RECREATING IDENTITY: ACTS OF TRANSCENDENCE AND RESISTANCE
IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

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RECREATING IDENTITY: ACTS OF TRANSCENDENCE AND RESISTANCE IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

The following faculty have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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The Indian and the white man perceive the world in different ways. I take it that this is an obvious fact and a foregone conclusion. But at the same time I am convinced that we do not understand the distinction entirely or even sufficiently.

- N. Scott Momaday
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The Native American novel is inherently a “cross-cultural” device with roots both in the western written tradition and Indigenous oral tradition; a mix that oftentimes makes these novels difficult for readers, especially non-Native ones. What makes these texts particularly challenging is that the need for clarification in what and who an American Indian is becomes central to the text, and the way in which myth is enmeshed within the text plays a crucial role in answering that question.

In this thesis essay, I examine two broad reoccurring thematic trends that emerge from Native American literature to help illuminate the ways in which myth is used in the project of recreating identity. Through the use of literary illustrations that represent each of these broad trends or strains, I will examine the means through which movement either away from or towards the larger cultural narrative aids the reader in recognizing the issues connected with each of these strains, and how that movement achieves the ends of either healing or subversion. Next I compare the two strains showing how myth as part of oral tradition is interwoven into a palatable western literary form, or how through the use of postmodern devices it is used as part of historical revisionism. The result of this analysis reveals recreating identity is not just a project for Native Americans, but non-Natives as well, as the reader is confronted with issues about the “other” that is a part and a genesis of our own heritage.
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The year 1968 was a turning point in literary history: For the first time since the prize’s inception, a novel written by a Native American was chosen to receive the Pulitzer Prize for literature. Although many works by Native Americans had been written before this time, N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* sparked a Renaissance of writing by Native American authors. Since then, the growing popularity of works by Native Americans has helped to make non-Native readers more aware of Indian culture and a style of writing that, in some important ways, differs from other works in the American literary canon. As the number of prolific authors has grown as well as the number of texts read by the general public, so too has the number of Native American texts accepted by the academic community.

While an increase in the body of literary criticism has responded to serve this growing popularity, still more pedagogical tools are needed to aid readers, teachers, and instructors so they may be able to engage themselves and their students in a richer experience and understanding of Native American literature. While many of the Native American works that have been written since that pivotal year of 1968 are difficult to categorize, some general trends emerge that may serve as guideposts for the reader by providing a contextual framework in which to place the Native text. Although Native American authors often limit the amount of cultural context they incorporate into their texts for aesthetic reasons, it is not difficult to see that many of these writers are concerned with issues of identity. Author Louis Owens says that, “Native American writing represents an attempt to recover identity and authenticity by invoking and incorporating the world found within the oral tradition--the reality of myth and ceremony” (Owens 11). The word ‘recovery’ denotes a restoration of something that has been lost. In the case of the Native American, not only is restoration needed, but a refreshment and renewal of what it is to be a Native American is required in what might be called a *recreation* of identity. Recreating identity means
looking to reclaim who and what it is to be an Indian, not as it has been defined by the dominant culture, but as an identity that is linked to the worldview traditional of the Native American. How Native American authors use their stories to “incorporate the world found within the oral tradition” as a part of their texts varies depending on differing ideas about what ‘identity’ is. For some authors, the tribe and community are central to individual identity, with myth acting as a force that connects the individual to land and kinship. For other authors, identity is a construction, with the word and concept of ‘Indian’ as an invention of Western culture. These two differing views on identity and the “reality of myth and ceremony” that Owens refers to become a defining pattern that suggests two trends.

The first of these two trends or strains I call the “literature of transcendence.” The primary features of this strain of Native American literature are a protagonist who experiences a psychological breakdown as a result of memories or reoccurring symbols that appear in dreams or trance-like daydreams that he or she is unable to understand. The emphasis in the literature of transcendence is on spiritual healing through a recognition of the importance of tribal kinship, the land, and cultural myths, ones that are embedded in whole or in part, oftentimes accompanied by ritual enactment. The reason I refer to this strain of literature as “transcendent” is because of its inherently rising above the discourse of postmodern fragmentation and the deconstruction of the dominant Western culture, and instead chooses to focus on traditional Native American healing. Through the re-enactment of myth and ceremony within the text, literature of transcendence seeks to recreate identity, both individual and tribal, by reconnecting the protagonist with his or her cultural past.

The second broad pattern that emerges in Native American literature also uses myth, but in a much different way than the literature of transcendence. In what I call the “literature of
resistance,” myth is used as a form of storytelling in which the protagonist re-envision history and, as a result, is able to reconcile his or her diasporic or mixed-heritage status. By depicting identity freed from the constraints of the language of the Western dominator, the literature of resistance allows for changes within the culture that do not disqualify one as an “Indian.” In contrast to the literature of transcendence, the literature of resistance does not merely re-enact a myth or perform a ritual; rather it unfolds the mythic elements, places them in a new context, and enfolds them back into the myth in a re-envisioning.¹ As typically is the case for the postmodern Indian, challenges to identity result from the diasporic condition as well as from the Indian’s status as being of mixed heritage or culture. Responding to this need for the recreating of identity, some Native American authors writing in the strain of resistance may use references to myth as ways to reconnect the diasporic or mixed heritage Indian with their cultural history rather than directly connecting the protagonist back to a specific cultural identity, as in the literature of transcendence.

Throughout this essay I will be using N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* to illustrate the features of the literature of transcendence and Gerald Vizenor’s *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* to illustrate the literature of resistance. Although the two works embody the categories in the ideal, the two strains should not be thought of in binary terms, as they often intermingle, sometimes within the same page of text. I will analyze how the literature of transcendence moves toward the more traditional narratives that synergistically provide the larger story of the culture. In contrast to the literature of transcendence, I will consider how the literature of resistance rejects the stories about Indians told by non-Natives. Influencing the over-arching cultural narrative in the literature of transcendence is the direct interjection of actual chants or rituals into the novel as manifestations of a particular tribal myth. In the literature of resistance, the texts resemble myth in how the characters in the context of the novel mirror characters of myth,
rather than include the actual text of a ritual or chant from a given myth. Next I will discuss how these texts are driven by different goals: healing and survival. The literature of transcendence, generally associated with healing, relies heavily on myth or rituals to connect the protagonist back to his or her place within the tribe. The literature of resistance does not seek so much to return the protagonist to the land, but to use myth as a means by which the protagonist can re-envision history. Finally, I will focus on how the use of myth as a means of returning the protagonist to the land promotes reconciliation of the individual’s disjointed identity in the literature of transcendence. In contrast to how myth is used as a vehicle for mediation in the literature of transcendence, my analysis reveals that the literature of resistance applies myth to re-envision history and subvert the dominant culture’s colonialist narratives to insure Native survival. The literature of transcendence integrates oral and mythic traditions with Western-style literary structures in order to satisfy the epistemological expectations of both Western and Native audiences. In the literature of resistance, however, acts of subversion are facilitated by using language that does not resemble or agree with the dominant culture’s representation of reality. Authors who write in the strain of the literature of transcendence permeate the text with many of the characteristics or properties of myth, giving a sense of the oral traditions infused within the Western-style text. Through a subtle but poignant style, Momaday provides the reader with a cultural schema that uses myth to instill a sense of how Native Americans order their world. The telling itself, however, may be in a nontraditional form, such as with the character Ben’s relating of the War God’s Horses Song in *House Made of Dawn* in a modernistic stream of consciousness. Within the chapter in which the War God’s Horses Song is related, Ben oscillates from a first-person account of the events of the story and his reaction to them to mythic language that recalls events of the recent past. Ben’s first-person narration details observations about his immediate
present ("It’s going to rain) alongside with a rendering of recent events as if they were myths ("You were coming) (Momaday 148).

