LAUGHTER IN THE AMERICAS: NATIVE AMERICAN HUMOR IN *ALMANAC OF THE DEAD*, *BEARHEART*, AND *GREEN GRASS, RUNNING WATER*

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Chapter I: Introduction

"It's a matter of life or die. So we laugh. At ourselves, at our situation, at the ludicrous circumstances in which we live and move and have our being…Perhaps there is something profoundly funny about spitting in the eye of death" (Allen xii).

Considering the limited research on humor, it is unsurprising to find minimal research on Native American humor theory. While Native American humor shares the survival aspect with Jewish and African American humor, Native humor does not address the same issues. There is also a gap in the amount of research compared to other marginalized groups: "Whereas there has been much attention paid to Black or Jewish humor…interest in Native humor has mostly been restricted to anthropological and ethnographic studies of ritual humor" (Gruber 229). Instead, Native American humor defines Native identity, reconciles cultural divisions, and ensures the continuation of Native culture. In "Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature," Eva Gruber defines Native humor. Gruber circumscribes the many aspects of Native humor. She first asserts that humor "partakes in shaping" group identities, then proceeds to define Native humor based on humor's operation in relation to Native life: "humor created by *Native people that reflects and shapes* aspects of *Native as well as Euro-American* life and culture" (Gruber 40). It is important to note how Gruber includes "Euro-American life and culture" into the definition. Both cultures are intertwined and find themselves throughout American history confronted with one another. In addition to

this definition, Native humor can become a kind of cultural connectivity between Indigenous communities and Americans, that in its best form works to remove the rigid bounds delimited by historical events, as well as to break apart the established stereotypes. In order to narrow Gruber's comprehensive explanation on previous humor theory, this study considers Vizenor's rhetorical concepts of survival and manifest manners central to the definition of Native American humor. While Gruber's work is cemented as a leap in Native humor theory, Gerald Vizenor's rhetorical terms are key to its understanding. Native American humor, with its "flexible renewal of Native cultural identity" (228), its mediation and continuation, is an act of survivance and a means of altering manifest manners.

Gruber's contribution to this topic requires less involvement in conversation over the purpose of humor. Her work draws from previous studies and is respected for her overview of Native humor. It is more productive to instead draw from her work and compare it to recent research on humor theory. This requires Jerry Farber's work, as well as the literary environment exhibited in Bakhtin's Carnivalesque. The three novels are used to visualize how Vizenor's terms form a large part of the definition of Native American humor.

Considering this definition of Native American humor, it will help to better understand Vizenor's rhetorical terms. Gerald Vizenor describes survivance as an act which "creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry," referring to the expectation for natives to live in a terrible state of cultural decay (Vizenor 1). It reveals Vizenor's view on language as malleable, for it is a term formed from survival

and resistance. With humor as an act of survivance, it forms part of how Native humor differs from Jewish and African American humor. Another of Vizenor's terms forms most of the narrative of *Bearheart* but shows itself in other works of Native literature. Louis Owens, in his afterward to *Bearheart,* writes, "'Terminal creeds' in *Bearheart* are beliefs that seek to impose static definitions upon the world. Such attempts are destructive, suicidal, even when the definitions appear to arise out of revered tradition" (Vizenor 249). Terminal creeds are obsessions that undermine characters of any background, though *Bearheart* shows multiple instances of Native characters dealing with their personal terminal creeds. John D. Miles discusses several of Vizenor's rhetorical terms, one of which being manifest manners. He writes, "Vizenor defines manifest manners as 'the course of dominance, the racialist notions and misnomers sustained in archives and lexicons as 'authentic' representations of indian cultures'" (Miles 37). The three novels challenge ideas, sharing qualities of Bakhtin's term of the carnivalesque, or "writing that depicts the de-stabilization or reversal of power structures," which the authors express through "mobilizing humour, satire, and grotesquery" (Buchanan 76). This mobilization of humor allows the novels to present their cases against terminal creeds, poor additions to manifest manners, and to exemplify honorable acts of survivance.

Working as a basis to pull instances of humor and Native rhetoric, *Bearheart, Almanac of the Dead, and Green Grass, Running Water* all share qualities and stand out in their own right as entries of Native American literature. They are unique parts of the multifaceted elements in Native American humor. The source of these Native American

rhetorical terms, Gerald Vizenor, an Anishinaabeg, whose novel *Bearheart*, or originally titled *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart,* takes a comical, often inappropriate, band of characters through a post-apocalyptic North America. The result is a violent and sexually violent, almost cartoonish journey through a ruined landscape in search of the Fourth World, along the way discovering terminal creeds of those among their ranks and also reaching a point where they can pinpoint the ideal Native.

A shaman living in the BIA building transmits the Bearheart chronicle to the reader, a story based around Proude Cedarfair and his wife, Rosalina. It follows their journey into the heart of America, while a wild mix of Americans tag along on this pilgrimage. In a sense, the way in which these pilgrims get removed one by one becomes the Ten Little Indians tale. Those who do not belong and succumb to their personal terminal creed get sorted out until being left behind or lost. Some are fortunate enough to last much longer than they deserve.

Without the right perspective, Vizenor's *Bearheart* confounds his audience more often than welcoming his audience into laughter at themselves and the irreparable future caused by material greed run amok. This is not to say that Vizenor prefers a coterie of a Native in-group to isolate his audience: Vizenor enjoys being his own clique with himself, snickering at the academics pulling apart references and names for meaning. Vizenor would rather frighten you with his world of clowns and villains for his own amusement than to invite you into a conversation, yet the novel invokes Native resistance through the perseverance of this Native pilgrimage. Along with challenging the boundaries of humor, Vizenor confronts the various terminal creeds through his

characters. Although Silko and King challenge terminal creeds, *Bearheart* presents a cautionary tale about static beliefs. Survivance applies to *Bearheart* in its embodiment in Proude Cedarfair, who, like his ancestors, resists the urge to humor terminal creeds. Formed as an opposing force, Double Saint, who had been with Proude all along, represents the comical aspects of the trickster clown taken too far. While Proude does not primarily rely on humor as survivance, his trickery against villains like the Evil Gambler and his personal journey to the Fourth World defines him as a role model. Double Saint almost takes survivance too far, becoming combative and dangerous in his sexual clowning. Vizenor's targeted audiences are the academics he means to upset and crossblood Natives in the lessons on Native identity.

A Laguna Pueblo tribal member, Leslie Marmon Silko is best known for her novel *Ceremony*. *Almanac of the Dead* blends Native American and Mesoamerican mythologies into a politically satirical novel about the American Southwest and Mexico. Tying in Vizenor's rhetorical concepts and ecological concerns, Silko uses the blended mythologies to continue stories and puts otherwise separate groups of people—police officers, governmental leaders, illegal porn distributors, insurance CEOs, security contractors, Native Americans, the homeless, and a hodgepodge of criminals together, revealing the flaws, forming surprising new alliances, and, like *Bearheart,* answering what it means to be a proper Native. Initially, Seese is the central plot in searching for her daughter. She is one of several characters linked in some way to other narrative arcs based in and around the Southwestern United States. While staying with twin sisters posted in a desert compound, Seese helps the twin sisters in their quest to record the

history of their people. She meets Sterling, a Laguna Pueblo exiled from his tribe, tending to the garden and contemplating his journey so far.

The shared culture of indigenous North American people has produced a variety of humorous novelists that successfully create a hybridization of the oral tradition through the written medium. Leslie Silko reveals to her audience, in particular those unadjusted to Native American stories, that for many indigenous tribes time is a web of the past, the present, the future, and in forcing typically separate groups of people together can result in new performances of survivance, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* is an almanac in and of itself, torn up, rearranged, and added to by Yoeme and Lecha. Her humor is less evident when placed beside the playful Thomas King and the uncompromising Gerald Vizenor. Silko's characters exhibit the willpower to endure and, in some cases, rise out of their circumstances as representatives of survivance. Just like *Bearheart*, *Almanac of the Dead* also involves terminal creeds, oftentimes in opposition of the natural world. The novel mostly applies to Native North American readers.

Thomas King is a Cherokee and Canadian author. His novel, *Green Grass, Running Water,* has Native myth invade Christian theology and Western media to expose the improper depiction of Native Americans and to laugh off the differences between the two cultures. He teases John Wayne and the worship of him as a television icon, all the while teasing Native Americans. Mixing Native myth with Christianity, *Green Grass, Running Water* throws Coyote and other mythological figures, biblical characters, media figures, and reality at one another, forcing conversations and leading to comical dialogue. Similar to John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, the humor comes from the

reactions of characters to one another when large personalities collide. King challenges the expectations from the Western literary tradition. As with Vizenor's challenge to language, King communicates with the audience in written representations of the oral tradition. Chapters link through repetition, oftentimes ending and starting with the same words or phrases. King's characters respectfully invade religion in media not to fight back, but to tease both Native and Western cultural choices. The characters work out their issues through a communal mentality, even extending into myth, to show the value of old stories and to show that problems are solved with others, and that there is value in humor as a communication tool. King's *Green Grass, Running Water* veers from what seems to be a tradition for Native literature. The postcolonial attitude towards the Eurocentric mindset has the tendency to isolate the audience into those fascinated with Native culture and a Native American in-group. King's ability to engage his audience into play prevents the judgmental tendencies when discussing sensitive topics such as genocide. Rather than to suggest an inherent defect with Eurocentrism, King uses a balanced teasing and a nonsensical narrative to enter into a state of play, even in the face of challenging subject matters like religion. Doing so allows King to challenge additions to manifest manners. King introduces authentic additions to manifest manners and reinforces these ideas using repetition and a character that represents a clueless audience. King involves more obvious humor than the other two authors using dialogue. Manifest manners being a core component of the narrative, *Green Grass, Running Water* challenges racial stereotypes, media depictions—print and television—and curiosity of Native American ceremonies, namely the Sun Dance. His ideal audience includes both Native and Euroamericans.

This study defines Native humor based on Vizenor's rhetorical terms. It first expands on definitions to go more in depth into Vizenor's rhetorical contributions and into humor with Gruber and Farber. Then, the prologues of these texts will be examined to provide some insights into the choices of these authors and to give a sample of what the narratives will entail. From there, each text will be discussed and be compared to one another based on humor, survivance, manifest manners, and terminal creeds. Finally, the novels will be examined based on how each tie into the Carnivalesque.

Chapter II: Humor Theory and Native Rhetoric

Humor contributes to an understanding between cultures, even divisive ones, because it loosens the tension compared to the seriousness when trying to express the emotions of experience. It restricts the potential of a conversation when the listening culture feels responsible for the negative emotions associated with the experience, especially when the message comes across as accusatory. By loosening the tension, humor is more capable of delivering an idea or the emotions of an experience of a group, in turn resulting in more empathy, which results in a higher likelihood for a group to join in a dialogue. Of course, empathy and open dialogue between nationalities is a positive result, but Native American humor can be interpreted as being in poor taste and insulting. Sherman Alexie, for example, has an audience but may have detractors for his humor style. The same can be said of stand-up comedians. Humor is subjective and difficult for scholars to decipher or find a unifying truth behind all its forms. That being said, scholars make attempts to create a lasting theory on the subject.

