

POSTMODERNISM, NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE  
AND ISSUES OF SOVEREIGNTY

by

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## ABSTRACT

Criticism of Native American literature is barely two centuries old, while criticism of Western literature boasts a history that is quite a bit longer. The questions on how to read and interpret tribal narrative and modern American Indian fiction are still urgent topics that trigger numerous debates among literary scholars. What theories to employ and what approaches to use to dispel misinterpretations of the literature are still matters open to suggestion. Postmodernism, the new world trend, has influenced all spheres of life, not excluding literature. Although it does seem to better account for American Indian voices as it shifts attention to local narratives and re-evaluation of history, the issue of whether it is applicable and favorable to Native American literature and its cause is a debatable one. Postmodern theory claims to liberate the suppressed voices including those of Native Americans, but at the same time presents the danger of limiting Native American literature to another set of frames while denying it its purpose, i.e. achievement of the establishment of Native American *national* literature. Many American Indian scholars insist that American Indian literature should not be interpreted using mainstream approaches, such as postmodernism, since they have already done enough damage, but implementing American Indian philosophies instead, such as nationalism. It also seems premature to apply postmodern theory since it deconstructs history and identity, which are still to be constructed in Native American literature. Tribal literature and tribal realities are closely connected and, therefore, the fight for Native American literature and how to interpret it appears to be a part of a bigger fight, the one for sovereignty, both national and intellectual. The “post” of postmodernism, as well as the “post” of post-colonialism, might simply not be present for Native American literature yet and, therefore, theories offered by nationalism can at the given moment be more promising to American Indian literature and its purposes.

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

While criticism of Western literatures boasts quite a history, criticism of Native American literature is barely two centuries old. The questions on how to read and interpret tribal literary traditions and modern American Indian fiction are still urgent nowadays. What theories and what approaches to apply to avoid misinterpretations, get rid of stereotypes, and break the centuries-old tradition of silencing Native American voices are still matters open to suggestions. Numerous scholars offer various theories to approach Native American literature both of today and traditional narratives of the past. The argument on how to treat American Indian literatures is fundamental and drives the discourse of Native American literary studies. Many scholars who are of Native American heritage tend to pose an opinion that only Native American theories should be applied (Womack, Warrior, Swisher); still others support the idea that applying other theories and using “master’s tools” might appear quite beneficial to Native American Studies (Krupat, Johnson, Champagne).

The objective of this work is to discuss some of the current issues of Native American literary studies with focus on which theories to prioritize in interpretation of Native American literatures; whether assigning the leading role to Native-based theories is the ultimate decision or whether applications of the mainstream theories are worth considering. This work concentrates on postmodern era and theory and opportunities and limitations that it might offer to Native American literary studies if applied. Native

American literature, although stereotypically considered the youngest one is the United States, is as a matter of fact the oldest on the continent. It has its own story to tell as it has developed under particular circumstances separate from any other minority literature present in North America. The way Native American literature continues to thrive and the direction it takes is predetermined to a great extent by oral tradition, which at the same time constitutes a rather big part of indigenous literatures' character and identity. The history of Euro-American/Indian relationships has also been of tremendous influence on the course of Native American literature and shaped to a certain extent its goals as well, i.e. the establishment of Native American literary canon and criticism, Native American national literature, and fight for intellectual sovereignty.

This work will discuss the connections that Native American literature has to indigenous cultures and communities, as well as their current issues and concerns, which influence the formation of tribal literatures. Literature, after all, is the reflection of a society and all the movements within it. Along with other forms of art, it is the face of a culture and reflects its contemporary state. Since fight for self-determination and sovereignty is the most urgent one Indian Country today, it is represented in Native American literatures, which support and promote it and join in the struggle for independence. Therefore, connectedness of Native literatures to tribal sovereignty is vital and without doubt. The way American Indian literature is tied to indigenous communities and its relatedness to sovereignty is discussed in chapter "Native American Sovereignty and Literature." This chapter helps define the goals Native American Literature is



pursuing today as well as sets a historical background for understanding the specificity of Native American literature.

The main traits and what defines Native literatures is identified in the following chapter “Native American Literature and its Nature.” This chapter deals with the character of indigenous literatures and discusses what defines their nature. It gives an insight into tribal narratives and their characteristics as stories of resistance. It identifies features that are most common to Native American literary works and explores how traditional traits of tribal narratives are reflected and implemented in modern Native American fiction. In addition, this chapter explores how Native American writers use mainstream theories and conventional literary forms to serve indigenous purposes and support Native messages. It also poses the question whether the same process of indigenizing is possible to perform with postmodern theory.

Chapter 4 “Postmodernism” sets the stage for the discussion whether postmodernism offers valid application to Native American literature and whether Native American literature can benefit from theories of postmodernity. It identifies the main characteristics of the postmodern era and defines its frames and impact on the society. Also, it addresses some of the debates that are vital in understanding nature of the postmodern since postmodernism is one of the most controversial theories. This chapter considers the main notions of postmodernism that guide the discussion in the following chapters.

“Postmodern Applications” addresses the issue of whether postmodernism can be used to support the main goals of Native American literature in its pursuit of sovereignty

and resistance. The discussion focuses a lot on deconstructive nature of postmodern theory, which, on the one hand, provides new opportunities to Native literatures by opposing the grand narrative and introducing the marginalized voices into the discussion, but on the other hand, by assuming that truth is out of reach, which leads to endless multiple interpretations, it questions Native point view and deconstructs identity and history which is yet to be established or reestablished in Native communities; therefore, it undermines the work that Native American literature is doing by devaluing Native cultures. At the same time, this chapter explores whether the similarities that postmodern and Native fiction seem to have are in fact identical. The example of trickster clearly demonstrates that these similarities draw their powers from different cultures. Although trickster is chaotic, like postmodernism, he only serves to prove the importance of balance. Thus, it appears that certain techniques used by Native American writers are not rooted in postmodern theory, but rather in tribal traditions. Therefore, it makes Native American fiction more tribally derived than postmodern oriented, which poses another question: who borrows from whom – tribal literature from postmodernism or the other way around? It is Native consciousness that speaks in Native literatures, not the current literary trends.

Thus, up-to-date Native American literature might not be entirely ready to apply postmodern theory since postmodern resistance to domination and organization and Native resistance to oppression and on-going colonization are not quite the same. Although discarding possibilities of postmodernism will not improve the state of Native literary criticism, ideas of literary nationalism offer more support to the purposes of

Native American communities, and, therefore, Native literatures as well. Before postmodernism can be applied to interpretations of tribal literatures, there is a necessity to recover and tell the stories of the past as well as find and reconnect with indigenous histories and identities.

## CHAPTER 2

## NATIVE AMERICAN SOVEREIGNTY AND LITERATURE

There are many issues that have to be addressed while dealing with Native American literary texts. While their authenticity seems to be questioned at times by various scholars (for instance, David Treuer), one thing becomes clear – the fight for Native American literature and how to interpret it is a part of a bigger fight, the one for sovereignty, both national and intellectual. Although there are different, and very often contradictory points of view on what treatment Native American literature should receive, the matter of sovereignty remains as its focal point. Whether Native American literature should be approached with mainstream theories on equal terms with any other literature, which very often puts it into the realm of minority literatures, or regarded from Native points of view, what its main purpose and task are seem to be the main questions that trouble the minds of literary critics working with Native texts. Among the questions that pertain to the issue of Native American literary sovereignty are whether there is a link or should be a link between literature and society, text and context, stories and community. Are these all parts of one puzzle, or should literature be treated as literature on its own, not a cultural representation? Do literature and identity have anything to do with each other? Considering the postmodern tendency to separate those things and the popularity and fashion of postmodernism as cultural dominant and era which incorporates social, political, and literary theories (here we will discuss its literary positions as a

cultural dominant), those are the hard issues for Native American literature in its struggle for independence and acknowledgement.

The struggle for sovereignty is the main issue in Indian Country today. Autonomy and self-determination are what Native nations are striving for. This fight has been going on for several centuries and can be observed in all spheres of tribal life and activities, but unfortunately, this fight is far from being over. Although the goal is national sovereignty, what the tribes have is only partial or limited sovereignty; but if it is limited, is it sovereignty at all? National sovereignty demands literary sovereignty, as well. Since literature is one of the most vital facets of a culture and a representation of a mentality of a people, it holds the struggle for sovereignty as its most widely addressed topic and motif.

It would seem that the meaning of sovereignty is rather clear, but from the legal discourse on tribal sovereignty, it becomes apparent that sovereignty is a matter of interpretation, at least when it comes to Native American sovereign rights. In legal discourse, Native American tribes have been acknowledged as possessing a certain amount of independence in certain matters and “allowed” a certain amount of self-determination. Although “allowed” is not an appropriate word to be used, that is the stereotype that has been perpetuated by the federal government and colonialism for centuries. It would be more appropriate to say inherited, since while talking about Native American nations, one is discussing inherent sovereignty rights.

The first legal official acknowledgement of Native tribes as nations dates back to 1778 and the signing of the first treaty of the United States with the Delaware nation that

granted the right to the troops to pass safely through the territory of the Delaware tribe to capture Detroit. Although the signing of the treaty was mere military strategy, it was an important landmark that determined the United States policies towards American Indian tribes for the next hundred years. Most of the land was acquired by the United States by means of treaty signing, which helped the new country secure their positions in North America. Signing of the treaties was abandoned by the federal government when the United States felt confident enough to dictate their own terms to Indian tribes and felt secure in the Western territories of North America in 1870's. Nevertheless, the important point is that the signing of treaties acknowledged Indian tribes as nations and sovereigns (the practice of treaty signing was inherited from the British policies. That was the practice of the Crown starting in the beginning of 1600's, according to Biolsi). According to the definition of a treaty and the brochure published by Means and W. Churchill, "Treaty: Platform for Nationhood," it is a contract that is signed between two independent parties, two equal sovereign entities, therefore, entering into international relations. That meant legal equality and no United States authority over internal affairs of American Indian nations. Nevertheless, the practice of treating Native Americans as sovereigns was abandoned with the abrogation of the treaty signing process and transition of the BIA from the Department of War to the Department of Interior.

However, federal Indian law and policy have seen controversial decisions on Indian sovereignty rights that have affected all of the fields of life of Native American tribes, including culture and literature. The Cherokee cases (or the Marshall trilogy) are the court cases that still continue to be considered rather influential even nowadays and

established the mode in which Native Americans were destined to be treated for years to come. In 1831 Judge Marshall recognized Indian peoples as national entities in the Supreme Court case *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (Biolsi 233). Cherokee were acknowledged as a distinct political community capable of managing their own affairs, which, in fact, recognized them being a state of their own (Biolsi 234). The following year, in 1832, in *Worcester v. Georgia* Judge Marshall again stated that Native American nations were like any other nations on earth, therefore recognizing their sovereign status. Unfortunately, the damage has already been done in *Johnson v. McIntosh* in 1823, where Marshall stated that upon discovery the rights of the original inhabitants were impaired; therefore, their sovereignty had been infringed and they held only the right of occupancy to the soil. Marshall as well commented on the Doctrine of Discovery as Conquest that was used as the basis for federal Indian law and policy. He did admit the Doctrine to be “pompous,” but since it had been in the American law so long, it could not be denied. He stated that the Doctrine of Discovery had become the law of the land because the whole country was built upon it (Biolsi 233).

The Court has had contradictory opinions as to how to treat Native American tribes. This can be clear even from the Marshall decisions. In *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, although admitting the American Indian tribes to be nations, Marshall also named them “domestic dependent nations,” i.e. what one might call “kind of sovereign, but not quite,” where he established the official policy of the United States government as a guardian to Native Americans, who were considered its wards. In the same case Justice Johnson in his dissenting opinion doubted the whole idea of calling Native American

tribes “states,” never mind “foreign nations.” He insisted that such terms could not be applied “to a people so low in the grade of organized society as our Indian tribes most generally are” and continued to emphasize that they are just Indian *tribes*, “an anomaly unknown to the books that treat of states, and which the law of nations would regard as nothing more than wandering hordes, held together only by ties of blood and habit, and having neither laws or government, beyond what is required in a savage state” (qtd. in Biolsi 234). It appears to be quite obvious that in legal discourse there has been little to no tolerance and understanding of who Native American tribes were, which seems to be the case in the culture area as well. Thomas Biolsi narrows it down to the issues of racism:

What is clear is that while the Enlightenment principle of the universal Rights of Man was present in the diplomatic relations of the United States with Indian peoples from a very early date, so was the “underside” of the Enlightenment in the form of the assumption of universal “racial” inequality. Indian tribes might be almost white and therefore entitled to the Rights of Man, but not quite; thus the inherently contradictory idea of “domestic dependent sovereignty.” Their “race” and lack of “civilization” would constitute the “liberal strategies of exclusion” faced by Indian people and their governments; this is the key to the colonial situation. (Biolsi 234)

The court case, that put the notion of tribal sovereignty and tribal status of nations out of legal discourse for quite a while, was *United States v. Kagama*, 1886. It allowed the federal government to intervene into the tribal affairs. The case that followed in 1903 *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock* secured the federal government’s powers over Native American tribes by vesting Congress with plenary power to abrogate treaties. The federal government expected Native Americans to slowly vanish or assimilate into the general public so that there would be no necessity to deal with Indians and their claims to self-



determination at all. Nevertheless, the reservations did not dissolve and Indians did not disappear. However, until 1933 the discourse on tribal sovereignty stagnated. In 1933, a new commissioner of Indian affairs, John Collier, became determined to change things around. In 1934, Indian Reorganization Act was passed, which entitled Native American tribes to self-determination and self-government, and although the constitutions and governments adopted by various indigenous nations of the United States were modeled after the European ones and still had to be approved by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, it was a rather big step towards recovery of the theory of tribal sovereignty. The Indian Reorganization Act, nevertheless, did not specify the powers of Indian governments, despite the solicitor's opinion "Powers of Indian Tribes" that was supposed to indicate what rights Indian nations possessed. Finally, Indian nations were admitted to have inherent powers from the aboriginal sovereignty. Nevertheless, the Congress still "possessed" plenary power to limit this sovereignty.

The legal discourse on how much sovereignty Indian nations have still continues. On the one hand, the fact that states have no jurisdiction over Indian reservations proves the existence of tribal sovereignty. On the other hand, Public Law 280 issued in 1953 gave five states jurisdiction over Indian tribes without their consent, although later it was amended so that now tribes have to agree to their affairs being overseen by the state. Still, *Nevada v. Hicks (2001)*, a relatively recent court case, set a precedent that the states can interfere with the dealings of the tribes if the matter under consideration directly influences or threatens the states' sovereignty and integrity or concerns the states' interest off-reservation.

With respect to the jurisdiction on the reservations, things are not that straight and clear either. On the one side, there is plenary power of Congress, which can abrogate treaties and any relations with Native American tribes (Termination and Relocation Era), but at the same time has the right to grant federal recognition. On the other side, there is inherent sovereignty theory supported by the solicitor's opinion of 1934. Therefore, the question who has jurisdiction over what in Indian Country is still being debated. For instance, the passage of the Major Crimes Act in 1885 took a big toll on Native sovereignty. Another blow was *Oliphant v. Squamish Indian Tribe* court decision that stated that tribes do not have the jurisdiction over crimes committed by non-Indians on Indian territory and that led to higher crime rates on the reservation and drug trafficking through Indian Country. The Duro decision (*Duro v. Reina*) was another case that ate away at tribal sovereignty since it stated that tribes did not have jurisdiction over non-members as well. The latter has been revised by the Duro fix, but the struggle for the revision of the Oliphant decision is still ongoing.

Some scholars account the mess that is going on about tribal sovereignty as cultural misunderstandings and a European legal tradition that does not acknowledge any possibility of other valid structures and traditions of governing. Scott Lyons points out two notions that in his opinion can account for the differences in understanding sovereignty and cultural differences as well. He differentiates nation-states and nation-peoples with Native American tribes being the latter. In legal discourse, they are not associated with states. But as Vizenor claims, native sovereignty is not necessarily territorial, or not limited to territorial aspects (as regarded by the mainstream legal

discourse), but is also visual, material, and spiritual. As Lyons points out, the main charge of a nation-people is the sovereignty of the group through a privileging of its traditions and culture and continuity (qtd. Krupat, "Red" 4). Therefore, its purpose is to guarantee cultural sovereignty. According to Lyons, the two pillars of sovereignty are the power to self-govern and the acknowledgement of peoplehood.