Unlike the Western worldview, Native Americans do not see people as entering the world already flawed with original sin. In the traditional worldview, as individuals progress through life, the assumption is that they will adhere to the path where good and evil, health, and communal life are in balance. Native Americans understand that temporary deviations will take place as one journeys through life, where problems will arise and one falls out of balance with the traditional beliefs and values. Typically embedded within the specific tribal myth is sacred language of a performative nature, the substance of which, when recited as prayer, chanting, or within ceremony and ritual, serves to rebalance the individual, and for some tribes is believed to extend to the forces of the natural world. Often expressed in connection with the cosmology of the tribe, the use of sacred language begins a process of regeneration, calling forth the healing powers into a manifested reality for the patient or one in need of healing. In *House Made of Dawn*, N. Scott Momaday uses the sacred language specific to the Navajo and Jemez traditions, employing the larger cultural narrative of those groups. Momaday opens his novel with the word “Dypaloh” and ends it with “Qtsedaba,” using the “conventional formulaic words” the Jemez Pueblo employ to situate his story within the oral tradition. These chantways are the same ones used at the time of creation, keeping the power that was first generated during creation alive and in motion in the present. The power that sustains the umbrage of the Native American cultural narrative is illustrated through the traditional language used by Momaday in his opening words in the novel: “There was a house made of dawn. It was made of pollen and of rain, and the land was very old and everlasting” (Prologue 1). In the literature of transcendence, the style of writing closely resembles the oral tradition, with more frequent use of references to times long ago and natural
landmarks such as mountains used in conjunction with declarative statements. Underlying the style are the thematic beliefs conveyed in oral tradition, acting as the foundation for tribal knowledge. The frame or form upon which the novel is situated is one that eschews chronological and linear time and enters cyclical or mythic time. The cyclical nature and the overlapping of time beckons toward the nature of being and existence, conveying an ontological state inherent in the tribal myths. Momaday emphasizes style and beliefs that convey a Native American understanding of how one comes to know the world and temporality in a way that conveys a sense of being in the world. The Native American worldview—their traditional ways of knowing and being as well as their way of marking time—are significant, underlying elements in Momaday’s novel, whereas in the literature of resistance, these elements are not as immediately obvious. *House Made of Dawn* begins where it ends, and ends where it begins. As illustrated above, Momaday opens the novel with language that is not only sacred in terms of what is being said and as a basis for belief and knowledge, but the use of the specific words places the events squarely in mythic time. The idea of cyclical time and the circle is illustrated by Abel’s running in both the Prologue and in the conclusion of the novel. In the literature of transcendence, the temporal unification of past and future is expressed by visual imagery, using symbols to act as a bridge between the material world and the ineffable mystic realm.

The language takes on the quality of poetic and religious expression in terms of its imagery, diction, and symbolism for the purpose of evoking mystically-oriented insights. Momaday consistently seizes language in a “poetic process of creation,” linking the real world to the world of the ineffable (Owens 94). In the beginning of the Prologue, Momaday describes the Jemez landscape as having “many colors on the hills” and a plain that is “bright with different-colored clays and sands. Red and blue and spotted horses grazed in the plain, and there was a
darkness on the mountains beyond” (Momaday Prologue 1). According to Native American philosopher Sam Gill, the horse’s shape symbolizes the Navajo cosmos through its primordial form, originating from when the world was created (Scarsberry-Garcia 95, Gill 50). The visual imagery reinforce one another as a “language of images,” with each image containing a story or a part of a story from well-established tribal myths (Rainwater 80). For instance, in this passage the imagery of the “red and blue spotted horses” is reminiscent of the myth of Changing Woman, the deity that is responsible for the creation of horses, and of the “War God’s Horses Song,” which Momaday includes later in the novel. “The War God’s Horses Song” is an anthem of praise for the horse by the son of Changing Woman, known either as Enemy Slayer or Monster Slayer, who destroys the monsters in the world and makes it safe for human habitation. Through the cyclical structure, and the use of visual imagery, order is restored through the balance of good and evil, implied by the Monster Slayer myth in the “War God’s Horses Song” given in the text. The beginning of the War God’s Horses Song begins with the words, “I am the Turquoise Woman’s son,” who is Monster Slayer, mythically known for his eradication of evil, making the earth safe for its habitants. The visual images used are those of mythic or religious gods or elements, such as the horses legs that are described as “quick lightening,” the dwelling place of the Thunderbirds.

Unlike the literature of transcendence, the movement in the literature of resistance is away from any larger cultural schema, particularly those rooted in the dominant Euro-American reality. Resistance writers confound “the great narrative of entropy and loss” by revising history from a Native American perspective and in doing so, they echo the concern of others regarding how sacred art, rituals, and practices, when removed from their cultural contexts, become exoticized and put on display. Native American literary critics and writers have expressed concern over items such as art pieces and practices such as rituals, that when removed from their cultural contexts end
up ‘exoticized,’ put on display. In *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, Gerald Vizenor rewrites the Western presumption of Indian extinction by having a handful of Native Americans survive an apocalypse brought about by the depletion of oil. Vizenor indicates from the opening pages that the story is one of Native survival, as Bearheart proclaims, “we survived as birds and animals because we were never known as humans” (Vizenor viii). The reference to surviving as “birds and animals” comes directly from the Ojibwa, while the second half of the statement, “because we were never known as humans” suggests the Euro-Americans’ cultural arrogance in their perception of the American Indian as savage, sub-human, and racially inferior. In Ojibwa mythology, birds and animals play a role in the creation of the earth, with specific animals associated, for instance, with a specific role or function in their spiritual belief system. Animals such as the bear and the thunderbird signify renewal, regeneration, and sustenance. In an act of transubstantiation, the ritual performer in Ojibwa and other American Indian ceremonies turns into a bear, representing the re-emergence into a new life. The allusion in this passage is to the spiritual deities and actors representing the animistic mythologies that will guarantee their survival. As a result of the narrative of loss and extinction being perpetuated, a metaphysical merging with the animal-deities that can be traced back through Native American cosmology was required to affirm and continue their existence. Thus, the thrust of resistance writing is away from the Western cultural story of American Indian loss and extinction through the assertion of continued existence. While resistance writing moves away from the West’s over-arching cultural story, the style, substance, and form of the novel does not move toward the comprehensive schema found in transcendence writing. Resistance writing, for the most part, lacks the poetic and performative language of ritual and ceremony as found in the literature of transcendence, an essential part of the Native American cultural narrative as reflected in their mythology. That is not to say that mythology is absent from
resistance writing. As will be discussed throughout this essay, the key difference is in how the myth is used on the literatures of transcendence and that of resistance.

By moving away from the Western schema of conquest and extinction, texts such as Vizenor’s characterize the survival of the American Indian as robustly adaptive. Survival, Vizenor contends, can only be successful when coupled with “the active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (Cox 105). Out of this conceptual blending of survival with resistance to the Western dominant culture, Vizenor has coined the portmanteau word, “survivance.” The interaction of the word with the text reflects how myth is adapted to a contemporary context in resistance-style novels, a context that takes into consideration how individual Native American tribes adapt their traditions to a postmodern world. The proactive nature of “survivance” is illustrated in the words of a character in Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart: “Survival is a keen view, the vision of eagles, the forearm of the bear and the ritual of a spider building his web on the wind….That is survival!” (Vizenor 187). The nature of survival articulated in this passage is one of foresight, wisdom, strength, and courage, all positive and proactive attributes. A common theme in resistance literature is the repudiation of the ‘Indian’ as an invention of the dominant culture, for according to Vizenor, the word “Indian” has no referent in tribal languages or cultures (Vizenor, Manifest Manners 11). Native American resistance writers see the post-Indian as “the absence of the invention” and the end of the “invented Indian” as a representation in literature. Arguments about words and how they relate to each other, denotation and connotation are beyond the scope of this paper. Thus the thematic concern in the literature of resistance is the exclusion of Native Americans in the defining of who and what an Indian is. An examination of the historical and legal record shows that the Western culture has imputed a static definition of and upon the Indian. Nonfiction author Eva Marie Garoutte (Cherokee), describes how courts of law have ruled that, for
a community to be recognized as an Indian tribe, there can be no abandonment of traditional
“habits, manners, and customs” as determined by the white dominant culture (Garoutte 64). In one
particular case concerning the Mashpee tribe, the consumption of fast food was enough to
disqualify a community from being recognized as a tribe (Garoutte 61-81). This is just one
example of how the question of “what is an Indian” is determined by static standards applied by
nontribal courts. There are those that would argue that statutory law is not a valid measurement of
the larger culture. I would argue that the law is certainly one of many important measures of the
culture, and that statutory law broadly reflects the values of the culture it represents. The results of
these applied static standards filter down into film, literature, television, and other media typed
representation of the American Indian varying from the “noble savage” to the romanticized New
Age Indian. Native American authors seek to repudiate these damaging images as inventions of the
dominant culture. The exposure of this invention opens up a dialogue among Native Americans
regarding their representation, thus taking the first steps in seizing control of their own identity and
cultural patrimony. An example of this dialogue regarding representation is when the tricksters of
the Orion Fortress challenge the idea that “Tribal people seldom touch each other” and “do not
stare at people” when they are talking (Vizenor 191). This conversation leads to the beginning
steps in the dialectical process concerning who gets to decide about matters of identity and cultural
heritage, the first steps in taking control of their own destiny. This conversation continues into the
present among the Native American literary, religious, and academic community.

In Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart, Vizenor repudiates the static standards of the
dominant culture by addressing the question “what is an Indian” within his text. In the chapter
titled, “Terminal Creeds at Orion,” the character Belladonna Darwin Winter-Catcher, one of the
twelve apocalyptic pilgrims journeying the abandoned interstates, is asked by one of the members
of the Orion fortress “what does Indian mean?” (Vizenor 191). Winter-Catcher, a representation of the stereotyped and statically defined Indian, responds that “an Indian is a member of recognized tribe and a person who has Indian blood” (191). The inquisitor of the Orion fortress, who represents the opposition against the doctrinal and static standards applied to definitions of Native American ‘Indianness,’ responds to Winter-Catcher’s perfunctory answer:

You tell me that the invention is different than the rest of the world when it was the rest of the world that invented the Indian…An Indian is an Indian because he speaks and thinks and believes he is an Indian, but an Indian is nothing more than an invention. (Vizenor 191)

Besides repudiating the Indian as an invention, Vizenor is making the point that who qualifies as being an Indian, and maybe even what an Indian is, may be indefinable. Vizenor may also be responding to the Native American separatists who insist in the kind of language that Vizenor finds limiting that Native American writers have a definable blood quantum or have an enrolled status with a tribe.

What Vizenor objects to is that the emphasis on blood quantum prevents many of the works of Native Americans who are of mixed-heritage or are diasporic from being accepted or recognized. Writers from the resistance perspective would argue that an Indian of mixed-heritage is just as much Indian as a full-blood living on the reservation. Repudiating the notion of an invented Indian frees the concept from limiting standards and allows for a more expansive and dynamic reconceptualization of the Native identity particularly as situated in a postmodern world.

A poignant departure from the strain of transcendence writing is the use of comedy in repudiation of the dominant culture. As literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, comedy is a way of bringing a subject into the realm of familiarity, and thus can help destroy fear
and reverence one may feel towards that subject. In this way, humor can allow us to approach a sacrosanct topic on more egalitarian terms. No where in Vizenor’s novel is the humorous repudiation of Western dominance as explicit as in the satirizing of President Jackson, one of the most aggressive opponents of Native Americans in history. Before his presidency, Jackson was responsible for the mass slaughters of American Indians, and during his presidency he forced eastern tribes to give up their land and move to the American West. In the novel, Saint Benito Plumero, a clownish trickster figure often portrayed as lusty and full of himself, has a phallus that is so large that he has to throw it over his shoulder to keep it out of his way. Being so inordinately endowed, Plumero has a reputation for providing sexual satisfaction to his female companions. One of the female characters who is the benefactor of this oddity refers to Saint Plumero’s phallus as “his superlative president jackson” (Vizenor 34). The reference to Plumero’s “president jackson” thereafter appears several times throughout the novel, enough to transition the reader to the point of no longer associating “President Jackson” with the person, but with the genitals of a clown. Vizenor is pointing out the gratuitous and unbridled lust for land associated with the action of President Jackson, as well as those who benefited from that greed. By using humor, Vizenor strips away at any sense of reverence one might have toward President Jackson or the office of the presidency itself. Complementing humor with anger, the literature of resistance repudiates and mimics the nature of tragedy with its arousal of pity and fear and the flawed hero. Authors writing in the strain of resistance literature express anger “fueled by outrage” for the “historical treatment and current marginalization of American Indians” by mainstream white Americans (Grassian 30). The notion of anger fueled with imagination, formulated by author Sherman Alexie (Coeur d’Alene), is illustrated in Bearheart as outrage and resentment escalates over the apocalyptic economic holocaust caused by the Western culture’s gluttonous need for oil. The sagacious
character Bearheart states that “when the oil is gone the culture is gone….When the oil is gone there will be nothing more to believe in here. White culture is refined from oil” (Vizenor xiv). Throughout the novel, the resentment for the Western culture’s lack of respect and stewardship of the land comes to pass in Bearheart’s predictions: “Traditions will end and white people will turn to the roads with evil and violent sex” (Bearheart xiv). Through Bearheart, Vizenor squarely places the blame for the apocalyptic state of the world on Western culture. Through the expression of inspired anger, Vizenor challenges the status quo through his rendering of an alternative history.

Furthermore, Vizenor repudiates victimry by giving his characters choices about how to form their own identities. This positioning serves two purposes: First, by blurring the roles of the Native American characters with unexpected roles from the Western culture, Vizenor demonstrates the choices made available to all people seeking an “uninvented” identity, while at the same time paradoxically pointing out the problems of representation. In addition, the fact that the characters given choices about their multiple identities illustrates the confluence and complexity of human beings, thus making stereotyping and categorization impossible. The quintessential example of this ambiguity of identity is Vizenor’s character Pio Wissakodewininin, a “parawoman mixedblood mammoth clown” (Vizenor 75). The narrator explains that Pio, who had originally been a man, was unjustly convicted of rape on two accounts, and was sentenced under the new penal codes to become a woman through a mandatory surgery and hormone injections. Finding the experience enlightening, he-transitioning-to-she becomes a leader in the women’s liberation movement. As a result of the economic crisis, medical and pharmaceuticals fell into short supply, causing Pio to decline in womanly ways and features. Depressed and unhappy, Pio joins the band of Native American pilgrims hoping to find an herb that would “bring back to him her new woman dreams and voices” (Vizenor 75). Within this passage, an Indian confronts gender issues in addition to the
already complex problem of mixed-heritage identity. I would argue that Vizenor is demonstrating that issues of identity become exacerbated by how one categorizes oneself, on the one hand, and how one is categorized by the culture one lives in, on the other. Furthermore, the confluence of attributes that compose identity are inextricably linked, making it virtually impossible to talk about identity in anything but multifaceted terms. Defying victimry, Pio refuses to accept the state of affairs caused by the apocalyptic economic collapse, and takes his destiny in his own hands by searching for his own remedy as a means of clarifying who he is. Vizenor further illustrates the issues associated with identity when the character Rosina is asked by a group of women about “her dependencies, her sexual and political responses to men, and her rituals as a person” (Vizenor 35). The narrator states that Rosina “did not have abstract answers” that she saw her life as “visual and personal” and Rosina “did not see herself in the abstract as a series of changing ideologies.” Identity, Vizenor seems to be saying, is something more than what one is labeled based on one’s ideological or political positioning.

Rather, Vizenor gives multiple identities to his characters: Saint Benito Plumero, also known as “Bigfoot,” Bishop OmaxParisimo, with the use of metamasks that allow for gender transformation and serve a similar subversive function to the masks in Restoration comedy, becomes the red-headed female museum curator Scintilla Schruggles. Multiple identities are also found in the characters of Zebulon Matchi Makwa, who is named after an explorer, a wicked bear, and a drunken urban shaman and Belladonna Winter-Catcher, who is the outcome of a tryst between a white journalist and an American Indian at the modern-day Wounded Knee, a 71 day siege that took place in 1973. The repetition of this motif of multiple identities illustrates the complexity involved in determining who one is and the choices one has in deciding who one is.
Identity becomes a proactive choice and not the passive acceptance of one’s notion of oneself based upon dominant Western culture.