Stepping away for a moment from Native humor specifically, the relationship between Western humor and scholarly research has been complicated for some time. The Incongruity Theory of humor surpassed the long-held belief in the Superiority Theory by the 18th century, but not without its holes (Farber 67-68). Sheilla Lintott defines and interprets the consensus on the Superiority Theory in her article, “Superiority in Humor Theory.” She writes, “Rather than defining humor per se, the Superiority Theory explains

the nature and value of some humor" (Lintott 348). Lintott considers Superiority Theory as an interpretation of humor rather than a separate theory. Farber seems to consider the theory as separate. He categorizes the Superiority Theory into "derisive humor and empathic humor" that differ in their "payoff" (72). Acknowledging the less recognized, ongoing debate on humor paints a picture of the state of research on Native humor.

The problem in research lies in the widely accepted Incongruity Theory. This theory has setbacks that scholars ignore. Farber comments, "In other words, humor is based on incongruity, provided that we exclude situations that inspire fear, or are perceived instrumentally, or are regarded primarily as a puzzle, and so on. But of course, this is patchwork" (68). In an effort to come up with a new theory of humor, there must not be patchwork, rather an alternate theory that satisfies all elements. Farber explains Incongruity Theory as a disconnect between a component, which is "closer of the two to a social norm or to something that has been socially valorized" and the destabilizing component, which is "gratifying" to the audience (69). The interplay between the two components leads to this satisfaction. Incongruity Theory is characterized by an unexpected aspect that stands out compared to what can be considered a control group. It is the variable of the situation that provides the humor. Farber writes, "One element—we can label it A—typically is the closer of the two to a social norm…The other, more gratifying element—the B—tends in some way to counter or undermine or defy or circumvent the A" (69). He responds to the Incongruity Theory by addition rather than an alternative theory. Regardless of difficulties in defining humor, Farber's great contribution is that humor "has the potential to reveal fissures within the notions through

which we understand the world, and therefore even in reality itself as we comprehend it" (84). That is to say that humor may just be about incongruity, but by pointing out these incongruities in life, we take note of its strangeness, its flaws, and open it up for others to delve into these holes. It does not matter to what depth we point out these incongruities. For many, humor goes without examination. As Farber writes, "It may be that most people, even teachers in the arts, bypass theory entirely and simply accept humor as a given: an unanalyzable fact of human life" (67). Such an attitude ignores the countless comedies on the stage, the various comedic forms on the screen, not to mention the psychological effects of laughter in everyday life. Humor plays an important role in facing long-held disputes between Native and Euro-American groups. If authors can point out incongruous elements of American culture, it can mend relations. On the subject, it is important to include Vizenor's contributions to rhetoric through a Native lens.

Though Vizenor is one of the author's being discussed, rhetorical scholars also recognize him for his contributions to their field, namely in how he sets out to reshape the Native image engrained in the American mind. In "The Postindian Rhetoric of Gerald Vizenor," John D. Miles examines several of Vizenor's terms and how they work to change the false images of Native Americans. Looking at Miles's observations provides understanding to not only Vizenor's choices as a humor writer but also the choices of Silko and King. To Vizenor, "there is no such thing as an *indian"* because *indian* is merely an "accumulation of various simulations that shape thinking and writing about native people" (Miles 36). The many tribes, each with unique, individual practices and

beliefs, have been boiled down into a universal image that is called *indian.* The universal image determines what the uninformed imagine about Native existence often through a false depiction in Westerns and other outlets of entertainment.

While it may seem that rhetoric does not play a role in Vizenor's uncanny, violent novel, his ideas not only persist in *Bearheart* but also in Silko and King's novels, and "[his] terms manifest manners, survivance, and postindian do circulate in rhetoric studies" (36). Miles writes, "Vizenor defines manifest manners as 'the course of dominance, the racialist notions and misnomers sustained in archives and lexicons as 'authentic' representations of indian cultures'" (Miles 37). Manifest manners blanket over the multitude of tribes and tribal uniqueness with the universal idea of indian. Miles goes on to say that Vizenor pictures manifest manners "as a terrain" dotted with what Vizenor describes as dynamic "simulations," ever changing as they are "introduced both by Natives and non-Natives" (37). A new Western comes out, and the map changes with this new simulation, and with it an altered idea of the indian comes to the public mind. The same can be said about a novel chronicling an authentic Native experience. The map will change. Introducing poor additions to manifest manners forms a false, oftentimes universal, image of Native American culture. It does not encourage further investigation into individual tribes. Some additions are dangerous in terms of communication between cultures. For instance, the thought that alcoholism is solely an issue in indigenous circles alters the way people approach tribal members.

Given the historical state of the landscape of manifest manners, it is a natural tendency for Native stereotypes to influence our perspective of Native existence in its

current form. Tribes have been relegated to limited spaces on reservations. Some languages, such as Lakota, are losing speakers, for those who do speak the languages are aging. Recent events have transpired that alter the Native image to one of victimhood. Yet indigenous tribes have come together and formed a coalition, sharing cultural qualities, becoming satellite communities with a shared bond holding them together. One aspect of Native literature is addressing these poor additions to manifest manners with authentic images of Native life.

Yes, their history is one of bloodshed and loss. However, Vizenor argues that indigenous communities do not live in survival but engage in survival and resistance, or "survivance" (Vizenor 1). In *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, edited by Vizenor, the authors in the anthology unravel the act of survivance and look at works that exemplify survivance. Vizenor begins the anthology by defining survivance in multiple ways. He states that survivance is "clearly observable in narrative resistance," having already established that indigenous presence in the written tradition is an act of defiance or refusal of the "unbearable sentiments of tragedy," going on to note how survivance manifests itself in the form of "native humanistic tease, vital irony" (1). When Silko, King, and Vizenor incorporate humor into their work, it is commonly an act of survivance seeking to change manifest manners. In addition, humor has its uses from a rhetorical standpoint. King excels at finding a comedic balance so as to continually feed the reader his perspective. Though some might argue Vizenor is a provocateur, as the author relishes in how uncomfortable his subject matter is, his characters, namely Proude Cedarfair, learn to exist in a post-apocalyptic landscape. Proude transcends the physical

realm out of his mastery of humor and avoidance of terminal creeds. Silko's survivance is less often one of humor. Some of her characters thrive through alliances, others simply from paying attention and listening to the world.

Vizenor defines survivance in other terms. One of these relates to the oral tradition, as "Survivance is the continuance of stories" (1). Comparing Native texts to Western literature, there is the assumption that Native literature borrows from postmodern literature. Silko blends several timelines, and in *Bearheart,* Vizenor, from an oral perspective, challenges the power of language through word play and explicit language to present it as malleable and inconsequential. Yet Native literature is postmodern literature out of the reaction created when oral tradition enters into the written form. Indigenous authors make use of the written tradition out of a desire for the stories to live, and in doing so, their texts become orality on the page rather than a transfer from oral to the written word. It is uniquely Native. There are other facets of survivance inherent in indigenous texts, such as how it "is character by natural reason, not by monotheistic creation stories and dominance of nature" (11). The stereotype that indigenous tribes worship the natural world is instead a will to continue on in a world of chance and a reverence for nature. He outlines more commendations of the act, but the best definition he gives for survivance is in its misinterpretation by scholars:

> Survivance is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory. The theory is earned by interpretations, by the critical construal of survivance in creative literature, and by narratives of cause and natural reason. The discourse on literary and historical studies of survivance is a theory of irony. The incongruity of

> survivance as a practice of natural reason and as a discourse on literary studies anticipates a rhetorical or wry contrast of meaning. (11)

Vizenor has an aversion to theory in its limiting effects on Native culture, which he confronts in *Bearheart.* Putting survivance into theory removes itself from Native culture into the Eurocentric activity of literary theory.

In order to get a better sense of what survivance in practice entails, Vizenor presents the case of Charles Aubid as witness in federal court over "a dispute with the federal government over the right to regulate the manoomin, wild rice, harvest on the Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Minnesota" (2). Aubid recited Old John Squirrel's words by memory in front of the court. He insisted "the Anishinaabe always understood their rights by stories," and as such, his testimony, one Vizenor considers "a storied presence of native survivance," should be taken as evidence against the federal government (2). By this, Vizenor refers to Aubid's recitation of the events where John Squirrel was present as survivance, for it is as if John Squirrel came as witness into the courtroom. Aubid willed John Squirrel into existence for testimony. The judge retorted, "'John Squirrel is dead,' said the judge. 'And you can't say what a dead man said'" (2). Aubid countered this by "point[ing] at the legal books on the bench," and commented how "those books continued the stories of dead white men. 'Why should I believe what a white man says, when you don't believe John Squirrel?'" (3). The judge found little at fault with his reasoning: "'You've got me there'" (3). The reliance on the written word makes it difficult to imagine an existence without it. Survivance as practice does not have to take place on the page, but it is deliberate that it does. In a sense, Native authors

choose literature as a vehicle for their ideas because it is where Western audiences exist. They are bound to find difficulties communicating to audiences, where orality has to take place in literature. Regardless of these challenges, Vizenor, King, and Silko succeed in speaking to their readers through survivance, in humor or otherwise, allowing for alterations to manifest manners. They merely take different avenues.

It is understandable to assume survivance only exists in literature from the Native Renaissance with such names as Vizenor, Silko, and N. Scott Momaday. The Native American Renaissance occurred when "Indian writers began to emerge in the 1960s" who at first "were recognized as outside the great traditions of Western literature" (Lincoln 7). Kenneth Lincoln writes, "The Native American Renaissance here targeted, less than two decades of published Indian literature, is a written renewal of oral traditions translated into Western literary forms. Contemporary Indian literature is not so much new, then, as regenerate: transitional continuities emerging from the old" (8). There are, however, other instances of survivance. Vizenor gives another example of survivance, this time in the written form. The *Progress* was a reservation newspaper from the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, which continued in spite of several attempts by federal agencies to discontinue its publishing (Vizenor 8). Vizenor has a personal attachment to the newspaper, writing, "I was transformed, inspired, and excited by a great and lasting source of native literary presence and survivance. The newspaper countered the notion of a native absence…" (6). The value of language over orality has led to written examples of survivance such as the *Progress.* Vizenor goes on to mention how "the *Progress* endured, truly an honorable declaration of native survivance and liberty" (8). This Native presence

in the written form has traveled into literature as well, where tribal stories and myths continue to this day in a blend between written and oral traditions.

Traditionally, comedy has a place on the stage. Facial expressions, physicality, pauses, and other performance techniques bolster the gratification provided by humor. Each author gravitates towards different forms of humor they rely on that relate to rhetorical modes Vizenor summarizes, as well as the styles of humor mentioned by Farber. The introduction of these themes is revealed in the opening chapters of the novels, so to better develop an understanding of their humor and the framework of their novels, the introductions should be examined.

Chapter III: Introduction to the Texts

Since the introductions to the novels epitomize their distinctive humor styles, the introductions will be discussed. Among the three texts, *Almanac of the Dead* is unique in its absent prologue. The opening pages are familiar to the uninformed audience—less playful, less exclusive. There is no reveal of the narrator, simply the introduction to a set of characters in the large ensemble of the time-hopping text. There is no humor present other than in the motley cast of characters that find themselves in the desert wasteland outside Tucson, Arizona. Silko sets an unsettling tone with the sparse communication between the characters. No culturally significant Native figures interact with one another. Other than for the purpose of introducing characters and setting the stage, the scene reveals what must change. Silko provides the before image of a world without a Native network spread across the Americas. The sparse world without the communal bond between native individuals leaves the world without humor. Only later when political factions and individuals who would normally not interact find themselves together does satire play a role.