Native American literature pursues similar purposes to those that indigenous political programs pursue, and often reflects the political struggle of Native nations. It reflects the struggle for independence and self-determination. It has a similar history with that of every Native American tribe, the history of silencing and displacement, i.e. history of colonization. Therefore, anticolonial nationalism (Krupat, "Red" 5) is on the rise in every sphere of life in Indian country. It is a struggle with an entire body of systematic knowledge that holds Native Americans as inferior.

The racial discrimination of Native Americans can be traced in all fields of study, whether it is legal discourse or literature. Vine Deloria, Jr. points out the inherent racism in academia. Donald Fixico points out, in agreement with Vine Deloria, that there is a growing interest in Native American Studies. Nevertheless, he draws attention to the fact that unfair treatment from academia and lack of respect are the main causes for unbalanced development of American Indian Studies (Fixico 120). This is largely due to the inability of academia to give credibility to Native American traditional ways of knowledge. The latter is well discussed by Vine Deloria, Jr. in *Red Earth, White Lies*. Deloria draws the readers' attention to oral stories (which is a part of oral literary tradition that has largely been ignored by academia) and their importance as a means of

constructing and interpreting history. Deloria points to the stagnation and conservatism of academia and blames education to a great extent for it, as well as the fact that educated Indians are too often suppressed by the scholastic world as not having enough competence to talk about matters of their own culture. He criticizes Western anthropology for going in a narrow direction and not being open to the evidence that might change the worldview of history. Deloria suggests that racism still exists in academia, although not necessarily on the surface. He talks about the inherent racism in the scholastic world that makes it extremely hard to bring non-Western traditions within serious consideration in the academia (Deloria 34). He draws attention to the stereotype that non-Western people are believed to be subjective and emotional, and, therefore, unreliable. Thus, the information provided about indigenous peoples is considered credible only if it is offered by a white scholar recognized by the academia (Deloria 35).

This is the case with literature and cultural studies as well. Many American Indian scholars point out that somehow non-Native scholars believe that they know more about the cultures they do not belong to. For instance, Wendy Rose speaks of her experience with anthropologists, who claimed to know absolutely everything about Native cultures. As an example she recollects how certain colleagues of hers state one of the indigenous languages to be extinct; she went on to remark that just a little while ago she had heard elders speak the language. This situation can be observed in literary studies as well. Arnold Krupat points out that “historically specifiable acts of translative violence marked the European colonization of the Americas from Columbus to the present” (Krupat, “Postcolonialism” 74). He goes on to support Brian Swann’s argument that the

indigenous peoples were not considered to have any mental abilities and their languages were looked down upon, since they were so complicated but considered to be underdeveloped. Therefore, the newly discovered people were not perceived as capable of any kind of literature. Thus, the “idea of a [Native American] literature was inherently ludicrous” since Indian “languages themselves were primitive” (qtd. Krupat, “Postcolonialism” 74). As Krupat states, the Natives were expected to “learn to speak” (in this case to speak English) first in order to have literature (Krupat, “Postcolonialism” 74). Krupat also criticizes the opinion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars, such as Daniel Brinton, who were persuaded that Indians were inferior by nature and “fatally handicapped in the race for the highest life” (Krupat, “Postcolonialism” 74). The winners of this race, as it was believed at that time, were the ones with the “highest” language, which is the focal point of literature. Therefore, Indians, as the ones possessing primitive languages from the point of view of the colonizers (since it was extremely hard for the Europeans to succeed in learning indigenous languages and they, therefore, considered them to be cumbersome), were denied any chance of literary achievement.

If one assumes that this belief of inferiority of Indians and their so-called incapability to produce any kind of literary art persisted for centuries, one might guess right. Native American literature, although being the oldest on the continent, is the last one to be acknowledged. Cultural discrimination seems to go well in hand with the political one (Native Americans, although being the first inhabitants of the Americas, were the last peoples to become citizens of the United States in 1924).

The discrimination mentioned above can be, for instance, regarded in the case of the American literary canon and Native American literature. There has been much ado about American literature not being good enough to be accepted by its European relative and its canon, but the same thing is happening within the U.S. itself with so-called, ethnic literatures being excluded from the American canon. Let us briefly explore the American literary canon and its tradition (its mechanisms, the process of its formation, purpose, and imperatives) and the relation (inclusion or exclusion) of Native American literature to it.

Although the recent bringing of the margins into the center seemingly introduced local literatures from a new perspective, it still didn't give the American Indian literature full acknowledgement. It seems that even after the publication of Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn*, the mainstream attitude towards Native American literature has not been much revised. Although some scholars might disagree, the inclusion into American literary canon might serve as an acknowledgement of Native literary capacity. Although the inclusion of American Indian literary works into the canon might not be sufficient, it might serve as a step towards equality. Despite all its richness, in themes as well as in genres, its claim to the American literary canon has not yet been granted full consideration. Therefore, as Arnold Krupat states "to urge the inclusion of Indian literature in the canon of American literature is not only to propose an addition but a reevaluation of what "American literature" means" (Krupat 98), as well as reevaluation of the importance and value of American Indian literature.

As discussed earlier, until the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, American Indians' ability to produce any kind of literature was strongly doubted and oral tradition of storytelling was

refuted by such reasoning that literature, ““littera-ture”, of course, meant precisely the culture of letters” (Krupat 97), and thus could not be oral (Interestingly enough, theoretically that would exclude the long standing epic oral tradition of Greece as well. Nevertheless, the Greek oral tradition is still considered to be literature). Even nowadays mainstream academia does not seem to give American Indian literature any credit. An obvious proof of that is the article *Going Native* by Morris Dickstein, a distinguished Professor of English at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Despite the promising title of the article (judging by the title one could assume that it would concentrate on Native or indigenous traditions incorporated into American literature), it has, in fact, nothing to do with Native American literature. As a matter of fact, Dickstein speaks of the American literary canon, its formation and the changes it underwent in recent years, and explores the history of its relationship with its ‘cousin’ European literature and canon. He points out that “the celebration of our native literary genius has accelerated tremendously in recent decades” (Dickstein), but what he means by ‘native’ is the white mainstream literature; namely, he accents the shift of the student’s attention from the English to American literature, but somehow with the exclusion of the American Indian one. Dickstein often speaks of multiculturalism, but never even once, while enumerating the great works of the twentieth century, includes works by American Indian authors, although he does acknowledge some African American writers, among them Zola Neal Hurston. It seems that Native American literature to him simply does not exist. Dickstein claims that the works included in the American literary canon are as well of great historic value. He states that

if historians better understood how to use this material, they would find buried treasure in the American literary canon, where urgent and still-troubling social problems take on a lived reality. No archival evidence could measure up to the vigorous treatment of immigrant life in Upton Sinclair's *Junge*, Cather's *My Ántonia*, or Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*; hardscrabble farm life in Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads*; John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*; and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; social mobility and the American dream in Howells's *Rise of Silas Lapham* and Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*; slavery, of course, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; race in the work of Charles Chesnutt, Richard Wright, and many other writers; marriage and divorce in *A Modern Instance* and Chopin's *Awakening*; faith and doubt in Harold Frederic's once-famous *Damnation of Theron Ware*, which was one of Fitzgerald's favorite novels; the cut-throat money society in Wharton's *House of Mirth* and *Custom of the Country*; city life in innumerable novels from Howells, Crane, and Dreiser to Bellow. (Dickstein)

But what happened to that big part of history that speaks of the Native American colonization and cultural erosion? What about the historical value of *Fools Crow* by Welch, for instance? Nowadays, still, regardless of the contributions made by Native literary tradition to the mainstream literature in matters of themes, symbolism and so on, American Indian literature is mostly regarded in matters of ethnocentrism and marginalization, as inferior. But before going into detail on that, it is necessary to define the notion of canon itself.

The concept of a literary canon is generally understood in either of two ways. According to Krupat, on the one hand, the canon is conceived of as a body of texts having the authority of perennial classics. These texts are "the great books" and considered to be nothing less than the very best that has been thought and said.

To understand their content—to have isolated for further meditation their themes or ideas—is to gain or make some nearer approach to timeless wisdom; to apprehend their form is to experience the beautiful or at the least to perceive a significant order.



On the other hand, however, the canon is simply the name for that body of texts which best performs in the sphere of culture the work of legitimating the prevailing social order: canonical texts are, as they always have been, the most useful for such a purpose (although the modality of their usefulness may, of course, alter with time). To understand their content is largely to accept the world view of the socially dominant class; to apprehend their form is to fail to perceive that acceptance as such. Sympathetic contact with these texts tends mostly—although not always or exclusively—to contribute to that ideological conditioning, the production of that consciousness, necessary to conform one willingly to one's—usually subordinate—class position in society. (Krupat 22)

Landow, on the other hand, claims that “belonging to the canon confers status, social, political, economic, aesthetic, none of which can easily be extricated from the others. Belonging to the canon is a guarantee of quality” (Landow). While not belonging to the canon does not state the inexistence of literature or its poor condition, canonical status introduces it to the general public. Nevertheless, it is a complex process which very often (as in the case of some African-American novels) might include misinterpretation of the works. “Gaining entrance clearly allows a work to be enjoyed; failing to do so thrusts it into the limbo of the unnoticed, unread, unenjoyed, un-existing. Canonization, in other words, permits the member of the canon to be read and hence not only exist, but also be immortalized” (Landow).

Harold H. Kolb, Jr. in *Defining the Canon* agrees with Richard Ohmann “that the selection of texts [for the canon] is a political act, one that embodies “complex social relations and a continuing historical process” (Kolb 36). He also states that “a canon is a cultural mirror, imaging our notions of who we are” (Kolb 39). Thus, it is clear that the non-inclusion of American Indian literature into the canon is, on the one hand, a reflection of the political tendencies in the country and ruling class interests, and, on the

other hand, nation-wide cultural illiteracy and unawareness. Although Kolb states that canon is never fixed, it seems that it develops only in the direction of the “white” literature. He does, nevertheless, acknowledge that population and political power are the main factors which influence the admittance into the canon. Thus, African Americans are pretty much successful in their fight for acknowledgement. Kolb’s suggestion of the way the canon should be, in order not to let any important works out, sounds reasonable. He suggests “that we think of the literary canon not as a single authoritarian list and not as a pluralistic cacophony of innumerable voices but as a tiered set of options, relatively stable at one end, relatively open at the other, joined by the possibility of change” (Kolb 40). Nevertheless, his practical application of his theory is somewhat questionable. He divides the canon into three levels, where first level works (writers) are a “must,” the second level ones “should be generally acquainted with,” and the third ones are “a sampling based on interest, community, happenstance”. All American Indian writers but Momaday fall into the third category, which is simply another way of introducing the ethnic, minority literature. Momaday joins the second group, which is basically placed somewhere in between the canon and minority literature and does not seem to have any specific place of its own. The first group (level one) excludes any writers of color on the whole. As Roemer points out, the canon should not contain or restrict the reader but get the reader acquainted with the most important characteristic of the literature and liberate, make the reader go beyond its borders.

Arnold Krupat in *The Voice in the Margin* explores the history of the mainstream’s attention towards American Indian tradition. From his work it becomes

clear that writings that were published in anthologies and collections were not the ones written by American Indian writers, but on Indian subject and by Western scholars. Is that not discrimination? The well-known *Hiawatha* had, in fact, nothing to do with the acceptance of Native American literary tradition and with the expansion of the American literary canon. There have been several gestures in the anthologies of opening the canon by including American Indian poetry translated by western scholars, but it was very much romanticized.

Michelle Vessel in *The Canon and African American Women Writers* points out that “notions such as the recognition of literary masterpieces on the basis of their universality and the organic preservation of those masterpieces are inextricably rooted in standards set by the prevailing critical tradition, which has been indomitably white and male” (Vessel). The tendency to revise the “white” standards of the entry into the literary canon has to be admitted, but nevertheless, there’s been a lot of cultural pressure against revision of the canon, which was widely demonstrated in the mainstream media by publishing top 100 novels to read.

Annette Kolodny sees the problem of entering the canon in a similar light. She states that “the problem of integrating the new scholarship is usually posed within prior categories (regionalism, realism, the Gothic) and standard periodizations (colonial America, the early Republic, the American Renaissance, etc.) and articulated as the need to be conscious of the contributions of women and minority group writers within these categories and periods” (Kolodny 294). Kolodny also investigates the way other “non-white” American literatures are represented in anthologies and finds out that non-

canonical works are mostly divided into sections like “Women Writers” or “Minority Voices,” or often omitted just because there is, so to say, not enough space for them as the “grand” works occupy most of the pages.

It is evident that entering the mainstream canon is not an easy task, although in Roemer’s opinion,

it seems particularly easy to integrate contemporary Indian fiction into survey courses. There are compelling examples of economically, racially, and sexually alienated protagonists; provocative examples of modernist and postmodernist literary experimentation; and profound attempts to define the American landscape. In other words, there are so many easily identifiable bases of comparison between contemporary Indian fiction and other types of twentieth-century American fiction that the texts may seem to teach themselves. (Roemer 585)

The issues American Indian literature addresses, such as the importance of multi-ethnicity, identity, women’s voices, sense of place, and so on, are not marginalized, but are central to literature and social concerns. Roemer suggests all marginalized literatures create their own canons which might assist in breaking into the canon. Nevertheless, he considers this process to be ironic. “The ironies of outsiders imitating insiders in order to make the outside-inside may be the most conspicuous and consistent element in American literary canon formation” (Roemer 583). He identifies four criteria of the formation of American Indian literary canon, i.e. patterns seen within it: addressing the issues Native Americans currently have to deal with, “diversity of viewpoint about an Indian sense of traditional words and place, belief in the multiethnic nature of the Indian experience, and an acceptance of Indian identity coupled with strong resistance against one-dimensional definitions of Indianness” (Roemer 587).

Among the American Indian authors, who have been canonized (included into American Indian literary canon), according to Mona Kratzert and Debora Richey, are Michael Dorris (*Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987), *Cloud Chamber* (1997)); Louise Erdrich (*Love Medicine* (1984), *Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *Bingo Palace* (1994), *Tales of Burning Love* (1996)); D'Arcy McNickle (*Wind from an Enemy Sky* (1978)); Leslie Marmon Silko (*Ceremony* (1977), *Almanac of the Dead* (1991)); James Welch (*Winter in the Blood* (1974), *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), *Fools Crow* (1986)); and Gerald Vizenor (*Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicle* (1978; 1990), *Griever: an American Monkey King in China* (1986), *The Trickster of Liberty* (1988), *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991)). Kratzert and Richey also suggest a number of other writers of Indian descent, who have been left out, to be accepted into the American Indian canon, among whom are Sherman Alexie, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Linda Hogan, Louis D. Owens, David Treuer, and others.

Nevertheless, the formation of American Indian literary canon does not liberate Native American literature from being marginalized. Despite the well promoted multiculturalism, the mainstream society seems to still have problems with differences. Paula Gunn Allen draws attention to the fact that the western reader has a problem studying nonwestern literatures as he tends to address them in terms familiar to him, although most likely those are irrelevant to the object of his studies. Thus, there is the reason why American Indian literature has very often been labeled folklore. It also explains why such terms as “childlike,” “savage,” and “primitive” have been applied (Allen 112).

Accepting American Indian literature into the canon would mean the necessity to break the stereotypes created by centuries of colonization. It would mean having to acknowledge the richness of oral tradition as well as literary works of Native American writers and having to learn how to read and interpret them. It would mean to have to look at Native American literature not as at a marginalized one from the viewpoint of a westerner but from the point of view of Indian people. Therefore, fighting for canon is one of the ways of fighting cultural oppression with the tools that are offered, attacking with the same instrument you have been attacked with, and preserving cultural sovereignty.

All of the things enumerated above are signs of on-going colonialism and resistance to it, and as Krupat points out, these are the conditions that Native American literature is produced in. And since literature is by no means a-political or a-social, according to Cook-Lynn, it is vital to understand the environment, as well as history that, influences creation of literary texts.

