americans make the stories one-dimensional, static, and vulnerable to parodic revision. Alexie exploits this weakness by intervening in the narratives, exposing their destructive cultural biases and ideologies, and re-visioning them to tell new tales of Native American resistance. (66)

Cox, and Louis Owens whom he quotes, basically argue, as I do in my introduction, that dominant stories about Native people often elide Native voices and identities, substituting in their stead monolithic representations that ultimately have little or nothing to do with the cultures they are meant to represent. Such is the case, I have contended, for the master narratives surrounding Wounded Knee, a historical event that has long been situated as the dying gasp of all Native peoples. Cox suggests iterations such as the dominant stories of the massacre eventually become, through their constant recurrence, senseless caricatures whose simplistic repetition is the key to their own undoing. Thomas’s depiction of Wounded Knee proves that point.

Alexie presents an argument about Native identity in Thomas’s story, an argument that can be made precisely because of the dynamic that Cox lays out. When Thomas tells Chess, “We were slaughtered at Wounded Knee. I know there were whole different tribes there, no Spokanes or Flatheads, but we were still somehow there. There was a part of every Indian bleeding in the snow,” he and, I would argue, Alexie, stake a claim for pan-Indianism. That claim is based on the
assertion of a communal Native history operating on the most visceral level—Chess, a Flathead, and Thomas, a Spokane, were, according to Thomas, actually present at the massacre. In Chess’s case, as Thomas describes, her presence takes the form of “a shadow” that moves along with the Lakota woman, following her to her death. And that shadow—so reminiscent of Callahan’s descriptions of women on the battlefield—becomes the basis of Thomas’s claim for a physical and psychological connection between all Native people. Given its importance to my argument, I want to look again at Thomas’s description and highlight the moment of the cavalry soldier’s attack—“He jumps off the horse, falls on her and you, the Indian, the shadow. He cuts and tears with his sword, his hands, his teeth. He ate you both up like he was a coyote. They all ate us like we were mice, rabbits, flightless birds. They ate us whole” (Reservation Blues 168). Looking closely at this passage, it becomes clear that when the soldier assaults the Lakota woman and, simultaneously, Chess, he sees, not the two women, but instead, a dominant construction of Native identity, coded here, as in Callahan’s text, as “the Indian, the shadow.” Thus, falling upon the Lakota woman, he attacks, what to him is not a person, but “the Indian,” a one-dimensional, static production of the dominant U.S. imagination. And though he kills the woman, the image continues to circulate: sitting with a wooden smile outside a cigar store; charging, red-painted and feathered, onto a Florida football field; or grinning from a sea of hats at a Cleveland baseball game.

This stereotypical, singular Native identity has circulated with particular frequency in conjunction with Wounded Knee, which, in the reiteration of dominant
stories, has long been imagined as the end point for all Native history and for all Native people. Instead of resisting such an impossibly entrenched rhetoric of loss, Thomas builds his story upon it. Moreover, since the dominant cultural mythology surrounding Wounded Knee already invokes a unified Indian past, that mythology actually enables Thomas to transform Wounded Knee from a site of irreparable loss to a site of coalition. The repetition of dominant stories, then, becomes, just as James Cox predicted, the weakness that Alexie exploits, thereby “exposing [the narratives’] destructive cultural biases and ideologies, and re-visioning them to tell new tales of Native American resistance” (Cox 66). In Reservation Blues, Alexie, through the voice of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, offers a Wounded Knee narrative with revisionary potential for contemporary Native people. And, while the outcome of Thomas’s story is grim, as was the massacre itself, the possibility that it constructs for pan-Indian coalition is revolutionary.

In many ways Alexie’s 1996 book of poetry, The Summer of Black Widows, segues between the implicit possibilities in Reservation Blues’ depiction of Wounded Knee and the radical manifestation of such possibilities as seen in Alexie’s depiction of the Ghost Dance in his second novel, Indian Killer. Like The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, The Summer of Black Widows contains far more images of the Ghost Dance than of Wounded Knee. Two of these images, in particular, show how Alexie’s arguments about Native identities continue to evolve in each text.
The initial of these images occurs in a poem called "The First and Last Ghost Dance of Lester FallsApart":

It rained buffalo
in a wheat field
just off the reservation.

Confused and homeless
but otherwise free
of injury, the buffalo were rounded up and shipped
to Spokane’s Walk in the Wild Zoo.

From behind a symbolic chain link fence
the buffalo stared
intelligently

at white visitors
who soon became very nervous.

Everything beautiful
begins somewhere. (Black Widows 18)

Although not clear from the body of the text, the title of Alexie’s poem—“The First and Last Ghost Dance of Lester FallsApart”—implies that one of Alexie’s recurring characters, the alcoholic but loveable reservation philosopher, Lester FallsApart, has danced the Ghost Dance. And, like Thomas in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Lester is successful in his endeavor. But while Thomas’s Ghost Dance results in the whites’ disappearance, Lester’s brings about a sort of intermediate moment in which the buffalo signify an as-yet-unrealized threat to the “white visitors” at the Spokane Zoo. This difference of degree can perhaps be explained by the different historical moment of each dance: while Thomas clearly dances in the
nineteenth century. Lester dances in the uncertain time of the present in which freely wandering buffalo no longer have anywhere to go, thus comically complicating the fulfillment of the Ghost Dance prophecy.

Alexie’s tongue-in-cheek rendition of a present-day Ghost Dance turns serious in “Bob’s Coney Island,” the last poem of The Summer of Black Widows, where Alexie answers the grim question posed by his poem “Inside Dachau,” in which the narrator asks:

What do we indigenous people want from our country?
We stand over mass graves. Our collective grief makes us numb.
We are waiting for the construction of our museum.

We too could stack the shoes of our dead and fill a city to its thirteenth floor. What did you expect us to become?
What do we indigenous people want from our country?

We are waiting for the construction of our museum.

We are the great-grandchildren of Sand Creek and Wounded Knee. We are the veterans of the Indian wars. We are the sons and daughters of the walking dead. We have lost everyone.
What do we indigenous people want from our country?
We stand over mass graves. Our collective grief makes us numb.
We are waiting for the construction of our museum. (Black Widows 119-120)

Although it occurs six poems later, the first stanza of “Bob’s Coney Island” seamlessly responds to the repeated refrain, “What do we indigenous people want from our country?”, answering:

Let’s begin with this: America.
I want it all back
now, acre by acre, tonight. I want
some Indian to finally learn to dance the Ghost Dance right
so that all of the salmon and buffalo return
and the white men are sent back home
to their favorite European cities. (138)

With this final demand, Alexie ends the narrative play of “The First and Last Ghost Dance of Lester FallsApart,” shifting the Ghost Dance from the comic to the serious and situating the dance not as parody, but as possibility. He also, for the first time, revises the prophecy so it promises a return of a culturally significant Spokane symbol—salmon—along with the return of the Plains Indians’ buffalo. This addition recalls the adaptable spirit of the 1890 Ghost Dance, which was most often melded with the existing beliefs of those who adopted the religion. For example, as I noted in my introduction, the Lakota revised Wovoka’s prophecy to include Ghost Dance shirts and the violent demise of the whites, both of which had implications in the warrior traditions so central to Lakota cosmology. But while the Lakoia Ghost Dance was only one of the many variations of the belief, that single interpretation has been reified in the narratives surrounding the Wounded Knee massacre. By expanding the Ghost Dance to meet the needs of the Spokane, then, Alexie removes the religion from the frozen annals of history and makes it new, thus paving the way for its appearance in his next novel, *Indian Killer*.

If the present-day possibilities for the Ghost Dance in *The Summer of Black Widows* were combined with the proposed coalition politics of *Reservation Blues*, the outcome would be Alexie’s 1996 novel, *Indian Killer*, in which the Ghost Dance serves as a metaphor for indigenous revolution. The plot of Alexie’s second novel follows the dark life of an Indian boy, named, ironically, John Smith, who is adopted by a white couple, Olivia and Daniel Smith, as an infant. While the
adoption agent assures John and Olivia that “The best place for this baby is with a white family. This child will be saved a lot of pain by growing up in a white family. It’s the best thing, really” (Indian Killer 10), John’s anguish shows otherwise. The flashbacks to John’s childhood and early adulthood show his gradually progressing alienation. Physically marked as Indian, but with no named tribal affiliation due to his sealed adoption records, John is “Indian in the most generic sense of the word” (Indian Killer 31). And as a result he is disconnected from both whites and Indians, and lost to his well-meaning, but helpless, white parents from whom he retreats further and further as he slips into a world of unrelenting paranoia and fear. When the novel takes place, John is a twenty-seven-year-old construction worker on the crew of one of the last skyscrapers to go up in downtown Seattle. An introverted Indian with odd patterns of behavior, and a burning, submerged anger, John is, for most readers, a prime suspect in the rash of serial killings that are taking place in Seattle. White men are being murdered, found stabbed, with eyes torn out and two white owl feathers left as a cryptic calling card by the person radio talk show host Truck Schultz, the voice of racial hatred in the novel, dubs the “Indian Killer.”

Amidst the welter of fear and confusion brought on by the killings we meet a number of other characters, almost all of whom could themselves be the Indian Killer. There is Marie Polatkin, a Spokane Indian college student and Native rights activist who delivers sandwiches to Seattle’s homeless and who, in her angriest moments, “wanted every white man to disappear [. . .] wanted to burn them all down to ash and feast on their smoke. Hateful, powerful thoughts. She wondered
what those hateful powerful thoughts could create” (Indian Killer 85). There is Marie’s archenemy, Dr. Clarence Mather, who teaches a whitewashed version of American Indian literature and who romantically admires the Indian Killer as “an inevitable creation of capitalism [. . . ] a revolutionary construct” (Indian Killer 245). There is Marie’s mixed-blood cousin, Reggie Polatkin, who, after enduring a lifetime of abuse at the hands of his white father and being betrayed by Dr. Mather, says of the killings: “I think an Indian could do something like that. Maybe the question should be something different. Maybe you should be wondering which Indian wouldn’t do it. Lots of real Indian men out there have plenty enough reasons to kill a white man. Three at this table right now” (Indian Killer 184). And, finally, there is Jack Wilson, who has Wovoka’s white name, claims to be part Shilshomish Indian, and writes “Indian” detective novels. An orphan, Wilson spent his childhood in a series of abusive foster homes, where “[I]lying in strange beds, [he] read about Indians and recreated himself in the image he found inside those books” (Indian Killer 157). Into this complicated cast of characters, with their dysfunctional relationships and painful histories, comes the news of the Indian Killer, which further heightens the tensions in and between these characters.