In the introduction to *Bearheart,* Vizenor takes the opportunity to fulfill his desire of playing with his audience and cement himself as the ultimate trickster of Native narratives. The italicized portion of the novel titled “Letter to the reader” places a man occupying the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in the position of Vizenor as narrator. What stresses the unfamiliarity is how the employee claims to be a bear, formerly a crow

(Vizenor viii), laughing at the death of his culture: “The crossbloods and wicked skins dressed in animal hides and plastic bear claws are down around us here in the heirship documents…the words are dead, tribal imagination and our trickeries to heal are in ruins” (ix). Soon, a woman from the American Indian Movement breaks into the office to confront the bear whom the Bureau ordered “to dance in the darkness on the cabinets and to remember the heirship documents” (ix), and the two in opposition begin to trade in scornful accusations. He mocks the younger generation and the older generation. Vizenor tells the audience to take witness of what has become of this culture through the name-calling between two generations with conflicting ideas on how to preserve the tribe.

The bear goes by many names: “the hairship man” (x), a man holding “Bearheart” (x) within, a “white, white, white, bear” (xii), and “White Indian” (xiii), among others. The old bear goes by hairship man rather than heirship man. The puns in Bearheart address the stance of language as static and instead make it unfixed. The overreliance on language, as Aubid points out in the federal court case, shows up in *Bearheart* as a terminal creed. Next, the AIM member calls him White Indian for joining the BIA. He mocks her back for fruitless efforts in the AIM. She considers herself “Songidee Migwan,” or “Fearless feather” (xii), he tells her she “pose[s] as a warrior with chickens in the third world” (x), unenlightened and unable to enter his fourth world. The bear considers her a “word bear” (x) adorned in “plastic bear claws” (xi), labeling her as a false representation of the tribe fixated on the power of words.

The teasing comments on the disparities of the young and the old, those fighting and those immersed in Euro-American culture. Though the old bear has given in to the

allure of the BIA, the bear holds the tribal knowledge and tribal stories. His position as a bear, despite significant character flaws, indicates that he still holds his unnamed, possibly collective, native culture within him. Just as *Almanac of the Dead* is a living text, so too does *Bearheart* live and breathe. The reader holds the heirship documents that are retained in the old bear in the text's "Letter to the Reader." Given that it is an oral culture, the old bear questions the AIM member. Vizenor writes, "Would you tell us good stories about our people and the revolution in winter words before we die?" (xi). The old bear wants confirmation, though she is "proud to hold freedom in terminal creeds," that she will remember the tales before the inevitable death of their people, and the bear moves in to physically transmit the heirship chronicles to the young, rebellious generation (xi). She concedes, and the two engage in sex while she reads and he transmits the tale orally, mimicking the transfer from the oral tradition to a literary one. Vizenor merges the two traditions to pass on the knowledge of his tribe. He informs the audience of his intent in a violent, sexual manner, just as the rest of his novel uses sex and violence to spread his message. Humor in this context satisfies neither the Superiority Theory nor the Incongruity Theory. It is not the misfortune of the AIM member that we laugh at. The two characters leave little room for empathy. The subcategories of Superiority Theory, derisive and empathic humor, do not explain the humor in the situation. To Farber, Incongruity Theory "exclude[s] situations that inspire fear, or are disgusting" (Farber 68). The revolting exchange of knowledge through sex does not fulfill the theory's definition. Therefore, it is necessary to turn to Native humor scholars for more context. Gruber writes:

> …in American humor incongruity arises from ideal and fact…the thematic forms of Native humor is entirely different. While Native humor certainly should not be considered a result of colonization but, rather, precedes the colonial presence, as with all fourth world nations, the sociohistorical condition of subalternity shapes Native humor to a substantial degree. (Gruber 41)

American humor is the failure to attain the American dream. Native humor, though it has its own history prior to colonization, certainly has a reactionary element to it. Gruber goes on to say that "there is a strong consensus on teasing and self-deprecatory humor as the most prevalent forms" and these elements are the result of the issue that "Native identity and existence are in constant jeopardy" (41). As a result, humor is a means of counteracting this threat to "identity and existence" as an act of survivance. The interaction between the bear and the AIM member demonstrates the teasing side of Native humor. Vizenor mocks both generations that identify as Native in the teasing interaction. While Vizenor certainly employs gallows humor further into the novel, the prologue is an alternative playfulness to King's folklorist imagining, providing explanation as to why Vizenor chooses to transcribe this supposed myth in a nonsensical fashion. Both include "teasing and self-deprecatory humor" (41) in narratives of separate tones. However, the sexual component of the teasing sets it apart from King's lightheartedness. Transferring stories through intercourse is not easily understood or as rewarding in terms of humor for a non-Native audience unfamiliar with the sexual debauchery present in Native myth or trickster tales.

Of the authors, Vizenor has the tendency to push the boundaries and include topics one might find unnerving. *Bearheart* devolves into a narrative of violence and violent sex; characters like Little Big Mouse are torn apart from the desires of others. Yet comedy exists in uncomfortable spaces. When uncomfortable spaces are explored, the uncomfortable has the opportunity to become less uncomfortable. It is no coincidence that Native writers celebrate humor, and it has been established that humor is one act of survivance. Uncomfortable topics work in comedy narratives, so long as they fit a purpose. But what purpose does sexual humor serve, as Vizenor often incorporates it? Is Vizenor's humor a practice of survivance?

To answer these questions, it will help to confront the boundary-pushing humor styles. What Farber describes as "counter-restriction humor" takes humor's tendency to explore boundaries and shows that there is a gratification from this exploration (Farber 78-9). He writes, "…the A corresponds to some internalized restriction or thought, feeling, or behavior. The juxtaposition of a B that corresponds to the restricted need or inclination itself and that in some way counters or evades the restriction may provide the entire payoff, or it may serve to support some other sort of payoff" (78). The first category of counter-restriction humor, aggressive humor, takes the satisfaction in humor about physical pain, such as falling down the stairs or other painful situations. The second half of the movie *Home Alone* bases its humor around pain. The shenanigans of *The Three Stooges,* for example, are based around the gratification of reactionary facial expressions from aggressive humor. Though "derision may well satisfy an aggressive impulse," the two forms of humor have different gratifications (79). Farber writes, "It is

one thing to feel the rush of superiority when a respected figure's imperfections are revealed; it is another to enjoy seeing someone hit over the head with a vase" (79). It is not that Larry or Curly or Moe deserve physical pain, but the reaction itself to pain is what gratifies. The second category is difficult to laugh at on its own. Sexual humor is a challenging category, especially in the Euro-American audience unaccustomed to the sexual meddling of Coyote, a staple among various tribes. Franchot Ballinger discusses this challenging category of counter-restriction humor in his article, "Coyote, He/She was Going There: Sex and Gender in Native American Trickster Stories." He writes, "In any event, the hyperbole that abounds in dramatizations of male trickster sexuality carries that sexuality to levels traditionally unacceptable to many Euroamericans, but traditionally many Native American societies have been less priggish than the dominant Euroamerican culture" (Ballinger 17). One could argue against this assertion with instances of comedy movies depicting college debauchery. *Bearheart's* frequent depiction of sexual violence in his novel is a part of several native myths, where Ballinger comments how "no woman is safe for long from a trickster's penis" (18). For another explicit example, there is one tale about the advances of Old-Man Coyote of Crow mythology. Ballinger writes:

> During a dance, a young woman tells the men to expose their penises because she wants to marry the man with the smallest. Old Man Coyote exchanges penises with mouse. The girl chooses him, of course, but his triumph lasts only until the on-lookers see mouse trying to walk through the encampment dragging Old Man Coyote's huge penis. (18)

This example shows a successful mix between sexual humor and the absurdity of such an image. It is not the subject matter that the audience relies on for gratification. Farber argues, “Sexual subject matter in humor is not necessarily sexual, or entirely sexual, in its payoff” (81). That is, other humor forms are open to take center stage over the sexual gratification. To prioritize the sexual reward of the joke is to risk losing some audiences.

Another category of counter-restrictive humor is the concept of nonsense humor. Relating nonsense humor to children’s books, Farber reaches the conclusion that nonsense humor “can encourage even ‘no nonsense’ adults to let down their guard, to move more fully into a play mode, and therefore be less impatient with language and visual images that are ‘weird’ and ‘off the wall’”(83). Although King’s narrative is an exemplary novel of nonsense humor, Vizenor’s word play and the situations in which his characters find themselves highlight the madness of following the supposedly sensical world.

Bearheart and *Almanac of the Dead* bear similarities in how the physical novels themselves hold more properties than just a written story. *Green Grass, Running Water* and *Bearheart* share qualities in their prologues, where tricksters take over as storytellers. King and Vizenor use these passages to reveal what humor the audience is to expect while reading their stories. King’s Coyote struggles with an escaped dream that “gets loose” during his slumber (King 1). The escaped dream declares itself God soon to run amok and cause havoc through history. This introduces the Native character, Coyote, poking fun at the Euro-American religion of Christianity. Even though it cements Coyote as God’s creator, Coyote looks no better than God. In fact, God is the one urging Coyote

to take action against the threat of water. King writes, "'Take it easy,' says Coyote, 'Sit down. Relax. Watch some television.' But there is water everywhere, says that G O D" (3). Their interplay reveals the negligent nature of Coyote, at the same time introducing the recurrence of television to the audience, giving credit to the Christian god, and teasing the notion of the Christian god as the Supreme Being. This teasing goes back and forth, all of which leads to a balance. Neither side comes out superior, yet both feel justified. This is not necessarily a part of Native American humor. Silko and Vizenor reveal no desire to balance their condemnatory humor directed towards Euroamerican culture. Vizenor's introduction is more serious than the playful interaction of Coyote and G O D in *Green Grass, Running Water*, as the humor takes on a more dismal quality that shows Vizenor cares little about welcoming a Euroamerican audience. Humor is still present, though more accusatory and profane than the nonsensical exchange in *Green Grass, Running Water*. The playfulness of King's prologue is in stark contrast to the opposite interaction in Vizenor's "Letter to the Reader" introduction, while the opening chapter of *Almanac of the Dead* removes humor from the equation.

Chapter IV: *Bearheart, Almanac of the Dead,* and *Green Grass, Running Water*

From the introductions, we will move into the texts, beginning with *Bearheart.* Although the prominence of sexual violence offsets his message, Vizenor is quick to explain why his protagonist will eventually succeed in entering the Fourth World. Three ancestors precede the fourth Proude Cedarfair, each clown challenged with evolving authoritarian pressures and each with their own methods of preserving the Cedar Circus. Their lineage progresses from a primal man closest to myth, described as a "ceremonial bear" (Vizenor 5). His flatulent humor reflects his primal nature, where he "squat[s] just over the river and fart[s] into the surface water" (9). This act shares the element of bridging cultures that King's novel does so well, for this primal sort of humor shows itself in other cultures. It stands out from the sexual humor that is frequent in Vizenor's novel. First Proude's violent death, a recurring part of Vizenor's pilgrimage tale, leaves Second Proude responsible for a nation he is not prepared to defend. His "cedar nation" turns to him for answers in the growing threat of attack (Vizenor 11). While his father embraced humor, Second Proude chases laughter through his gripping alcoholism, as revealed during his speech to the nation's women: "I drink to smile when I should dream, to give me laughter…" (11). Previous events taught Third Proude that violence is less effective than the trickster tactics, foreshadowing the methods Fourth Proude employs.