Although the mainstream believes today to be the age of post-colonialism, which allows new perspectives on ethnic minorities as well as introduces the voices of these minorities into current discourse, that is hardly the case with Native Americans. European colonization did not take place only over Native lands, but over Native cultures and literatures as well. Native American literatures are the oldest literary tradition on the continent and the last one to be acknowledged by the academia. Nevertheless, according to Vizenor, literature is exactly where Native American cultures survive; it is the expression of sovereignty. Vizenor, though, as well as some other scholars, claims that

using the European legal notions and terms is perpetuating colonialism. He tries to do away with them, by substituting them with the terms he coined himself, those of sovenance, survivance, and transmotion. He explains these notions through indigenous motion in any sphere of life, of action through imagination. He claims that these notions determine the survival of national sovereignty through stories (Vizenor, "Fugitive" 184).

It is through literature that Native Americans practice their sovereignty, just by choosing to tell one story over another, one form of telling it over a different one (Krupat, "Red" 6). Oral tradition, which is continued and incorporated into the written word, is in itself documentation of tribal sovereignty and contains accounts of American Indians' presence on this continent. In addition, literature is tightly connected to tribal realities and communities. Cook-Lynn claims that literature is a powerful tool in the politics of possession and dispossession. That leads us to three main theories that steer academic debates in literary studies nowadays: nationalism, indigenism, and cosmopolitanism. Although post-colonial theory makes nationalism obsolete, indigenous nationalism is different, plus the "post" has not taken place in Indian country yet. It is anticolonial nationalism that fights against colonial epistemologies and systematic knowledge. Nationalists focus on the inherent sovereign rights that the tribes used to possess and puts as its mains purpose the restoration of such rights. Nationalists vote for literary sovereignty; therefore, they deny the inclusion of Native American literature in the American canon but claim the existence of Native American literary canon or tribally specific canons. They are against Native literary works being included in American literature anthologies and would rather see Native American literature taught in a course

separate from American Literature. The main representatives, the three pillars of nationalism, the three W's, are Womack (who argues for literary studies specific to tribes and also literary separatism), Weaver (communitism), and Warrior (with his notion of intellectual sovereignty). Simon Ortiz also argues for development of national literature and points out that sovereignty survives in the ways that tribes adjust to the challenges and changes of the environment and how they incorporate them into their own ways, thus still maintaining who they are. Nationalism, according to Krupat, leads to indigenism, which acknowledges common history and experiences of colonialism of indigenous peoples and draws from indigenous knowledges. Although the two concepts are different, in Krupat's viewpoint, nationalism is shortsighted without cosmopolitanism. That connects to cosmopolitanism, which provides ability to interpret various indigenous knowledges and is based on comparison of one to another to be able to identify cultural peculiarities, as well as find new solutions. The theories mentioned above will be discussed in detail further.

Elaine Jahner points out that questions about sovereignty are questions about boundaries of the communities, as well as cultural boundaries, and literature is identity, cultural distinctiveness, which makes it an expression of sovereignty (qtd. In Krupat, "Red" 6). Christopher Teuton states that stories and criticism are ways of creating worlds (qtd. in Cox 110). Literature is definitely a kind of activism. For instance, during the American Indian Civil rights movement, scholars and writers made their contribution by writing about social realities and histories of the communities. Bauerkemper draws



attention to narrative, stating that through stories there is narration of nationhood (Bauerkemper 28).

Ideas of sovereignty in literature are tightly connected to communities' social happenings, and as literary critics point out, it should be connected to social realities of the communities, story-telling tradition, and histories. Therefore, such theories of literary sovereignty are based and focused on cultural survival and thriving. It seems that discourse on literary sovereignty and discourse on tribal sovereignty that is going on in Indian country have a common purpose, acknowledgement of nationhood, sovereign rights to determine identity, past, present, and future.

## CHAPTER 3

## NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE AND ITS NATURE

Character of Native American Literature

To be able to consider whether what postmodern era and its theory has to offer to Native American literature and if Native American literature can benefit from ideologies of postmodernism, one has to take a closer look at what constitutes indigenous literatures, what characteristics they possess and what goals they pursue. Since American Indian literature has a very particular history of development and struggle for its very survival, it also has to be considered separately from any other, on its own ground. Therefore, before considering applications of postmodernism to Native American literary studies, we will discuss the character and nature of Native American literature and the function it performs for indigenous communities.

Literature is one of the means of telling the truth about the past and history, especially when other means are cut off, as was the case with Native American communities. Kelly Morgan, Standing Rock Lakota, argues that “imaginative literature – fiction and poetry – is a more accurate gauge of cultural realities than the ethnographic, anthropological, and historical record” (qtd. in Womack 15). She goes on to say that literature is an important factor in cultural survival of nations because it preserves and extends cultural knowledge and practices to younger generations. Literature, unlike “scientific” representations of Native Americans, is never fixed, and definitely more

flexible, always growing and changing under the influence of diverse members of Native American communities, and what is even more important, it is influenced and molded by these communities. Morgan, supported by many other scholars, believes the written word to be a continuation and a means of carrying on the oral traditions, and by no means either inferior or separate from the oral stories of the tribes.

Until 1960's and 1970's, the times of the American Indian Movement for civil rights, Native American histories and viewpoints have been largely ignored and misrepresented. Mostly, even if Native American histories were of some concern, they were dealt with only in the relation of law and federal Indian policies or, if the accounts were performed by the anthropologists and ethnographers, it was the description of tribal histories with narratives that stopped before 1900 (since Native Americans generally were believed to be a dying race). To cut the story short, Native American literary accomplishments were mostly suppressed unless they fit the interpretations the mainstream society wanted to hear and accommodated Euro-Americans in some way strengthening their claims of authority. In contrast to that, Native American literatures have expressed a different experience of history, as well as a different understanding of the past. Many scholars agree, in particular Simon Ortiz and Joy Porter, that Indian literature is an important component of Native resilience, as well as its power and strength.

Today, at last, the scholastic world finally comes to admit that the history of American literature did not start when Columbus "discovered" America, but long before that; that the origins of it go back to the oral literatures of the indigenous people of North

America. Indian oral literatures, due to the historical consequences, especially the last five hundred years of colonization, have undergone birth and rebirth numerous times on the American continent, but even then still serve as the basis of Native American heritage and the starting point of contemporary Native American literatures.

Categorized into four porous genre groupings: ritual dramas, including chants, ceremonies, and rituals themselves; songs, narratives, and oratory, these sacred and non-sacred storied expressions of language articulate, amongst many other things, Indian understandings of the fundamental truths of creation and the origins of human beings and their relationship to the universe. (Porter 42)

These forms continue to develop and translate into contemporary Native American literatures. Since the oral traditions of the past are often incorporated into contemporary fiction, the distinction between the past and the present is often erased and insignificant. The linear understanding of time does not apply here.

Indigenous oral traditions are not obsolete by any means. The stories speak not only to the past and history but also to the consciousness that is ongoing (Porter 42). Porter remarks that “Indian oral traditions are not fragile: in spite tremendous adversity they survive and continue to grow, reflecting change and diversity within the cultures that produce them and those cultures’ relationships over time both with other Indians and non-Indians” (Porter 42). Womack urges that Native American literature, with its centuries long history of oral tradition, stories, and commentaries, both oral and written, is separate from Euro-American literature or any other minority literature, and, therefore, should be treated as such, and exactly the indigenous commentaries should be the ones to provide models for interpretations of indigenous literatures and form the basics of literary aesthetics.

I have felt that literature rises out of land and language and stories, and given that tribal nations have different landscapes, different languages, and different stories from the United States and England (and, importantly, tribal members and their nations are defined, legally, differently from the rest of the American citizenry, including America's minorities), those differences must suggest rejection of the approach to teaching Native literature as simply some kind of "minority extension" of the American canon. (Womack 76)

Womack remarks that not enough, or rather little, has been done to pay due respect and attention to the oral tradition and the principles that it provides for interpretation of Native American literatures. There is a great need to articulate the perspectives that the oral tradition gives on the genres and themes of native literatures, as well as their characters, plots, settings, philosophies, and the very structure and organization of literary works. Oral tradition provides a valuable context for understanding current issues on religion and politics, as well as other things Native American societies are struggling with today. Womack urges scholars to investigate the question of what oral tradition teaches about interpreting tribal literary texts that are written under the influence of the same oral tradition, since it is itself a collection of narratives and, therefore, a literature of its own. He states that there are certain key stories that, when studied thoroughly enough, can contribute greatly to developing and formulating culturally sensitive interpretative strategies (Womack 76). By examining oral traditions of various indigenous cultures, scholars might make a discovery that whatever technique is currently considered to be a borrowing from, for instance, the mainstream literary tradition might appear in reality to be a typical characteristic of a Native American oral tradition that has been practiced since time immemorial. For example, Womack determines through thorough examination of the Turtle story of the Creek nation that the technique of persona writing is

traditionally Creek, and the fact that it is utilized by so many Creek writers is not a coincidence because this technique is deeply rooted in the oral tradition of the nation (Womack 77).

Porter identifies several important characteristics of Native oral literary tradition drawing on common traditional beliefs that are still relevant to contemporary Indian literatures. These include the belief in interconnectedness of all things, including physical and spiritual worlds, as well as animate and inanimate objects, and therefore, the belief in the vital importance of balance of all the powers in the world as well as balance with the surrounding environment, whether it is geographical, communal, or spiritual. “Thus the self in oral traditions has unlimited context: it benefits from a profound sense of kinship to all animate and inanimate forms of being and there is no split between the sacred and the secular or between humanity and the rest of creation” (Porter 43).

Particularly interesting in the oral tradition is the reverence for language as a means of symbol and thought as well as silence, which serves as a climate for the act of language since oral tradition is all about performance. Therefore, the meaning is created and delivered not only by means of language itself, although it is the bearer of the sacred. As Porter points out, those writers who follow these traditions create works that are in their nature conversations, i.e. interactions between the text, the writer, and the community. Thus, contemporary literature that follows the principles of the oral tradition operates within a different way of knowing specific only to tribal narratives. Porter emphasizes that “storytelling in the oral tradition established a dialectic relationship between text and interpretation”, which to her mind unites Native American literature

with postmodern tendencies (Porter 44). She also points out that it is vital to understand Indian artistic expression, and that includes literary expression as well, is tribally, and therefore, culturally specific, oriented around specific beliefs and landscapes, as well as rather often around sacred ceremonies.

Under the influence of five hundred years of contact and colonization by the Europeans, Native American literatures have undergone numerous changes but, nevertheless, still draw their strength from the oral tradition. During these five hundred years, Indian literatures performed the function of an honest journalist who has been recording the struggles of Indian nations through the wars with the European powers, the signing of the treaties, the broken trust, the civilization policies, which included forced Christianization, land loss, and the boarding schools, termination and relocation, and now is finally witnessing the new era for Native nations as well as its literatures. All the histories of Native American survivals and continuity were well documented by writers of the age: the alcoholism, brought about by the fur trade, the alienation introduced by relocation programs and boarding schools, the grief of the loss of sacred sites and ceremonies caused by allotment and other land policies as well as prohibition of practice of traditional religions – all of that is the bulk of literature created by Native American writers, as well as the perseverance of tribal oral traditions. However, the importance of Native American literature has not historically been eagerly accepted, if acknowledged at all, by Western Academia. Nevertheless, that does not negate the existence of Indian literature and its thriving. Craig Womack makes an important comment on that subject:

tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the *tree*, the oldest literatures in the Americas,

the most American of American literatures. *We are* the canon. Native people have been on this continent at least thirty thousand years, and the stories tell us we have been here even longer than that, that we were set down by the Creator on this continent, that we originated here. For much of this time period, we have had literatures. Without Native American literature, there is no American canon. We should not allow ourselves, through the definitions we choose and the language we use, to ever assume we are outside the canon; we should not play along and confess to being a second rate literature. (Womack 7)

In recent decades, Native American literature has broadened its context and there has been much debate how to identify its position in relation to other national and transnational discourses (Porter 59). Some scholars often regard it as one of the postcolonial literatures, but that seems to be a little too easy of a solution since ‘post,’ as it has been argued earlier, is not quite there yet in Indian Country. Porter suggests that the conditions Native Americans currently live in are more likely to be described as paracolonialism, and therefore, Native American literature should be classified as literature of resistance. Porter tends to agree that postmodernism, as well as many other intellectual developments of the mainstream society, “can place sophisticated and severe limitations upon the intellectual bases to Indian claims to literary and extra-literary voice and agency” (Porter 59). Whether it is true or not and what kind of limitations, if any, postmodernism can place on Native American literature will be discussed later in detail with consideration of the main characteristics of postmodernism that have been explored in the previous chapter.



### Native American Literature – Literature of Resistance

Another important aspect of Native American literature that can not be left out is the fact that during the five centuries of colonization it has become one of the main tools of resistance. Therefore, omitting this function of Native American literature would be erroneous and would also lead to misunderstanding of the importance of indigenous literatures and their connectedness to tribal communities.

For many centuries Indigenous communities have been voicing their resistance to policies of colonialism aimed at the destruction of their cultures by means of literature. In most cases the indigenous writers have been using conventional language as well as commonly accepted forms to voice this resistance, i.e. the English language in the case of North America and such literary forms as novels, autobiographies, short stories, essays, histories and so on, i.e. both fiction and non-fiction forms. It does not mean, however, that these forms were ‘discovered’ by Native Americans only when contact took place and then later on adopted by them through the civilization policies (with the exception of the novel, although one has to keep in mind that some kind of narrative was definitely in use of Native American tribes in pre-contact period). At the same, the fact that Indian writers use some of the western forms does not speak for their inability to be authentic either. Why not dismantle the master’s house with his own tools? Why should not this approach work? And who said that using those tools automatically classifies one’s works as inauthentic? Is there something in the Western form that makes the indigenous content insignificant? This is a rather controversial matter, because on the one hand, using

conventional forms attracts more attention and understanding, but on the other hand, poses the dangers of not supporting the message the writers are trying to convey. Michael Wilson gives a perfect example that proves the opposite: “indigenous writers George Copway, William Whipple Warren, and Chief Elias Johnson, among others, offer historical narratives quite different from the American vision of heroic triumph over the forces of pagan savagism, yet they write within the linear tradition of European historiography” (Wilson ix). Another good example is Charles Eastman who exposes Christian hypocrisy toward Native Americans through a typical European literary form, autobiography. As Wilson points out, there is a good reason why Native American writers challenge the Euro-American ideology of erasing Indians from the American landscape but not necessarily the language and form (although it is also important to mention that more Indian writers are undertaking writing in their indigenous languages in order to preserve them and as a better means of supporting their communities and cultural heritage). A larger audience is more likely to respond to the issues laid out in conventional form than in experimental ones that are hard to grasp.

Disembodied and institutional, the forms of literature such as the sermon or short story nonetheless provide a useful (but not neutral) medium of exchange for the provocative thought of resistance literatures. Indeed, these forms seem to promise a transparent medium through which indigenous writers can communicate reason and evidence to sway public opinion against oppression and injustice. (Wilson x)

However, although the usage of conventional forms to express resistance could be useful and fruitful, caution is necessary because these Western literary forms are by no means neutral and transparent as it might seem at first sight. They rather often reflect the philosophies and relationships of power of the dominant society that are not necessarily

in the best interest of Native American nations. For instance, novel and short story are likely to be the most conventional of all the literary forms, but they are not of indigenous origin, and, therefore, might not always reflect indigenous worldviews, even though they might be filled with Native American content, i.e. elements of oral traditions, histories, and tribal beliefs. As Wilson remarks, these literary forms are based on conflict and resolution: “humanity against humanity; humanity against nature; the individual against culture; against a particular ideology, or against the forces of history” (Wilson x). Many Native American writers mastered these techniques to represent the conflict between the ideology and politics of colonialism and indigenous communities. However, in many Native societies the whole idea of opposition and conflict as cultural basis might be regarded as antithetical to the communal perception of the world in which everything is related.