While the overt plot of Indian Killer is driven by the classic question of “whodunit?”, the underlying commentaries, which reveal and critique the ongoing legacy of racial hatred in the U.S., are equally compelling. And it is within the cross sections of these investigations that Alexie situates his allusions to the Ghost Dance, which serve as central metaphors for Indian resistance in the novel. The first of
these references occurs at a white-owned Indian bar named Big Heart’s, where Jack Wilson goes to drink and fraternize with his Indian “brothers.” During one such visit Wilson has a conversation with Reggie Polatkin and Reggie’s friends Harley and Ty (whose names are no doubt a play on “Harley” and “Tayo,” characters from Laguna author Leslie Silko’s acclaimed 1977 novel Ceremony, which would appropriately equate Reggie with Emo, an Indian character twisted by his encounters with racism). Wilson, an ex-detective, tries to win points with the three Indian men by sharing his inside information—the as-yet-unannounced news of the Indian Killer. He says enthusiastically, “‘Hey, [..] I heard something crazy. […] I heard a white guy was scalped’” (Indian Killer 183). Conversation comes to a grinding halt, and after informing Wilson that “‘[t]here are lots of real Indian men out there with plenty enough reasons to kill a white man’” (Indian Killer 184), Reggie and his friends leave the table. Before he reaches the door, however, Reggie delivers this warning:

‘You know about Bigfoot? That Sioux Indian?’
‘Yeah,’ said Wilson. ‘He died at the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890. He was Minneconjou Sioux, I think. He was killed because he was leading the Ghost Dance.’
‘The Ghost Dance?’
‘Yeah, it was a dance that was supposed to destroy the white men and bring back the buffalo. Ghost Dancing was thought to be an act of warfare against white people.’
‘Yeah, and who killed Bigfoot?’
‘The Seventh Cavalry.’
‘No, I mean, who killed him?’
‘Some soldier, I guess. Nobody knows for sure.’
‘You’re not paying attention. What color was the man who killed Bigfoot?’
‘He would’ve been white.’
‘Exactly Casper. Think about that.’ (Indian Killer 185)
By using Wounded Knee to remind Wilson that his skin color implicates him in the long U.S. history of Indian-killing, Reggie constructs history and, specifically, the Wounded Knee massacre, as the potential rationale for the murders. But it is not the still-stagnant image of Wounded Knee, but the rebellious echo of the Ghost Dance that resonates after the two men’s conversation, as we see when the narrator describes the speedy dissemination of Wilson’s news: “Within a few hours, nearly every Indian in Seattle knew about the scalping. Most Indians believed it was all just racist paranoia, but a few felt a strange combination of relief and fear, as if an apocalyptic prophecy was just beginning to come true” (Indian Killer 185). The “apocalyptic prophecy” is undoubtedly the Ghost Dance prophecy Wilson reiterates in answer to Reggie’s question, a prophecy that will excite more and more interest within the Seattle Indian community as time goes on.

In “Testimony,” the following chapter, for example, word has spread far beyond the first “few” Indians, as we see when Arthur Two Leaf, a Makah Indian, gives the police a statement about being attacked by three white men. Arthur makes a joke while relating the details of his assault and the policeman says, “I’m surprised you can laugh about this. [. . . ] Weren’t you afraid?” (Indian Killer 188). Arthur answers:

‘Indians are outnumbered, Officer. Those guys scared me bad, but I’ve been scared for a long time. But you know, I think something crazy is starting to happen.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, I’ve been hearing rumors, you know?’
"What kind of rumors?"
"That Indians are organizing. They're looking to get revenge."

*(Indian Killer 188)*

Arthur “testifies,” then, not only to the crime, but to the possibility of a burgeoning underground revolution, much like that imagined in Leslie Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, where indigenous people from across tribal and national boundaries band together and begin to march from Mexico to the United States. For many of the characters in Alexie’s novel, this burgeoning possibility is embodied by the image of the Indian Killer. A conversation between Boo, one of the homeless Indians Marie helps feed, and John’s father, Daniel, who searches downtown for his son after hearing that the Indian Killer had taken a third victim, illustrates this point.

Boo compares the Indian Killer to the Oglala leader Crazy Horse, explaining: “This Indian Killer, you see, he’s got Crazy Horse’s magic. He’s got Chief Joseph’s brains. He’s got Geronimo’s heart. He’s got Wovoka’s vision. He’s all those badass Indians rolled into one” *(Indian Killer 219)*. Boo pulls out newspaper clippings and waves them at Daniel: “See, [...] I’m keeping track. We all are. Every Indian is keeping score. What? That Indian killer got himself two white guys? And that little white boy, enit? That makes the score about ten million to three, in favor of the white guys, enit? This Killer’s got a long way to go. Man, maybe he’s the underdog” *(Indian Killer 220)*. The brief glimpse we get into the killer’s psyche further reinforces this reading. After kidnapping the white child, Mark Jones, the unnamed killer looks at the boy’s sleeping body and recognizes the abduction as “the true beginning, the first song, the first dance of a powerful
ceremony that would change the world" (Indian Killer 192). The Indian Killer, then, as we see from these excerpts, becomes the catalyst for retribution and his acts are, in many ways, the initial steps in the fulfillment of the Ghost Dance prophecy with which the text ends.

If the Indian Killer is read as the instrument by which Ghost Dance prophecy is fulfilled, then the question of “whodunit” no longer matters since meaning lies in the outcome of the killer’s actions—the death of whites—rather than in his actual identity. So while the final chapters of Indian Killer strongly suggest that Jack Wilson, the wannabe-Indian author, commits the crimes, the most significant question by then is not “who,” but “why?” Marie Polatkin provides a compelling answer to this question when she challenges Dr. Mather and presents this potential explanation for the novel’s serial murders:

‘You think you know about the Indian Killer, huh? Well, do you know about the Ghost Dance?’

‘Of course.’

‘Yeah, and you know that Wovoka said if all Indians Ghost Danced, then all Europeans would disappear, right?’

‘Yes, it was a beautiful, and ultimately desperate, act.’

‘Yeah, you don’t believe in the Ghost Dance, do you? Oh, you like its symbolism. You admire its metaphorical beauty, enit? You just love Indians so much. You love Indians so much you think you’re excluded from our hatred. Don’t you see? If the Ghost Dance had worked, you wouldn’t be here. You’d be dust. [...]’

So maybe this Indian Killer is a product of the Ghost Dance. Maybe ten Indians are Ghost Dancing. Maybe a hundred. It’s just a theory. How many Indians would have to dance to create the Indian Killer? A thousand? Ten thousand? Maybe this is how the Ghost Dance works.’

‘Ms. Polatkin, the Ghost Dance was not about violence or murder. It was about peace and beauty.’

‘Peace and beauty? You think that Indians are worried about peace and beauty? You really think that? You are so full of shit. [. . .]
Dr. Mather, if the Ghost Dance worked, there would be no exceptions. All you white people would disappear. All of you. If those dead Indians came back to life, they wouldn’t crawl into a sweat house with you. They wouldn’t smoke the pipe with you. They’d kill you. They’d gut you and eat your heart. (Indian Killer 313-14)

While Marie initially configures the contemporary Ghost Dance as speculation—e.g., “Maybe this Indian Killer is a product of the Ghost Dance,” “Maybe ten Indians are Ghost Dancing,” “[If] the Ghost Dance worked”—in her final speech and the penultimate moment of the text, she states it as fact. Like Arthur Two Leaf’s police report, Marie’s claim, too, is “testimony.” In this case, that testimony is given during a police interview about John’s attack on Wilson and subsequent suicide, which the authorities believe solve the mystery of the Indian Killer:

‘John never hurt anybody. And this isn’t over.’
‘What makes you say that?’
‘I just know.’
‘What else do you know?’
‘I know that John Smith didn’t kill anybody except himself. And if some Indian is killing white guys, then it’s a credit to us that it took over five hundred years for it to happen. And there’s more.’
‘Yes?’
‘The Indians are dancing now and I don’t think they’re going to stop.’ (Indian Killer 418)

Marie ultimately contends, then, that the Indian Killer is a product of an ongoing Ghost Dance, which has revolutionary potential for Native people. And as is Wounded Knee in Reservation Blues, in Indian Killer the Ghost Dance is figured as the site of indigenous coalition. But while Alexie’s stories about Wounded Knee
build that coalition on dominant culture’s tragic representations of Indians, his story about the Ghost Dance ultimately situates Native continuance as a pan-Indian phenomenon occurring within current cultural practice.

**Outcomes and Expectations**

Through acts of appropriation and resignification, Alexie recovers Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee images from the annals of dominant history, turning these previously tragic symbols into significant commentaries on past and present American Indian life. In *Old Shirts and New Skins*, Alexie invokes the Ghost Dance as the classic dominant signifier of Native loss in order to highlight the inaccuracies of master narratives of Native history, and then uses Custer, one of the central symbols in nineteenth-century Indian-white history, to construct the story differently. In *First Indian on the Moon*, Alexie uses the metaphor of Wounded Knee to depict the fraught weight of mixed-blood identity, while also appropriating one of the most popular media representations of the massacre—Big Foot’s photograph—to criticize the ways in which such racial hierarchies lead to war and violent deaths. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie turns again to the Ghost Dance, where his literal and metaphoric representations of the dance situate Native futures in imaginative acts of survivance. These self-conscious acts of identity formation are also significant in Alexie’s first novel, *Reservation Blues*, in which Wounded Knee becomes the location for pan-tribal coalition. And
if Wounded Knee becomes a common signifier for Indian identity in *Reservation Blues*, the Ghost Dance becomes a pan-Indian signifier for Native resistance in *Indian Killer*.

While Alexie’s commentaries are by no means the same in each case, they do, when examined together, shed light on his argument about American Indian identities, about how such identities become the site of dominant misrepresentations, of internal conflict, and later, of hope and resistance. I began this chapter by arguing for the existence of an overarching trajectory in Alexie’s work, in which his Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee references progress from historical referents and personal metaphors to politically charged sites of resistance. I conclude by suggesting that, in the case of the Ghost Dance, the image transforms from tragic iteration to triumphant sign, ultimately situating the imaginative spirit of the dance as the hope for the next generation of American Indian people.