He comments, “The tricksters and warrior clowns have stopped more evil violence with their wit than have lovers with their lust and fools with the power and rage” (15). Third Proude’s words relate to both nonviolent resistance and humor’s role in eliminating feudal evil. He asserts that humor is an act of survivance. Native tricksters are known for solving problems through their penchant for mischief, which will come more apparent later. The Proude history culminates in the novel’s example for benevolence with its protagonist, Fourth Proude Cedarfair, who “avoided word wars and terminal creeds” and understood the importance of “political and religious interdependence” to attain the position nearest to peace (15). If the goal is to gain relationships with other cultures, and Proude and his father recognize that wit is the best tool against violence, it is safe to assume that Fourth Proude uses humor and trickery as means for some goal. Other characters use nonsense as a form of humor as well. There is more nonsense to the spectacle of Bigfoot’s extremities than sexual humor, though the payoff in revealing his aptly named genitalia takes until the end of the novel, at which point, the joke is both difficult to catch—as is the case with Menardo and Iliana in *Almanac of the Dead*—and less gratifying due to Bigfoot’s rape of Rosalina. President Jackson (his name for his genitalia) assaults the Native woman as a nod to the violent decisions of the U.S. president, which is difficult to find gratifying. Native humor has a tendency indeed to laugh at dire circumstances.

As it is with *The Canterbury Tales,* sexuality is often put in a humorous frame. With *Bearheart,* it is to the extent of a limited inclusion of other humor forms, where in some circumstances, there is a small gratification through nonsensical humor. Benito

Saint Plumero, one of the trickster clowns Proude Cedarfair encounters, is introduced to the pilgrimage and subsequently joins in their journey. One of his companions named Sister Flame describes his body of comical proportions to the pilgrims. She notes, "'Neither his brain nor his heart, but his nose, and, and, his superlative president jackson…and his feet as you can see, all in proper proportions, should belong to a man ten times his altitude'" (38). When asked for elaboration about his "president jackson," Sister Flame responds, "His glorious uncircumcised president Jackson penis" (38). A non-Native reader has no context as to why Vizenor introduces characters with off-putting physical traits and lack of self-control. It could be argued that First Proude's flatulent humor brings audiences together, at least momentarily. However, the majority of the novel focuses heavily on the negative aspects of trickster clowns. Then again, there is the argument that Vizenor's trickster clowns are true to form in the sense that tricksters of Native origins are known for an "Enlarged genitalia, an interest in excrement and flatulence, and a constant drive to fulfill primal desires" (Andrews 96). The trickster "serves as a model of how individuals ought not to behave" (96). Yet, as Andrews later states, "By bending the rules, literally and figuratively…Coyote embodies the resistance and endurance of Native North American communities" (97). In *Bearheart*, Proude is the best representation of proper survivance. He is less humorous than Coyote. Without humor, it is less evident that he is a trickster clown. King's Coyote challenges norms without running the risk of Benito Saint Plumero's, or Bigfoot's, sexual violence, and the Four Indians are present to help guide him. Coyote breaks rules that result in the best interest of the town and enlightens the audience with his nonsense humor about the flaws

of religious institutions. This occurs without consequence or alienation of a non-Native audience, for "Using humour as the basis for his critique, King is able to justify his repeated violations of established categories and Western narrative models," which invites his audience to examine Native struggles "without necessarily feeling threatened" (99).

In the chapter involving the word hospital, where Vizenor addresses the dynamic nature of language, there are instances of derisive and sexual humor alongside his nonsense humor. Vizenor challenges the expectations of words in this section. Though Vizenor plays with his audience, as tricksters contribute to disorder, Vizenor rights his wrongs in confronting the terminal creed of the overanalyzing of words for the Eurocentric mindset. Scientists run "conversation stimulators" where certain words and ideas [are] valued and reinforced with bioelectric stimulation" (Vizenor 168). Although Vizenor's word play is nonsensical, he subverts the A and B, the expectation is that the static word hospitals are the A—the normal or societal group in the situation—and the pilgrims the B—the incongruous group providing the gratification—yet the pilgrims who frequently alter words view the hospital scientists as the ones going against rational thought. Double Saint Plumero locks the scientists into this room and "set[s] the dials on argumentation" (170). He makes "'One last word in the word wars'" (170). The comical victory of the pilgrims takes a turn, when two members of the pilgrimage decide to stay and give in to their desires. With this message in mind, it is surprising to a non-Native audience that Vizenor ends the chapter in such a manner: "'When we finish stimulating their conversations the three of them will give us their bodies'" after changing the

machine setting from “argumentation” to “passion and lust” (171). Vizenor succeeds in pointing out the overreliance on words, such as strict adherence to laws written down in the case of John Squirrel, through his belief in the dynamic nature of words: “In stark contrast to the avaricious attempts of the hospital workers to devour the ambiguity of language Vizenor uses language to shake up fixed meanings, to liberate the thinking of his readers. In *Bearheart* and elsewhere he engages in wild word play” (Blaeser 263). The sexual humor does not translate as well without the knowledge of the relationship trickster clowns have with sexual deviancy.

While it could be misinterpreted as a humorless novel, *Almanac of the Dead* is a subtle satirical work that, among the various interpretations, pushes for a network of indigenous groups and pro-indigenous sympathizers and argues that an accurate account of history must be remembered for cultures to survive. It would be wrong not to forgive the casual reader for missing the humor among the multitude of obscene acts and foul characters. After all, it is just as difficult to find sympathetic characters in *Almanac of the Dead* as it is in *Bearheart*. Interviewers scarcely ask Silko questions regarding humor in the work. In the collection of interviews, *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, edited by Ellen L. Arnold, interviewer Linda Niemann sits down with Silko to discuss survival in *Almanac of the Dead*. On the subject of the dangers of being a novelist, Silko notes how blending personal knowledge into a work can jeopardize a reader’s psyche. She comments, “And for some people I think *Almanac* is kind of a dangerous book. Maybe you shouldn’t give it to somebody who’s depressed” (Arnold 110). Niemann responds by saying, “I think the humor would rescue anyone who was depressed,” to which Silko

replies, “Oh, good. You saw humor” (110). This pertains to the challenge others have experienced in interpreting the novel as humorous. Silko’s response implies that humor rescues those who find connections with the madness of Silko’s world and the mad reality in the state of the reader’s current world. Humor practiced as survivance in *Almanac of the Dead* agrees with the efforts of recording Native American history in an almanac. Just as the characters record pages of the almanac, which exist in Silko’s pages, the publication of *Almanac of the Dead* is an act of survivance. Though certainly less explicit in depictions of sex, *Almanac of the Dead* and *Bearheart* both confront difficult subject matter, such as the kidnapping of a newborn child on page 111. Native literature, and by extension Native cultures, oftentimes turns to humor as a repellent against the demoralizing affairs in time, whether they exist in the present, past, or future. Beaufrey’s presence as a character seems to repel sources of humor as many characters often do in the text, considering his business selling late abortion films to “antiabortionist lobby[ists]” and fake snuff films to customers with lurid tastes (Silko 102-3). Characters who are not morally bankrupt take the brunt of the violence, making it difficult to find the humor in the satire. The more realistic aspect of the violence compared to Vizenor’s cartoonish depiction of violence makes it difficult to bear. The real depictions become so insurmountable—Seese never finds her newborn child—that it almost becomes comical. Still, the novel shows characters surviving and resisting despite the odds.

Vizenor stresses that terminal creeds devastate characters and prevent them from reaching the fourth world. Both Vizenor and Silko laugh at terminal creeds and preoccupations. Silko leaves room for error, her characters imperfect people on a

spectrum of morality. Characters in *Almanac of the Dead* have preoccupations that hold them back, but Silko presents their position rather than outright condemning them. Some characters simply exist as examples of how preoccupations lead to ruin. The novel documents its reality with little reliance on traditional conventions or character development, instead turning to oral memorization techniques such as repetition and parallelism, but Silko also incorporates Western styles of comedy instead of the teasing that Vizenor and King mostly use in their text. Rather, Silko presents a sort of condemnation towards characters through satire.

Through humorous demise, Silko invests in Vizenor's concept of terminal creeds and joins it with humor. Doing so points out the incongruities in North American communities. Menardo once listened intently to his grandfather's storytelling until the "teaching Brothers" (Silko 258) warn Menardo about "pagan stories" (258). This, coupled with his desire to impress the boys preoccupied with girls, leads him astray from his culture. These boys call him "Flat Nose" (258) for his distinctive nose that indicates his Native ancestry, so he learns to hate the lineage that gave him this feature. Soon, his grandfather dies once Menardo stops visiting. Menardo "almost felt sorry" (259) since his grandfather "did not require anything in return, except that Menardo listen" (259). Menardo goes on to make a fortune in insurance (260). It is in his business endeavors that Menardo looks to mold his public image. Such a long narrative separated by pages of other narratives runs the risk of losing the reader's attention to the humor. Menardo is so ashamed of his nose that he isolates himself from family and culture and plunges himself into a global business of insurance and security. His fortune in his company, Universal

Insurance, leads him to meet Greenlee, an arms dealer, who assists Menardo in protecting his assets (264-66). The use of "universal" implies an all-encompassing organization, a terminal creed. His wife Iliana also abandons her culture. Illiana is too distracted to notice the affair Menardo has with Alegría, the architect he has hired to build the house that covers the jungle with its walls (280). The separation is so strong that it manifests itself as a physical blockade. She does not pay notice, for Iliana is obsessed over building her dream mansion, and when she eventually does catch the two, it does "not shake Iliana's fascination with the structure she herself had designed" (296). Iliana's love for the house leads to her downfall.

Once the final touches are made in the dream home, workers do the "final cleaning of the white marble staircase" (288). The narrative separation again takes away from the humor of the position a character puts themselves in, because Iliana dies—a terminal creed now truly terminal—falling down her own custom staircase. Silko writes, "The coroner's officer noted that while the marble staircase was by far one of the most stunning focal points of this most modern and beautiful mansion, still the stairs themselves had been made with a peculiar design" (300). Her humor has the potential to be passed over in how understated it is, for it is odd that an officer of the coroner takes note of the interior design of the home. Iliana's desire to impress the wives of the men Menardo surrounds himself with—men whose approval he seeks—using her particular tastes in architecture is what kills her, for "Iliana had done the design of the steps herself. It had been Iliana who had insisted the marble be highly polished" (305). She builds up

walls to rid herself of her culture and to hide in comfort. The character's house, Iliana's preoccupation, exacerbates the rift in her relationship and ultimately breaks her.

Returning to Menardo, his paranoia grows, revealing itself gradually in the same manner. Although snakes are generally evil symbols in Western literature, snakes are a positive force in Silko's text. Menardo's aversion to snakes exemplifies his aversion to his native culture, for when Alegría buys a snakeskin purse and shoes, he comments, "'Reptile, aren't they,' he frowns, 'You know how I dislike snakes'" (319). Silko subverts these thoughts to show misunderstandings or incorrect thoughts in Western culture. Other characters revere snakes in later passages that will become apparent. Menardo shares the desire for comfort Iliana has in that Menardo obsesses over protection. His preoccupation with body armor builds until he starts "sleeping in the bulletproof vest" (335). Menardo leads his obsession to his final act: gathering military and police leaders to show off "the magic of high technology" (503). He orders his indigenous limousine driver, Tacho, to fire a 9mm pistol at his protected chest (503), which ends up killing him in the process. The satire takes over two-hundred pages spaced out with other interwoven narratives to satisfy the irony of Menardo's preoccupation. Menardo's desire for protection kills him in the end. His final act is his attempt to assert how separate he has become from his culture. Over his life, Menardo's initial frustration with his physical body (and alienation from his own culture) lead to an investment in protection from an outside culture and creed that ironically destroys him through technology rather than protecting him.