Another question one has to consider is whether form and content are interdependent and to what extent. Paula Gunn Allen remarks that in many works that pertain to Native American tribes, the form determines the content to a great extent, especially when the writers are of non-Native origin. She points out that often, because of following the imperatives created by the Western oriented communities, the majority of the writers dealing with Native American issues tend to create mixed-blood main characters and tend to incorporate the theme of cultural conflict into the psychological struggles and the very being of the protagonists (Allen 81). Therefore, she assumes that the issues brought to the public attention are not the ones that communities are most concerned with, but the stereotypical ones that the general public is used to. The success

of the characters of such texts is vested in their ability to overcome the conflict and then reintegrate themselves into the tribal reality, which Wilson, along with Bevis, calls homing in or coming home. This concept of coming home is what determines the primary mode of knowledge in Native American literary works (Wilson xi). The plot of such novels results in failure and tragedy if the main characters are alienated and can not come to terms with their societies and fit in. This case of Native American protagonists is represented through the idea of being caught between two worlds. The whole notion of being caught between two worlds is often perceived by Native scholars as introduced by the mainstream society because that is how the general public envisions Native Americans. Nevertheless, as James Ruppert points out, this perception of both who the writers are and who the protagonists are is not the most favorable for Native Americans. Therefore, a better and more appropriate way to look at them is “not as between two cultures (a romantic and victimist perspective), but as participants in two rich cultural traditions” (Ruppert 7). This way Wilson comes to a conclusion that “indigenous fiction that focuses on conflict and resolution, then, may tell much less about the cultural narratives of an indigenous community than they tell about necessities of the literary form – in other words, fiction that is not ‘true to life’ so much as it is ‘true to form’” (Wilson xii).

Thus, by using conventional literary forms do Native American writers unwillingly support the colonial stereotype and feed the interests of the general ignorant public? Kwame Anthony Appiah in *Is the “Post” in “Postcolonial” the “Post” in “Postmodern”?* speaks of the “Otherness-machines” which the minority and third-world

countries' cultures often become for the mainstream societies, for the colonizer, who always interprets them in terms of his own traditional criteria. The author points out, as well, that the minority cultures undergo a risk of being always perceived as "Otherness-machines" and talks about the fact that the postmodern reader's demands are not far from what modernism demanded. It is also mentioned that there should be a distinction between the role that the third-world, or minority, cultures play for Euro-American postmodernism and the role that postmodernism plays for the third-world, minority culture. Could this be applied to Native American literature? It can be stated without any doubt that Native American cultures have been for centuries perceived as "Otherness-machines" and, as already mentioned, that the entire history of Native American/Euro-American relations was written in the terms of "Other," "us-them." The attempts to assimilate Native American cultures and make them "more like us" still haven't been abandoned. The other question is what role Native American literature plays for Euro-American postmodernism and what role postmodernism plays for Native American literature. The question is not that easy to answer. A possible answer is that Native American literature, by trying to fit in the frames of Euro-American postmodernism, supports the colonizer and promotes the process of assimilation, but if treated on its own terms and trying to be creative, like Ortiz puts it, adjusts postmodernism to its needs and makes it Native, cultural survival might be the outcome.

So, is it possible then to make conventional literary forms work for Native American literature or are these forms just an implicit way of assimilation? Wilson also points out that there are ways to make such narratives of conflict and resolution

indigenous by challenging the form and turning the “figure of liminal mixed blood from one of unresolved tragedy into one of vitality, humor, and survival” where attention is not focused on the resolution of the protagonist’s mixed-blood identity, but on his inner world and traits of characters, i.e. ability to demonstrate compassion for those around him (Wilson xii). (Nevertheless, Wilson does not seem to consider the “homing in” plot to be one of such ways since it is based on conflict and resolution.) That turns the narrative into the one of resistance that implicitly critiques the narrative of mixed-blood conflict, which creates dangerous misrepresentations of indigenous peoples. Wilson also remarks that many Native American writers for these purposes use oral traditions in their fiction as a means of resisting meta-narratives of the mainstream society that suggest the disappearance of indigenous peoples. Therefore, Wilson also suggests that the tragedy and plight for mixed-bloods is just another meta-narrative created by those in power. However, some scholars, including David Treuer, in cases when oral tradition is used in written literature, question the ethics and authenticity of Native American literature. Treuer states that when oral tradition is widely used it eventually becomes mere props, which are present on the stage, but at the same time do not constitute the play, therefore, creating only an illusion of authenticity (Treuer 60). In such cases, things representative of tribal oral traditions are transformed into signs of Indianness that are often copied and reproduced by those who possess no knowledge of tribes, both by Native and non-Native writers. Nevertheless, Wilson emphasizes that the situation described above is not all-pervading. He does agree that there are writers who use oral tradition as means of creating props within the context of conventional literary forms, but at the same time

there are writers who base the entire trajectory of their texts “either on specific oral stories or on narratives derived from concepts of orality” (often rewriting traditional oral stories), therefore, making the oral tradition both into props and stage and providing alternative forms of narrative resistant to generic expectations (Wilson xiii).

Notions of purity and impurity, authenticity and inauthenticity place Native American literature into binary oppositions, and the question whether it is possible to resolve them is of vital importance to some scholars. Nevertheless, it would be also crucial to consider whether such oppositions, in fact, limit the scope of Native American literature and divert attention from the fight for independence and the urgent issues of Native communities into alienating theoretical debates. It seems more significant to stress the importance of representation in literature of a Native belief and perspective of their own identity on their own terms. It can serve as one of the means of authenticity (if the binary opposition of authentic-inauthentic has to be considered, which is often the case because of the misleading representations of Native Americans by the New Age literature), therefore, creating literature of resistance and avoiding turning tribal beliefs into mere signs and props that create only the illusion of Native American literature instead of pursuing the goal of establishing Native national literature.

The situation with the possible applications of postmodernism to Native American literature is similar to the one described above on the issues whether conventional forms (postmodernism is after all a tool of the mainstream society) benefit Native American literary works or on the contrary deprive them of indigenusness. As it has been described earlier, conventional literary forms at times can be antithetical to Native

philosophies and often pursue aims of their own rather than supporting indigenous purposes. On the other hand, Native American writers also have an ability to convert such forms in ways to make them serve Native goals and represent Native perspective, thus creating indigenous literature of resistance by means of the mainstream society, and therefore, like Simon Ortiz mentions, adjusting the borrowings from other cultures in such a manner as to make them indigenous. That constitutes one of the most vital characteristics and abilities of Native American literature which define its very nature. Thus, the question is whether the same adjustments are possible with postmodern theory, whether conversion into Indianness is something that the essence of the postmodern does not deny. Would that sustain the principles of colonialism or be a fine example of dismantling the house of the master with his own tools? Does Native American literature need external theories to be able to overcome five hundred years of submission and oppression or is the way to do that is already present within its own nature?



## CHAPTER 4

## POSTMODERNISM

Postmodern Theory

Postmodernism, which has been called a fad by Huyssen in 1984, has over time gained ever more power, both supporters and oppositionists, and therefore has become one of the trends that can not be ignored since it has already provoked so many debates. It has become “a battleground of conflicting opinions and political forces” (Harvey 39). In 1984 in *Mapping the Postmodern*, Huyssen described postmodernism in the following way:

what appears on one level as the latest fad, advertising pitch and hollow spectacle is part of a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility for which the term 'postmodernism' is actually, at least for now, wholly adequate. The nature and depth of that transformation are debatable, but transformation it is. I don't want to be misunderstood as claiming that there is a wholesale paradigm shift of the cultural, social and economic orders; any such claim clearly would be overblown. But in an important sector of our culture there is a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices and discourse formations which distinguishes a post- modern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a preceding period. (Huyssen 8)

The reasons for final rejection of modernism and search of new ideas were numerous, but among the most important ones that David Harvey points out, is the understanding that there is “more to learn from the study of popular and vernacular landscapes than from the pursuit of some abstract, theoretical, doctrinaire ideals;” it was time to create “for people rather than for Man” (Harvey 40).

The shift from modernism towards the postmodern could be felt in all spheres of life, including literature. According to McHale, the novel became postmodern by shifting from an epistemological to an ontological dominant (McHale 12). This shift was characterized by attempts to foreground the matters of how different realities, that oftentimes are quite radical, can coexist in the same plane, collide, and intertwine while the perspective of modernism used to be focused on exploring the meaning of a complicated but singular (compared to the postmodern plural) reality. As a result of the postmodern attempts, the boundary between science fiction and fiction (reality and its possible interpretations) disappeared leaving it up to the characters to find their way out of the confusion and figure out what world or reality they function in and how to act accordingly. “Even to reduce the problem of perspective to autobiography, says one of Borges’ characters, is to enter the labyrinth: ‘Who was I? Today’s self, bewildered, yesterday’s, forgotten; tomorrow’s, unpredictable?’ The question marks tell it all” (Harvey 41).

Harvey poses several important questions as to the understanding of what postmodernism is and what kind of shift has occurred brought about by the postmodern. Among the matters of concern that Harvey identifies are the following: whether postmodernism in fact represents a radical break with modernism or just an opposition to certain ideas and trends of high-modernism; if postmodern is a style of its own or whether it should be regarded merely as a periodizing concept; whether it has a revolutionary potential due to its revolt against to any kind of meta-narrative and its particular interest in giving way to “other voices” and “other worlds” that have been

silenced under the oppression of the mainstream meta-narrative for too long (i.e. women; sexual minorities; ethnic minorities; colonized peoples who happen to have their own unique stories to tell); whether it is nothing but commercialization of modernism and further degeneration of its aspirations to “market eclecticism”; whether we view it as originating in the cultural logic of capitalism or whether we attribute its rise to the emergence of postindustrial society with postmodernism being its new representation of the state of art (Harvey 42).

Hassan, in his attempts to identify differences between modernism and postmodernism, sketched several characteristics of postmodernism that might be helpful in understanding the principle of postmodern. Among the notions ascribed by Hassan to postmodernism are the following: paraphysics/Dadaism; antiform (disjunctive, open); play (as opposed to purpose); anarchy; process/performance/happening (opposed to finished work); decreation/deconstruction/antithesis (in opposition to creation/totalization/synthesis); dispersal (opposed to centering); text/intertext (opposed to genre and boundary); rhetoric (absence of semantics); combination (opposed to selection); rhizome/surface (opposed to roots/depth); against interpretation/misreading; anti-narrative/against grand narrative; idiolect (opposed to master code); mutant (opposed to type); schizophrenia (opposed to paranoia); difference-difference/trace (opposed to origin/cause); irony (opposed to metaphysics); indeterminacy; immanence (opposed to transcendence) (Hassan 123-4). One should be careful, however, with the oppositions provided by Hassan, but they provide a reasonable starting point to understand the essence of postmodernism. For instance, mastery of the text is considered by the

postmodernists to be a vain purpose; the text does not have to be well structured and organized in the principles of modernism, but the process can be chaotic and uncontrollable (one of the new notions introduced is the death of the author), in which anarchy and change can form a state of play. Postmodern literary critics do not judge literary works by the codes of the genres; the boundaries are often erased and the work is viewed as a text paying attention to its rhetoric and idiolect. Thus, any text can be compared to any text regardless of its form.

What appears to be the most startling fact about postmodernism, according to Harvey, is “its total acceptance of ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic,” exactly what modernism used to be organized against (Harvey 44). But unlike modernism, postmodernism perceives these notions in completely different way. It does not try either to counteract chaos or fight it; it swims in fragmentation and chaos as if that is all that there is. Foucault remarks on this matter that one should avoid uniformity by preferring difference and multiplicity, achieving mobile arrangements over systems and stability; he advocates developing thoughts and desires by disjunction, juxtaposition, and proliferation. He points out that the sedentary is not productive; the nomadic, however, produces change (Harvey 44). Postmodernism uses reference to the past to be able to legitimize itself. However, it is not just a continuation of modernism or its opposition. Harvey claims that real revolutions can take place when hidden and latent things that have been suppressed for a long time finally become explicit and dominant in the new age.

The fact that postmodernism does not try to deny notions of overwhelming chaos and fragmentation, but on the contrary, embraces them implies a whole new set of consequences. For instance, it harbors the fact that Lyotard and Foucault absolutely deny any acceptance or validity of existence of meta-narrative, meta-theory, and meta-language or any kind of broad or generalizing schemas of interpretation that can connect and represent all things without exception. The idea that universal truths are out of our reach and can not be specified, that is in the case if they exist at all, is rooted in the same notion of ephemerality. Foucault and Lyotard act against the totalizing forces employed before arguing for the plurality of ‘power-discourse’ formations (Foucault) and ‘language games’ (Lyotard) (Harvey 45). As a matter of fact, Lyotard uses meta-narrative as a means of defining the postmodern as an incredulity towards meta-theory (meta-narrative). In *La Condition Postmoderne*, Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernity by means of its relation to modernity; he identifies any science that uses meta-discourse and makes an appeal to any kind of grand narrative (for instance, “the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth”) as a means to legitimize itself as modern, and, therefore, since postmodernism is in opposition to modernism, the purpose of the postmodern is to defy metanarratives (Lyotard, “The Postmodern” xxiv).

The source that many explanations of postmodernism go back to is Foucault’s work on power and knowledge. He comes to the conclusion that

there is an intimate relation between the systems of knowledge (discourses) which codify techniques and practices for the exercise of social control and domination within particular localized contexts. The prison, the asylum, the hospital, the university, the school, the

psychiatrist's office, are all examples of sites where a dispersed and piecemeal organization of power is built up independently of any systematic strategy of class domination. What happens at each site cannot be understood by appeal to some overarching general theory. (qtd. in Harvey 45)

According to Foucault, there are no relations of power without resistance. He also points out that there is no utopian escape from the power-knowledge relation in non-repressive ways. The only way to influence such relation is to influence the way knowledge is constituted and constructed at the particular locations (sites) where localized power-discourse dominates. Therefore, the resistance should be localized as well, the resistance to the institutions and techniques of organized oppression.

Another issue that should be addressed is "otherness" and "other worlds" in postmodernist fiction. Postmodern fiction consists of a multitude of worlds that coexist with each other. This pluralism of worlds could well be depicted by Foucault's concept of heterotopia which exactly expresses what the postmodern fiction is trying to portray. Heterotopia in Foucault's understanding is the coexistence in "an impossible space" of a "large number of fragmentary possible worlds" or in Harvey's words, "incommensurable spaces that are juxtaposed or superimposed upon each other" (Harvey 48). The characters' task in this new postmodern fiction is no longer to unravel the great mystery but to figure out what world they appear to be, what has to be done in that world, and which part of them, or better, which self of them should perform the task.

One more issue worth addressing is the way postmodernism views language and communication. Deconstructionism, introduced by Derrida, appeared to be a very powerful stimulus for the development of postmodern theory. As for the signifier and the

signified that, according to the modernist theory, were supposed to have a tight and identifiable relation, in the poststructuralist viewpoint they are “continually breaking apart and re-attaching in new combinations” (Harvey 49). Deconstructionism in the case of literature is more of a way of looking at the texts and reading them rather than a philosophy.

Writers who create texts or use words do so on the basis of all the other texts and words they have encountered, while readers deal with them in the same way. Cultural life is then viewed as a series of texts intersecting with other texts, producing more texts (including that of the literary critic, who aims to produce another piece of literature in which texts under consideration are intersecting freely with other texts that happen to have affected his or her thinking). This intertextual weaving has a life of its own. Whatever we write conveys meanings we do not or could not possibly intend, and our words cannot say what we mean. It is vain to try and master a text because the perpetual interweaving of texts and meanings is beyond our control. Language works through us. Recognizing that, the deconstruction impulse is to look inside one text for another, dissolve one text into another, or build one text into another. (Harvey 51)

This seems to be connected to another notion characteristic of the postmodern theory, developed by Baudrillard and heavily relied on by Jameson in his critique, that will be discussed somewhat later, - the notion of simulacra. The way Harvey describes the usage of the language and the construction texts reminds the essence of simulacrum – copy of a copy. That poses an interesting question: does Harvey suggest that nothing new can be created? Has everything already been said and expressed and the only thing left to do is numerous combinations and various clusters of what has already been thrown out there by predecessors? Does postmodernism negate creativity and perpetuate stagnation and absence of the new at the same time stuck in the middle of nowhere needing a reference to the past because it does not envision a future? Derrida identifies collage as the main

source and form of the postmodern discourse. Exactly this collage is supposed to be the creator of meaning, if that meaning or variations and even rather suggestions of meaning can ever be found (Jameson considers postmodernism to be the killer of meaning and sense). Since there can be numerous combinations, the plurality of collage never ends, hence the never-ending variations of meaning and the postmodern belief in the inability to identify the truth.