While these acts of repudiation may seem to have little to do with Native American traditions, the names of the characters as well as their actions relate to well-known pan-tribal Indian myths. The characters and the themes in various tribal variations of a particular myth are repeated within the novel, but placed in a new context that results in the evolution of a traditional myth, thus maintaining the didactic principles or morals while at the same time allowing for changes within the culture. The most readily identifiable character from Native American myth is the trickster, the shape-shifting, part-deity, part-clown who mocks and tricks his prey into self-knowledge. Benito Saint Plumero, who is also known as “Bigfoot,” is recognized throughout the novel as a clown by the crows, the weirds and sensitives (a group of women poets who establish a survival center), and the other pilgrims. Such excessive lustiness and trickery are also very prominent characteristics of the traditional trickster of Native American myth. Proude Cedarfair, who tells the story from within the refuge of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, is also a bear, a key figure in the myth of ritual regeneration, resurrection, and renewal. Associated with the trickster-clown, Cedarfair and his wife Rosina are from the “cedar circus,” while the group of Native American sojourners are referred to by the narrator as “circus pilgrims” (113). The use of the word “circus” suggests that the characters are based on myth, satirically blending nature and “cedar” with Euro-American structures of “clowns” and “circus.” The word “circus” also implies a carnivalesque kind of theatricality. The story of another character, Lillith Mae, who has a sexually inappropriate relationship with her dogs, parallels that of an Ojibwa myth about a woman who married a dog. These allusions function as a living template, giving Native Americans an experience of choice in self-constructing or defining their own identity, while at the same time
staying grounded on their cultural narratives. In the novel, myth acts dynamically, as it does on the culture, moving Native Americans ahead as they adapt to change and new conditions while at the same time staying anchored within their traditions. Similarly, identity in the novel is grounded on tradition, but not limited or exclusively defined by it. As a device for coping with change, myth fuels the act of survivance by providing a blueprint for a robust adaption to the postmodern condition. Through the repudiation of extinction and the resistance to the larger Western cultural narrative, the resounding message in the novel is that Native Americans have not only survived, but thrived, echoing the title of the recent Public Broadcasting Station documentary, “We Shall Remain.”

The literature of transcendence concerns itself less with the repudiation of extinction and assertions about identity choice than it is with the thematic issues of resistance literature, such as the ‘invention’ of the American Indian manifested through the use of anger and humor. Unlike the literature of resistance, transcendence literature aims to include more of the performative language of myth as a means of healing the main protagonist of the text. In including more of the performative language in the text, transcendence writing parallels more closely the traditions of the oral literature, such as the use of declarative sentences and phrases such as “there were” and “you see.” A significant feature that distinguishes the literature of transcendence from the literature of resistance is the direct incorporation of a prayer, chant, or words of a ritualistic ceremony found in the tribal myths. Some resistance-style writers such as Alexie feel that inclusion of prayers, chants, or ceremonies within the text leaves the tradition open for exploitation by non-Native audiences and, at any rate, are not relevant to the everyday life of contemporary American Indians on reservations.
Transcendence writers, however, seek to “transcend” the issues related to identity fragmentation by focusing on spiritual healing, which will ultimately reconnect the character in need of healing with a restored sense of balance as he integrates his life into that of the community and thus establishes his tribal identity. In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday includes two Navajo ceremonial songs of the “Night Chant,” which is administered for the healing of mental disturbances, and the previously mentioned “War God’s Horse Song,” from the Blessingway series. Songs from the Blessingway series are sung over soldiers and warriors who are going to leave the protective boundaries of the Navajo nation as it is marked by four sacred mountains.  

Upon returning from warfare, the Enemy Way, a chant from the Blessingway series, is used to repair mental imbalance caused by the psychological damage of warfare. In *House Made of Dawn*, Abel returns home to the reservation from World War II drunk, mentally distraught, and unable to connect his past with his present. In the cyclical Native American worldview, personal identity is forged through a temporal unification of the past and the future with the present. Yet when Abel returns home, he finds he can speak of the time before the war, but he can’t remember those days in “whole and in detail” (Momaday 21). Abel has the desire to speak to his grandfather, but the narrator says, “he could not say the things he wanted” (Momaday 57). Having no sense of his past, Abel finds that his recent experience is “without meaning,” a confusing time of “calm and collision” that “he could not put together in his mind” (Momaday 21). Abel’s lack of a continuous idea of the self and cultural identity translates into an inability to speak of life with coherence. “No longer attuned” to “enter into the old rhythm of the tongue,” Abel is unable to pray, sing, or even place himself within the ordinary context he needs to answer a question as simple as “where are you going.” Instead, the narrator tells us “he was dumb,” but immediately corrects the word “dumb” into “inarticulate.” Owens suggests that the word “inarticulate” indicates that Abel cannot
speak because he is “not whole” and “cannot imagine a future” (Owens 99). According to
Momaday, naming things gives them existence, and we create ourselves through our own
utterances. Only when Abel reconnects himself to his larger place in the cosmos will he be able to
put the fragmented parts of his life together spiritually, psychologically, and individually, and
when he is able to speak with fluidity will he be able to create his own sense of wholeness and
existence. Ben, Abel’s friend and mentor in *House Made of Dawn*, assists Abel by reciting the
words of the Night Chant, restoring the balance of time through the invoking of the spirits of
thunder and night and thus reconnecting Abel’s past life with his present. This, in turn, enables him
to speak coherently of a future now that his cultural and individual identity is mended.

The Night Chant, a curative ceremony, is typically performed by four men who represent
the four male deities of corn, rain, plants, and pollen, who represent the Thunderbird (Swann 166).
Repeated several times throughout the chant are the words “rain,” “plants,” and “pollen,” words
endowed with the regenerative power of the Navajo deities. The chant begins with the Navajo
word “tsegihi,” a word invoking the place of the gods, thus indicating a recreation of the power of
the deities in the Thunderbird-performers. The thunderbirds in Native American mythology
represent spirits who animate clouds with thunder and lightning and have a complementary
relationship with the female Nightspirits. The female Nightspirits are responsible for the creation
of darkness and are said to live in the east, where the sun rises. The male Thunderbird is said to
live in the west, with the Thunderbird spirits contained within the lightening. This
complementarity of east and west and of lightening and darkness illustrate the joining of opposites
in a right of regeneration and fertility. What both the Thunderbird and the Nightspirits have in
common is that they are responsible for the occluding of the sun and the creating of darkness
(Dieterle 1). In the Native American worldview, darkness is associated with the male lightening
and life-giving rain in the case of the Thunderbird, while the complementary female Nightspirits, also associated with darkness, help to usher in the new birth of each day. The joining together of the two opposite yet complementary forces within the chant are what make it such a powerful source of healing. Wielding his warlike power, the Thunderbird also uses strikes of lightning against his enemies, restoring balance and harmony to the earth. The allusions to the power of the Thunderbird are expressed in the lines: “The trail out of it is dark cloud./ The zigzag lightning stands high upon it” (Momaday 130). While dark clouds are often taken as symbols of doom and gloom in Western culture, the words “Happily with abundant dark clouds, may I walk” demonstrate the power of an alliance of the Thunderbird and the Nightspirits. Momaday’s inclusion of the Night Chant in *House Made of Dawn* demonstrates the power myth has to heal when it is re-enacted in ceremony, providing Abel’s restoration as empirical evidence of that power. After the administration of the Night Chant, Abel eventually is able to assume communal ritual responsibilities, such as the preparation of his grandfather’s body for burial.

Another act of healing occurs for Abel when Ben performs the chant from the Blessingway series, the previously mentioned “War God’s Horse Song.” “The War God’s Horse Song” is an affirmation of identity, containing a pattern for the recreation of the self. Through the song, Abel has the means to re-create himself within his ancestral history and reconstructs himself with the new knowledge provided in the song. The song provides for a three-step approach to re-establishing Abel’s identity, beginning with an ontological affirmation: “I am the Turquoise Woman’s Son” (Momaday 149). According to Navajo myth, the Turquoise Woman’s son is the powerful Monster Slayer who makes the earth safe for human habitation. This statement endows Abel with a rich heritage, making him a present-day actor in the cosmology of his people.
Furthermore, it assures his success in gaining the skills he will need to overcome what seem like the insurmountable problems of finding stability within himself and his place within his tribe.