In reading the ironic ends in the narratives of Iliana and Menardo, Tacho serves as the foil to these two characters. The native limousine chauffeur drives Menardo around, stuck in the middle of these events, hearing from one of the key players about political machinations that affect not just the surrounding region but also Central and North America. In turn, Tacho sees the corruption shaping the lives of the major characters dotted across Silko's world. Other characters take notice of his clear differences. Silko writes, "He listened to every word Menardo or Alegría said…he not only made eye contact with his social superiors, this Indian alternately had mocking, then knowing, eyes. Alegría hated what he had said with his eyes" (278). Tacho does not give in to terminal creeds as evident in his behavior around his superiors. He listens and therefore survives. The macaws are willing to speak to Tacho because he is not distracted. If present in *Bearheart*, Tacho would be a candidate for the Fourth World. Not only is Tacho's employer and his employer's inner circle flawed individuals, his position as a foil makes more evident the ridiculousness of the preoccupations of surrounding characters.

In *Almanac of the Dead*, the snake is a recurring symbol. How characters react to snakes reveals information about them. For one, it indicates their nearness to the land and to their culture. There are few who recognize or listen to snakes, and oftentimes, characters devoted to personal terminal creeds despise snakes or reptiles. Sterling is from the Laguna Pueblo people. He is banished after an incident involving a snake statue that the tribe and others fear or revere without true understanding of its significance: "A giant stone serpent had appeared overnight near a well-traveled road in New Mexico. According to the gardener, religious people from many places had brought offerings to

the giant snake, but none had understood the meaning of the snake's reappearance" (Silko 702-3). Understanding snakes in Silko's text presents a challenge in the same sense that Silko's humor is difficult to follow. To interpret the symbol, it will help to see the pairing in the right contexts and to delve into Yoeme, Lecha, and Zeta.

The twins Lecha and Zeta are gifted sisters recognizable for their relationship with spirits. Lecha is plagued by her communication with spirits of the dead, while Zeta has a passing acknowledgement of her talent for hearing the voices of snakes, at first with little care for their messages. Zeta and Lecha take their knowledge from their grandmother, Yoeme, a Yaqui native. Compared to others like Menardo or Iliana, Zeta and Lecha embrace their nativeness, going so far as to distance themselves from their mother and white father. Yoeme is easily recognizable from the list of characters for her sense of humor, which is frequently directed towards traditionally bleak circumstances: "Yoeme slid into one of her long cackling laughs. 'Killing my people, my relatives who were only traveling down here to visit me! It was time that I left. Sooner or later those long turds would have ridden up with their rifles, and Guzman would have played with his wee-wee while they dragged me away'" (117). Yoeme's sense of humor rubs off on the twins. Her influence sickens their mother, who despises her culture: "Lecha had answered right back, 'Well, Grandma, that means you yourself are a coyote with us!' To which Yoeme had clapped her hands, but their mother had looked upset because…her twin daughters listened far too much to the wild old Yaqui woman" (125). Yoeme invokes the curiosity and wit of Coyote. However, Yoeme, and by extension, Zeta and Lecha, is most connected with snakes. Yoeme gathers the young twins and takes them out

into the desert to put their abilities to the test. While she is tested with her terminal creed, Zeta is passive and negligent of her position as a messenger with the snakes. Lecha is a snake messenger who has less humor than her sister, while her sister Zeta talks to snakes, messengers of nature, until embracing her talents.

Zeta has no interest, at first, with talking to snakes. Her sister Lecha is an "intermediary" between worlds, despite Zeta's common interest in laughter with Lecha (138). It is as if Zeta takes from Yoeme her sense of humor while Lecha stumbles with drugs and television appearances as a medium. Lecha struggles with drugs because of her communications with the dead, and she struggles with her ability because of her drug addiction. Lecha thrusts herself into cyclical torment through her terminal creeds. In their youth, Yoeme took the twins to test and witness their ability to speak to snakes, the messenger spirits. Lecha is fearful of the snakes. Zeta, however, experiences her talent. Silko writes, "All Zeta had ever thought was that she knew how it worked, how one talked to snakes. But it had not impressed her" (131). Her disinterest in spirit messaging continues throughout the narrative. She embraces this duty, to the point of it becoming a terminal creed, which relates to Belladonna from *Bearheart,* a character overly reliant on Native culture. Lecha misuses her duty by appearing as a television psychic. In the meantime, Zeta is on the opposite end of the spectrum, more humorous almost to a fault, less interested in the messages of snakes or in Yoeme's almanac, where Lecha is handed the duty of recording stories and prophecies. When their white father succumbs to his personal demons, drying out and dying of malnutrition, Zeta reacts in such a way Yoeme would: "Zeta had laughed: 'He sounds like one of those saints that don't decay!'" (123).

The characters in focus experience a metamorphosis into snakes through personal journeys. Zeta's metamorphosis culminates in a confrontation with Greenlee, an arms dealer. Greenlee acts as judge of Zeta's metamorphosis, for Greenlee tests his business partners by telling racists jokes, waiting to notice if they laugh. Silko writes, "He had always watched Zeta's eyes as he told the jokes, and she had never flinched" (703). Zeta is competent as a deceiver, as if she has become a trickster, a coyote like Yoeme. More accurately, she is a messenger of snakes with some talents she has picked up on from the animals infamous for their deceit. "Zeta had laughed out loud because everything essential to the world the white man saw was there in one dirty joke; she had laughed again because Freud had accused *women* of penis envy" (704). This is an example of Silko's reliance on derisive humor towards the dominant culture through her characters. Zeta gets the last laugh, killing Greenlee, in an ironic twist, through his personal terminal creed of violent technology. It is ironic that he dies by his own interest. Just as Menardo dies from technology, so too does Greenlee die because of his obsession with firearms. Greenlee brags about his plans being infallible. Zeta plays on his words. Silko writes, "'No, not foolproof,' Zeta said as Greenlee's grin went flat on his face when he saw the pistol was cocked. 'Soundproof though'" (704-5).

Another character whose life is affected by snakes, Sterling finds himself banished from the reservation after he is blamed for a film crew's possession of an artifact. Though less inclined than Zeta to rely on humor, Sterling does at times find the humor in dire circumstance. When on trial for allowing the film crew to do damage, "Sterling shook his head. This was terrible. They had probably confused 'conspirator'

with ‘conquistador’” (96). On the moral spectrum, he rests in a more redeemable slot than characters who despise or are antagonistic towards snakes. Leah Blue’s wells suck up water from the arid landscape of Albuquerque. One of several morally-corrupt characters, Leah makes excuses for her actions: Leah: “what possible good was this desert anyway? Full of poisonous snakes, sharp rocks, and cactus!” (750). Sterling, however, rests much closer to Native culture, surpassing even Yoeme in his understanding of Native culture. Sterling drifts away from his culture in his youth, though still fond of his Aunt Marie. Regardless, Sterling suffers for his choices. Silko notes, “…but back then, talk about religion or spirits had meant nothing to Sterling, drinking beer with his section-gang buddies. Back then Sterling used to say he only believed in beer and big women bouncing in water beds. For Sterling, the stone snake had been a sort of joke” (760). The sacred snakes bite back at those who mock them, no matter how innocent.

Silko loosely involves the myths of Mesoamerica, and to understand the myths is to visualize the larger picture of the text. Maahastryu is a creation of Silko’s imagination but is connected to Quetzalcóatl, a mythological serpent deity of the Nahuatl people. Quetzalcóatl brought peace and knowledge to the people in Tollán (Fleischmann para. 2). He made use of his ability to transform to gather maize for the people: “…other gods had even tried to fetch it for them. None succeeded until Quetzalcóatl took the form of a black ant in order to find it. With this grain they were able to plant their first crops, build their city, and learn their first crafts” (para. 5). His gift led to a time of prosperity for the people, but then “Tezcatlipoca, a god of war and destruction…tricks Quetzalcóatl and drives him from the city, ending the blessed period of an idealized Tollán and initiating a

period of warfare and sacrifice" (para. 2). Quetzalcóatl has less to do about humor and more about the transformations involved in myth and reality. Cultural figures with the power to adapt through transformations link both Native North American and Mesoamerican cultures. In terms of *Almanac of the Dead*, and by extension, the other texts in question, Quetzalcóatl embodies the adaptability, or survivance, of Indigenous communities. The trickster, the deity, and people who turn to these myths, emerge out of hardships. By the same token, the almanac represents how proper stories are dynamic in order to pass on from generation to generation. The fictional almanac survives within *Almanac of the Dead*. With Lecha involved with drugs and Zeta antagonistic, Sterling is set up as the closest to Quetzalcóatl, as shown in his return to the statue and his place as the focal point of the final chapter.

Sterling stands out, especially at the end of the novel, where he is separate from all the movers who are mostly clumped together in an assembly in Tucson to discuss the plans of revolution against the U.S. government and other major institutions. The rebels' war is a spiritual war against institutions that insult the sacred orders of nature. Sterling plays no part in this war. He spends the majority of the novel as a gardener for the twin sisters. Sterling is productive. He tends to the land. As a gardener, he is an individual nearest to nature, and by extension, Native culture. It is also evident that snakes are notorious for spending time in gardens, biblical or otherwise. In the final chapter, Sterling finds himself returning to the stone statue of the snake. His opinion is valid of the assembly members: "He tried to forget everything Lecha had told him because she and the others at the meeting in Tucson were crazy" (Silko 762). The group consists of

ecoterrorists, psychics, religious ideologues, rebel guerillas, and misguided spiritualists, each with their own version of the future, many keeping their plans to themselves. In a related fashion, the reservation members once gave conflicting predictions of the messages from the stone snake. Silko writes, "Rumors claimed the snake's head pointed to the next mesa the mine would devour…But the following year uranium prices had plunged, and the mine had closed before it could devour the basalt mesa the stone snake had pointed at" (762). Both the reservation members and the members of the assembly cannot listen. As Sterling approaches Maahastryu, black ants emerge. Sterling "remembers that 'the old people had believed the ants were messengers to the spirits, the way snakes were'" (Adamson 183). Sterling understands his terminal creed. Silko writes, "As he contemplates the black ants, Sterling becomes aware that the crimes he has been reading about in *True Crime* are merely distractions that keep him from understanding the causes of large scale patterns of crime" (Adamson 184). He understands the messages of the snakes and cares because he came to the snake of his own volition: "Sterling knew why the giant snake had returned now; he knew what the snake's message was to the people. The snake was looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come" (Silko 763). Though Sterling has yet to prove his ability as a snake, as the novel ends before he has the chance, Sterling is in place to become a snake messenger who combines the guile and wit of a trickster much in the wheelhouse of twin sister Zeta, and the connectedness of Lecha and Tacho to cultural and natural roots. Sterling is a shining example of proper survivance through the refusal of terminal creeds. The challenge in categorizing *Almanac of the Dead* is its ambiguity in myth, meaning

that Silko includes names of Indigenous cultural figures that find themselves represented in her characters. Zeta, Lecha, and Yoeme share elements of Coyote and Quetzalcóatl yet are merely messengers. Sterling is to return to the people as a manifestation of Quetzalcóatl. The humor is dry in *Almanac of the Dead*, and characters rely on derisive humor more often than other humor forms. Silko is less obvious about her native rhetoric as well.