Many scholars identify another important characteristic of postmodernism as responsibility to otherness. Some tend to believe that postmodernism failed to perform this function. White refers to the reason of its failure as postmodern impertinence, “the carnivalesque philosophical laughter and slapping of faces that postmodernists so often identify as their response to the challenges and criticism by modernists” (qtd. in Gibbons 97). The question is also what White means by postmodern impertinence; is it the rebellious tendencies of postmodern theory to reevaluate and question social values that he is referring to? He points out that the overemphasis of postmodern thought on this impertinence that is praised as a means of questioning and challenging the piety of the established ideology threatens the fulfillment of its responsibility to otherness. Does White imply that postmodernism in its parody tends to go overboard?

Linda Hutcheon points out that many scholars tend to identify postmodernism in art, including literature, as art which focuses mainly on investigation of its own internal nature, as well as possibilities of its discourse or language. She remarks that at first sight it might appear that postmodernism is primarily interested in the process of its own causes, “its production and reception,” as well as its relation to the past expressed through



parody. Nevertheless, Hutcheon argues that the most important component in the equation is parody, which “paradoxically brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself, to a discursive world of socially defined meaning systems (past and present) - in other words, to ideology and history” (Hutcheon, “A Poetics” 179). She stresses that postmodern creation, i.e. art including literary works, is undeniably historical and political exactly because it is parodic. She states that postmodernism is a contradictory venture in its very nature:

its art forms (and its theory) use and abuse, install and then subvert convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past. In implicitly contesting in this way such concepts as aesthetic originality and textual closure, postmodernist art offers a new model for mapping the borderline between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet within neither, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe. (Hutcheon, “A Poetics” 180)

The summarizing idea of postmodernism is the absence of center (Shirvani 291).

Linda Hutcheon tries to investigate the positive sides and influences of postmodernism. She presents her points of view on what postmodernism is and how it functions from a postculturalist perspective, “which sees the absence of the center as an opportunity created by decentering moves designed to open up ideology and social life to an appreciation of difference” (Shirvani 291). According to Shirvani, postculturalists in viewing postmodernism tend to ask questions rather than provide conclusions and find answers. They side with the point of view that full understanding and mastery of the text is not possible since there are forces, for instance, historic and linguistic, that can not be mastered. Therefore, postculturalists mostly open up discussions and enjoy contradictions

while constantly renewing the list of questions. On the other hand, according to Fredric Jameson, the factors that shape culture are historical and economic and, therefore, every position on postmodernism in culture is a reflection of one's political position and opinion (Shirvani 291). Jameson also finds a direct connection between postmodern views and capitalism and its world development. Shirvani remarks that "postmodernism has ushered in a cultural and experiential break with the past. It has thereby ended the distinction between 'high' and 'mass' culture crucial to modernism and engendered new categories, forms, and texts for art" (Shirvani 291). He continues by saying that "aesthetic changes stem from shifts in capitalism and politics because art and culture have become commodities integrally related to structures of economics and politics" (Shirvani 291). Although Hutcheon and Jameson base their opinions upon the same definition of postmodernism, i.e. that postmodernism tends towards the absence of center (although Jameson places the logic of capitalism at the center of postmodernism), they view postmodernism in two quite different lights, Jameson – as a movement having negative impact on the society by deconstructing everything that has been considered valuable, Hutcheon – as a new window of opportunity and reevaluation of everything.

Hutcheon positions postmodernism as "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (Hutcheon, "A Poetics" 231). However, she also admits the commercialization of culture as a tendency characteristic to postmodern era. Hutcheon's main interest lies in the interpretation of history by postmodernism, i.e. historiographic metafiction. She is fascinated by the way such novels implement irony to subvert history but not reject it at the same time and play with the idea of historical

objectivity using it as a means to rethink and reevaluate the past. “For Hutcheon, postmodernism questions both historical objectivity and artistic subjectivity without denying either one. It also challenges simple binary distinctions between life and art in order to formulate an open, flexible discourse that stresses the constructedness of both life and art” (Shirvani 292). Hutcheon points out that by problematizing subjectivity, postmodernism plays an important role. In her opinion, the perspective that has been marginalized earlier, i.e. decentered, takes on a new role and function by acquiring significance through recognition that culture is never homogeneous, as it was assumed, but possesses variety, whether it is ethnic, class or sexual differences. Therefore, the concept of “alienated otherness” is substituted by the concept of differences giving way to “the assertion of, not centralized sameness, but of decentralized community – another postmodern paradox” (Hutcheon, “A Poetics” 12).

In contrast to Hutcheon’s viewpoint, Jameson regards the absence of center as the death of the subject, complete loss of meaning and history, as well as aesthetic inquiry. This loss in its turn gives birth to the key terms of Jameson’s critique, which are schizophrenia and simulacrum (Shirvani 292). What matters in a simulacrum is surface; everything, including truth and meaning, is replaced by surfaces. Therefore, the distinction between outside and inside is lost and the subject becomes fragmented. Thus, simulacrum can be described as an empty and meaningless imitation of reality without any reference. Hutcheon, nevertheless, opposes this opinion by stating that truth and reference have not been completely abandoned; they have just “ceased to be unproblematic issues” (Hutcheon, “A Poetics” 223). She sees postmodernism as a means

of questioning of the meaning of “real” and how one can know what it is, not as degeneration or hyperreality that has no connection or reference to meaning. In her opinion, postmodernism achieves questioning of representation without reducing it to empty simulacrum, thus drawing attention to the act of representation, its possibilities, outcomes, and dangers.

Shirvani states that the difference of opinion between Hutcheon and Jameson can be attributed to the fact that Hutcheon, as a feminist and a woman (both roles have been suppressed by the dominant male society for centuries), gains an opportunity for her voice to be heard. She acquires certain powers that are provided by postmodern cultural ideologies. Jameson, on the other hand, with the loss of centralization appears to lose his positions of power, both as a Marxist and a male. Therefore, Jameson claims that postmodernism is meaningless since it questions and renounces social values and status. This is exactly the situation that Hutcheon sees as full of new opportunities giving a way to a great variety of possibilities.

Jameson sees the age of postmodernity as promoting a-historical thinking. He also claims that “we are now free from alienation, but only because we are free from every other feeling as well. There is no longer a self present to do the feeling, but such feelings are free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a particular kind of euphoria” (Shirvani 294). This opinion seems to suggest that insensitivity eventually develops into indifference of a kind towards any reality or truth, (since postmodernism offers that there is no universal truth and reality is just a matter of interpretation) therefore, making all of it irrelevant.

Hutcheon strongly disagrees with the opinion that postmodernism discards history. She states that postmodern is “an attempt to re-historicize – not de-historicize – art and theory” (Hutcheon, “A Poetics” 225). By means of historical novels she tries to prove that postmodernism is neither naïve nor a-historical. She remarks that historiographic metafiction does not search for truths and, unlike modernist tendencies, neither discards previous descriptions of the past nor tries to reestablish them, but might only suggest a new interpretation or, to be more specific, one of the possibilities of new interpretations. In response to Jameson, she writes:

most theorists of postmodernism who see it as a “cultural dominant”... agree that it is characterized by the results of late capitalist dissolution of bourgeois hegemony and the development of mass culture. I would agree and, in fact, argue that the increasing uniformization of mass culture is one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism exists to challenge. Challenge but not deny. But it does seek to assert difference, not homogenous identity... the very concept of difference could be said to be a typically postmodern contradiction; “difference” unlike “otherness” has no exact opposite against which to define itself. Postmodern culture then has a contradictory relationship to what we usually label our dominant, liberal humanist culture. Postmodernism differs from this, not in its humanistic contradictions, but in the provisionality of its response to them; it refuses to posit any structure or ... master narrative. ... This does not mean that knowledge somehow disappears. There is no radically new paradigm here, even if there is change. (qtd. in Shirvani 294)

One of the most important points that Hutcheon makes is the distinction between “difference”, which as she claims belongs to the postmodern era, and “otherness”, which is one of the main notions of colonialism, according to Edward Said. Nevertheless, in her description of postmodernism, it appears to be rather passive in its goals since it puts forth the questions, but at the same time neither denies nor asserts anything and does not attempt to make any significant change. As for the issues of history that both Hutcheon

and Jameson take so much interest in, according to Hutcheon, postmodernism suggests a unique way to subject the way we think we know about the past to questioning, while Jameson believes postmodernism simply obliterates the past as we know it (he suggests that the past is fixed, while Hutcheon suggests there are numerous ways of interpreting it). According to Jameson, erasure of past is due to postmodernism's schizophrenia and results in the loss of personal identity by the loss of the temporal (Shirvani 295).

For Linda Huntcheon, in the spirit of the postmodern the author has a right to inscribe timeless or universal values (Shirvani 295). As a matter of fact, postmodern art does point out the dependence of values and their interpretation upon context, therefore stressing that they are constructs and thus can fluctuate and vary depending upon the situation. It would be only reasonable to ask: is postmodernism a-moral since values are what dictates social morality? Does postmodernism make values into a parody? On the matter of parody as an ironic mode, Hutcheon remarks:

Parody is a perfect postmodern form, ... it paradoxically ... incorporates and challenges that which it parodies [and forces] ... reconsideration of the notion of originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations. ... While theorists like Jameson ... see this loss of the modernist unique, individual style as a negative, as an imprisoning of the text in the past through pastiche, it has been seen by postmodern artists as a liberating challenge to a definition of subjectivity and creativity that has for too long ignored the role of history in art and thought. (qtd. in Shirvani 295)

According to Jameson, because of the collapse of the ideologies of high-modernism and its conceptions of style, the artists have no choice, nowhere to turn to but to the past, therefore imitating the styles of the past, or dead styles, and creating merely numerous images of images, i.e. imitations of imitations, without any uniqueness or

ingenuity. This is what he calls a pastiche, “the reproduction of past styles that leaves them devoid of any meaning and allows no norm but fragmentation” (Shirvani 295). Hutcheon, on the other hand, praises fragmentation and sees no wrong in commercialization since there are the factors that turn “Culture” into “cultures”, therefore creating plurality and multiplicity (Hutcheon, “A Poetics” 12). She sees that as happening in spite of and to a certain extent due to the consumer society that originated from capitalism, which is one of the contradictions that postmodern is full of. To sum up, Jameson considers postmodernism to be the murderer of the real, while in Hutcheon’s view if the real is dead, postmodernism is the means of questioning when and how it died or why it was murdered, if that is the case.

Hamid Shirvani concludes his analysis of the works by Hutcheon and Jameson on postmodernism the following way:

Jameson’s postmodernism mourns the decentered present as a dismal state now and for the future. For him, cultural production has become a process of commodification into all areas of society and culture and destroys any and all things meaningful. Hutcheon’s postmodernism sees the creation of many postmodern centers as an opportunity for innovation and creativity in art. Hutcheon acknowledges the pervasive commercialization of art but does not see commerce as the sole agent defining or ordering artistic production. The postmodern era opens up the realities of traditionally oppressed peoples and cultures and necessarily throws into question the objectivity of historical texts. But this does not deny the possibility of meaning. Hutcheon discusses postmodernism as a process that merges and rearranges the borders between art and life. (Shirvani 296)

While some of the arguments mentioned above seem to be quite valid, nevertheless, the question that arises is if postmodernism does present the oppressed peoples in a new perspective, what reality does commercialization create for them if values are constantly questioned and any form of meta narrative is rejected as well as

when the truth is narrowed down to being merely a matter of interpretation? In the argument initiated by Jameson and Hutcheon, could the truth lie somewhere in-between, in a compromise of the two opinions? Apparently, the modernism that Jameson tends to favor did not allow anything to interfere with the master narrative of the mainstream dominant society that dictated its rules to the minorities while silencing their voices, but the postmodernism presents a danger of “making pretence” of the acceptance of the latter voices, while not making anyone accountable for anything.

According to Timothy Beasley-Murray, the political status of postmodernist theory and art questions traditional political divisions (Beasley-Murray 267). Those who tend towards a conservative viewpoint condemn postmodernism for being relative in the issue of morality and the corruption of traditional (eternal) values. Despite the fact that postmodernist thought supposedly bears a reactionary nature (opposition to modernist thought, in the first place, and the questioning of everything), the supporters of postmodernism, according to Beasley-Murray, “claim that its power as a radical critique of any justificatory mechanism is emancipatory” (Beasley-Murray 267). There is obviously disagreement among the critics on the purposes, aims, and means of postmodernism. This fact has already been mentioned on the examples of arguments of Hutcheon and Jameson. Berry Smart suggests this as well. He claims that postmodernism is often conceived of in two absolutely different ways, as “postmodernism of reaction” and “postmodernism of resistance,” where one is understood as a variant of eclectic culture which praises the status quo (where, for instance, postmodern fiction can be understood only by those capable, therefore, it is aimed only at a selected audience), and



the other is considered to be an alternative postmodernism which fights for the deconstruction of the status quo (is mass culture implied in this case?). Therefore, there exists a radical difference between an affirmative postmodernism and a critical one (Smart 20).

## CHAPTER 5

## POSTMODERN APPLICATIONS

Postmodernism and Native American Literature:  
Supporting or Defying the Purpose?

Postmodernism, – with its characteristics of cultural pluralism, fragmentation of narrative, multiple identities, absurdness, confusion, play, irony, and challenge to official seriousness, – seems to give more account and a chance of new possibilities to American Indian voices as it rejects master narratives, giving way to local narratives, thus admitting the marginalized literatures and issues into the mainstream. According to J.F. Lyotard, “Postmodern knowledge is not simply an instrument of power. It refines our sensitivity to differences and increases our tolerance of incommensurability” (Lyotard, “What about” 29). But there is much more to postmodernism than already discussed, and its relationship with Native American literature, if established, would not be an easy one.

Decentering and Deconstructing

Postmodernism is all about bringing margins into the play and rejecting grand narratives. Michael Dear and Gregg Wassmansdorf point out in *Postmodern Consequences* that postmodernists learn to contextualize and reject meta-theories in favor of undecidability and microexplanations and renounce the universal truth. Nevertheless, Craig Womack’s statement that there is Native American truth and it is worth looking for

(Womack 4) seems to be more convincing, especially in terms of quest for sovereignty and re-establishment of Native histories and their validity.

It is way too premature for Native scholars to deconstruct history when we haven't yet constructed it. We need, for example, to recover the nineteenth century, especially in terms of understanding what Native writers were up to during that time and how their struggles have evolved toward what Indian writers can say in print today, as well as foundational principles they provide for an indigenous criticism. (Womack 3)

Deconstructing history and identity would negate the whole purpose of American Indian literature, which, by many scholars, is identified as a support of sovereignty. Postmodernism deconstructs identity and gets rid of Native American points of view, thus putting Native perspective as well as Native narrative and story out of existence. Womack points out that postmodernism has a “tendency to decenter everything, including the legitimacy of a Native perspective” (Womack 6).

Therefore, on the one hand, it undermines the ideology of the dominant mainstream society by ridding it of the notion of “alien other” and introducing it into the positive world of differences. On the other hand, the loss of center leads to the loss of meaning and history, therefore devaluing Native perspective as well as five hundred years of colonization that is still on-going.

This brings us back to the concept of simulacrum, where surface is all that matters and what replaces the meaning and truth. For the entire period of colonization that is exactly what Native American tribes have been fighting for – the deeper understanding of who they are and what they represent instead of the generalization of all the tribes by what lies on the surface. On the other hand, if one sides with Hutcheon, postmodernism is what questions the truth and history and states that they are problematic, therefore,

opening the mind to new suggestions and viewpoints by questioning the meta-narrative of history performed by the mainstream society. Thus, the representation is not reduced to empty, but its process, forms, and outcomes are questioned. The problem here is that while such questioning of the Euro-American grand narrative might be eye-opening, postmodernism does not stop there.