As I illustrate in this chapter, then, Alexie responds to dominant narratives about the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee by appropriating, revising, and rejecting such images throughout his work. But Alexie’s wide-ranging deployment of these images, and especially his depiction of their pan-tribal potential, is intimately tied to his own tribal position—he is a Spokane author reworking and revising images from Lakota history. The particular historical moments that Alexie most often invokes, as Jane Hafen points out, hold great significance for all Indian people. But I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that such images become pan-tribal metaphors at a price, which is the loss of cultural and historical specificity. Alexie’s
appropriation of Big Foot’s photograph presents one example of a case in which a specific historical moment and document becomes a decontextualized and abstract symbol. And while that symbol may still speak for social justice, as Alexie’s Big Foot image does, it nevertheless loses a certain amount of tribal meaning so that it may function as a more broadly defined signifier. The question then becomes, what might another approach look like? By examining Dakota author Susan Power’s novel, *The Grass Dancer*, in my next chapter, I contrast Alexie’s wide-ranging deployment of these politically charged images with Power’s differently situated reply. Power’s novel demonstrates not a better or more “authentic” reaction to the weight of Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee images, but an alternative, tribally specific reaction. Together these analyses illuminate two very different points in the spectrum of literary representations of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee that contemporary American Indian authors use to construct Native identity.
NOTES

1 “The thing that gets me [...] is the Vizenor thing. I mean he’s the god of the Indian lit-crit people. [...] It’s obtuse prose, a lot of word play and word masturbation, essentially, that results in, nothing.”—Sherman Alexie, interview with John Purdy

2 This spectrum, as my next two chapters will show, both illustrates and engenders the difference in consciousness of which Vizenor speaks, since late twentieth-century Native writers produce Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee images that are informed not only by tribal and dominant histories, but also, importantly, by the remembrances and (re)constructions of their literary forerunners.

3 Alexie is prolific not only in terms of his writing, but also in terms of the pure volume of press that he manages to engender. The interviews and reviews of his work, while growing every day, are already too many to list. Within this body of press several stories are retold; the first is the Grapes of Wrath tale and the second is the story of Alexie’s change of majors. Here’s one version from a 1998 interview with Liza Bear: “I was premed, but I kept fainting in anatomy class,” said Alexie. “That’s not good bedside manner” (1). These stories are undoubtedly part of what one writer calls Alexie’s “repertoire” of comedic responses. And their repetition, as Alexie’s character Velma says laughingly after hearing one of Thomas’s stories, “is a fine example of the oral tradition” (Smoke Signals 40).


I open the door.

(this Indian girl writes that her brother tried to hang himself
with a belt just two weeks after her other brother did hang himself

and this Indian man tells us that, back in boarding school,
five priests took him into a back room and raped him repeatedly.

and this homeless Indian woman begs for quarters, and when I ask
about her tribe, she says she’s horny and bends over in front of me

and this homeless Indian man is the uncle of an Indian man
who writes for a large metropolitan newspaper, so now I know
them both

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and this Indian child cries when he sits to eat at our table
because he had never known his own family to sit at the same table

and this Indian woman was born to an Indian woman
who sold her for a six-pack and a carton of cigarettes

and this Indian poet shivers beneath the freeway
and begs enough quarters to buy pencil and paper

and this fancydancer passes out at the powwow
and wakes up naked, with no memory of the evening, all of his
regalia gone)

I open the door

(and this is my sister, who waits years for a dead eagle from the Park
Service, receives it
and stores it with our cousins, who then tell her it has disappeared

though the feathers reappear in the regalia of another cousin
who is dancing for the very first time

and this is my father, whose own father died in Okinawa, shot
by a Japanese soldier who must have looked so much like him

and this is my father, whose mother died of tuberculosis
not long after he was born, and so my father must hear coughing
ghosts

and this is my grandmother who saw, before the white men came
three ravens with white necks, and knew our God was going to
change)

I open the door
and invite the wind inside. (Black Widows 96)

I do not analyze any of Alexie’s chapbooks in this chapter due to their lack of availability. Since all three were printed in limited edition runs, they can only be obtained through rare book dealers at prices that sometimes range up to $1500 per text.
See Robert Utley’s *The Indian Frontier* (25) for more on the attack.

Elsewhere in her article, though, Hafen is quick to point out that such understanding in no way supersedes or negates specific tribal histories. And, in fact, she concludes her analysis of *Reservation Blues* by contending that Alexie situates the possibility of redemption firmly in a Spokane framework at the end of his novel.

See Allen’s “Blood (and) Memory” for an excellent discussion of Native author’s responses to this attempt.

I gender the speaker here because it seems disingenuous to do otherwise when the poem specifically references Alexie’s own blood quantum background. But while I make that correlation in this case, I do not mean to suggest that all of Alexie’s work is non-fiction or that all of his narrators have a one-to-one correlation with their creator. He himself, however, often says that his work arises from his own experiences. In an interview with Thomson Highway, for example, Alexie called three of his most frequently recurring characters—Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor Joseph, and Junior Polatkin—“the unholy trinity of me” (6).

Given the constraints of a chapter that tries to look across the entire body of an author’s work, I have performed an in-depth analysis of only one of the short stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Another interesting story in terms of my project is “Distances,” which is set in what appears to be the aftermath of a nuclear war. The piece begins with a paraphrase of Wovoka’s prophecy and suggests that either “Custer could have, must have, pressed the button. [. . .] Or maybe it was because the Ghost Dance finally worked” (105). The ensuing narrative is a fascinating but opaque commentary on the divisions between urban and reservation Indian identities in which the ghosts of dead Indians return as strange and sometimes frightening “Others.” Much as in “Apologies,” where the Wounded Knee allusion is somewhat fraught, “Distances,” too, illustrates that Alexie’s Wounded Knee and Ghost Dance images never entirely fit within a single trajectory or argument.

Two critics who take opposite approaches to Alexie’s use of pop culture allusions are Gloria Bird and James Cox. Bird, as I noted, criticizes the wide range of Alexie’s work, arguing, “In *Reservation Blues*, alluding to popular culture does not serve as either parody or as a serious interrogation of popular culture. It is a way of carrying the story from one subject to another” (47). Cox disagrees, saying, “Alexie does more than allude to popular culture productions: his narrative strategy is to revise and subvert the misrepresentations in popular culture narratives while
concomitantly emphasizing how the misrepresentations have a destructive influence on his characters’ self-perceptions” (64-65).

12 See Coleman for more on mixed-blood interpreter and scout Philip Wells’ part in the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre. See Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes’ *Lakota Woman* (1990), Vine Deloria, Jr.’s *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties* (1974), and Peter Matthiessen’s *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (1983) for more on Wounded Knee II.

13 Alexie addresses this connection in an interview, saying, “I think *Indian Killer* is the first step and *Almanac* is the last step in the time line of a fictional revolution” (qtd. in Berry Brill de Ramirez 56).
CHAPTER 5

FROM GHOST DANCE TO GRASS DANCE:
PERFORMANCE AND POSTINDIAN RESISTANCE
IN SUSAN POWER’S THE GRASS DANCER

In “Border Wars: Creativity and Ethics in American Literature,” a keynote speech that Dakota author Susan Power delivered at the Newberry Library’s D’Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian Studies, Power discussed the importance of tribally specific history to Native authors, saying: “As a Native writer, like it or not you are representing your history. That’s the reality. We are privileged to be published and there is responsibility [that goes along with that privilege]. So what I feel is that it’s not right for us to reinvent our history.” Instead of invention, Power calls for “specific, accurate tellings of history,” discussing a scene from Sherman Alexie’s movie Smoke Signals in which Thomas-Builds-the Fire’s grandmother makes fry bread, as an example of some of the contemporary slippages in representation. Pointing out that fry bread was not a traditional food for Alexie’s tribe, Power comments, “Pan-Indian culture. Powwow culture. That’s fine. But that’s not Coeur d’Alene. Not Dakota. If we want to know who we are today, we have to know where we were” (Power “Border Wars”).¹ Because inaccurate dominant histories have been used as repressive mechanisms, Power argues that change can only occur when Native writers counter the still all-too-prevalent

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misrepresentations of American Indians with their own researched, tribally specific
depictions of Native people and histories. And while Power does not directly
address either the Ghost Dance or Wounded Knee in her keynote speech, the
representations of these two events are inextricably bound to almost any discussion
of images that, like Alexie’s fry bread, create a pan-Indian history for Native people.

Interestingly Alexie seems, on some levels, to agree with Power (at least
when speaking of Native authors other than himself). In an interview with Spokane
writer and activist Charlene Teters, Alexie was asked to characterize the “new
stereotypes developing” about Native people, such as those seen in recent movie
theaters where, as Teters noted, “Films start with flute music, pan to a campfire,
maybe go to the drum” (Teters 35). Alexie answers:

‘Yes, it’s pan-Indianism, generic Indianism that
Indians have adopted and somehow think is traditional
or real. Like the vision quest in the third act.
Whether it’s made by an Indian or not, there is always
the vision quest, where some Indian is standing on a
mountain like this: [Alexie raises his hands.] I’m
sorry, but I’ve met thousands of Indians, and I have
yet to know of anyone who has stood on a mountain
waiting for a sign. I don’t know anyone who’s done
it. If you told someone on the reservation. ‘I want to
go out on Lookout Mountain and wait for a sign,‘
they’d say, ‘You want me to do what? Hell, no! It’s
cold! I want to watch football.’ It’s almost the 21st
century. The way of being Indian is vastly different
than it was a hundred years ago.’ (Teters 35)

Alexie and Power, then, both see certain “generic” representations of Native people
as misleading, although clearly their views on where the line between creative
license and misrepresentation should be drawn are somewhat different given Power’s comment and the revisionary history in Alexie’s work. But while Alexie and Power differ in approach, both use their writing to engage, revise, or resist dominant versions of Native history.

Gerald Vizenor terms such acts of resistance “postindian simulations,” stories that rise in the gap between the signifiers of Native identity and the now ever-so-exponentially removed signifieds, which Vizenor calls “the tribal real.” For Vizenor, these postindian simulations are a matter of survival and endurance, for which he coins the term “survivance,” a concept he explains in the 1999 preface to his landmark 1994 text, _Manifest Manners_ (which was originally subtitled _Postindian Warriors of Survivance_ and is now titled _Narratives on Postindian Survivance_): “Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (vii). Vizenor’s definition of survivance speaks directly to the sort of revisionist work accomplished by Wounded Knee and Ghost Dance references such as Alexie’s. When, for example, Alexie situates Wounded Knee as a signifier of identity for all present-day tribal peoples in _Reservation Blues_, he disavows the popular gloss of the massacre as the “end” of Native history; correspondingly, when he invokes the present-day potential of the Ghost Dance in _Indian Killer_, he similarly dismisses historical readings that frame the dance tradition as the last gasp of a dying culture. But what might other

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survivance stories look like? And, specifically, how might “dominance, tragedy, and victimry” be renounced by an author whose ancestors’ blood was literally, rather than figuratively, spilled on that frozen battlefield in December of 1890? To consider this question, I turn to *The Grass Dancer*, the first novel by Dakota author Susan Power, which I find particularly interesting precisely because of the dearth of Wounded Knee and Ghost Dance images in the text.