The endowment that Abel receives is not only spiritual, but material as well. Abel is given an affirmation of wealth in the passage, “When my horse neighs, different-colored sheep follow. I am wealthy, because of him.” As was explained earlier, the horse is connected to the primordial form in the Navajo cosmology, as well as being connected to the source (Turquoise or Changing Woman) from which horses are created. Because Abel’s mythological double is Monster Slayer, the implication is that his mythological mother is Turquoise or Changing Woman, the creator of horses. Therefore, Abel is the beneficiary of the wealth of horses passed down through the lineage of Turquoise or Changing Woman. The various colors of sheep suggest the four cardinal directions that most tribes associate with specific colors. When the horse speaks, the sheep from the four cardinal directions follow his lead, symbolic of the power the owner of the horse has in leading the people. The final affirmation of identity is “I am Everlasting and Peaceful,” two words brought together to imply “rejuvenation, reanimation, and temporal punctuation” (Scarberry-Garcia 96). According to Susan Scarberry-Garcia, the words “everlasting” and “peaceful,” act together as a performative vehicle for “increase, reproduction, and sexuality,” extending continually into future generations. The functions of “everlasting” and “peaceful” require updating and renewal in order to adapt to a universe that is constantly in the state of change. Through the Blessingway of the “War God’s Horse Song” that in many ways performs the same function as the Enemy Way, Abel is brought into wholeness through a healing knowledge of what he is and who he is. As illustrated in this example, the literature of transcendence aims to embed language of Native American myth, staying close to oral and spiritual traditions for the purpose of healing the characters and extending the participation of that healing to reading audiences.
Transcendence literature also ties identity back to the land, which, in the Native American worldview, is synonymous with the sacred events that take place on it. Sacred stories from the oral tradition help the listener to learn about his or her own cultural and geographic history. With this knowledge, the listener is able to place oneself in relationship to the natural world, as sacred places become intertwined with the history and cosmology of the tribe. In the ritual naming of these sacred places, the landscape itself becomes part of the consciousness of the listener. The Navajo deities that are summoned in the Night Chant, for instance, are associated with specific sacred spaces. The first line of the Night Chant, the Navajo word, “Tsegihi,” which means “White House,” is a real place where the deities are believed to dwell. Momaday calls this “the realization of the imaginative experience” because it takes its existence from the landscape and makes the listener conscious of a mythic time that combines past, present, and future into an unending cycle.

Because the land is believed to bring about healing, the protagonist in transcendent literature suffering from identity loss is required to return to tribal lands and sacred places for restoration. The performance of the ritual or chant, while necessary, is not enough for full recovery. Place in transcendence literature is synonymous with tribal identity and, often the sacred events that took place there. In order to facilitate Abel’s ability to associate himself with his culture’s past, Momaday returns him to sacred lands. Differing significantly from a Western worldview, Native American identity was traditionally based less on the idea of an individual “self,” and more on tribal identity; to be disconnected from one’s tribal identity is to be disconnected from one’s self. A return to sacred lands infers a connection back to the tribe. Returning from World War II psychologically fragmented, Abel is unable to negotiate meaning between the urbanized and militarized worlds in which he has lived with his tribal life on the Jemez reservation. Abel arrives at the reservation so drunk that he falls against his grandfather,
“and did not know him” (Momaday 8). Abel’s grandfather, Francisco, represents the balanced and centered life of the tribe, and thus Abel’s inability to recognize his grandfather is equal to not knowing his own self. As an author Louis Owens points out, “in a world in which identity is derived from community, to not know one’s grandfather is dangerous” (Owens 97). Abel’s falling against his grandfather, the pillar of tribal identity suggests that Abel has a center to return on which he can depend until he is well and able to stand on his own.

While placing emphasis on the healing of the character within the novel, Momaday also extends that healing to readers, incorporating Western literary forms alongside Native myths so as not to alienate a non-Native audience. By guiding the reader through the protagonist’s search for meaning, Momaday leads the non-Native audience through the oral tradition, pairing it with the action of the character. This kind of pairing is typical where confusion results for the protagonist or other characters in the novel as they keep experiencing the same symbolism in dreams and the reoccurrence of the symbols in the awake-state without any cultural cues to connect them to their meaning. Two things are accomplished in this pairing: 1) Non-Native audiences are given interpretive clues to the symbols of the myths and oral tradition within the text; and 2) as the protagonist experiences a recreation of identity, the non-Native audience can participate in that recreation by relating it to their own experience.

An example of interpretive clues given to the reader in *House Made of Dawn* is found when Abel oscillates between consciousness and unconsciousness after a physical altercation on a beach. We are told that as Abel lays beaten and bloodied “He peered into the night,” his vision reaching so far “that the owl, when he saw it, seemed to fly in his face and break apart, torrential, ghostly, silent as a dream” (Momaday 91). Half delirious, Abel holds the “owl away in the corner of his eye,” as it watches him “without meaning.” The narrator describes the night as “infinite and
serene, and there was an owl in the darkness and a tremor in the earth” (91). The symbol of the owl in Navajo culture represents death, as manifested, for example, in the Navajo story of Owl Boy who runs from the evil or death of Owl (Scarberry-Garcia 60). Here the owl symbolizes Abel’s own flight from death and evil, a flight that Scarberry-Garcia says in the myth not only saves the life of Owl Boy, but also “leads to adventures that bring knowledge and power” (Scarberry-Garcia 61). In this passage, Momaday pairs the events of the myth with the action of the character without directly referring to the myth of Owl Boy. Even as he lay in his beaten and bloody state, Abel begins to heal spiritually by connecting the image of the owl he sees to Navajo myth. While it is unclear whether Abel is aware of the myth of the Owl Boy, he does connect the owl to his culture and gains knowledge and power from this connection, as even the reader uninformed about the myth can. The myth of Owl Boy as a cultural representation ultimately connects Abel back to his kinship, his tribal lands, and to an identity that is both communal and individual.

Authors who write in the strain of resistance, on the other hand, seem to have relatively less interest in getting their protagonist or other characters back to the reservation or sacred lands. Resistance writers incorporate the values and the patterns of myth within the text in order to emphasize the choices and adaptations, one can make about who one is. The physical return to the tribal or sacred land seems less of a prerequisite for the recreation of identity for the American Indian in the literature of resistance. The emphasis in the literature of resistance is the dynamic integration of the tribal myth into everyday happenstance. The merging together of tribal myth with the conditions of postmodern society often makes for humorous outcomes, and as mentioned earlier, often subverts Western culture. Because identity in the literature of resistance is not contingent on a return to mythic tribal lands for identity recreation, I refer to this condition as “mythic portability.” Unlike Bearheart, many of the protagonists in the novels of Thomas King and
Sherman Alexie as well as Gerald Vizenor are urbanized and diasporic Indians, or mixed-heritage who have anywhere from vague connections with their heritage to none at all, and so are not so much haunted by the reoccurrence of collective memories as they are confused by the demands of living with a bi-racial identity or of living in a multicultural society. The problems presented in the literature of resistance have to do with reconciliation of opposing or contrasting worldviews that are more strongly represented or emphasized than in the literature of transcendence.

Despite Bearheart’s singular ethnicity, the situation presented in *Darkness in Saint Louis* is an extreme illustration of this, with a band of Indians from various places, backgrounds and tribes, forced into a diasporic condition by the economic catastrophe. Because the tribal lands have been converted for government use, there is no returning to a place of origins yet Vizenor illustrates being cut off from the land does not mean being cut off from the curative qualities of myth. Empowered as mythic beings, who take on qualities of tricksters and bears, the characters re-shape the story of oral tradition in the present. Bigfoot Saint Benito Plumero, with his comically large phallus, fits the profile of the lusty trickster who is self-centered and foolhardy. Proude Cedarfair is a bear who is wise and spiritually strong, paralleling the shape-shifting trickster that more closely resembles a cultural hero. At the end of the story, Cedarfair evolves into the fourth world, a place where, according to many Native cosmologies, the American Indian emerges from the potential of the unseen underworld into a place of visible reality. The narrator states in the first page of the “Morning Prelude” that “In the fourth world evil spirits are outwitted in the secret languages of animals and birds” (Vizenor 1). The emergence into the fourth world may also suggest a progression into the fourth of the eight degrees or ranks of the Midewiwin Society, an organized system of shamanic medicine practitioners based on the cult of the bear. Under the Midewiwin system, the fourth order gives the member power over life and death. As
mythic creatures, the pilgrims confront issues of identity in the context of apocalyptic conditions, and as they do so, they create new possibilities that are free of the kinds of stereotypes that helped to bring about such a catastrophic cataclysm. Unfettered by the constraints of the dominant culture, these characters are permitted to create the “uninvented Indian.” Through the adaption of myth to diasporic conditions or to mixed-race status, the text makes what was old new again. This process is similar to the natural progression of oral stories: The story changes but remains the same, with each telling, each cycle of the past, acting with the present and the future.