The concept of simulacrum (a copy of a copy) puts Native American literature in quite an interesting predicament since one of its purpose is to re-claim back one of the spheres of indigenous art as well as perform a historical function in many cases by portraying the Native perspective. The notions of postmodernism, if applied to Native American literature in this case, would suggest that Native American writers are recreating what has already been created; the main question in that case is what exactly are they recreating – their tribal tradition or texts about Native Americans produced by non-Natives with numerous errors and misinterpretations? Would postmodernism, thus, pose a danger of the implication of the latter variant? Then, the whole notion of tribal culture would be destructed.

Regarding the purpose of Native American literature, postmodernism as art that mainly focuses on investigation of its own nature might not be adequate since it suggests the existence of literature for the sake of itself and its experimentation with itself. Native American literatures, on the other hand, serve a different purpose and mainly exist as the voice of the Native communities and a means to serve these communities in various ways in their pursuit of sovereignty. A glimpse of hope can be found in Hutcheon's statement that postmodernism is all about ideology and history; therefore, the texts are historical

and political, but they bear that character through parody. It does not seem that Native American literature is trying to parody the history told from the perspective of the dominant white society; it does not attempt to mock, but merely to tell the new story from its own perspective that has been silenced for so long. One has to admit that there are exceptions in Native American literature and some writers do use this approach to literary texts. For instance, Sherman Alexie uses parody on a regular basis. However, the question is whether it is perceived by the readers unaware of cultural realities as such. Maybe that is why Alexie is so often blamed for perpetuating stereotypes.

According to Womack, Abenaki poet Cheryl Savageau, while in college, was labeled an essentialist by one of her professors because she published an article in a newspaper on Native writers and land issues. She wrote in correspondence to Womack: “The same professor who labeled me ‘essentialist’, said there was no truth, no history, just lots of people’s viewpoints. I argued that some things actually did happen. That some versions of history are not just a point view, but actual distortions and lies” (qtd. in Womack 3). Savageau goes on to say that it is curious that exactly then, when Native Americans are finally starting to tell their story from their perspective, all of a sudden there is no truth, but only points of view. She states that it is a political move by the Euro-American academia to safeguard itself from having to deal with all the minority stories, whether they are African-America, American Indian, or gay and lesbian. She points out that this “equality” of everybody’s stories frees the mainstream from accountability since there is then “no need to change anything, no need for reparations, no arguments for sovereign nation status, and their [mainstream] positions of power are maintained”

(Womack 4). Therefore, Womack underlines the importance of discovering and re-discovering what has been made implicit and making it explicit: “at least until we get our stories told, especially in terms of establishing a body of Native criticism in relation to nineteenth-century writings, postmodernism may have some limitations in regards to its applicability to Native scholarship” (Womack 4). Womack remarks the vital part that nineteenth-century Indian literature of resistance played in the establishment of Native American literatures. Indian people produced works that argued for the rights of the indigenous nations and criticized land theft.

The fact that postmodernism lets the marginalized voices be heard by rejecting the meta-theory of the mainstream society seems, on the one hand, rather promising to Native American literature with respect to the fact that the voices are finally going to be heard. On the other hand, American Indian literary works to a great extent are dependent and subordinate to the meta-theory of Native American nations, which in our modern condition is a fight for independence and rights. “Native literary aesthetics must be politicized and that autonomy, self-determination, and sovereignty serve as useful literary concepts. [...] literature has something to add to the arena of Native political struggle” (Womack 11).

Postmodernism is one of the most notoriously ambiguous terms in literature and it is far from including every literary work written nowadays. Postmodernism is a movement and thought that influences all spheres of life; therefore, it can be considered as a social epoch, aesthetic, a style in art, and a cultural dominant, all at the same time. It reconsiders the values of modern society and puts them into question. Craig Owens

points out that however we decide to define it, it is usually treated as a crisis of cultural authority, i.e. Western European culture and its authority and domination are questioned, and it is brought to the public's attention that encounters with other cultures do not necessarily have to happen through conquest or domination (Owens 57). Therefore, the main characteristic of the postmodern age, which gives Native American culture on the whole a new perspective, is the coexistence of different cultures. In theory, it puts an end to ethnocentrism. That is why Lyotard talks about meta-narrative (grand narrative) versus little narrative. Postmodern theory does away with meta-narrative as an overpowering and globalizing cultural narrative that dictates the rules, with the idea that it explains all historical experience from one perspective. But does that theory become reality?

On the other hand, postmodernism brings about deconstruction and to a certain extent the devaluing of culture and identity. Paul Ricoeur wrote:

When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an "other" among others. All meaning and every goal having disappeared, it becomes possible to wander through civilizations as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole of mankind becomes an imaginary museum: where shall we go this weekend – visit the Angkor ruins or take a stroll in the Tivoli or Copenhagen? We can very easily imagine a time close at hand when any fairly well-to-do person will be able to leave his country indefinitely in order to taste his own national death in an interminable, aimless voyage. (Ricoeur 278)

This is basically what we know today as the postmodern condition, but as Owens states, it reduces difference to indifference (Owens 58). Therefore, this might bring about the undesired effect into interpretation of Native American literature. Can it be that instead of stressing the value of Native literary difference, the indifference to the Native viewpoint

can be brought about by postmodern interpretations? The purpose, however, is quite the opposite; it is to prove the independence and value of indigenous literary traditions, as well as put it on an equal level with Western literature. Therefore, it is important for Native American literature to make a difference, not to create indifference originated by postmodern apathy. Thus, Womack stresses the need for a literary criticism

that emphasizes Native resistance movements against colonialism, confronts racism, discusses sovereignty and Native nationalism, seeks connection between literature and liberation struggles, and, finally, roots literature in land and culture. This criticism emphasizes unique Native worldviews and political realities, searches for differences as often as similarities, and attempts to find Native literature's place in Indian country. (Womack 11)

Therefore, Native American literary criticism has to be with regard to culture, community, and its current issues, and its purpose is to support the continuity of this specific culture instead deconstructing it and turning it into a mere tourist attraction.

### Postmodernism or Native Consciousness?

Despite some of the dangers that postmodernism might pose to Native American literature, as the indifference mentioned above, certain scholars believe in its value and are persuaded that Native American literature and postmodern literature have plenty in common. Indeed, one might find several characteristics that postmodernism and American Indian literary tradition share, although the origins of those characteristics, as well as the purposes those literary techniques are applied for, can be very much different. For instance, fragmentation as a set of literary devices to make narrative nonlinear is one of the traits of postmodern fiction. The non-linearity of the American Indian narrative



(however, it has to be mentioned that not all Native narratives are non-linear) is, in fact, circular, which is somewhat different from postmodern non-linearity and originates within the Native American tradition also representing the oral literature and tribal beliefs of the sacred circle. The main theme in Native narrative, being a quest for culture and self-identity, hardly resembles the sense of postmodernism, which favors “depthlessness.”

In fact, there is quite a small number of works which could be referred to as postmodernism. It is not a general school. Postmodern literature is very often called experimental. There is no agreement among scholars on the definition and specific characteristics of postmodern literature, as well as postmodernism as a whole, although it is still possible to identify some of them as has been done earlier. Nevertheless, most often it is associated with the three concepts: meta-narrative vs. little narrative developed by Lyotard; concept of play by Jacques Derrida; and Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra.

Regarding the issues mentioned earlier and the applicability of postmodernism to Native American literature, a lot of scholars tend to support the nationalistic viewpoint, although not completely denying postmodern theory but rarely accepting it as well. Howard Adams writes: “We must have Aboriginal nationalism, an understanding of the state’s capitalist ideology and its oppression, and ultimately, a counter-consciousness” (qtd. in Womack 5) Womack goes on to support this idea of Native consciousness. He points out that indigenous viewpoints are vital since “mental means of production” as to the analysis of Native American cultures have been possessed primarily by non-Indians

while Native voices have been silenced. “Radical Native viewpoints, voices of difference rather than commonality, are called for to disrupt the powers of the literary status quo as well as the powers of the state – there is a link between thought and activism, surely” (Womack 5).

In response to why nationalists urge to exercise such extreme caution with mainstream theories in interpreting Native American literature, Suzanne Lundquist writes that

a nationalist believes that it is time for Native people to exclude any European or Euroamerican influence from a developing Native aesthetics. This is a necessary tactic because tribal views of the world are incomparable, worthy of independent investigation, and therefore must, at this point in time, be exclusionist. In other words, Nationalists are tired of, even enraged by, outsiders’ incessant need to define Native experience. (Lundquist 291)

Wendy Rose in *Great Pretenders* gives some good reasons for separatism. She talks about life examples, where anthropologists, college professors, and artists of the mainstream society tried to persuade her that they knew more about her own culture and traditions than she did herself. Does literature undergo the same risk if submitting to the rules of the American canon and methods of the mainstream theory?

Womack rejects thinking that

white culture always overpowers Indian culture, that white is inherently more powerful than red, that Indian resistance has never occurred in such a fashion that things European have been radically subverted by Indians.

In terms of Native literature, I relate this to a more radical “Red Stick” approach – the assumption that Indian viewpoints cohere, that Indian resistance can be successful, that Native critical centers are possible, that working from within the nation, rather than looking toward the outside, is a legitimate way of examining literature, that subverting the literary status quo rather than being subverted by it constitutes a meaningful alternative. (Womack 12)

Womack continues by saying that this is not an easy task since for the last five centuries Native Americans were forced by various civilization policies to believe that they have neither intellectual history or culture of their own and, therefore, nothing to create the frameworks for analysis, and that today there are still critics who try to persuade the public that Native Americans “are not “pure enough” to be taken seriously as Indian” (Womack 13).

In contemporary literary criticism, it is still a struggle simply to legitimate Native approaches to Native texts, to say that it is OK for Indians to do it their own way. Indian critics, like any others, should be subject to critique, but sometimes the critique has approached the absurd when they have been accused of being atheoretical for wanting to examine their own cultures or for using their own authors as sources for building literary ideas, or when their ideas about looking at Native intellectual history have been characterized as a belief in the pristine quality of all things Indian. (...) if we Native critics share the fault of being “theoryless,” my contentions would be that this comes from not looking *enough* at our home cultures, not from looking *too much* at them. (Womack 13)

On the other hand, Womack does acknowledge that the process described earlier does not necessarily declare abandoning literary theory, and that the majority Native American scholars have not done so. Nevertheless, it is also important not to go overboard in the application of literary theory since it might take the critic too far in negating the whole purpose of Native American literature in its struggle for sovereignty. For instance, David Treuer is one of the most prominent Native American scholars of a younger generation, whose last work *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* has provoked a lot of debates and has often been criticized for deconstructing the notion of Native American literature. Nevertheless, the discussion Treuer generated is rather important since it essentially deals with the same issues of sovereignty and equality.

David Treuer in *Native American Fiction* deals with the issue of Native American literature being treated as an artifact instead of art on the same level as Euro-American literature. He argues for Native American literature to be recognized as literary culture and not necessarily as Native American culture in itself (Treuer 199). Treuer distinguished between culture of literature and literature seen as culture, advocating for the recognition of the first. He states that because the two have been fused together, it led to a stop in the development of American Indian literature. Although it seems quite reasonable to argue for the acceptance of literature as an artistic form of expression and to stress the importance of having a critical approach towards Native American literature, Treuer's idea to completely separate the literary tradition from community and culture does not sound realistic since literature in every respect is a vital facet of culture and, therefore, can not be a-cultural and a-political. Treuer argues for the acceptance of Native American literature as an equal to Western literature, but at the same time, as many critics argue, he deconstructs the notion of "Native American Literature": "Native American literature, if there is such a thing, does not constitute culture. It constitutes *desire* with seemingly culturally derived forms. (...) it is LITERATURE that creates the fantasy of the "NATIVE AMERICAN" – not the other way around" (Treuer 199). The question one might ask in this case is what the latter statement achieves. Does it perpetuate colonialism and inferiority of Native Americans, i.e. their inability of possessing culturally valid literature? It seems that Treuer's literary analysis of certain works by Native American writers in his *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* tends to be especially harsh. Therefore, while attempting to prove that Native American

literature is not a cultural artifact but a masterpiece in itself, he pays too much attention to how non-Native the writing of most American Indian authors is, thus deconstructing the Native viewpoints. He draws attention to the language and literary techniques, but is it possible to alienate literature from cultural and social context? Should it be alienated? As Shanley in “Writing Indian: American Indian Literature and the Future of Native American Studies” states, any given literary work, just like an ecosystem, consists of jokes, anecdotes, myths, gossip, songs, and memories of a certain community (Shanley 141). Thus, understanding a literary piece requires a full perspective. Although Shanley does agree with Blaeser that “a suitable way of analyzing texts is always already contained within them in their circularity of form – the distinctively indigenous view of time as cyclical,” suggesting that there is no need of searching for interpretation methods anywhere else but within Native American literature, she at the same time offers that

literature, one of Coyote’s frequent haunts, can be a place of “free play” in the postmodern sense as well as means of bringing history to life. Literature can thwart the comfort of an imperialist nostalgic perspective by disrupting expectations in several ways: by presenting the voices and perspectives of Indians to contradict or counter stereotypes; by adding validity and emphasis to the points made by historical facts; and, most of all by rendering Indians as multidimensional and fully sentient human beings. (Shanley 141, 147)

Although postmodernism does open space for more voices and new interpretations, it as well erases the nationalistic perspective, the insider’s view. If all of the above is, in Shanley’s point of view, the main purpose of American Indian literature, which seems to coincide with aims of the struggles of modern Indian Country, then postmodern interpretations of Native American literary texts seem to be out of the question.

As to the views of Treuer, John Kalb does agree with Treuer that “literature labeled ‘Native American’ is not an artifact, but literary art in the broader category of the ever-increasing American canon” and that much is lost when Native American fiction is interpreted with more stress on Native than on fiction, but also points out that Treuer “overlooks that such literature is sometimes best served when studied within the context of other works that reflect similar worldviews and thematic concerns” (Kalb 114). Kalb, as well as many other Native scholars, also does not support Treuer’s claims that the entire canon of Native American literature is an illusion and that works of great Native American writers, such as Erdrich, Welch, and Silko, are not authentic. Kalb points to some of Treuer’s errors and misreadings. For instance, Kalb draws the reader’s attention to the fact that *Fools Crow* by Welch, one of the works analyzed by Treuer, has great historical significance, and it is a historical novel, written from the viewpoint of an insider, not an outsider, as Treuer claims. Kalb remarks that in this case “Treuer reduces the historical novel to a quaint descendant of the 19<sup>th</sup> century literary imagination” (Kalb 115). In the case of *Ceremony* by Silko, Kalb declares that Treuer reduces the metaphorical meaning combined with time-immemorial stories and web of creation and Tayo’s present ceremony and flashbacks to simply a piece of Freudian talk (Kalb 116). Although one has to ask here how Treuer’s ideas contribute to the development of independent Native American literature and the creation of a national literature, as pointed out by Simon Ortiz, one still has to admit that Treuer’s arguments that Native American writers as well as their literature are labeled and limited by stereotypical expectations of the audience and critics are more than valid. According to Treuer, ideas

about Native American literature are damaged by the preconceived notions of non-Indian readers. However, does Treuer support the viewpoint of colonialism since he denies the existence of Native American literature?

According to Womack, Native American literature is often looked upon as a hybrid discourse that draws its influence from the European literary forms. Most approaches to the “Native American Literary Renaissance” have proceeded as if the Indian discovered the novel, the short story, and the poem only yesterday (Womack 3). According to this viewpoint, Native American writers are not the creators or originators, as Womack points out, but “adaptors” and “adapters” (adopting from the mainstream and adapting it to their purposes), who incorporate indigenous or tribally specific worldview into the literary forms borrowed from the mainstream Euro-American culture, such as the novel, the short story, the poem and others. Such literary works, accordingly, in the opinion of theorists, perform mainly one function: they are the mediator between the two worlds that Native Americans are supposedly stuck in, the indigenous one and the white world. Concerning the authors of these works, the characteristic that is emphasized the most is their mixed blood and, therefore, their positionality between cultures (Womack 137). This approach to the perception of Native American literature, however, appears to be quite limited and tends to place emphasis on the “torn between two worlds” (Womack 137) concept instead of focusing on the histories of Native tribes, their oral tradition, and current fight for nationality.