Some may see a claim that builds upon the gaps of Power’s text as leaning perilously close to the gray area of intentionality. For example, recently discussing my ideas about Power’s deliberate omission of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre with several Ohio State University professors, I was asked why I read Power’s depiction of the Grass dance, or rather the virtual absence of Wounded Knee and Ghost Dance references in her text, as a commentary on the history of Wounded Knee/Ghost Dance representations rather than simply as a change of focus. I answered there, as I do here, by 1) pointing to Power’s repeated insistence on the importance of accurate and specific retellings of tribal history and 2) situating Power’s own writing within both Native history in general in the U.S. and Power’s own Dakota history. Given this Dakota background, her insistence on Native writers’ responsibility for historical representation, and the fact that her novel, which moves back and forth in time from 1864 to 1982, includes the period during which the second Ghost Dance was being adopted by Native peoples across the Great Plains, Power must have at least *considered* the events of 1890 as she wrote

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*The Grass Dancer.* But rather than employ repeated images of Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance, Power chooses instead, as I will demonstrate, to shift the focus from the Ghost Dance, which dominant culture has long inscribed as a site of loss, to the Grass dance, which Power represents as a site of revitalization. As a result, *The Grass Dancer* ultimately uncouples Native dance traditions from predetermined tragedy by situating the continued practice of the Grass dance as an act of postindian resistance.

My claim for Power’s knowledge and ties to her Dakota heritage (and thus for her deliberate exclusion of key historical moments within that history) are underlined by her family history: she comes from a line of Dakota activists who are and were supremely aware of tribal history. Dakota on her mother’s side, Susan Mary Power is the great-great-granddaughter of Mato Nupa (Two Bears) who came to the Standing Rock Reservation in Dakota with the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. She is the granddaughter of Josephine Gates Kelley, an activist who was the first woman in the U.S. to be elected tribal chairwoman; and she is the daughter of Susan Kelley Power, also an activist and the co-founder of both Chicago’s American Indian Business Association and American Indian Center, which is a nucleus for the city’s 25,000 Indians. Susan Kelley Power’s influence on her daughter is key to my argument since Susan Kelley Power “strongly subscribes to ‘telling our own story,’ by which she means, in part, tribal members taking responsibility for correcting stereotypes and misconceptions and doing more than accepting the white historians’
revisions of other white historians’ lumping all Indians into one culture” (“Dakota”).

The importance of history and specificity, which her mother, Susan Kelly Power, emphasizes, are a refrain in Susan Mary Power’s life, as well.

For Power that history is not entirely Dakota. On the side of her father, Carlton Gilmore Power, Susan Power’s white ancestors include a governor of Civil War-era New Hampshire and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. She says, “My father was a New England WASP—he died when I was eleven, but he was always much more interested in my mother’s culture. I guess that’s why my Sioux blood dominates” (qtd. in Carlin). Power herself was born in Chicago on October 12, 1961, which, as she says her mother often teasingly reminds her, is the anniversary of Columbus’s landing in the “New” World (“Dakota”). In interviews, Power often speaks of trying to find a balance between her Indian and white backgrounds, which she calls the “two worlds that exist within me” (Putnam). She explains:

I spent most of my high school years learning to switch on and off like a light bulb. The only Native American at the University of Chicago Laboratory High School, I was involved in American Indian Center activities, which took me to the opposite side of the city, and into another world. At school I learned to be aggressively competitive, to speak up for myself, and to question friends about themselves. With Native American friends I was expected to refrain from asking direct questions, to wait for them to share information when they were moved to. My schoolmates were fascinated when they heard I had been elected Miss Indian Chicago in my senior year. Some of my friends felt I had a ‘secret’ life they knew nothing about. (Putnam)
While Power describes this divide as sometimes difficult, she continued to stand in both worlds as she pursued her education. Power earned a B.A. in psychology from Harvard/Radcliffe, a J.D. from Harvard Law School, and an MFA from the University of Iowa Writer’s Workshop, where she was the first recipient of an Iowa Arts Fellowship. She has also won a James Michener Fellowship in 1992, a Bunting Institute Fellowship in 1993, and the 1995 Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award for best first work of fiction. Like Alexie, Power has been published in a plethora of journals and literary anthologies, including The Atlantic Monthly, The Best American Short Stories 1993, The Paris Review, Ploughshares, Story, and The Voice Literary Supplement.

Whether living in Iowa, Boston, or Chicago, Power, like her mother, is always active in the Indian community of the area and conscious of her Dakota history. She situates her earliest idea for The Grass Dancer within that ever-present tribal connection, describing how, after being rushed to the hospital and having emergency surgery for appendicitis she “awoke and saw this beautiful Dakota woman in my room. She was wearing a buckskin dress that was beaded. She was next to my bed and she was dancing. I looked down at her feet and saw this powdery substance. I thought of it as moon dust” (DesJarlait). This image would become one of the central stories in Power’s novel, The Grass Dancer. Given Power’s strong ties to the Dakota community and given that both Dakota and Lakota peoples danced the 1890 Ghost Dance on the Great Sioux Reservation, the symbolic
power of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee would seem to be strong in both Power’s familial history and her writing. And there is, in fact, evidence that this holds true in her personal cosmology. For example, when remembering her grandfather, Power couches her reverie in the form of a metaphorical Ghost Dance, saying:

I want to sew him a Ghost Dance shirt. I want to use the softest buckskin and brightest paints. I will paint the history of our family on its front and back with such careful strokes everyone will say it is a miracle: Look, she has included our move from the East to the West; there are the battles of Whitestone Hill and Little Big Horn; there are our dead chiefs—Gall, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Two Bears; there is the White Buffalo Calf Woman and her gift of the sacred pipe; there is Wounded Knee and the mass graves; there are our boys in World War I; there is her grandfather slipping under the train. (“Dakota”)

In Power’s vision, a melding of past and future, of history and desire, the Ghost Dance presents renewed possibility, just as it does for Alexie. In Power’s case this possibility lies within the process of remembering, and, importantly, of chronicling Dakota history. Her act of sewing the shirt and, thus, of physically embodying tribal narrative, keeps such history alive. Within this retelling, Wounded Knee stands not as a literary or historical trope, as it does in Sherman Alexie’s work, but as a specific tribal and familial memory, thus marking the importance of both the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee to Power’s personal history. Strikingly, though, Power does not end with a list of names on a painted historical vignette; instead, she moves her story into both the present and the future when she continues:
I will sew tassels of horse hair and medicine wheels made of dyed porcupine quills on the shirt. I will trim its edges with long glass bugle beads so my grandfather sparkles in the sun. The Ghost Dance shirt will make him invisible to whites so he can move through this country like a man on a bold vision quest. The Ghost Dance shirt will heal his leg and cure his taste for liquor. He will be the tallest man in Fort Yates, North Dakota, on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. He will whisper my Dakota name, Wakca Wastewin, as he walks along the Grand River, counting the water moccasins he sees resting on its shore, and he will smile, knowing that I am coming. ("Dakota")

This vision of the future, of a twenty-first century Ghost Dance that heals both body and soul, that succeeds in bringing past and present generations of Power’s Dakota family together is, in many ways, at the core of survivance, according to Vizenor’s concept which emphasizes “new stories of tribal courage” (4). Power uses the Ghost Dance metaphor not only to recount, but also to rewrite her family’s history. Within her revision, the Ghost Dance shirt, which has as its very fabric the stories of her family and her people, becomes a healing agent, returning the leg her grandfather lost while attempting to escape from Indian boarding school and curing his alcoholism. But, regardless of its importance to her tribal history and personal cosmology, Ghost Dance visions, new or old, are found nowhere in Power’s novel, _The Grass Dancer_, where the Ghost Dancers are recalled only once as they “faint in desperate, useless ecstasy” (Power, _Grass_ 281) and, in an absence that speaks volumes, Wounded Knee is mentioned not at all.
While the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee are not foregrounded in Power's narrative, she unquestionably writes back to the often-misleading dominant histories surrounding those events. In fact, some have suggested that "the Ghost Dance shirt has been sewn" with Power's words ("Dakota"). In this light, *The Grass Dancer* itself becomes a Ghost Dance shirt, connecting Power to her Dakota past, and offering the promise of tribal renewal. That renewal is ultimately found not in the Ghost Dance, however, but in the Grass dance, a war dance whose object, according to anthropologists Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, "was to stimulate an heroic spirit among the people and to keep alive the memory of historic and valorous acts" (459). Like the Ghost Dance, then, the Grass dance emphasizes a connection to history. But while the Ghost Dance located that connection in the physical embodiment of the dead (it was through the return of all those lost to famine, disease, and war that history and the past lifeways of the Lakota would live again), the Grass dance, as Fletcher and La Flesche indicate, focuses on carrying tradition forward by invoking specific tribal memories in dance performers and observers. As this comparison suggests, the impetus of the dances seems to be diametrically opposed: while the Ghost Dance looks to the past, the Grass dance looks to the future. In many ways, though, as I will show, Power melds these two visions in *The Grass Dancer*, because while the Grass dance is one of the lynchpins
of present-day communal identity for the Dakota of the text, Red Dress, a Dakota ghost from the nineteenth century, must return from the past to keep the cultural resonance of the dance intact.