Unlike the literature of transcendence, the literature of resistance does more to revise the past in terms of Western history, which is generally perceived as being told from an objective, unquestioned authority. A poignant feature of resistance writing is the revising and rewriting of history as it’s been told since the fifteenth century. Alongside this revision are condemnations of “non-Native storytellers who produce narratives of conquest as omnipresent and powerful white noise” (Cox 199). “White noise,” a term coined by Alexie, refers to the “hegemonic disturbances” that silence the voices of Native Americans, plot their absence from the landscape, and demand adherence to inflexible and reductive definitions of Indianness. Authors who write in the strain of resistance literature re-envision history by placing historical figures into a contemporary context and by satirizing the epic form that Western conquest takes. In Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart, Vizenor registers a concern about the appropriation of Native American spirituality by the New Age movement and other contemporary secularized spiritual groups. Belladonna Darwin-Winter Catcher, a metonym for the romanticized “cult of the Noble Savage,” exemplifies the static, rigid caricature of the typical New Age follower. When asked by a non-Native group to talk about tribal values, Belladonna spews clichés, explaining that “We are tribal and that means that we are children of dreams and visions . . . Our visions are the living breath of the wilderness” (Vizenor
190). Belladonna represents what Vizenor calls “terminal creeds,” or the “beliefs that dominate plots, foreclose on human possibility, and serve the will to dominate by imposing inflexible and exclusionary definitions of people and cultures” (Cox 109). Vizenor also uses the name “Belladonna” to symbolize the name of the plant associated with witchcraft and narcissism (Owens 234). By coupling the name “Belladonna” with the name Darwin, Vizenor questions the West’s concept of survival-of-the-fittest on which survival may be determined by who owns the largest or most advanced technology. In the scene that takes place at the Orion Fortress Vizenor replaces the stereotypical, romanticized Indian with the “uninvented Indian,” undoing the past “cult of the Noble Savage” by opposing the conventional wisdom that Indians are very different from other peoples of the world. The trickster questioning Belladonna forces her into a reflective pause, prompting her to say, “Let me find something out here before you make me so different from the rest of the world” (Vizenor 191). For Vizenor, the Indian is not someone who has a specific set of physical and cultural features or someone defined by their past.

Vizenor goes on to present another perspective about identity, this time from the standpoint of political and religious ideology. In *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, Vizenor depicts an old farm couple named Bernadette and Devlin, who live in an old farmhouse in Iowa, and who are reminiscent of the “American Gothic.” As they are looking out a window, the couple observes the strange assortment of pilgrims, crows, and dogs as they pile out of an old postal van. Devlin questions the validity of their senses, wondering if they have passed on to another world. Bernadette, a religious fundamentalist, believes the “clowns and animals” were sent by the forces of evil and she warns Devlin to “shun the devil” (95). The names Bernadette and Devlin allude to the Irish-Catholic Bernadette Devlin. Bernadette Devlin, a radical socialist, had broken off from Sinn Fein and was shot along with her husband while taking refuge in a farmhouse in Ireland.
Here, Vizenor points out that radicalization or extremism in response to racial stereotyping is just as bad as the stereotypes themselves. This is also consistent with the beginning of the novel, where Bearheart dances on file cabinets at the Bureau of Indian Affairs to protect the heirship chronicles they contain and is approached by a female warrior from the revolutionary American Indian Movement who “wears plastic bear claws” (xi). After listening to the demands of the AIM warrior for written apologies from the government, Bearheart admonishes her because of her militancy and violent methods of protesting.

Equally revisionary is the form *Bearheart* takes in doubling the pilgrim narrative of Euro-American conquest, *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Vizenor’s story and Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* are both “fictionally born out of similar conditions” (Rigel-Cellard 94). Bunyan’s anxieties manifest as literary expression because of the persecutions perpetrated upon him by the Church of England. Vizenor’s story likewise is manifested from the suffering inflicted upon him and Native tribes by the American government. The names of the pilgrims in both novels have an allegorical quality to them, such as Bunyan’s characters Pliable and Valiant and Vizenor’s characters Proude, Little Big Mouse, and Pure Gumption. While Vizenor’s characters are far too complex to be allegorical, their names have meanings that parody the social effects of totalizing moral values. Through a doubling of the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Vizenor parodies the quest for Christian perfection, suggesting that evil and good are parts of one whole that cannot be separated (Rigel-Cellard 110). Vizenor implies that the kind of policies such as Manifest Destiny that helped perpetrate both the genocide and forced assimilation of the Native population were driven by dualistic Christian principles. Re-envisioning the religious dogma of good and evil, he exposes the constraints of faith-based government policies and thus revises the past by allowing for alternative outcomes.
Many literary critics have recognized the Bakhtinian principles and postmodern devices such as parody used by Vizenor and other resistance-style writers. Unlike the literature of transcendence, resistance writing does not initially seek to transcend postmodern life, neither embracing or rejecting it, but rather, recognizes effects accepting of the postmodern condition. Vizenor’s characters have no where to turn, and are forced to cope with the cataclysmic situation that presents itself. Paradoxically, the pilgrims must play the hand that fate has dealt them in a game of chance with the mythical Evil Gambler, as they attempt to change whatever they can of destiny. Traditionally known as a test for the culture-hero, the myth pits the Evil Gambler against the culture-hero who must win if the tribe is to survive or hold on to what they value. Proude Cedarfair plays a game of chance with the Evil Gambler for oil and the survival of the pilgrims. Vizenor has described the gambler story as a threat to the culture-hero’s ability to “balance the forces of good and evil through good humor in the urban world” (Vizenor, Wordarrows 30). Proude Cedarfair is able to survive the gambling test because he approached it with wisdom and humility rather than manipulation. By contrast, Lillith Mae initially plays against the Evil Gambler and ends up losing her life because “She took personal pleasure in winning and lost her place in the energies of sacred time” (Vizenor 114). Lillith Mae resists spiritual testing and instead asserts her own ego, concerned for personal glory rather than accepting the test of her ability to cope with adversity. When pitted against the sagacious Proude Cedarfair, the Evil Gambler recognizes his opponent’s ability to “balance the world between good and evil” (Vizenor 126). The Evil Gambler sees that Proude Cedarfair has an understanding of his test as a culture-hero stating, “Your game is not a simple game of death. You would change minds and histories and reverse the unusual control of evil power.” Rather than seeking to transcend the fragmentation and chaos of the postmodern condition, Vizenor’s characters instead use it as an opportunity for questioning the models of
Western culture. Vizenor seizes the postmodern moment in which institutions are losing definition as a time for self-reflection and intellectual meditation upon the issues of identity creation for Native Americans.

Throughout the novel, order comes from a world where good and evil are balanced, rather than one in which good triumphs over evil. The Evil Gambler’s statement that “Evil will still be the winner because nothing changes when good and evil are tied in a strange balance” suggests that the opposite is also true, that evil will never win where good and evil are balanced (Vizenor 127). This kind of thinking challenges the strict oppositions often found in Western morality. Breaking down cultural structures and assumptions about good and evil, Vizenor deconstructs the Western worldview while also gesturing toward Native American myth, using vague language in reference to the power possessed by such mythical entities as the bear and the trickster. Vizenor does not directly embed any of the ceremonial language that Momaday does. Most of what we are told about the power of the bear comes from Bearheart in the beginning of the novel when he is confined in the office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Bearheart explains that the voices of the bear first spoke through him when he was locked in a “small dark closet on the reservation” by a school superintendent (Vizenor vii), proving that hardship is a kind of purification in attaining spiritual power. In what I would argue is among the most figurative and poetic language in the book, Bearheart speaks of “the secret language of the bear” and of “stumbling into the fourth world on twos and fours,” suggesting the transformation of the human into the bear as in the Ojibwa Midewiwin Medicine Society. The “shadowing” motifs in these texts serve both readers and the characters as a way to bridge the inconsistencies of postmodern life and ultimately to facilitate renewal. Literary devices of deconstruction do not serve merely to illustrate the fragmentation and chaos found in some postmodern novels; deconstruction takes place with the purpose of breaking
down barriers so new worldviews can be presented. These “shadowing motifs” such as allusions to the bear introduce these new worldviews by bridging the gaps “between the secular and the spiritual and connect the physical and the spiritual” (Barry 95).