James Cox points out that the opinions described by Treuer and Womack (i.e. Treuer’s work as his “plea for aesthetic or formalist rather than cultural analyses of

Native literatures” (Cox 103) and Womack’s desire for the literary critical practice to be tribally specific) create an important debate that is currently shaping a good deal of intellectual and scholastic work in Native American communities. Cox, in agreement with Womack, poses that critical practices should be relevant in an explicit manner to the everyday lives and concerns of Native peoples. He comments that consistent attention to Native histories together with consideration of social realities in American Indian communities and national storytelling traditions should create “a mode of critical inquiry that challenges scholars to be rigorously and simultaneously responsible to all three” (Cox 103). Like many other scholars who support the nationalism movement in literature, Cox remarks that “everyday native realities, Native bodies, and Native experiences should stand at the center of contemporary American Indian literary critical practices” (Cox 105). According to Cox, the ultimate purpose should be preserving and sustaining indigenous epistemologies. In pursuing this purpose, Cox, like Womack, suggests drawing closer attention to specific tribal literatures, as well as recovering works of earlier times that have not been taken into consideration. He urges to perform more lengthy tribal-specific studies as well as comparative tribally specific studies of various regions and their land issues in order to be able to share ideas and come up with solutions about the future of indigenous nations. Christopher Teuton comments on that subject that “stories and criticism should enable us [Native American nations] to create our worlds” (qtd. Cox 108). Teuton states that in Native theory the subject should be Native experience, and the object – Native community (Teuton 176). He points out that surprisingly and unfortunately little research is carried out on what functions literature



performs in Native communities, how it is perceived, and what influence it has on the peoples. Teuton argues that one of the pressing needs in literary studies is acquiring knowledge of the reading practices of Native communities. He poses an important question about the connection between Native readers and writers. Teuton carried out a survey of the Cherokee Nation readers trying to find out about the Cherokee's reading habits and tastes. His results were interesting: one of the findings, whether intentional or not, proves the notion of inherent racism towards Native American writers and scholars in mainstream academia, which is also dictating behavior to minority scholars as well. The most widely read author among the Cherokee Nation appeared to be Robert Conley, who has received numerous awards, including recognition from his peers, fellow Cherokee, even the State of Oklahoma, but somehow is nearly ignored by scholars. Teuton urges that "scholars of Native literature need to go beyond theorizing relationships with Native communities and actually create working relationships with communities" (Teuton 182). Thus, if one's aim is to establish the ties with communities, postmodern theory is hardly applicable since it breaks those ties instead of securing them. Too often, when theorists apply postmodern theories and approaches as well as their jargon, they limit the audience to a rather small number of scholars in the academic field, therefore, cutting off the Native people (and nationalists argue for the importance of the connection to the communities and giving back to the people subjected to the study). Thus, Womack argues that postmodernism does not address Native people on their own terms and ground.

Many Native scholars support a similar argument about the importance of connectedness of literature to communities and their social life. It is one of the pillars of nationalism movement in literary studies supported by Womack, Warrior, and Ortiz. Womack's argument about the interconnectedness of tribal literature and tribal realities seems rather relevant. He points out that "whatever one might argue about postmodern representation, there is the legal reality of tribal sovereignty, recognized by the U.S. Constitution and defined over the last 160 years by the Supreme Court" and however you look at it, it still affects the lives of tribal nations and individual on an everyday basis and, therefore, has something to do with tribal literatures too (Womack 6). Thus, like many other scholars, Womack is arguing that it is practically impossible to separate society and culture from literature. Literature always comes in context and in the case of Native American literature that context should be tribal and connected to current issues of Native societies.

Similar ideas can be found in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, where Simon Ortiz in his article "Towards a National Indian literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism" points out that the purpose of Native American literature is to find meaning and meaningfulness, to adjust what was imposed by the mainstream and make it authentic in order to be able to overcome colonization and assimilation. Thus, not accepting the mainstream views is fighting colonialism, where literature has an important role since, as Gunn Allen points out in *The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective on American Indian Literature*, "literature is a facet of a culture" (Allen 116). Ortiz draws

the reader's attention to the fact that American Indian literature is a continual story on its own as well as continuation of the culture:

Many Christian religious rituals brought to the Southwest (which in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the northern frontier of the Spanish New World) are no longer Spanish. They are now Indian because of the creative development that the native people applied to them. Present-day Native American or Indian literature is evidence of this in the same way. And because in every case where European culture was cast upon Indian people of this nation there was similar creative response and development, it can be observed that this was the primary element of a nationalistic impulse to make use of foreign rituals, ideas, and material in their own – Indian – terms. Today's writing by Indian authors is a continuation of that elemental impulse. (Ortiz 254)

But why nationalism? How, specifically, is nationalism connected to literature?

Why should Native American literature be regarded within the cultural and political context and not apart from it as literature on its own as David Treuer urges to do? Simon Ortiz in Preface to *American Indian Literary Nationalism* states that “nationalism is a term on a short list, one that also includes sovereignty, culture, self-determination, experience, and history, that is central to understanding the relationship between the creative expression of Native American literature and the social and historical realities that such expression embodies” (Ortiz xv).

Cook-Lynn, as well as other prominent scholars such as Silko, urges that Native American literature should be historical and political, should depict the tough lives of American Indians, their struggles and search for identity.

Native literature, and Native literary criticism, written by Native authors is part of sovereignty: Indian people exercising the right to present images of themselves and to discuss those images. Tribes recognizing their own extant literatures, writing new ones, and asserting the right to explicate them constitute a move toward nationhood. While this literary aspect of sovereignty is not the same thing as the political status of Native nations,

the two are, nonetheless, interdependent. A key component to nationhood is the people's idea of themselves, their imaginings of who they are. The ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty alive in the citizens of a nation and gives sovereignty of a nation a meaning that is defined within the tribe rather than by external sources. (Womack 14)

Berglund also admits in *Facing the Fire* that Native American texts are political and there is no way they can not be political. He is one of those scholars who advocates a tribally conscious approach towards American Indian writing, which, he admits, might further the alienation of non-Native readers, but at the same time proves the complexity of tribal narratives and broadens the view of the reader with the knowledge of endurance and survivance of Native Americans. He points out the importance of the indigenous perspective, which is so often ignored. Womack's latest work on literary nationalism and separatism *Red on Red* arises out of his conviction that Native literature, and the criticism that surrounds it, needs to see more attention devoted to tribally specific concerns (Womack 1).

These statements show why Womack's argument about inappropriateness of the postmodern approach sounds valid. As mentioned earlier, he acts in favor of the "Red Stick" approach to view Native American literature from the viewpoint of an insider, from within, with Native American literature being in the center. Therefore, postmodern decentering in this case will not work. Thus, he urges to apply tradition in "radical new ways with attention given to analysis, criticism, and political reflection" (Womack 12). He argues as well that Native American literature should be regarded as Native American, and thus inclusion of it in the all-American literary canon would erase this distinction. According to Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, opening up the American literary canon

to native literary traditions and contemporary literature might not be of much significance anyway because it might not be very helpful to the unique aims that Native American literature has developed, which are at the same time the elements that constitute American Indian literary nationalism, namely “the interest in establishing the myths and metaphors of sovereign nationalism; the places, the mythological beings, the genre structures and plots of the oral traditions; the wars and war leaders, the treaties and accords with other nations as the so-called golden standard against which everything can be judged” (qtd. in Womack 14). Cook-Lynn points out that the basis for the critical literary discourse in Native American studies should be formed by legends, myths, symbols, and metaphors, events and people, as well as writers and their works, and they should be nationalistic.

Like Ortiz and Cook-Lynn, Womack is more interested in what can come out from and be initiated by Native people rather than deconstructing Native points of view. His point of view on the insider status vs. outsider status in Native American literatures compared to that suggested by postmodern theory is quite different.

The postmodernists might laugh at claims of prioritizing insider status, questioning the very nature of what constitutes an insider and pointing out that no pure Creek, or Native, viewpoints exist, that Native and non-Native are constantly deconstructing each other. In terms of a reality check, however, we might remind ourselves that authenticity and insider and outsider status are, in fact, often discussed in Native communities, especially given the historical reality that outsiders have so often been the ones interpreting things Indian. Further, it seems fool-hardy to me to abandon a search for the affirmation for a national literary identity simply to fall in line with the latest literary trend. (Womack 6)

Suzanne Lundquist also questions the status of insider-outsider in *Native American Literatures*, where she argues for the connectedness of authenticity and

sovereignty in current Native discourse (Lundquist 286). Her argument supports the message of Owens in *Mixedblood Messages*. Taking into consideration that most of contemporary Native American literature is written by authors of mixed descent, Owens goes on to state that the mixedblood writers are themselves a sort of representation of postmodernism and thus are especially well equipped to discuss the postmodern condition. Why then are these writers in constant quest for identity? Why is “longing for culture,” if not culture itself, as Treuer puts it, the main topic that penetrates every Native American literary work? It is also interesting that very often the mixedbloods are the ones in contemporary Native American literature who represent endurance, development, and survival of the tradition. For instance, Tayo in Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony* is the one who is destined to perform the ceremony and cure the nation, to bring the new message and keep the evil from its wrongdoing. Owens suggests, as does Vizenor in *Narrative Chance*, that “the Native American novel is the quintessential postmodern frontier text, and the problem of identity at the center of virtually every Native American novel is the problem of internalized transculturation” (Owens 46). Doesn’t “frontier” push Native American literature even more into the margins? At the same time, it seems that Owens, as well as Vizenor, does not take into consideration that postmodernism deconstructs identity and culture, and Vizenor’s trickster, whom he calls postmodern, can be understood only within cultural context. Vizenor also suggests that postmodernism liberates Native American literature with humor and absurdness, which are so characteristic of trickster, and by letting the marginalized into the center, i.e. deflation of metanarratives. Vizenor, being opposed to hyperrealities and misreadings, some of the most characteristic features

of postmodernism, in his *Trickster Discourse* still supports the postmodern. Vizenor suggests viewing tribal narratives neither from the viewpoint of the social sciences nor literary criticism as both of them failed to acknowledge the sense of narrative as does trickster discourse. He suggests postmodernism as liberation. Postmodernism, very simply explained, revives imagination as it never gives any specific answers and does not put narratives into “cultural categories” (Vizenor, “Narrative” 278). Vizenor admires postmodernism as it promotes difference and suggestion. Nevertheless, to state that the whole amount of works produced by American Indian writers, including oral literature, can be regarded from the point of view of postmodernism (i.e. that postmodernism can explain it as a literature) is somewhat bold. Vizenor explains his trickster discourse as a language game. A question arises here whether trickster characteristics that Vizenor refers to as postmodern are, in fact, tribally derived.

#### Gerald Vizenor and Trickster

Trickster is one of the most often encountered characters in different cultures (ancient Greece, China, Japan, etc.) which with time developed into a jester and somewhat a clown. The trickster encountered in Native American cultures is considered to be its archaic form. “Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being” (Radin 254). Whatever trickster does, it is always full of laughter, irony, and humor. Trickster is, on the one hand, a character of traditional narratives that disobeys

rules and norms of behavior and, on the other hand, provides a way to access the sacred. Trickster symbolizes absurdness and complexity, which correspond closely to postmodern ideas of reality. Thus, Vizenor states that “the trickster is postmodern” (Vizenor, “Narrative” 281). This statement has, nevertheless, a doubtful credibility as trickster is rather often met in different cultures at different time spans and is an archetypal figure. Paul Radin claims that “we are here in the presence of a figure and a theme or themes which have had a special and permanent appeal and an unusual attraction for mankind from the very beginnings of civilization” (Radin 254). He suggests that the Trickster is a “speculum mentis” (Radin 255) which expresses man’s struggle with the world and himself. Radin goes on to state that if the trickster is a reflection of human troubles with the surrounding world and his own nature, it is impossible to understand it without the cultural context and historical settings.

Trickster possesses powers to transcend boundaries, which is often associated with shape-shifting as one of the main characteristics of postmodernism. As Womack points out, “often shape-shifting and tricksters are used as tropes to the postmodern obsession to make everything amorphous, indefinable, and decentered” (Womack 204). However, the relation of these powers to Native intellectualism should be questioned. Womack identifies some of the issues that are worth attention, such as whether usage of the language of postmodernism can be effective in analyzing tribal worldviews and whether usage would produce desirable outcomes since postmodernism expresses skepticism about language and literature and often tends to place them in the realm of nonrepresentation. Are the values (or the denial of such) that postmodernism promotes



ethical in regard to Native philosophies, and do they support the Native struggle for national literature and achievement of intellectual sovereignty? Can the power of the word, which is often a part of indigenous religious worldviews, be lost when considered within the system that devalues its significance? In what ways is that connected to the loss of spirituality and any further spiritual possibilities? Womack remarks that if one admits that words no longer possess fixed meanings, but instead acquire a new ability to shape-shift, that in regard to Native beliefs, as well as literature, tricksters appear to be not the only one capable of shape-shifting; in this case, the witches shape-shift as well (Womack 205). He calls for the need of some sort of balance; it is obvious that in certain situations fixed is not necessarily negative, but shape-shifting without any concern for the consequences might appear harmful. Therefore, there has to a certain balance between fixed and free play, which is often fragile and can be abused. In the case with Native American nations, there appear to be several terms that are better off fixed rather than fluctuating and susceptible to numerous interpretations, such as sovereignty, nation. What will happen to the struggles for sovereignty and self-determination if identity is deconstructed and the Native point of view loses its validity even before it is gained? “It is difficult to argue that a group faces oppression if you no longer believe the group exists because you have deconstructed its identity to death” (Womack 205).

Identity is to a great extent a cultural construct. Therefore, the stories of oral tradition are oftentimes the expression of identity in literature. This can be performed in numerous ways, but rather often identity of the tribe manifests itself through the main characters, for instance, trickster. The argument for postmodernity in Native American

literature is mostly based on the assumption of Gerald Vizenor that trickster is postmodern, which has been mentioned earlier. However, one tends to come to a conclusion that trickster, being an archetypal figure, is of all times and ages and that referencing him to the notions of postmodern would also be limiting to the character itself. The following question might also be a consequence of such argument: who borrows from whom – trickster from the postmodern or postmodernism from trickster’s abilities and powers? Nevertheless, although Vizenor seems to contradict himself at times on his own desire to fit into postmodernism by being against depthlessness and simulacrum as well as literature as merely a means of entertainment for mass culture, he and his novels are generally considered to be representative of postmodernism in Native American literature.

In his novels, Gerald Vizenor tries to stay consistent with his views in postmodern theory; therefore, he bases them on the tribal tradition of trickster/clown (which is the main point of his postmodern discourse), which is common to many indigenous cultures. It has previously been mentioned that trickster seems at a first glance to have certain similarities with what is believed to be postmodern. He is an extremely ambiguous figure, the one who plays tricks, but rather often he appears to be the trickeer himself. His role and main characteristics, however, strongly depend on how the tribe views itself. Therefore, how often trickster plays jokes or becomes the victim of those jokes varies from tribe to tribe and depends on tribal culture. Although trickster can be a benefactor and often has the second role to god (in some trickster tales he is the creator of man), he is also capable of being a dangerous menace since generally he is an immoral figure.

Alan Velie remarks that “trickster violates all tribal laws with impunity, to the amusement of the listeners of the tales, for whom he acts a saturnalian surrogate” (Velie, “Vizenor” 159).