*The Grass Dancer*

Power’s novel begins by flashing forward from a 1964 car accident to the 1981 Dakota Days Contest Powwow, an abrupt switch that is only the first of many. The bulk of the remaining sections of *The Grass Dancer* spiral back toward an 1864 narrative of contact. Along the way, the interconnected stories of four generations of Dakota families are told through the voices of different narrators. But although Power’s story begins in the second half of the twentieth century, the intertwined strands of the narrative lead back to the story of Cuwignaka Duta, or Red Dress, a young Dakota woman who answers the call of a dream and travels with her brother to Fort Laramie in 1864. At the fort, Red Dress becomes a conduit for Dakota spirits who, though her, cause three soldiers to commit suicide before Red Dress is killed by Reverend Pyke, the Fort’s hate-filled spiritual leader. As a ghost, Red Dress follows her brother back to their camp where Ghost Horse, another member of their band whose sacred responsibilities as *heyoka*—a sacred clown whose actions serve to “appease the thunder-beings” (Power, *Grass* 244-45)—had precluded his involvement with Red Dress before she left, posthumously asks to marry her. The ceremony is undertaken, but the marriage is not enough for Ghost Horse, who also
chooses to keep Red Dress’s spirit alive for a year in a traditional Sioux practice
called Ghost keeping (*nagi yuhapelo*). During the Ghost keeping ceremony, which
is “the most onerous form of grief” (Power, *Grass* 280), a family member honors the
dead by feeding and housing their spirit in a series of daily rituals. At the end of the
year, the family conducts a feast, giveaway, and spirit release ceremony. As Red
Dress explains, however, “Ghost Horse did what was expected of him, said the
words, and gave away his last possession, but he did not loose me from this earth.
His heart was a stone room without doors” (Power, *Grass* 280). And so, while
Ghost Horse dies and goes on to the world of his Dakota ancestors, Red Dress is
trapped in the land and ongoing story of her people. She explains:

> At least a hundred years have passed [. . .] I am
hitched to the living, still moved by their concerns.
My spirit never abandons the Dakota people, though
sometimes all it can do is watch. I was there when the
army confiscated our horses to cut off our legs. I
stood behind the Ghost Dancers, and when they
fainted in desperate, useless ecstasy, I blew a
refreshing wind into their faces. There have been too
many soldiers and too many graves. Too many
children packed into trains and sent to the other side
of the country. Many times I ran alongside those
tracks and waved at the bleak copper faces. *You are
Dakota,* I called to them. *You are Dakota.* [. . .] I
saw the language shrivel, and though I held out my
hands to catch the words, so many of them slipped
away, beyond recall. I am a talker now and chatter in
my people’s ears until I grow weary of my own voice.
*I am memory,* I tell them when they’re sleeping.
(Power, *Grass* 282)
Red Dress's description of her position includes the only mention of the Ghost Dance in the text, which is figured in her story as one in a series of losses. In Red Dress's recollection, the Ghost Dance, a "desperate, useless" practice, holds no possibilities. Relief is, instead, situated in Red Dress herself who "refresh[es]" the dancers with her breath, which is elsewhere figured as tribal memory. The brief allusion to the Ghost Dance, then, serves to emphasize that in Power's text possibility and cultural continuity reside, very specifically, within Dakota practices and traditions. In this framework, the Ghost Dance, although an important aspect of Dakota history, cannot become the site of tribal regeneration as it does in so many of Sherman Alexie's texts. Thus, as we will see, in *The Grass Dancer*, the Ghost Dance is figured as a site of loss, and, as such, is left in the annals of history, while Red Dress, and the novel as a whole, turn to a dance tradition that has both historical and contemporary currency in Dakota lives.

The resonance of the Ghost Dance is never completely erased from the novel, however, since much of the narrative action revolves around issues of dance and Red Dress's ghostly intercessions. As the embodiment of memory, Red Dress observes all that happens in the ensuing years and while she watches over all Dakota, she is intimately involved in the lives of her family and the family of her long dead husband, Ghost Horse. Among her own relations, Red Dress's presence and power is recognized, and she is both feared and revered by the generations that follow. The women, in particular, are aware of and connected to Red Dress, whose
intermittent visitations offer them a strong spiritual legacy: Red Dress’s powers can be called upon by any of the women in her family who see her in their dreams. Like so much in Sioux cosmology, however, such visions and supernatural abilities are never entirely good or evil since the efficacy of spiritual power rests in the intentions and actions of individuals rather than in any inherent facet of the power itself.

While almost every story in The Grass Dancer involves ghosts and dance in one form or another, “Anna Thunder,” which is set in 1935 and directly precedes “Snakes,” (Red Dress’s narrative), seems to invoke echoes of the Ghost Dance most clearly, and, much as in Red Dress’s speech, that legacy continues to be fraught with loss in the world of Power’s novel. We are first introduced to Anna Thunder, Red Dress’s great niece, in the first chapter of the text, which takes place in 1981, some fifty years after “Anna Thunder.” At that point in her life, Anna, now “the reservation witch,” has taken the name “Mercury Thunder” after “her granddaughter brought home a copy of the periodic table of elements” and explained, “An element is a substance that can’t be split into simpler substances” (Power, Grass 113):

“‘That’s my story,’ Mercury had told [her granddaughter] Charlene, running her thick forefinger across the chart. ‘I’m all of a piece’” (Power, Grass 113). But the story that Mercury references does not unfold until much later in the novel when the reasons, or at least the circumstances, behind Mercury’s misuse of her inherited powers are clarified.
When “Anna Thunder” opens, Mercury is a young and very different woman from the malevolent trickster the reader encounters in the opening sections of the text. The antithesis of the wise grandmother figure so common in Native literature, Mercury heartlessly uses her power for her own gain, ensnaring young men for temporary love and labor, and generally terrorizing her Dakota community. Anna, however, is a woman filled with warmth and cognizant of her responsibilities within her Dakota community. The two seem so disparate that it is initially unclear they are the same person. But as Anna tells her story, the puzzle of her identity and the origin of her later bitterness as Mercury Thunder begin to fit together. The chapter begins with Anna’s narration of a scene of domestic bliss:

My niece Bernadine Blue Kettle, the one I called Dina, was thirteen—too old to be sitting on my lap. But there she was, her long legs draped over mine and her feet scraping the ground. Our fingers were laced together, both sets of arms wrapped around her pole waist. My four-year-old son, Chaske, was sitting on the floor, drumming a pillow with my long wooden cooking spoon. He covered one ear with his hand and twisted his face to imitate the Sioux singers he worshiped, old men who singed their vocal cords on high notes. He pounded his music into the pillow, making the Dakota lullaby sound energetic as a powwow song.

‘Dance for me,’ I told Dina. [...] She left my lap and danced around her cousin as if he were a drummer at the powwow grounds. (Power, Grass 219)

The beauty of children’s play at powwow dance becomes a bitter memory, however, when a short time later Anna’s son Chaske shows signs of the consumption that has been running rampant across the reservation. Recently widowed, Anna is without
phone or nearby family and so has no means by which to contact the doctor when
Chaske’s condition worsens. Her prayers are answered when Dina’s mother, Anna’s
cousin Joyce, knocks on her door to check whether Anna has completed the
traditional Sioux dress she has been making for Dina. Joyce promises to go for the
doctor, but because of a history of bitterness between the two women, she instead
brings Dina to a dance at the community hall. As her son lies dying in her arms,
Anna imagines Joyce riding hard for the doctor, but to her horror, that imagined
scene dissolves into a vision of Joyce and Dina: “They were dancing together
around the drum, their feet moving in perfect mother-daughter symmetry. Then it
was Dina [. . .] dancing alone as her mother watched from the sidelines” (Power,
Grass 232).

Over the next few days Anna turns, in her grief, to the beadwork on Dina’s
moccasins, which she covers with “red beads [. . .] scarlet as a fresh wound sliced
into [her] palm” (Power, Grass 224). After finishing the regalia, Anna ties Chaske’s
rattle to her long braid much as her ancestress, Red Dress, tied rattlesnake rattles to
her hair, and then walks to her cousin’s house, where she entreats, “Cuwignaka
Duta, you help me now” (Power, Grass 234), before she mentally calls Dina out
into the snow. Dina come from the house and, in a daze, allows her aunt to dress
her in the trade-cloth dress, leggings, and blood red moccasins. “You dance,”
Anna hisses, and, as the narrator explains, “No one will ever know how many hours
Bernadine danced in the snow. She danced herself into another world. [Her father]
found her the next day about a mile from their house, at the edge of a circular track she’d worn through high snowdrifts. [. . . ] shreds of leather and beads [were] all that remained of Dina’s red moccasins” (Power, Grass 235). Like the Ghost dances her tribal relatives danced nearly fifty years before, Dina’s trance-like steps bridges the world between the living and the dead: “That spring, after the children were buried, I discovered that magic let loose can take on a life of its own. I had made my niece dance and there was no one to tell her to stop. Bernadine Blue Kettle was still dancing, this time around my house” (Power, Grass 236).

If, as I argued earlier in this chapter, the Ghost Dance looks to the past and the Grass dance looks to the future in The Grass Dancer, the dance that occurs in the intermediary period of Power’s text seems to be caught somewhere between the two, at least as it is exemplified by the story of Anna Thunder and her niece, Dina. The horrifying references to snow, blood, and death combine with Dina’s circular dance to invoke the classic dominant images of Wounded Knee. Thus, we again see connections between dance traditions and loss in the grim circumstances of Dina’s death, which fulfills the prophecies of the rabid newspaper editorialists of the 1890s who suggested that the Indians in the Dakotas would “dance themselves to death.” At the same time, however, Anna’s story, as bleak as it is, speaks to the awesome and ongoing power of Dakota spirituality. “Anna Thunder” suggests that, in many ways, the Ghost dancers were right to look toward their ancestors for strength and relief—Red Dress provides Anna with the power to fulfill her wishes, despite the
fact that Anna's misuse of that power causes irreparable harm. Dance traditions and Native belief systems such as the Ghost Dance, then, have the power to affect the living in The Grass Dancer, and the dancing ghosts of the text, such as Dina Blue Kettle and Red Dress, act as reminders of that power's efficacy. The productive potential of such dance, however, is not realized until the novel moves into the latter half of the twentieth-century, when the echoes of the Ghost Dance have become fainter and the regenerative possibilities of the Grass dance come to the fore.

As the stories in The Grass Dancer wind toward the modern day, they continue to follow the descendants of Red Dress and Ghost Horse as they struggle to find their places in the rapidly changing world of the reservation. Principal to my analysis of this section of the novel, is Ghost Horse's great-great nephew, Harley Wind Soldier, a young Dakota grass dancer whose story serves as the text's narrative frame, and Pumpkin, a mixed-blood Menominee/Irish grass dancer whom we meet during the last few days of her life. Both are introduced in "Grass Dancers," the initial chapter of the text.