In spite of their shamanic status, Bearheart and Proude Cedarfair are ordinary characters in many ways. Bearheart lives in the work-a-day world familiar to all of us, working in an office in a metropolitan area. Proude Cedarfair is married, has a cedar cabin, drinks tea, wears clothing, and has sex. These are beings living in a secular world with many of the same issues that any of us might experience, but they find a spiritual path to help them cope with the secular world and in the process are able to see the world detached from an egocentric point-of-view. This transformation is a physical as well as spiritual one. As Proude Cedarfair takes on the physical body of the bear as he evolves into the fourth world, a place where the spiritual becomes a physical reality. Through “mythic portability,” mythic beings come to live secular lives, and secular beings come to live mythic lives. The outcome in Vizenor’s novel is renewal; however, renewal is only experienced by those who are willing to walk a rigorous spiritual path. Twelve pilgrims undertake the journey down the abandoned interstates towards the southwestern United States, but by the end of the journey, only four pilgrims remain, and out of that four, only two make it to the fourth world. The same journey was undertaken by all twelve pilgrims, and all twelve pilgrims had access to the same external resources. What makes the difference in attaining the fourth world is the degree to which each character was able to access their internalized and “portable” myth. While it may seem that Vizenor has ‘hard-wired’ his characters for spiritual success (Proude Cedarfair, for instance, comes from a long line of bears), the novel depicts complex characters whose simplistic allegorical names emphasize the ubiquity of stereotypes. Furthermore, Vizenor gives characters that he does not agree with a forum to express their views in order to create an ensemble of characters with
diverse responses to their world. An example of this is when Proude Cedarfair has a confrontation with a corrupt tribal leader, Jordan Coward, who evicts Proude off the reservation for his opposition to the government’s wrongful conversion of reservation land in order to use the trees as fuel. Vizenor allows Coward to fully state his case and air his grievances against Proude, who stands as a metonymy for Vizenor’s point-of-view.

Attaining ‘salvation,’ or the kind of transformation experienced by Proude Cedarfair, is not contingent on returning to sacred lands for the purpose of establishing kinship ties, nor is it guaranteed through ceremonial ritual or performance. At the end of the novel, Proude Cedarfair and Inawa Biwide enter the fourth world through the window at Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon in New Mexico. This is the sacred area where, according to Hopi myth, the tribes traveled from the underworld with the bears. Out of all the pilgrims, Proude Cedarfair and Inawa Biwide remain the most silent and participate in little dialogue, a reflection of their spiritually inward nature, and they are the only two who make the transformative step to the fourth world by the end of the novel. These two characters are able to attain wholeness by connecting to the feminine or Nightspirits, virtually the same spirits as those in the Night Chant featured in Momaday’s novel. The second requirement is the ability to live alone, and the third is being able to internalize the myths thoroughly. When the pilgrims are all assembled in one place, Proude Cedarfair studies them individually, perceiving intuitively the moral or spiritual status of each one. In his observing of Inawa Biwide, Proude makes two statements to his wife: “Inawa Biwide has the old nights in him” and “He knows the darkness and how to live alone” (Vizenor 73). The narrator describes Biwide as having “black eyes like the dark apsidal chapels” (Vizenor 71). Later in the same passage, the narrator describes Biwide as “staring into the darkness toward the river at the bottom of the hill.” The darkness in these passages is the same kind of darkness that symbolizes the renewal of life
associated with the male rain in the Night Chant. Likewise, Proude Cedarfair’s spiritual
progression as a youth is described by the narrator early in the novel, when Proude was ten years
old: “His father taught him to live alone in the world” (Vizenor 13). The narrator states that Proude
“lived in his own silence” and that as an adult, he “gave more time to being alone” (Vizenor 12).
Each of these references to darkness, night, and solitude connects the characters to myth.

The importance of cultivating this connection is illustrated by the characters who do not
integrate the masculine and feminine aspects of their selves. Bishop Omax Parisimo, for instance,
wears masks of various female characters in the story, using them as a handicap by appropriating
the persona for the expression of a femininity that he is unable to synthesize within himself. The
very large Sun Bear Sun keeps a small white female strapped to his waist as an appendage. Dr.
Wilde Coxwain initially resists homosexual advances by Pardone Cozener because he feels he has
a reputation as a great lover of women to uphold, but the two eventually end up in a committed
homosexual relationship. Lillith Mae has a troubled past due to being molested by her father, and
with a name that suggests resistance to males, is a lover of dogs instead of men. Little Big Mouse
dies when she exploits her sexuality in front of a wild crowd of cripples. Bigfoot’s contact with the
feminine is through his constant obsession with having sex. Zebulon Matchi Makwa meets his
death as he has sex with an alleged witch while wearing the metamask of a female princess. All of
these characters are estranged from a natural and healthy sense of self that consists of appropriate
balances of femininity and masculinity required for spiritual progression.

The only two remaining characters not yet considered are Rosina, Proude’s wife, and
PioWissakodewinini, the “parawoman mixed-heritage mammoth clown,” both of whom make it to
Chaco Canyon, but evidently fall just short of the spiritual progression needed to enter the fourth
world (Vizenor 75). Because of his transformation from a man to a woman, Pio appears to be an
ideal candidate for entry into the fourth world, but s/he needs time to realize that progression, as he seeks to integrate his masculine and feminine identities into wholeness. Rosina progresses to a state in which she can live alone, but she does so “with her memories” (Vizenor 12), and thus fails to escape temporality as her husband has. Another obstacle to her entrance into the fourth world is illustrated near the end of the novel when the lusty trickster Plumero seduces her into giving him oral sex. In coming upon the violation, Pio strangles Plumero from behind, freeing Rosina from being the object of greed through her association with the lusty trickster. Some critics have cited this as the reason Rosina does not enter the fourth world with her husband because she has engaged in an act that associates her with the spiritual immaturity of the trickster. All is not lost, as the novel ends with a female Pio and Rosina holding each other in front of the solstice window (Vizenor 241). Another hint that Rosina may yet enter the fourth world comes when she finds bear tracks in the snow and follows them. An explication of these passages suggests that the male rain (or water) united with the female Nightspirits (or darkness) are symbolic acts of sexual integration as well as renewal and regeneration. While Pio and Rosina are able to survive and are candidates for the fourth world because of their progression towards integration of their sexual identities, the other characters who are unable to synthesize their sexual masculine and feminine selves are unable to undergo renewal and therefore do not survive, either physically or spiritually.

Biwide’s success at advancing this synthesis is acknowledged by Proude in phrases such as he “knows the darkness” and has the ability to “live alone.” The connection between “darkness” and “living alone” is explained early in the novel, again in the passage about Proude’s early life. Proude’s father had taught him to be alone in the world because “Cedar warriors should never be dependent…” (Vizenor 13). This phrase is reminiscent of the expression of empowerment within the “War God’s Horse Song” in its tone of self-reliance, which appears contradictory to an identity
that is based on the tribe. Self-reliance, however, as it is used in this context does not mean an identity separate from the tribe, but instead means an inner resourcefulness that provides spiritual leadership to the tribe. Proude’s father tells him that, “From the sounds of your silence […] you will learn not to measure yourself through others.” Through Proude and Inawa’s lack of dialogue, Vizenor demonstrates the power of silence, implying a deeper wisdom and frugality of language. Being alone means having the inner fortitude and integrity to live authentically with one’s own values regardless of the “conventional wisdom” of the day. While Vizenor never names or embeds the myth these symbols are tied to, he makes it clear through Proude’s observations that Biwide has successfully internalized the essence of the tribal myths.

Differing from the literature of resistance, the literature of transcendence goes further to avoid alienating the non-Native reader. Transcendence writers intentionally use language that more closely resembles or agrees with the dominant culture’s definitions of self, reality, and truth, or what author Catherine Rainwater calls a “modality of high affinity” (Rainwater 89). The more the language resembles Western writing, the less of its transcendent nature will be communicated, because of the decrease in or absence of mythic-style wording. In including relatively less language that shows agreement with the dominant culture, resistance writers’ work has a correspondingly low affinity of modality, and therefore less cross-coding than the literature of resistance. Transcendental writers use both Native American and Western literary forms to satisfy the epistemological expectations of both audiences. The idea is to achieve a delicate balance between the use of tribal myth and symbolism so as to not alienate the non-Native reader, yet at the same time not use too many Western cultural symbols as to disenfranchise the Native American reader.
In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday mediates between native and non-native culture both in the literal and figurative senses through the sexual union of Anglela St. John, a non-Native, with Abel. Angela is also a mediating figure in her physical appearance. She appears to the priest, Father Olguin, as both having Native American features and white features: “Her hair was long and very dark, so that ordinarily it appeared to be black; but in a certain light, as now, it acquired a dark auburn sheen” (Momaday 26). She is also described as “too thin,” with a longer nose and clear and lovely skin, and with eyes and mouth made “carefully and well,” an ambiguous description that could be of a Native American or an Anglo-Saxon. At one point the priest observes that Angela “seemed pale to him again,” suggesting that he previously saw her as having darker features. One reason why Momaday frames Angela as having multiple appearances is to show her as a manifestation of both worldviews. Such mediation between cultures allows for the healing of non-Natives readers who may face their own crisis of identity. Angela comes to the Jemez village seeking relief from physical fatigue in the mineral springs of the Jemez. Momaday associates Angela with the bear myths of the Navajo and Jemez in the scene in which she observes Abel her window chopping wood:

> Once she had seen an animal slap at the water, a badger or a bear. She would have liked to touch the soft muzzle of a bear, the thin black lips, the great flat head. She would have liked to cup her hand to the wet black snout, to hold for a moment the hot blowing of the bear’s life. (29)

The characteristics of the archetypal bear are applicable to Angela’s circumstances, for the death-like hibernation of the bear in winter and its reemergence in the spring “represent a pattern of transformation that is symbolically parallel to the healing process” (Scarberry-Garcia 46). For the Navajo, the potent powers of the bear closely parallel the symbolism of death and resurrection.
Abel, who symbolizes the bear, revitalizes Angela by reminding her of the possibilities of new life represented in the world of nature and in her own womanhood. In many Native American myths, particularly those of the Navajo, the bear is thought of as a great shaman, both powerful and dangerous (Rockwell 51). For Angela, all of these elements work towards a sexual awakening that is a portent of her transformation. Angela’s vision of water acts as a “symbolic baptism” into a new life” (Scarberry-Garcia 54). Her soaking in the mineral bath right before she has sexual intercourse with Abel acts like a rite of purification undergone before a ritual (Scarberry-Garcia 54). The Jemez Pueblo have a ceremony celebrating the killing of a bear as a figure for a great warrior, whose purpose is to convert the bear from an enemy to a friend. At the close of the ceremony, a holy man washes the bear’s head, symbolizing the adoption of the bear’s spirit into the tribe (Rockwell 56). The water could possibly symbolize Abel as a culture hero as well as the conversion of Abel from someone Angela wishes to manipulate to someone she respects and considers with fondness. When she first meets Abel, she wants to “bring about a vengeance” (Momaday 28) for his refusal to bargain, saying she is “offended that he would not buy and sell” (30). His refusal to give a response to her questions makes her “full of irritation” and makes her “seethe” (30). After her sexual union with Abel, she is transformed and her viciousness dissolves, probably due to the mitigation of her desire to dominate based on racial privilege.

Angela surfaces again later in the story when Abel is hospitalized, continuing to incorporate herself and, additionally, her son into the structure of the Bear Maiden myth (163-164). Ben, Abel’s close friend, evidently embarrassed by Angela’s use of the myth as it reflected her intimate relationship with Abel and her exceptional understanding of the Native American worldview, responds with: “Ei yei! A bear! A bear and a maiden. And she thought it up out of her own mind” (164). Angela transcends her own culture by relating a version of the Bear and Maiden
myth “out of her own personal experience and imagination” (Scarberry-Garcia 55). Her version of the myth also includes motifs of the Jemez “Myth of the Mother Moon and the Great Bear” (Scarberry-Garcia 56). In this myth, the pregnant Mother Moon (symbolically goddess or feminine) is abducted by the bear and gives birth to a son in the bear’s cave. The boy, who is the stepson of the bear, is born with supernatural powers and saves Mother Moon from the bear by returning her to Father Sun. Paralleling the myth, Angela is pregnant from her husband-doctor at the time she is attracted to Abel. Implying that her son Peter parallels the boy in the myth, Ben relates the telling of Angela’s story in the hospital room to the myth, saying, “He was born of a bear and a maiden, she said, and he was noble and wise. He had many adventures, and he became a great leader and saved his people” (Momaday 163). Even though Angela’s story is rudimentary and missing the cultural context and details of the original source, Ben recognizes the myth of the Changing Bear Maiden, substituting the Navajo name “Esdza shash nadle” and filling in the missing landscape with Navajo sacred geography (Scarberry-Garcia 68). The same motif of a woman having sexual intercourse with a bear appears in the Bear Maiden myth that Ben tells and Momaday embeds in his story, as well as the birth of a male child who becomes a “medicine man,” thus the actual events of the story double the myth (Momaday 165). Angela instills a sense of Native culture in her son, Peter, who may not become a Native American medicine man, but may become a western doctor like his father (Scarberry-Garcia 66). Peter will be informed by his Native American worldview in thinking about and applying acts of healing, just as Angela’s life will continue to be effected by her mythic role as Bear Maiden. Scarberry-Garcia suggests that Momaday’s use of the word “anointed,” a term frequently used by Catholics in the administration of the sacraments, is used as a form of mediation in describing the Navajo ritual of rubbing of pollen upon the body, linking the Bear Maiden symbolically to Angela, who is Catholic (69).
Through her sexual union with Abel, Angela is transformed and healed both physically and spiritually. Overall, Momaday writes his text with a higher modality of affinity towards the Western culture than does Vizenor.

Yet underlying both strains is the effect that the recreation of identity has not only on the Native, but the non-Native as well. The consequences of those effects between the two strains are that resistance literature is inherently more political, while transcendence literature has more of the language of the oral tradition. That is not to say that the literature of transcendence does not have political consequences. The literature of resistance is explicit and sometimes intentional in its political tone, whereas in the literature of transcendence, political issues tend to be implicitly conveyed. The underlying mood of resistance literature is akin to that of the literature of witness, wherein the role of the narrator is to give voice to the injustices his or her community faces or to issue an urgent call for the community’s survival (Beverley 32). In both cases, the purpose is to provoke a political response from the reader and encourage an assessment of one’s own identity.

In *House Made of Dawn*, the effect is for us to be included in the experience, even though we may not be able to totally participate due to a lack of cultural context. An increase in pedagogical tools, such as the ones that I have suggested in this essay, will aid in non-Native readers’ participation, effectively increasing access to Native American works. With increased access, readers and students will become less intimidated by the complexity of the texts, an intimidation that results in large part by the language and ideas of a worldview that may be quite different than that of the reader. While all readers may not have the same response, some might find that engagement with Native American literature has somehow changed how they perceive their own identity or their worldview. Native American authors do this with the expectation of opening up a dialogue that will bring about healing between the Anglo-American and the
American Indian. At the same time that the text helps the Native American to recreate a sense of identity, it also helps the non-Native to recreate identity by learning about the “other” that is a part and a genesis of our own heritage. The literature of resistance also provokes a reassessment of identity, particularly in historical terms. The reader is challenged with new information that may destabilize the idea of history as objective, as well as who and what we are as Americans. The aim of Vizenor and others who write in the strain of resistance is to point out the injustices of the past and present, while the hope is also for a recreation of non-Native identity free from the constraints and “terminal creeds” of Euro-American culture.
Notes

1 With writers such as Alexie, this technique is not used as frequently, nor is it as explicit as in the work of Gerald Vizenor or Thomas King. In Reservation Blues it can be argued that the characters Chess and Checkers and their relationship with Thomas is a re-envisioning of a myth from the Washington state area about a man, White Shining Mountain, who marries two sisters, Clear Sky and Fair Maiden. Alexie also alludes to the symbols of myth such as the bear that hibernates on top of the Catholic Church in several of his novels.

2 Plumero’s persona is similar to the ancient American Indian Kokopelli, a male fertility god who was also known as “the Casanova of the cliff dwellers.” He is sometimes depicted with a prominent proboscis or trunk, with sacks of seeds thrown over his shoulder, representing the seeds of human conception. Lakota tricksters and tricksters of other tribes also have large phalluses as part of their mythology.

3 American resistance writers such as Vizenor as well as Sherman Alexie, and Thomas King couple imagination with anger to challenge the status quo of mainstream culture. As Alexie writes in “Imagining the Reservation,” “Survival = Anger x Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation (Alexie, Lone Ranger, 150).

4 A more contemporary view about who is to blame for the depletion of oil would include the increased demand from the emerging nations of China and India, and not just white America. At the time of Vizenor’s writing, U.S. demand far outweighed that of any other nation.

5 The name of a five part series on PBS’s “American Experience” that “establishes Native history as an essential part of American history” premiering in April 2009.

(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/weshallremian>).'
The boundary mountains are Mount Blanca on the east; Mount Taylor on the South; the San Francisco Peaks on the west; and Mount Hesperus on the north.
WORKS CITED
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