When comparing *Green Grass, Running Water* to the other texts, the lighthearted sort of humor present and King's strict adherence to the oral tradition quickly become evident. King incorporates several mythological, religious, literary, and television characters into the text, whose interactions with one another causes a great deal of mischief. There is also a high level of awareness in its absurdity, and King takes advantage of several cues for fourth-wall nods to the reader. To get a grasp of how this seemingly muddled mix of characters and humor work, it will help to see how King chooses to start the story. Four mythological beings set out to solve the problems around the town of Blossom. After several attempts to launch into a tale that should have begun a while back, Lone Ranger, Robinson Crusoe, Ishmael, and Hawkeye—or "the Indians" (King 13)—agree upon the correct way to begin:

> 'Gha!' said the Lone Ranger. 'Higayv:ligé:I'
>
> 'That's better,' said Hawkeye. 'Tsane:hlan(v with accent):hi.'
>
> 'Listen,' said Robinson Crusoe. 'Hade:lohó:sgi.'
>
> 'It is beginning,' said Ishmael. 'Dagvyá:dhv:dv:hní.' (12)

The group decides that speaking in Cherokee is the best course of action. This is in line with Vizenor's concept of manifest manners. Lone Ranger and his group's seemingly purposeless follies, which continue for several pages, illustrate the importance of proper cultural representation. This section, coupled with the novel's commentary on television's failure to accurately depict indigenous people, demonstrates King's adherence to Vizenor's quest to challenge the established vision of Native Americans. King overrides false images of indigenous culture using absurd, situational humor. Doing so, his text does not fall victim to distraction and disapproval. If King were to approach this novel without humor, the message would not be as easy to digest. Perhaps making Native American culture easier to interpret concedes to manifest manners. There is also the argument that making it easier works as an introductory novel, a bridge between cultural divisions. No matter how this is taken, *Green Grass Running Water* is unique in its potential for both Native and non-Native audiences. While this example does not challenge personal values or beliefs, there are other jabs that, if written without a playful sense of humor, would come across as insulting. Yet King's witty wordplay, as well as his careful ability to tease and use self-deprecatory humor, avoids the pitfalls that detract from the message of stories that cannot utilize humor in a manner which bridges cultural divides. Doing so illustrates how King rhetorically navigates through uncomfortable topics, challenging the reader to consider his Native perspective, while also altering the landscape of manifest manners through his playful, absurd sense of humor.

Take, for instance, Dr. Joe Hovaugh. His name is a reference to Jehovah, a name for the Hebrew god. Dr. Joe Hovaugh runs a mental hospital, in which the four Indians

were once patients. He catalogues the various times the four figures escaped the ward, lining up the dates to support his claims that they were the cause of catastrophes strewn across time, when in actuality, they were likely fixing Coyote's mistakes. One of his peers, Dr. John Elliot, sees Dr. Joe Hovaugh's claims as speculative nonsense:

> 'Makes you wonder where they were in August of 1883.'
>
> 'Eighteen eighty-three?'
>
> 'Krakatau,' said Dr. Hovaugh. 'August twenty-seventh, 1883' (48).

Dr. Joe Hovaugh wants to rid himself of the four Indians. His terminal creed is a disdain for indigenous culture and King urges his audience to laugh at the doctor's expense. Dr. Joe Hovaugh is an example of derisive humor. He is not a sympathetic character; rather, he is depicted as a nuisance for the four figures trying to fix the world.

Religion is difficult to mock without offense, so it is surprising when King has his Native characters come across figures of Christianity. On page 11, Lone Ranger tries beginning *Green Grass* with the opening lines of Genesis, and after some disapproval from her peers, excuses herself by stating that slipups happen. To which another of the four comment, "'Best not to make them with stories.'" (11). By this, King asks his audience to consider why representation is important. The four Indians and their careful consideration for storytelling juxtaposes Hollywood's disregard for cultural accuracy. Rather than deride a Eurocentric audience, King explains the reasoning behind his opinion of cultural misrepresentation in the landscape of manifest manners. King's text leaves little to point to as insensitive thanks to his approach. Both King and Silko challenge the story in the Garden of Eden. Even when facing serious subject matter that

still affects relations between indigenous people and the U.S. government, his sense of humor is convincing, and in that sense, allows for a transference of experience from King to the reader. First Woman is King's depiction of Eve, yet King is merging Native and Christian beliefs to start a dialogue. First woman floats around from the trouble Coyote caused with the rising water. Once meeting G O D and "Ahdamn" (41), who is busy incorrectly naming objects and animals he sees, First Woman plants the garden (40). King writes, "You are a cheeseburger, Ahdamn tells Old Coyote" (41). King continues, "Wait a minute, says that G O D. That's my garden. That's my stuff…Oh, oh, says First Woman when she sees that G O D land in her garden. Just when we were getting things organized" (42). King depicts the Christian god as a foolish, selfish deity. However, his approach is careful as his characters invade Western religion. Not only does King make the Christian god as a foolish character worthy of derisiveness, King is alluding to the landing of Puritans in 1620. First Woman struggles to repair the ill-behaved Coyote's mistakes. Now, Christianity enters to make more of a mess.

First Woman in the place of Eve, Adam's name changed to Ahdamn, G O D's depiction as a fool, and Coyote's mischievous behavior should come off as insulting to Christian beliefs. Although King's talent lies in his ability to not stir up emotions for the reader, this sense of feeling intruded upon is its purpose. King wants Christian readers to react and feel that King has it all wrong, that his text is a misrepresentation of their cultural beliefs. The depiction of Native Americans in Western literature and television has changed the image of Native culture. Through the use of the literary tradition, King alters manifest manners while his characters rewrite Judeo-Christian history. In the

process, King makes sure to balance out the teasing by directing it towards Native myth as well. If another of the authors were to approach the same subject matter, it would not be so easy to keep the author-to-reader connection going. His text allows for a dialogue. It is in a sense saying, isn't it strange what we choose to believe, and isn't it odd how Westerns depict Native culture? King asks the reader to consider or accept a new, accurate image of Native American life, history, and myth.

One noteworthy choice of King is his use of repetition for emphasis. His repetition is most useful to the reader, for it reminds the reader to pay attention. The text is meant to be an oral tale copied onto the page. There are aspects of Native American literature that are not immediately clear. Take for example the way King splits up his narrative. King's decision not to use chapters is an example of Native authors blending oral tradition with the written tradition. While close reading is integral to all literature, King helps the reader interpret his message about manifest manners. He makes the reader aware of the mistakes in the depictions of Native Americans. Lionel's uncle Eli is isolated from his tribe. Eli reads a Western romance novel his love interest lends him. It is a stereotypical Western romance novel. King writes, "He didn't have to read the pages to know what was going to happen. Iron Eyes and Annabelle would fall madly in love. There would be a conflict of some sort between the whites and the Indians. And Iron Eyes would be forced to choose between Annabelle and his people. In the end, he would choose his people, because it was the noble thing to do and because Western writers seldom let Indians sleep with whites" (222). In this section, King continually notes how far Eli has read, writing the chapter number between his narrations. When reaching the

end of the section, King transitions to the next section about television because the cliché portrayal of Native Americans crosses over from novels into television. It is also notable that as the characters gravitate towards novels or television, they drift away from their culture. In the closing lines of the section, King writes that Eli is on "Chapter twenty-six," then begins the next section commenting that Charlie is watching "Channel twenty-six," both to accentuate the difference of terminal creeds between Eli and Charlie but also to suggest how these clichés exist in both forms of entertainment.

Another use of repetition is as a reminder to pay attention to differences in Native and traditional literary texts. King wishes for the reader to recognize true Native cultural elements. On page 391, Coyote relates to the reader about the tiresome recurrence of First Woman floating away:

> 'Not again,' says Coyote.
>
> 'You bet,' I says.
>
> 'Hmmmm,' says Coyote. 'All this floating imagery must mean something.'
>
> 'That's the way it happens in oral stories,' I says. (391)

Coyote is a modern rendition of traditional Native folktales, but Coyote is also the voice of the reader when interacting with the four Indians. Though he is often the troublemaker, Coyote still takes his place as the one to fix his mess. With Coyote as the troublemaker and the Euroamerican audience's voice, the readers become the troublemakers in *Green Grass, Running Water*. Their additions to manifest manners, their religious beliefs, and their love of Westerns leave Lionel and the four Indians to clean up their mess. King stays true to tradition in a modern setting. When the four Indians arrive to make the

situation right in Blossom, they pause “for Coyote to catch up” to them (396). Coyote arrives, and Ishmael comments to him, “We always feel better knowing where you are” (396). King separates the folklore history of Native culture with the modern issues pressing present Native individuals.

As Lionel’s more successful cousin, Charlie is no longer drawn towards the reservation out of early experiences with his father, Portland. He moves with Portland to Hollywood in the hopes of Portland returning to the screen. Between flashbacks to Charlie’s time with his father in Hollywood, King describes present-day Charlie staring at the television and thinking of Alberta, his love interest. King writes, “On the screen, the chief and the captive white woman were in each other’s arms. It was standard stuff” (232). Charlie and the aging Portland struggle to land an acting job, so the two resort to working as valets in Indian attire at a Western-themed steakhouse (234-5). When the two dress up in absurd Indian regalia, Portland gives Charlie a word of advice: “‘Remember to grunt,’ his father told him. ‘The idiots love it, and you get better tips’” (235). Portland’s interaction with Charlie highlights one expectation from viewing Western film and television. The silent, primitive Indian manifests itself in physical settings, such as in a steakhouse. Though Portland displays an unhealthy yearning for acting, he still demonstrates in his words to Charlie the act of humor as survivance. Portland decides to act as the stereotypical Indian, choosing to make light of the absurd expectations.

There is a difference in the sense that King wants us to laugh at Coyote and laugh at Lionel’s misfortune, yet still feel for Lionel. Keeping in mind the subjective reality of humor, King has his expectations in audience reaction. Coyote’s interactions with the

four Indians have some elements of derisive humor. In his status as an inhuman character, there is less of a desire to feel empathy towards him. It is more accurate that Coyote is a silly character, existing for the audience's amusement than direct mockery of his misfortunes, for Coyote does not often find himself in predicaments that directly show him as a dreadful character. It is his nature, it is inevitable for Coyote to act out. He follows up his mischief with solutions. For this reason, Coyote as a clown is an instance of nonutilitarian humor. A form existent in Native American folktales, dance, and literature—*Bearheart* and its cast of clowns—nonutilitarian humor "is essentially a form of clowning" (Gruber 42). While Vizenor uses nonutilitarian humor to a greater extent, Coyote serves both as an object to derisive humor and as a relief for the audience's confusion. Take for instance the situation of the four Indians waiting for Coyote's arrival. King describes the natural splendor outside Blossom from their high vantage point. The four Indians marvel in its beauty. Coyote, however, has another perspective on the matter: "'Hey, hey,' says Coyote. 'That's all very profound, but I'm a little cold, you know. Maybe we could look and talk as we walk'" (King 396-7). Coyote is King's response to the impatient reader or the confused reader, the voice that keeps those readers in the conversation. King stabilizes the teasing in self-deprecation, and in his humility, he wins over his audience. He actively encourages his audience to be playful with Coyote as a metaphor for readers in general, thus encouraging them to create humor. Compared to Coyote, King sets up Lionel as a hapless character deserving sympathy.