Pumpkin enters the novel as she and three friends arrive at the Dakota Days Powwow. From the outset it is clear that she is a somewhat unusual eighteen-year-old: valedictorian of her Chicago high school—where she delivers a graduation speech called, "Exclusion: The Plight of the Urban Indian"—Pumpkin is "the only girl in her graduating class at Sand Creek High School [...] who wasn't pregnant" (Power, Grass 16). Because of what the narrator describes as her "spotless
reputation in the Indian community” (Power, *Grass* 16), Pumpkin also serves as the unofficial chaperone while she and her friends travel the powwow circuit on this, her last summer of freedom before leaving for Stanford University. Ironically, though, the very characteristics that earn Pumpkin this stellar reputation serve, in her eyes, to separate her from her peers “like a dead weight” (Power, *Grass* 16). This psychological distance and Pumpkin’s ensuing feelings of alienation stem from her position within what Mary Louise Pratt calls “the contact zone”—the “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (34). For Pumpkin, the contact zone exists within the discursive terrain of Indian-white relations. As a mixed-blood person growing up in urban Chicago, Pumpkin has come to adulthood in this complex terrain and thus has encountered a world of contradictions. She alludes to the liminal nature of her experience in her college application essay, saying:

> This goes beyond leaving home and my parents. [...] I will have to put aside one worldview—perhaps only temporarily—to take up another. From what I have learned so far, I know the two are not complementary but rather incompatible, and melodramatic as it may sound, I sometimes feel I am risking my soul by leaving the Indian community. (Power, *Grass* 17)

As Pumpkin’s essay suggests, the discontinuities between Native and white cosmologies, together with the differences between urban and reservation life, create an unstable space in which she must try to situate herself. Ultimately, though,
Pumpkin transcends the often-fraught realities of her life as a mixed-blood urban Indian through dance. And while she has been classically trained in ballet, it is through grass dancing, the most popular of all contemporary powwow dance traditions, that Pumpkin, however momentarily, finds personal reconciliation. In her attainment of an integrated sense of self, Pumpkin is very different from the archetypal mixed-blood protagonists of American Indian literature, such as Archilde Leon in D’Arcy McNickle’s *The Surrounded* (1936) or Jim Loney in James Welch’s *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), who, as Louis Owens points out, are “trapped inexorably between worlds” (26). Grass dancing enables Pumpkin to eschew the demands of a hybrid existence that has been so often depicted as tragic. Instead, Pumpkin performs the identity of her choice out of the heterogeneous traditions that comprise her mixed background. And thus it is the performance of a specifically Native—although, as we shall see, a not entirely “traditional”—identity that enables Pumpkin to create the sort of “new tribal stories” in which Vizenor situates successful contemporary resistance.

When Pumpkin dons her regalia—the red and yellow waves of yarn fringe that simulate grass—and steps onto the dance floor, she does more than merely participate in a contest: she constitutes, remembers, and reimagines community as it is constructed around the cultural arena of the powwow. As Southern Cheyenne scholar W. Richard West, Jr. explains, “Dance is the very embodiment of indigenous values and represents the response of Native Americans to complex and
sometimes difficult historical experiences. [. . .] The dance of native peoples is thus both a vital means of surviving culturally and a powerful expression of that survival” (ix). Historian Clyde Ellis’s work on powwow culture expands West’s philosophy. Ellis maintains:

[Native] Song and dance [. . .] are expressions of belief and action that, despite decades of adaptation and change, have remained a forum for expressing values not always adequately or appropriately expressed through other means. Part ceremony and part public show, with roots in Indian and non-Indian worlds, the modern powwow has become an arena for maintaining and reinterpreting cultural practices [. . . .] powwows are indeed often compelling expressions of unity and cultural perseverance. (134)

The movement that Ellis refers to between the maintenance and reinterpretation of cultural traditions is evidenced by Pumpkin’s very presence in a grass dance competition, as we see if we look at the history of the dance tradition.

Grass dancing, also known as Omaha dancing, stems from a Heluska warrior-society and has historically been performed by men (Hatton 199). Ethnomusicologist Orin T. Hatton explains:

While a specific origin for the Grass Dance musical style cannot be conclusively drawn, both the ceremony and the music grew out of traditions extant before 1850 in the Central and Upper Missouri River Valley. These traditions, of which the Sioux were already a part, were synthesized by the Omaha into a form that was picked up and elaborated upon by the Sioux. [. . . .]

The role of women in musical performance of the Grass Dance was limited for over a century to one of assisting the male singers. [. . .] Fem ale participation in the Grass Dance ceremony was
expanded in the early 1890s, as the dance underwent changes in structure and function. [. . .] The innovation of female drummers within the Grass Dance musical context [in the early 1970s], was predated by women dancing in men’s costumes and imitating the male dance style. Unlike the mixed drum groups which have persisted in the Northwestern Plains for some 15 years female participation as male dancers had only intermittent occurrence throughout the entire Plains for some 35 years. Howard noted that an Omaha girl was forbidden to continue dancing in men’s clothes at pow-wows in Nebraska in 1949. He also mentioned that in 1965, Ponca women were dancing in men’s feather costumes without interference. Rosemary Lessard tells me that two young Sioux women were dancing at Rosebud, South Dakota in men’s costumes in the early 1960s. In 1970 I photographed two women in men’s dance clothes.

(201-10)

According to Hatton, then, a woman’s performance of the grass dance, while not entirely unheard of on the actual powwow circuit, is atypical. This is definitely the case in Power’s novel, where Pumpkin’s grass dancing is seen as an anomaly, which is made clear by a conversation that takes place between a tribal elder, Herod Small War, and his grandson Frank when Pumpkin prepares to enter the dancing:

‘Look over there,’ Frank said. He pointed to a young woman in a grass-dance costume standing at the edge of the arena. It was unusual to see a woman in a man’s costume, but the outfit suited her.

‘Have you ever seen a girl grass dancer?’ Frank asked Herod.

‘No, I never did. But I guess it’s about time. They have every right.’ Frank looked at Herod in surprise. His grandfather wasn’t known to be very liberal when it came to women. (Power, Grass 24)

This exchange both spotlights and validates Pumpkin’s transformation of established gender norms within the Grass dance tradition. In fact, her participation
is not only recognized and accepted, but seen as overdue. But Herod’s approval signifies more than a mere surface shift in the gender roles of performance, though, when considered in conjunction with his significant position in the Dakota community of the text. Herod is a Yuwipi, a spiritual visionary or dreamer, who works as an intercessor between people seeking a cure, the spirit realm, and the members of the community who join in song and prayer to help complete that cure.\textsuperscript{4} As with many other indigenous religious practices, the Yuwipi tradition has shifted focus in the twentieth century, becoming a more generic term for healing rituals. In \textit{The Grass Dancer}, Herod is both a dreamer and a healer, as well as a respected tribal elder whose deep connection to the community imbues his words with a great deal of weight. With this context in mind, Herod’s acceptance of Pumpkin’s grass dancing can be read as a sanction of ongoing cultural change, since her participation in the grass dance tradition expands the boundaries of performance customs.\textsuperscript{5} The combination of Pumpkin’s dance and Herod’s approval, then, reinforces Ellis’s contention that “the modern powwow has become an arena for maintaining and reinterpreting cultural practices” (134). And, given her reinterpretation of tradition, one of Pumpkin’s functions within Power’s text is to replace dominant narratives of loss, such as those so long associated with the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee, with a more realistic tribal story of change and continuance.

Pumpkin’s importance to a narrative of postindian resistance, however, is complicated by the liminality of her Menominee/Irish heritage. As a Menominee,
Pumpkin’s tribal affiliation invokes the U.S. policy of termination, which withdrew Federal recognition and support from tribes that were deemed to be “sufficiently acculturated and prosperous” (Fowler 372). In May of 1961, the Menominee (Mamaceqtaw), a woodland people with a reservation in northeastern Wisconsin, were terminated. As a result, according to Menominee historian S. Verna Fowler, “the tribal role was closed, the sawmill became a state-chartered corporation, taxes were required, and the once prosperous reservation became Wisconsin's seventy-second and poorest county. During the next few years the Menominee lost identity, livelihood, land, and assets” (372). Although President Nixon reversed Menominee termination in 1972 and the Nation has since regained a good measure of economic prosperity, their tribal name is still synonymous with the history of termination.6 Those with knowledge of this background, then, can read the anxieties that Pumpkin exhibits off the dance floor—her feelings of alienation and her fear that she is “risking [her] soul by leaving the Indian community” (Power, Grass 17)—as, at least in part, a product of this indeterminate history.

The echoes of the turbulent history that underlie Pumpkin’s tribal affiliation are matched by the concurrent clash of Native-white cultures signified by her physical appearance. Markers of Indian and white identity collide on Pumpkin’s body. When she dances, her “bright red hair,” “red freckles,” and “dark skin” (Power, Grass 16) are simultaneously in conjunction and at odds with the stereotypical straight black hair and dark skin of a Plains dancer. The resulting
disconcertion, then, a union of the colonized with the colonizer, plays much the same role as Pumpkin’s transgression of gender norms by disrupting binaries and destabilizing attempts to situate her within a single identity category. Her body is a double-voiced text, acting as an unmistakable marker of contact, even as her performance marks her connection to an indigenous history. But it is in the multiplicitous spaces between those identities where Pumpkin’s subversive potential really lies. Circling a powwow dance floor, she engages in a performance that is rich with complexity. She does more than merely displace what postcolonial theorist Jenny Sharpe calls “the center/periphery binarism belonging to colonial systems of meaning” (185). Rather, she opens up what Homi Bhabha terms “a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics” (25). In Pumpkin’s case, however, that “place of hybridity” is not figurative, but the literal space of the dance floor. And as Pumpkin dances the Grass dance, “our recognition of the moment of politics” does change: dance becomes argument, making claims about systems of identification and classification. Thus, with her Grass dancing Pumpkin challenges dominant expectations of Indian identity, Indian expectations of dance, and highlights the constructed nature of those categories by situating her Indian identification as a mutable choice.
While Pumpkin’s Grass dancing signifies her personal connection to a Native heritage, her interactions off the dance floor, as we will see, tie her to a larger project of tribal healing. Pumpkin’s participation in this tribal recovery can be best conceptualized through an examination of the Grass dance tradition as defined within the novel. Herod Small War explains the subtleties, saying, “You have to remember, there’s two kinds of grass dancing. […] There’s the grass dancer who prepares the field for a powwow the old-time way, turning the grass over with his feet to flatten it down. Then there’s the spiritual dancer, who wants to learn grass secrets by imitating it, moving his body with the wind!” (Power, Grass 25). The two categories Herod outlines are complementary rather than contradictory, and Pumpkin falls into both, one in life and one in death. As a judge of the grass dance competition, Herod is transfixed by Pumpkin: “Goose bumps rose on his arms and legs. He was watching not a girl, he thought, but the spirit of grass weaving its way through a mortal dancer. Pumpkin was the color of blazing grass: grass that is offered to the sky in prayer” (Power, Grass 46). In Herod’s eyes, Pumpkin is a spiritual dancer who not only “learn[s] the secrets of the grass,” but, through her movements becomes, finally, indistinguishable from Dakota prayer. As such, her performance again recalls Bhabha’s “space of translation,” destabilizing categories and offering the possibility of new and different understandings, but, as opposed to Bhaba’s theory, which would situate this space as something other than Indian, Pumpkin’s transformation reintegrates her into a Native identity, as Herod’s reading
of Pumpkin illustrates. In Pumpkin’s first description, “her father was responsible for the red hair,” which “contrasted oddly with the dark skin she’d inherited from her full-blood Menominee mother” (Power, Grass 16). For Herod, however, Pumpkin’s red hair means differently. Within the context of her dance, Pumpkin’s red hair, the mark of colonization, becomes not only the marker of indigeneity, but also a symbol of the sacred. This transformation is indicative of Pumpkin’s role in the spiritual restoration at the heart of Power’s text, a restoration that requires both forms of Grass dancing. And so, while in life Pumpkin becomes the grass, in death she dances upon it, as Herod and others discover when they arrive at the site of her fatal car accident. Once there, they find the burnt earth of the accident scene surrounded by a wide circle of flattened prairie grass, leading Herod to proclaim of Pumpkin and her friends: “‘Now they’re the true kind of grass dancers. Now they really know how to prepare the way’” (Power, Grass 53). Herod’s statement underlines Pumpkin’s function in the text as a whole—she prepares the way for the personal and communal healing to come.