While Coyote is a laughable clown that coaxes the audience to pay attention, Lionel is an example of empathic humor. When King first introduces him, he is described

by his mistakes, “The kinds that stay with you for a long time” (28). His first mistake was with his tonsils, for Dr. Loomis suggests a tonsillectomy he is confident will not get in the way of Lionel’s schooling (31). To Lionel’s fears of the operation, his cousin, Charlie Looking Bear, pressures him with the comment, “‘What would John Wayne do?’” (31). Often, Charlie’s choice of teasing is improper. When the time comes, the four Indians come to Lionel for his sake, for Lionel listens while other characters ignore Lionel’s words. With Lionel in the hospital awaiting the operation, there is a mix-up from the staff, who send Lionel to Toronto for the wrong operation. Soon, Lionel realizes the trouble he faces:

> ‘Nothing wrong with my heart,’ said Lionel. ‘It’s my tonsils that hurt.’
>
> ‘You don’t have to worry,’ said the nurse. ‘A heart operation like yours is really simple.’
>
> ‘My heart is just fine.’
>
> ‘And it’ll be even better tomorrow’ (34).

While it could be interpreted that Lionel is a misfortunate straw man deserving of mockery (admittedly, he accepts his sorry state), being ignored is a frequent occurrence to the extent of absurdity. Lionel knows his heart is in the right place, yet people tend to tell him otherwise. Aunt Norma often equates Lionel to his Uncle Eli, as if to say Lionel also struggles to succeed, whether it is difficulties accepting the game of chasing the American dream or a failure to launch. He is comparable to Tacho from *Almanac of the Dead* and Proude from *Bearheart* in that those who pay attention succeed. Lionel predicts these moments:

‘You know who you remind me of?’ said Norma.

‘Uncle Eli,’ said Lionel.

‘You remind me of your uncle Eli.’ (36).

Again, Lionel’s voice is not respected, and he slowly loses his integrity until accepting his place working in an electronics store for Bill Bursum, a man with excessive reverence for television. Vizenor would go as far as to say Mr. Bursum has lost himself to his personal terminal creed. His pride does not stop there, for Mr. Bursum stacks his televisions on display in the shape of the United States (138). The displays, which Bursum calls The Map, loop Westerns throughout the day. Mr. Bursum is arrogant and confident that others, indigenous people in particular, will take his marketing skills for granted: “Bursum doubted that even Lionel understood the unifying metaphor or the cultural impact The Map would have on customers, but that was all right. Lionel, at least, would be able to appreciate the superficial aesthetics and the larger visual nuances of The Map” (140). It is reminiscent of the United States’ habit to believe it knows what is best for the country, for Native Americans.

Charlie is an old acquaintance of Mr. Bursum, and the two share a stronger bond than Mr. Bursum does with Lionel. King writes, “Power and control—the essences of effective advertising—were, Bursum had decided years before, outside the range of the Indian imagination, though Charlie had made great strides in trying to master this fundamental cultural tenet” (141). Mr. Bursum’s self-importance could be construed as a pessimistic view on how Americans look at indigenous people. From a comedic standpoint, Mr. Bursum is an example of derisive humor as an unsympathetic character

deserving of ridicule. Minnie, a worker for Mr. Bursum and witness to The Map, serves as the counter to Mr. Bursum's confidence in his creation. King writes, "Minnie leaned on the counter. 'I suppose its advertising value compensates for its lack of subtlety'" (141). For Mr. Bursum, The Map represents American pride. For others, The Map is foolishness on the part of Mr. Bursum, an act of jingoistic peacocking.

Mr. Bursum gravitates towards Charlie because he ignores his cultural connections and replaces it with television. As one who chases the American dream, he often refers to John Wayne or suggests others act like John Wayne. When Charlie has an opportunity to revel in the beauty of the natural world, he instead thinks of television. King writes, "One of [Charlie's] teachers at law school had said that the sky in Alberta reminded her of an ocean" (130). Charlie, however, sees it differently: " Charlie could hear the soft rumble of distant thunder, could see the low, banking mist and the sudden rains slanting onto the plains. It reminded him of movies" (130). Charlie, as Native, should have more of a connection to nature. It is shocking to hear that he cares more for television.

The novel culminates in the intervention of Coyote and the Four Indians, as well as the confrontation at the Sun Dance. Mr. Bursum shows Lionel a Western with John Wayne, a negative contributor to manifest manners. The Western is a negative application to manifest manners. John Wayne and his men cheer from the sounds of the arriving cavalry (355). Bill Bursum joins in, and so does another viewer:

> "'Hooray,' shouted Bill Bursum, and he bounced in place, keeping time to the music with the remote.

‘Hooray,’ shouts Coyote. ‘Hooray.’

‘Oops,’ said the Lone Ranger. ‘I thought we fixed this one.’

‘Yes,’ said Ishmael,’ I thought we did, too.’

‘A lot of them look the same,’ said Hawkeye’” (356).

Another sound comes from a distance, and the soldiers disappear before reaching the river, and the black and white film transforms into full color (357). Portland “started his horse forward through the water, and behind him his men rose out of the river, a great swirl of motion and colors—red, white, black, and blue” (357). The interruption of the four Indians bring a drab Western into color using the four colors of the Cherokee medicine wheel, painting new insights into manifest manners.

King playfully alters manifest manners, writing, “John Wayne looked down and stared stupidly at the arrow in his thigh, shaking his head in amazement and disbelief as two bullets ripped through his chest and out the back of his jacket” (358). Charlie, who began the novel idolizing John Wayne, roots for his father (358). Bill is unhappy with the result. Just like the repeated negative alterations to manifest manners, Mr. Bursum is stuck replaying the wrong ending to his Western: “The Indians charged out of the river and massacred John Wayne and Richard Widmark. Just like before. Bursum pushed the Rewind button again” (367). With proper comedic timing, Eli responds after the credits to Bill Bursum: “‘Now, that was some movie, Bill,’” (359). While the interaction with Mr. Bursum is humorous, George’s attempt to record the Sun Dance has sparse moments of humor. George offers a counter argument about recording the Sundance after being denied from the reservation: “People are curious about these kinds of things. And the

more people know, the more they understand.'" (420). When denied the attempt, he remarks:

"'No law against it,' said George. 'What are you going to do, scalp me?'

'Scalp!' says Coyote. 'Yuck! Where did you ever get an idea like that?'" (425)

At this point, Coyote, not to mention the audience, has learned more about misrepresentations of Native Americans. The thought that scalping was a widespread practice, an addition to manifest manners, is something that Coyote points out. In addition to showing he has learned his lesson, Coyote is actively seeking to resist these misrepresentations. Coyote then closes the novel with the four Indians by apologizing for anyone offended:

'Apologize for what?' says Coyote.

'In case we hurt anyone's feelings,' said Hawkeye.

'Oh, okay,' says Coyote. 'I'm sorry.' (468)

King is able to get away with what is considered impropriety for American standards. Through the dialogue of Coyote and the four Indians, he apologizes to the potentially upset reader.

Compared to the tactful use of humor with King, Vizenor's humor is not primarily employed for a new audience. The nonsense humor Vizenor employs allows Vizenor to explore what Farber calls "the holes" in reality and also allows the reader to accept his absurd premise and this new Native genre of literature that one might find difficult at first to explore. Though, as the "Letter to the Reader" and the word hospital chapter shows, Vizenor is less inviting than would be effective rhetorically to a reader of another, non-

Native background. The nonsense humor that should invite readers to think outside the box is instead jarring without further elaboration on the part of Vizenor and his sexual humor.

If Vizenor's goal through *Bearheart* were simply to point out and condemn the reliance on, or over-valuing of, words, there would be no need to include the final remarks of Doctor Wild, Vizenor would end on Double Saint Plumero's actions at the word hospital. Instead, Vizenor stresses the lust of characters through their sexual remarks to make his audience uneasy in his characters' terminal creeds. The sexual humor in *Bearheart* does not relate to a new audience. Rather, it fulfills the desire Vizenor has in making his audience uncomfortable. It does not contribute to the understanding of Native struggles for a new audience. Instead of this, it seeks to challenge the moral beliefs of his audience, to bolster the status of characters as clowns, and to represent some of the damning terminal creeds in the pilgrims and villains. A lot of the time, however, it highlights Vizenor's passion for counter-restriction humor as a trickster himself. Vizenor teaches the proper humor or acts of survivance for crossbloods. His humor is rhetorically valuable for a Native audience, but it does not cross over to a non-Native audience.

Vizenor and King have a strikingly different approach to humor for audiences. There is the distinction that counter-restriction humor that goes past boundaries is not humorous because it is obscene but because there is either no point or it is too much of one category. When Gary Shandling talks about sex, it is not humorous because he is talking about sex; rather, it has an element of self-loathing, of empathic humor directed at

himself. Aggressive humor is not humorous without an element of derisive humor towards someone deserving of pain or empathic humor for a character audiences feel for in their pain. Otherwise, it is just cruel pain.

The one category this rule does not apply to is nonsense humor. Farber argues, "Nonsense humor, then, suggests, a need for freedom and autonomy of thought at the deepest level" (82). Nonsense humor is a direct line to comedy in the sense that in its definition, it fulfills the requirement of comedy. Not only is it fitting the definition of comedy, it is inclusive to all ages and people in its childishness. Adults lose their reticence, allowing the transference of ideas. The problem with sexual humor in *Bearheart* is that the purpose of it is to irritate and to point out improper humor, and by extension, improper survivance. What works well for Vizenor and includes a non-Native audience is his nonsense humor. What separates Vizenor and King is King's devotion to nonsense humor, for the two authors have disparate goals with their texts.

In "Trickster Among the Wordies: The Work of Gerald Vizenor," Jace Weaver argues that Vizenor writes for mixed blood Natives, the majority of which exist in urban environments. Weaver does not discuss Vizenor's sexual humor but reasons that Vizenor uses tricksters in his narratives as models of survivance, as dynamic characters that mold their environment to thrive. Weaver writes, "He is a contrarian, the crossblood trickster he celebrates in his fiction. His stories are comic acts of survivance, helping crossbloods imagine themselves and negotiate their world the same way their ancestors imaginatively found their way through their own world via story" (Weaver 57-8). In *Bearheart*, Proude, Bigfoot, and others have elements of trickster clowns. They show talent in outwitting

assailants. Coyote has his fair share of blunders and tricks, yet in all of his troubles, Coyote shapes the landscape in King's novel. Addressing the habit of the trickster to mess with the world, Weaver comments, "This comic but compassionate clown undermines people's expectations and punctures the pompous-contradicting and unsettling lives, but, in the very process of disruption, imaginatively keeping the world in balance. By the trickster's actions, the world is defined and recreated" (Weaver 56). With all the balancing Proude and Coyote do, there is still the issue that *Bearheart*'s tricksters, all but Proude, lack the balance Proude is capable of and achieves. The other clowns lack his balance and are too caught up in terminal creeds, hang-ups that undermine and go so far as to harm other characters. There is the argument that Vizenor targets the flaws he sees in the real world and dresses them up as clowns with the tendency to commit violence, and in doing so, Vizenor gives crossbloods examples of how not to act. The clowns and flawed characters have real-world ties. Weaver writes, "In his works, with equal glee, Vizenor takes on tribal officials, Indian activists, identity politics, reservation gambling, and fellow Native academics" (Weaver 57). Vizenor does not write for the benefit of new audiences; he writes for the sake of crossbloods. Silko's ideal audience in *Almanac of the Dead* shares a disdain for the U.S. government and American greed. *Green Grass, Running Water* invites a conversation among various audiences.