The first step of this healing occurs during the night that Pumpkin and Harley Wind Soldier spend together at the powwow. The pairing of these young Grass dancers seems inevitable given the sort of contemporary ideal they embody within Power’s text: both are respected within their communities, both are chaste, and by the end of the text, both are clearly essential to the well-being of this particular Dakota community. The comparisons do not end there, however, since
this ideal is complicated by another striking similarity—Harley and Pumpkin both struggle with feelings of dislocation and loss. While Pumpkin’s alienation stems from her experience as an urban Indian growing up in the contact zone between indigenous and dominant cultures, Harley’s alienation is somewhat different.

Having grown up on the reservation, rather than being separated by a physical distance or difference from other Native people, as Pumpkin has been, Harley is psychologically distanced, separated from himself, from his own emotions, as a result of his father’s and brother’s deaths in a car accident and his mother’s subsequent retreat into silence, which occurred four months before his own birth.

So, while Harley appears to be a fully integrated member of his Dakota community, he, like Pumpkin, is missing an integral piece of the puzzle of his own identity. As the narrator tells us:

Harley couldn’t remember a time when he didn’t feel the black, empty hole squeezed in his chest between heart and lungs. It was solidly lodged there, sharp-cornered like a metal strongbox. When he was little he told himself it was only a matter of years before it filled up, packed with new experiences and sudden insights. [. . .]

When Harley grew older, the empty box didn’t fill itself in the way he’d hoped. It stretched to accommodate his new size. [. . .] So when Harley stood in front of the bathroom mirror, running a wet comb through waves of black hair, he recognized his face without claiming it as other people claimed theirs: casually, unconsciously, immediately. Harley slapped his comb onto the porcelain sink and jabbed the mirror with his index finger. He pointed at the face. The face pointed at him.

‘Who do you think you are?’ he muttered.

(Power, Grass 18-19)
This rupture in Harley’s self image relates to his incorrect interpretation of his mother’s silence, which he reads as her overwhelming love for his dead brother, Duane. Harley envisions his mother, Lydia, as “carrying him indifferently. Her hands [. . .] busy with her first son. [. . .] Harley saw his mother press her belly, wanting something to give Duane. He imagined she located his own spirit membrane, caught her fingernail under its edge and peeled it away [. . .] And so Lydia fed her sleeping son his brother’s soul” (Power, Grass 42). But such is not the case; Lydia’s silence is penance, rather then sorrow, for having loved Harley’s brother—actually the product of her husband’s infidelity with her sister—too little. Harley’s resulting alienation, then, stems from his incomplete knowledge of his familial history. Pumpkin’s physical and emotional intervention bridge his internal void. The first step of this healing occurs during the night Pumpkin and Harley spend together at the powwow.

One of the opening scenes of the novel finds Pumpkin with the Dakota Days Powwow flyer in her hands, “absentmindedly stroking the face of a dancer in a photograph that appeared below the print” (Power, Grass 17). The dancer is, of course, Harley, whose living-breathing figure is the first thing Pumpkin notices at the Grand Entry that begins the dance. The attraction is mutual and the two end the evening, in a move notably uncharacteristic for both of them, by leaving the powwow together. They spend the rest of the night in an abandoned house not far

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from the dance grounds, where their instinctive connection leads Harley to lay bare
his feelings of emptiness for the first time in his life:

‘You can talk to me,’ said Pumpkin.
‘There’s nothing here.’ Harley took her soft
hands and pressed them to his heart.
‘You’re wrong,’ she told him. ‘I can feel your
heart in there, beating like a two-step.’
‘Nothing’s here,’ he repeated. (Power, Grass
41)

But Pumpkin refuses to accept Harley’s claims of numbness, saying:

‘I have plenty of soul to spare. I’m rubbing it
into you right now. Can you tell?’ She was kneading
his lower back with her knuckles, and Harley nodded
because a warmth was spreading. Pumpkin was
making her way into his heart, lighting the corners of
his empty soul with a red-gold flame.
‘You won’t be alone now,’ Pumpkin crooned.
‘I’m a part of you, like it or not.’ (Power, Grass 42)

Significantly, in this pivotal moment Pumpkin is again compared to a flame, as she
was when Herod described her as “blazing grass . . . offered to the sky in prayer.”

The correlation is appropriate in this passage as well, since Pumpkin’s actions serve
as a sort of prayer or healing ceremony that precipitate Harley’s eventual move
toward reconciliation with both his family and the Dakota community. Like an old-
time dancer, Pumpkin prepares the way for Harley’s reconnection to family and
history, stamping down his resistance as if it were the waist-high grass of a powwow
field.

Power’s novel offers the reader no quick fix for the sort of alienation
experienced by characters like Harley and Pumpkin, however, and so, after hearing
about Pumpkin’s fatal car crash, Harley passes a year of mourning, of Ghost keeping if you will, before he begins his recovery in the final chapter of the text. This recovery comes in the form of a vision quest that Harley undertakes only after reaching his lowest moment in a drunken powwow performance. Interestingly, though, it is not Pumpkin, but Red Dress, who plays the ultimate role in Harley’s vision. A recurring figure in every era of the text, Red Dress, as I have argued, serves as a repository for tribal memory, and it is in this capacity that she appears to Harley on the fourth and last night of his vision quest. Her words teach Harley and the reader the historical significance of Grass dancing:

‘I have seen you dancing,’ Red Dress said in two languages, two distinct voices. ‘There is something you should keep in mind when you tie the grass to your shoulders and your knees and step as if you knew something about that kind of movement.’ ‘Do you know what the grass represents?’ Harley shook his head. ‘But you are even one step further from the truth, because the grass has become yarn, a replacement for a replacement.[ . . .] This is not a pleasant thing, but then, you aren’t a child. A long time ago, when we vanquished our enemies in battle we would hold a victory dance and flaunt trophies of war—the long hair of our adversaries. So when you move through those old steps, remember that you are dancing a rebellion and that the pretty fringes are hiding blood and flesh and captured hair.’ (Power, Grass 331)

Red Dress’s final speech recuperates Native dance as a present-day marker of resistance and renewal. Her words underline the fact that, despite the simulations of their costumes, Grass dancers such as Pumpkin and Harley, or, perhaps more
importantly, Grass dancers such as those who might be dancing over the dusty grass in many places across the country as I write, engage in performance that exceeds the limits of the powwow dance floor. Pumpkin, Harley, and Grass dancers like them are postindian warriors whose dancing invokes both a living history and a vital cultural present. Harley’s recognition of Red Dress and his acceptance of her words are essential to his reintegration into his Dakota community and are markers of possibility, which is figured as a future in which Dakota traditions, when practiced cognizantly and correctly, offer strength and guidance to Dakota people. The Grass Dancer, then, although it contains echoes of the Ghost Dance in Red Dress’s memories and in grim stories such as that of Anna Thunder, concludes instead by looking toward present-day traditions such as the Grass dance in order to tell a tribal story of survivance.
NOTES

1 Power makes it clear that, despite her critique, she admires Alexie's work a great deal and, in fact, early on in her talk, she quotes Reservation Blues, saying, "You are not really Indian unless at some point in your life you did not want to be" (Power, "Border Wars").

2 But while images from her life often become fiction, Power is adamant that events such as this are not the tricks of magical realism. She says, "I really feel that given the culture I was raised in, this is not magical realism, this is actual reality to me. It might not be another culture's reality but it is not a literary strategy" (Oslo 1).

3 See Orin T. Hatton for a more in-depth discussion of both the origin of the grass dance tradition and the pattern of female involvement in grass dance performance. Also see James H. Howard's "Pan-Indianism in Native American Dance," which gives valuable information about powwow performance, despite being somewhat problematic in its discussion of pan-Indianism. Howard argues that the "homogeneity in Pan Indian pow-wows approach[es] that of Howard Johnson restaurants or McDonald hamburger outlets" (74) and ends with this rather horrifying commentary:

   Though one may lament the growth of Pan-Indianism
   in sounding the death knell for many ancient and
   beautiful Native American songs and dances, such is
   the way of the world. In most cases these songs and
   dances would wither and disappear, probably to be
   replaced by non-Indian music and dance. I will
   therefore close my essay with what will undoubtedly
   come to be known as Howard's famous epigram:
   'Better Pan-Indian than no Indianism.' (Howard 81)

4 The Yuwipi (yoo-WEE-pee) tradition, called lowanpi or "sings" in Lakota, is a curing ritual usually associated with the sweat lodge and sometimes associated with the vision quest, although the three can occur independently of each other. A Yuwipi man, a dreamer, works as an intercessor between the spirit realm, the person seeking a cure, and the members of the community who join in song and prayer to help complete a cure (although active involvement is not required of participants). As with many other indigenous religious practices, Yuwipi has shifted focus in the twentieth century, becoming a more generic term for healing rituals rather than being related only to the specific tying ritual from which it originated. There are innumerable books on Lakota/Dakota culture and religion. The two central to my research in this chapter are William K. Powers' Yuwipi: Visions and Experience in


6 See Nicholas C. Peroff, Menominee Drums: Tribal Termination and Restoration, 1945-1974, for more on Menominee termination.

7 Pumpkin’s absence from the final scene in the text is one of the places where Power clearly privileges a specifically Dakota, rather than a Plains or pan-tribal, cosmology.
AN AFTERWORD: POSTINDIAN (RE)VlSIONS

I began this dissertation by pointing to the ways in which Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee narratives can function as repressive mechanisms, reinforcing the still all-too-prevalent myth of the “vanishing Indian.” What I argue for in my final analysis is an acknowledgement that while these narratives can tie the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee to tragedy, they do not automatically do so. In many cases, especially in the work of contemporary American Indian authors, these dominant tropes are instead appropriated, revised, or rejected in acts of, to use Gerald Vizenor’s term, postindian resistance. So in S. Alice Callahan’s Wynema: A Child of the Forest, for example, which I examine in my second chapter, I argue that while we should interrogate Callahan’s reiteration of tragic dominant rhetoric, such as Chikena’s claim to be the “last” of her tribe, we should also consider the instances where the text itself denies that rhetoric. I offer a first step in such considerations by analyzing Callahan’s inclusion of a fairly radical defense of the Ghost Dance and her depiction of her title character adoption of a full-blood child, who, by her very existence, at least potentially disrupts the narrative’s rhetoric of loss.