Chapter V: Native Literature and the Carnivalesque

There is one more aspect that these novels have in common. Throughout the novels, the narratives work as a sort of testing ground for excess, whether it is in the form of loose terminal creeds or misleading stereotypes in manifest manners. These excesses in whatever forms they manifest are part of the Bakhtin idea of the carnivalesque. I am careful not to make meaning out of a Native American tradition by applying a Western literary idea. Instead, it is a means of showing how terminal creeds are identified, vilified, and expunged from the novels. Researchers seeking to transcribe and compare native oral art "emphatically privilege the Identity of Native performance with that of Western literary art, assuming the likeness not the unlikeness of the two—and, indeed, they thereby mask much of the strangeness and Difference of Indian expression, as the price paid for asserting the aesthetic power of Native American work" (Krupat 38). Complicating matters further, the presence of Native art in a Western tradition of literature calls for the comparison of other literary modes. Out of the novels examined, carnivalesque has less applicability to *Green Grass, Running Water*, though it shows both the categories of "eccentricity" and "carnivalistic mésalliances" in its willingness to place Christian and Native myth together, group Coyote with the four Indians, John Wayne with Portland, and myth with reality. Doing so has several consequences. First, the range of eccentricity from the "vantage point of noncarnival life" shows the assumptions of Native life and the strangeness in beliefs (Bakhtin 123). The creation myths of Natives

and Christians are pushed together for further inspection. By having the Native Americans defeat John Wayne—the "see how you like it" moment—it forces the audience to revisit entertainment, to consider its depictions and its stereotypes. Coyote being paired with the four Indians comments on the ambiguous wise messages Native literature assumes readers understand, and Coyote's incessant forgetfulness comments on the oblivious reader. As Kirstin Squint writes, "Vizenor's interpretation of dialogism traverses the line between written and oral: the narrator, the characters, and the audience are all participants in a trickster narrative" (108). With old bear's transfer of the heirship documents, the AIM member, spurring him on, telling him "harder, harder to the last word" (Vizenor xiv), the audience is transmitted the story. Comparatively, King includes his audience in his narrative as the oblivious Coyote. The audience is messing up the narrative with their preconceived notions of Native life, their possible Western religious values, their love of John Wayne. Like Coyote, the audience is able to heal the damage between cultural divides with some guidance from the four Indians. Then, King piles them all together in the flood waters, myth and all, into the real world to objectively look at all the problems: media depictions, land disputes, and Sun Dance curiosity. In this space of play, the carnivalesque novel, the judgment is gone.

Regardless of the subtle humorous elements in *Almanac of the Dead*, the Bakhtin category of "*free and familiar contact among people*" exists in the novel. Where once Sterling finds himself exiled from his reservation, his placement into a drug-dealing compound ran by two trickster women with the ability to speak to snakes results in his return to the stone snake statue. The novel does vilify numerous characters like Menardo

for their terminal creeds, expressing elements of "eccentricity" in the process. The novel concludes with numerous characters that at the start of the novel had seemingly no connections with one another then meet to form a coalition: "All night long in Room 1212 they had discussed a network of tribal coalitions dedicated to the retaking of ancestral lands by indigenous people" (Silko 737). This breakdown of "hierarchal barriers" of all indigenous people of the earth leads normally unthinkable conversations to occur (Bakhtin 123). This suggests that community is an aspect of survivance. Sterling's disapproval of this coalition and isolated walk to the stone snake statue makes the ending of *Almanac of the Dead* ambiguous. Seese never finds her kidnapped son, and there is no conclusion other than the coalition's potential attack on the U.S. The ending suggests the dichotomous nature of survivance. In *Bearheart*, the reasoning behind these carnivalesque qualities is more explicit.

The inhabitation of tricksters in the carnivalesque novel can allow for healing and development. The interactions between trickster clowns in *Bearheart* has less to do with the healing of characters but the identification of terminal creeds which also exist outside the text. Identifying terminal creeds in a novel full of imaginary violence exemplifies the danger of terminal creeds in order to prevent real-world reliance on them. Kirsten Squint points out that Vizenor recognizes the trickster's healing ability, writing, "Karl Jung comes under fire in 'Trickster Discourse,' for his classification of the trickster as 'inert,' but Vizenor concurs with Jung that the trickster is a healing figure for its ability to manifest growth in groups and in individuals" (108). Where in *Green Grass, Running Water,* Coyote's reparations for his own personal mess, which had mingled itself in the

lives of two disparate cultures, heals the town of Blossom, the overabundance of sexual clowning only provides more reasoning for Proude's entrance into the Fourth World.

Throughout the text, there is a buildup of Double Saint's sexual proclivities, which culminates and reveals its excess in the pilgrims' imprisonment in the palace. The two clowns, whom the pilgrims find after their escape, weed out Double Saint's terminal creed of sexual clowning, resulting in Double Saint's rape of Rosalina. Being discovered, his terminal creed is uncontainable. The sequence begins with one addition to manifest manners, the expectation of Native Americans to rely on hallucinogens for visions. Vizenor writes, "Double Saint was mashing up the last of his precious vision vine leaves. The pulp was mixed with water. He sipped the hallucinogenic drink and then passed it around in the darkness. The pilgrims sat in a circle on the floor and sipped the thick vision vine drink. Proude refused the drink but shared time in the vision circle" (232). Proude, an embodiment of honorable Native living, refuses the hallucinogen. What is most significant is Proude sharing time, valuing community. Louis Owens, in the afterward of *Bearheart,* comments, "Vizenor's novel also reinforces the crucial Native American emphasis upon community rather than individuality and upon syncretic and dynamic values in place of the cultural suicide inherent in stasis" (249). Regardless of the abstention from the terminal creed of this blanket cultural expectation of vision quests through psychedelic ingestion, Proude sits alongside his companions for the communal bond. His "sharing" of his time juxtaposes the sharing of Double Saint's "precious" hallucinogen (232). This carnivalesque presentation of these opposites continues after escaping from the palace through visions, where the pilgrims find themselves crossing

"over the Rio Grande" until stumbling upon a pair of "sacred clowns" who walk backwards, "one red and one white for opposite directions" (235-236). Painted in the two colors of the four directions, the clowns represent an honorable path. Their sexual clowning is likened to Double Saint, yet they refrain from true physical intercourse, their contact with others only with red clown's "wooden penis" and white clown's "rough hewn penis" (237). This artificial thrusting shows a separation between clowning and real-world consequences. When the clowns give the pilgrims the reasons behind their struggle to find the Fourth World, that the forward movement of the pilgrims and their size—which "the wind and the crows" cannot catch—prevents their transfer, Double Saint argues against the clowns: "'Free hearts are never caught,' said Double Saint while he rolled the tight skin over the purple head of his penis" (238). The clowns retort: "Nor double erections on double saints" (238). Their puns in the use of the word "double" suggest the clowns recognize Double Saint for who he is. The pilgrims have not caught the betrayer in their group.

Double Saint progressively shows his buildup of tension. The two clowns take notice of this as well as the difference between Proude and Double Saint as clowns. Vizenor writes, "'That backward connection is standing behind you now,' the two clowns chanted and then doubled over in laughter" (238). The clowns continue their word play with "backward connection," foreshadowing what is to come with Double Saint as they "doubled" over in laughter. Before the tension reaches its breaking point, the scene allows for one more comparison as emphasis between Proude and Double Saint: "Proude and Inawa Biwide, who had lost control of his vision and was learning to see with birds,

wandered through the azure mountains with the sun and clown crows and sat in silence near the cedar fire at night. Double Saint told stories and lusted after the women in the pueblo" (239). The stoic Proude wanders through nature in search of answers until returning to sit quietly. Meanwhile, Double Saint remains static and consumed by his terminal creed. The scene culminates in his physical invasion of space through the rape of Rosalina, leaving Rosalina wandering towards Proude and ending in Double Saint's failure to pass into the Fourth World: "Rosina awakened the next morning near the fire with Sister Eternal Flame. She had traveled with death during the night. Double Saint laughed and clowned with her through the underground into the next world. Their bodies melted together in water and space" (240). *Bearheart* contains the four categories of the carnivalesque. Belladonna, one of the pilgrims, dies from her terminal creed of relying on the sacred beliefs in Native culture. She dies because "the tribal past, our religion and dreams and the concept of mother earth, is precious to [her]" (Vizenor 196), in line with the "*profanation*" category of carnivalesque. Belladonna becomes part of the earth in *Bearheart's* "carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings" (Bakhtin 123). For this discussion, it is more important to examine the category of "eccentricity," for these terminal creeds become exposed. The two sacred clowns identify Double Saint's overreliance of sexual clowning. Being prevented from transfer into the Fourth World, *Bearheart* comments on the boundaries for humor. While humor is a significant action of survivance, the condemnation of Double Saint suggests that terminal creeds exist even in acts of survivance. Though only one practice of survivance, the intentional use of humor in literature can continue Native stories into the future.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

The aim of setting the three texts together is not to review the texts but to show how they have ties to Vizenor's rhetoric and Native humor. They each have their trends: Vizenor with sexual humor, Silko with her satire, and King with his back-and-forth of teasing and self-deprecation. Humor influences each text individually in terms of their ideal audience. *Bearheart* targets the intellectual scholars who overvalue language, yet it also instills positive values for a mixed blood audience through Proude Cedarfair's ascension into the Fourth World. *Almanac of the Dead's* derisive humor and political satire condemns the U.S. government and corrupt corporations. With Sterling standing before the stone snake, it muddles up the message. However, there is value for a Native North American audience in the subtle references to myth. *Green Grass, Running Water* is ideally an introduction to Native literature, as well as a means of opening up a conversation between Native and Euroamerican audiences. Based on this study, Native American humor defines Native identity, deals with Native and Euroamerican interactions, works to mediate these cultures and continue stories, and involves survivance, manifest manners, and terminal creeds. The three texts confront topics through the Carnivalesque, leading to humorous consequences.

Humor in Native literature eases the tension involved in discussing difficult subject matter. Trickster clowns permeate in stories old and new. Involving humor is simply a continuation of this tradition. Based on King's success in *Green Grass, Running*

Water, it can also address problems between Native and American interactions. Invading the written tradition, Native authors flip the script on Westerns, stereotypes, language, and the circumscribed boundaries of humor, bringing with them their connections to the oral tradition. Although some speak towards their own audience, Native humor, through its teasing and self-deprecation, has the potential to engage non-Native readers in a state of play in which groups can learn about one another's perspectives. More research is needed on the sexual humor of tricksters as well as Silko's subtle comedic voice. This article is simply an attempt to cover shared aspects of Native American culture and to refine the definition of Native humor. This study is restricted to three novels, but because the authors are members of three separate tribes, this study is meant to show a range of perspectives. This is not an exhaustive study. More research into individual tribal references within the three texts is needed, and many connections could be made between humor and the value of listening as well as the connection of listening to orality, but overall, humor in all three novels serves a purpose. It shows that Indigenous communities have done more than survive historical events. Through humor and other acts of survivance, indigenous people thrive and arrive into uncharted territories of literature with fresh perspectives. In the case of these three authors, this study should help to improve our understanding of the theory and practice of Native American humor.

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