As I show in my third chapter, in the case of canonized texts such as Charles Eastman’s From the Deep Woods to Civilization and Nicholas Black Elk’s Black Elk Speaks, a comparison of these two eyewitness accounts to the body of criticism that surrounds them illustrates how many critics have read a complicated historical
event as a literary trope with pre-determined meaning. Thus the bulk of the critical interpretations of *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* and *Black Elk Speaks* have further reinforced and endlessly reproduced Neihardt's grim prophecy—"[T]he nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead" (*Black Elk Speaks* 270). In such readings, which often appear to be driven more by pre-conceived expectation than textual analysis, narrative agency is erased and any reference to the Ghost Dance or to Wounded Knee automatically serves as a signifier of loss. As I have shown, however, neither *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* nor *Black Elk Speaks* is so simple. Both Eastman and Black Elk emphatically deny the cause-and-effect narrative that situates the Wounded Knee massacre as the grim, but inevitable product of the 1890 Ghost Dance, Eastman by comparing the Ghost Dance religion to Christianity and Black Elk, more radically, by testifying to, and thus validating, his own dance experiences. And while both men acknowledge the horrifying nature of the 1890 massacre, their narratives, like their lives, emphasize stories of Lakota survival. In addition, by concluding their Wounded Knee accounts with their subsequent marriages, Eastman and Black Elk move the stories of the Dakota and the Lakota beyond the static moment of the massacre and into the future.

With my analyses of *Wynema*, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, and *Black Elk Speaks*, then, the first half of my dissertation examines how these early texts replicate, engage, or resist the dominant depictions of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre. The recent recovery of S. Alice Callahan’s *Wynema*, which was written just months after the massacre, enables me to analyze
the earliest of such engagements, while the juxtaposition of \textit{Wynema} with \textit{From the Deep Woods to Civilization} and \textit{Black Elk Speaks} enables me to contrast the single version of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee presented in dominant accounts with the varied nature of Native responses. In doing so, I argue that when we ignore slippages, or moments where early texts stray from formulaic history, we deny the validity of Native voices in favor of the often more prolific and louder voices of dominant society. It is my hope that recognition of the complexity of these early accounts of the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee Massacre can lead us to reconsider our critical interpretations of not only Callahan’s, Eastman’s, and Black Elk’s stories, but also of other tribal narratives of the period. Because, as I ask in each of these chapters, who knows what stories we might recover if we let go of preconceived expectations and instead approach each text with Vizenor’s open-ended question: “What did it mean to be the first generation to hear the stories of the past, bear the horrors of the moment, and write to the future?” (51).

In the second half of my dissertation, I have examined how Native writers counter the still-all-too-prevalent myth of the “vanishing Indian,” which has bound significant resistance movements like the Ghost Dance to tragic tales of a wholesale Native demise. Although such disturbing images have been (and are) endemic in the U.S. national imagination, Indian people have not disappeared into the sunset as Chikena predicted in Callahan’s 1891 text. They have, instead, engaged with dominant icons of Indian identity in any number of complex ways. In the case of such over-determined tropes as the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee, literary engagement has run the gamut from appropriation and revision to outright rejection.
The work of Spokane/Cœur d’Alene author Sherman Alexie, for example, as I show in my fourth chapter, suggests that Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance have become symbols around which to build indigenous coalition. Thus, in Alexie’s 1995 bestseller Reservation Blues Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Alexie’s Spokane protagonist, appropriates Wounded Knee as the basis for pan-Indian identification, saying to Chess Warm Water, a Flathead: “‘We were both at Wounded Knee when the Ghost Dancers were slaughtered. [. . .] I know there were whole different tribes there, no Spokanes or Flatheads, but we were still somehow there. There was a part of every Indian bleeding in the snow’” (167); and in Alexie’s 1996 novel, Indian Killer, Marie Polatkin, also Spokane, revises the Ghost Dance by presenting it as one explanation for the novel’s serial murders and, correspondingly, as a signifier for pan-Indian resistance: “‘So maybe this Indian Killer is a product of the Ghost Dance. Maybe ten Indians are Ghost Dancing. Maybe a hundred. It’s just a theory. How many Indians would have to dance to create the Indian Killer? A thousand? Ten thousand? Maybe this is how the Ghost Dance works’” (313). In the case of Reservation Blues such resistance arises from, but is not the point of, Alexie’s call for coalition, which employs the iconicity of Wounded Knee for new ends: while the dominant Wounded Knee image has erased Native peoples and histories by subsuming all Native people under its tragic sign, Alexie looks not to the past but to the future, when he claims the massacre as the basis for Native alliance. In the case of Indian Killer such resistance, while still based in coalition politics, is an explicit resistance to, or more appropriately, potential rebellion against, dominant society.
But throughout his work, Alexie's texts show how representations of Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance can be configured as resonant sites of postindian resistance.

As I discussed when analyzing Alexie's work, the 1890 Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre are of unquestionable significance to Native people. Speaking of Native poetry, Creek/Cherokee writer and activist Ward Churchill identifies the Ghost Dance as one of the central sources of inspiration for twentieth-century Native writers, saying that representations of the event are employed as a “call to active resistance,” and “a continued assertion of Indianness” (qtd. in Hussey 230-31). If it accepted that these images are, as critics, writers, and activists like Jane Hafen, Sherman Alexie, and Ward Churchill contend, important to the larger Native population in the U.S., then it follows that images of Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance resonate with even greater strength among Native who have Lakota, Dakota, and/or Nakota backgrounds people like Dakota author Susan Power.

In contrast to Alexie, Power illustrates a tribally specific response to the tropes of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee, which, unlike Alexie, are events from her own peoples' history. In her novel The Grass Dancer, Power eschews the overdetermined representations of these iconic images and instead situates Native resistance and renewal within one of the most popular forms of contemporary powwow dancing, the grass dance. By examining the functions of several of the text’s Native characters—Red Dress, a nineteenth-century Dakota ghost, Anna Thunder, a twentieth-century reservation witch, Pumpkin, a mixed-blood Menominee/Irish Grass dancer, and Harley Wind Soldier, a young Dakota Grass
dancer—I investigate how Power uses representations of the Grass dance and Grass
dancers to reclaim and revise present-day indigenous traditions as sites of cultural
survival and tribal revitalization. As opposed to Alexie, who imagines future
revolution in intertribal alliance, Power recuperates a specific Dakota history with
her character Red Dress, thereby locating the potential for what Red Dress calls
“rebellion” within a transformed but enduring tribal tradition. As would be
expected, these different approaches have different ends: whereas in the trajectory
of Alexie’s work, the emphasis is on the tension between dominant culture and
Native culture; in the trajectory of Power’s text, the final emphasis, while
acknowledging the loss and alienation caused by Native peoples’ interactions with
dominant society, is on Dakota culture and Dakota regeneration.

Together, then, the analyses that comprise my dissertation present a
trajectory of representations, illustrating the very different ways in which Native
authors have constructed and are constructing American Indian identity in relation
to the 1890 Ghost Dance, the Wounded Knee massacre, and the dominant rhetoric
surrounding these two significant events. Throughout my project I have tried to
emphasize the immense range of interpretations and counter-representations with
which Native writers denounce the inaccurate dominant histories that attempt to
subsume all Indian identities and all Native history under a single, tragic sign.
While certain kinds of revision and resistance, such as each author’s emphasis on
tribal continuity, are common to all the accounts I have considered, the movement
between and among these representations ultimately differs markedly. I believe that
these shifts in focus and technique illustrate corresponding shifts in the ways Indian
identities are conceived and constituted by different Native writers in relation to 1) the historical situations and periods out of which their narratives arise and 2) the way in which each writer conceives of tribal identity.

On one hand, the movement in the literary representations of/against the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee fall along a fairly predictable timeline. To return to the quotation with which I began my analysis of Alexie:

[T]here are serious and notable distinctions in the comparison of tribal identities in the past century. Those tribal men and women who heard oral stories and then wrote their stories would not bear the same sources of consciousness as postindian warriors of simulation who are heard and written about by others. (Vizenor 55)

Or, as Alexie says more simply, “The way of being Indian is vastly different than it was a hundred years ago” (Teters 35). Images of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee circulate in S. Alice Callahan’s, Charles Eastman’s, and Nicholas Black Elk’s texts in distinctly different ways than they do in Alexie’s or Susan Power’s texts. Callahan and Eastman, for example, are much more concerned with engaging with and, at times, correcting dominant assumptions about Indian identity on dominant culture’s terms. At the same time, Black Elk and Eastman, who were both at Pine Ridge when the Wounded Knee massacre occurred, are clearly invested in bearing witness, in telling the “truth” of these events in ways that, as Vizenor points out, later writers, with their very different “sources of consciousness,” cannot. Thus, in these early texts, the images of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee speak to the needs of the time, so, on at least one level, each of these texts calls for social justice from a white audience. At the other end of the twentieth century, Alexie and Power,
while they still acknowledge the fraught nature of Native-white power relations, can, in Alexie’s case, employ the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee as word play and metaphor, and, in Power’s case, eschew mention of the massacre altogether to situate the Grass Dance as the central metaphor in Dakota history.

Literary representations of/against the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee can also be seen to fall along the lines of tribal identification. Read this way, Susan Power’s *The Grass Dancer* could be said to have more in common with the transcripts and text of *Black Elk Speaks* than with the body of Alexie’s work. Both *The Grass Dancer* and *Black Elk Speaks* are grounded within Power’s and Black Elk’s specific Dakota/Lakota cultures in ways that, as we have seen, Alexie’s work, which appropriates images/history from outside his own Spokane background, is not.

The primary work of my dissertation is to examine the rich and complex terrain of American Indian literature. Within this terrain, the recurring images of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee serve as actions and counteractions, sometimes directly confronting dominant representations of these events, sometimes rewriting such representations, and sometimes presenting new interpretations of these events from and for Native perspectives. But in every case, images of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee are important in American Indian literature because, as their prevalence suggests, they are important symbols to American Indian people. Thus as I have demonstrated, an analysis of how Native authors use Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee images offers a better understanding of the ways in which they constitute Native identity, thereby highlighting some of the varied
concerns and contentions of Native authors from the 1890s to the present and showing how images of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee can become new tribal stories of survival and resistance.
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