Gerald Vizenor in his usage of trickster draws his material from his tribal Chippewa trickster called Wenebajo or Nanabush, who is also rather dangerous at times as, for instance, once he ends up murdering most of his family before he realizes what he is doing (Velie, “Vizenor” 160). In his analysis of Vizenor’s *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, Velie points out that the concept of trickster in this novel corresponds with the Chippewa traditional one where he is portrayed as benevolent but immoral with his main ability being to fight evil by means of trickery, combining violence with humor. Vizenor’s novel begins with the words typical for trickster narratives and the pilgrims, who constitute the main characters, are ascribed numerous trickster traits of character (Velie 160). So, is Vizenor tribal or postmodern? It seems that many characteristics of his novel tend to be tribally derived rather than of external origin, and while Vizenor might be attempting to show that Native American literature is not inferior and can stand on the same ground with mainstream developments and theories, he draws his forces and powers from tribal tradition. And although his novel is of unrealistic character (and, according to Velie, puts him in line with Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Brautigan, and other American postmodern writers), focusing on the concept of play and ignoring the established fictional traditions, it is still rooted in tribal oral literature. Velie tried to prove, however, that *Bearheart* is a fine specimen of postmodernism, but at the same time he states that “Vizenor, like most of the post-modernists, simply ignores American

writers of previous generations. He owes more of a debt to his Anishinabe grandmother than to Hemingway or Faulkner” (Velie, “Vizenor” 162). One thing that Velie does not take into consideration is that Hemingway and Faulkner do not represent the literary tradition that Vizenor belongs to in the first place. He is a continuation of the tribal literature and a part of survivance (to use the term coined by Vizenor himself). Therefore, it seems that Vizenor remains to a certain extent within his tribal literary tradition and spiritual beliefs and that way does not deny meta-narrative created by it. The only difference is that this meta-narrative has never been considered as such because during the times of colonialism tribes were not regarded as capable of creating their own literature and tradition. On the other hand, if to admit that Velie is right and Vizenor’s works are postmodern and, therefore, exclusionary (because it is too insane and strange), then what is the point of it in regard to Native American communities? Or is it in this case oriented exclusively to Native reader?

Womack also provides a somewhat different opinion on who and what trickster is. Gerald Vizenor based his favoritism of postmodernism on the trickster’s characteristics and ability to shape-shift and his resistance to definition. He associated the latter with postmodern ideas about language games and the indefinite signification of language. Womack, however, emphasizes that trickster is merely one of the representatives of indigenous cosmogony, and that his actions often require to be balanced out and counteracted by its other representatives (i.e. tricksters mischief often has to be punished by other characters of tribal stories). Womack denies trickster the position of the cultural norm (which Vizenor suggests he is), and that constitutes one of the reasons why people

laugh at him (Womack 239). This appears to be a vital idea since most of the Native American religious beliefs, and therefore stories, are based on the concept of balance. For instance, the Dine concept of *hozho* is understood as walking in beauty and balance with the surrounding world. This principle was followed in various spheres of life, including art, architecture, and literature. Contemporary Native American literary works also seem to propagate the same idea of balance, which very often consists of many ingredients, including understanding of one's identity and belonging as well as connection to community, cultural roots, and land. Take, for example, *Ceremony* by Leslie Silko. The main character Tayo is out of balance. He lost himself, his cultural identity, his story, and became alienated from whom he is and the land, and, therefore, his healing ceremony, which constitutes the story of *Ceremony*, is the quest for restoring that balance. Among other important issues that are regarded in contemporary Native American writings, the latter has become an important theme that should not be ignored. Likewise, many traditional trickster stories are intended to teach the importance of balance of oppositions, balance between chance and order. Womack remarks that

[trickster's] antics might teach us that it is possible to run off with ideas, too, to allow skepticism to override reverence for language, an emphasis on meaninglessness over possibilities for communication, the failure of the word over the power of the word, postmodern chance over the ordered worlds of Native creation stories, deconstructed Indian identity over cultural cohesion. (Womack 239)

Nancy Peterson in "History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*" suggests that Louise Erdrich's works are postmodern, but what is particularly curious is that she, at the same time, talks about Erdrich's hardships in telling a historical tale in *Tracks*. Peterson opposes Silko's critique of Erdrich's works, where Silko urges Erdrich

to be more authentic and political, by putting these works within the range of postmodernism where the beauty of the language is all that matters. Derrida's "there is nothing beyond the text," which Peterson draws upon, basically makes Native American literature a-historical as it suggests that even history is fiction with no connectedness to either past or present or any event whatsoever. Nevertheless, it can also be argued that Derrida's concept of play to a certain extent can be applied to Native American literature as trickster discourse but with limitations. As mentioned earlier, Vizenor considers it to be a game and trickster in itself, as one of the traditional characters of American Indian literature, is very characteristic of play. He is, on the one hand, not connected to any particular time, but is relevant to all times and ages, although he is very often the creator and moderator of history.

Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* draws the reader's attention to the fact that postmodernism, nevertheless, does not completely negate history but rather questions it. This means that, on the one hand, it gives space to new interpretations and lets the Native American side of the story be heard, but on the other hand, provides even more room for its complete reinterpretation and abolishment by the mainstream society. To elaborate further on this subject, it is important to mention Hutcheon's postmodern term of "historiographic metafiction." It signifies re-writing of history the way it has never been told before, i.e. fictional works claiming some historical accuracy, as well as self-reflexivity. In this respect, stating that Native American literature is postmodern might imply that it is to a great extent historiographic metafiction. There is, nevertheless, a difference between re-writing and expressing an opinion which has been always hushed

down. Unfortunately, the history of Native-European relations has always been regarded from only one side; the American Indian one has never been heard. Therefore, it is not re-writing but stating for the first time, or adding to history, if you will. Thus, it seems that Womack's argument for Native American literary separatism makes sense. Still there is an argument to be made for metafiction as one of the means of postmodernism. With its tendency to undermine the author's control as well as main function to oppose fiction and reality, it does appear to have certain similarities with trickster tales. On the other hand, trickster, especially the way he is often depicted, with some parts of his body exaggerated, is more carnivalesque than anything. He reminds as well of the medieval culture, which is reflected in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by Francois Rabelais. Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* speaks of the carnival as a social institution and grotesque as a literary mode which are implied in Rabelais's work. Alan Velie also points out the main function of the clowns and tricksters,

a function similar to the clowning at the medieval European Feast of Fools, in which once a year subdeacons sang filthy songs in church, mocked the sacrament, and threw the bishop in the river. These ceremonies allowed a saturnalian release to people whose religious and moral codes were very demanding. In a way the clowns are a reification in the tribe itself of the trickster figure of mythology; that is, they are figures who can ridicule customs, rituals, and taboos, with impunity to the delight of spectators who are forced to obey them. (Velie, "Vizenor" 160)

Therefore, the mixture of humor, fantasy, violence, and explicit sex, which are too often present in postmodern fiction (and are also present in Vizenor's novel *Bearheart*) is not new to literature and was not first introduced by postmodernism.

In this case it is appropriate to talk about another postmodern characteristic, high culture vs. low culture. One of the postmodern goals is to deconstruct high culture, in

which case trickster discourse could be referred to as low culture or rather a mediation between the two.

It might seem that trickster as one of the representative characters of Native American narrative tends towards play and chaos, but at the same time constantly gets punished for his insolence in breaking the balance and playing parody without boundaries. Although humor is greatly appreciated in Native communities and often serves as a means of resistance and survival (in certain ceremonies clowns are used as a means of healing powers in order to restore balance), irony is supposed to be in balance with other things and parody is not the sole purpose. Even more, if one looks at the oral literary tradition, it is never meaningless or without an aim. Trickster's actions often do seem to lack motivation and reasoning, but every story where trickster gets himself into trouble is aimed at teaching a lesson. The same characteristics have been translated by contemporary Native American writers into Native American written literatures. As for the discontinuity that is accepted by postmodernism, Native American literature is exactly the opposite – it is the literature of survivance (as Vizenor puts it) and resistance, thus, its main aim is to sustain Native cultures and knowledge and, therefore, provide this continuity that postmodernism rejects. One area where Native cultures might agree with the postmodern view is attitude towards difference and multiplicity, but their understanding of difference might not necessarily be the same. While postmodernism stresses that there can be multiplicity of interpretations and misreadings, Native American literatures, while accepting and respecting the differences with other groups, whether ethnic or religious, do express the viewpoint of a particular tribe holding the



most appropriate means of interpretation of the literary texts produced by writers of this specific nation. As for the postmodern intention to make the suppressed things and issues dominant, in the case of Native American literatures, this is still far from being true. Unfortunately, indigenous literary traditions are still being suppressed and underestimated.

### Fusion of Real and Supernatural

The fact that postmodernism is a transformation in sensibility and of the viewpoints popular in the previous era (i.e. modernism) is indubitable. Nevertheless, the question arises as to what advantages, if any at all, that provides for Native American literature and its pursuits of sovereignty. The one area where Native American and postmodern goals coincide is the determination to look into more localized landscapes instead of tending towards generalizations and grand overpowering theories. Many Native scholars, including Womack, stress the importance of the studies being tribally specific. The postmodern narrative, as it has been described in previous chapters, focuses on the possibilities of coexistence and collisions of different realities. Can a similarity be traced here between the postmodern novel and the indigenous one? Many Native American traditions believe that there are different planes of reality that are all interconnected, for instance, the spiritual world and the physical one. However, one cannot exist without the other. Therefore, many scholars argue that a Native American novel should be interpreted on many various levels. For instance, in *Ceremony* by Silko, the spiritual and physical worlds are intertwined and very often the main character Tayo has to figure out what world he finds himself in. These realities are expressed through

multiplicity of various stories: stories of creation, stories of healing, stories of power, which are all intertwined and consist the web of *Ceremony*. For instance, the novel starts with the creation story in which Thought Woman (representing a different plane of existence) “is sitting in her room thinking of a story” which includes everything that happens in the course of the novel including Tayo (which is what we understand as physical world): “and in the belly of this story the rituals and the ceremony are still growing” (Silko 1, 2). Tayo keeps sticking to different stories along his way; therefore, he finds himself in several ‘realities’. He invents stories to provide support: when corporal and he were carrying Rocky, “he made a story for all of them, a story to give them strength” (Silko 12). Through stories Silko also expresses the tribal traditions and beliefs of time and space: Tayo keeps remembering the past days as back then “distances and days existed in themselves ...; they all had a story” (Silko 19). In such manner Silko addresses both past and present, and all realities of Indian life: “[Tayo] had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of “nonsense”. But they had been wrong” (Silko 19). “All these things have stories alive in them” are Betonie’s words, and these stories constitute Native American tribal identity (Silko 121). Everything is about the story. The novel itself seems to be a story within a larger story (which could be called cultural context, specific time, place, universe, etc) which holds smaller stories within it. The story is more important than anything because everything is a story. Another example is when he is in the presence of T’sseh, the fine line between the physical reality and the spiritual one is erased. It seems the reader never comes to find out, as well as Tayo, if T’sseh is a woman, a

personalization of the mountains (which is suggested by her name), or a spirit. However, this is not even important. What is important is the role T'seh plays in the healing process of the main character. The point that the author is trying to make is the interconnectedness of the spiritual world with everyday life. Nevertheless, is this characteristic postmodern? Is this the message that the postmodern novel tries to get through to the reader? Does the American Indian novel in this case follow the postmodern pattern or the tribal literary tradition? Many oral stories of various tribes tell of the connection between the spirit world and the material goods acquired by the tribe. Most of the ceremonies were brought to the people by the spirits and so on. Nevertheless, can one say that this is Foucault's notion of heterotopia taking place here? It is most unlikely. In postmodernism fiction and science fiction melt into one, but is that the case in Native American literature?

Arnold Krupat, nevertheless, developed a whole different theory on interpretation of Native American literature in *Ethnocriticism* and *Red Matters*. He argues that for Native anticolonial projects to succeed the position of nationalism is not enough. Cosmopolitanism needs to be added, i.e. the ability to translate between different bodies of knowledge. Lundquist supports Krupat's idea by stressing that postmodernism is based on difference not bipolarity and suggests that American Indian literature should by no means be based on oppositions, therefore, bipolarity. Lundquist states that "nationalists believe that the multiplicity of Native cultures can serve the ends of difference," and according to cosmopolitans, literature is supposed to be based on multiplicity not duality (Lundquist). Nevertheless, she supports David L. Moore in his argument that Native

authors are significantly more dialogic than dialectic. It is the mainstream approach which seems to always have determined things in matters of otherness, i.e. us/them, black/white, male/female. Most Native American scholars who deal with Native American Studies have always pointed out that Native cultures have been quite pluralistic throughout. Native philosophies have never been dualistic. In this regard there is a good point in maintaining what is already there. One can not but notice that trickster and the trickster discourse approach proposed by Gerald Vizenor are dialogic, but again that characteristic is tribally derived and its invention by no means can be attributed to postmodern thought.

Therefore, maybe it does make sense not to completely reject postmodernism, but at the moment Native American literature is not quite ready for it and has bigger things to worry about than fitting into some fashionable trend, such as recovering the oral tradition and literature of the nineteenth century, establishing identity and intellectual sovereignty, supporting the decolonizing process in Native communities, and so on. However, discarding the possibility of a certain applicability of postmodernism might not be wise since. Although applications of postmodern theory seem doubtful at times, most of Native American scholars do not argue that “postmodernist’s resistance to centers, meaning, coherence, and technology is entirely antithetical to native viewpoints, nor that contemporary theory should be abandoned, only that it should be examined critically as to its value in illuminating Native cultures” (Womack 242). Everything should be performed in balance.

## CHAPTER 6

## CONCLUSION

Prioritizing Nationalism over Postmodernism?

The discussion represented in this work, whether postmodernism is applicable to Native American literature, whether it can help indigenous literature pursue and gain intellectual sovereignty and acknowledgement of Native literary canon and tradition, is one of the most urgent ones in the academia that stimulates a lot debates. This discussion, however, is also linked to many other issues of great importance and also, at the end of the day, constitutes a part of the discussion about what theories should be privileged while interpreting Native American literatures, Euro-centered/non-Native or indigenous-based, or if there is a certain combination of both that can be beneficial for the development of Native American literary criticism. In connection with this matter, scholars also argue vigorously about who should be allowed into the field of Native American Studies and who should have the final say.

While the answer to the question on who is to have the most authority in Native American Studies seems to be quite obvious, that naturally Native Americans should be the ones guiding and taking charge of what is being said and published about their nations and communities, the question whether non-Native scholars and non-Native theories should be allowed to continue in this sphere or should step aside, as Shanley and Womack seem to argue, is still being vigorously debated. I, as a person of non-Native

origin (a citizen of Ukraine), would probably tend to agree with Champagne and Krupat in their argument that one's identity and vision is not necessarily determined by the amount of Native blood, and that, for instance, comparison might be healthy and worthwhile for Native American tribes since the most obvious solutions can sometimes be found where one does not wish to look. On the other hand, once I was asked a question: if in my mind it would be appropriate if an American came over to Ukraine to study my culture and later tried to teach me about it and claim knowing more than I do. My natural reaction was "I'd be angry." On second thought, if that American followed the protocols of our research and did so in a respectful manner, I probably would not object as much and, as a matter of fact, would be glad to receive some help. Possibly, that might even enable me to learn more about my own culture in a different light and perspective I had never thought of. However, I strongly agree that the indigenous people (who are the rightful owners of the culture) should be the voices of authority and authenticity and by all means, have a better understanding of traditions and beliefs by possessing sensitivity towards their culture that no other person might be able to develop.

Nevertheless, before deciding to prioritize either Native American Studies-based theory or non-Native American studies-based theory over the other, as it has been mentioned in previous chapters, one should consider current issues of Native American literary studies, as well as the main goal that Native American literature is pursuing today. Its main purpose, as identified earlier in the work, is the pursuit of the establishment of national literature (both on tribal and pan-tribal levels), as well as resistance to the ongoing forces of colonialism and achievement of intellectual

sovereignty. This is important to keep in mind when regarding non-Native theories, since they might not necessarily serve the purpose indicated but pursue the goals of the mainstream society. Scholars agree that the purpose of any indigenous research program should be supporting communities this research is being done in, educating, and helping native epistemologies thrive. Therefore, whatever approach is applied to study of American Indian literature and development of the body of literary criticism, it should, first and foremost, be culturally efficient, and in the case of Native American Studies, focused on current issues of Native communities.

Postmodern theory, with all its open-mindedness but at the same time depthlessness, can be very limiting and dangerous to Native American literary studies since it devalues the Native point of view even prior to its establishment since Native American knowledge and epistemology, as well as aesthetics, are still having a hard time being acknowledged by mainstream academia.

With respect to postmodernism, although it might seem that Native American literary works oftentimes share common characteristics with postmodern fiction, one has to question whether these characteristics are actually of postmodernism or tribally derived. The case of trickster, which has been elaborately described earlier, is one of those instances where one has the right to ask the question: what came first – trickster or postmodernism that features trickster as one of its main characteristics? The answer, most likely, will be trickster. Therefore, Native narratives are also more likely to borrow not from postmodern powers of shape-shifting but the powers of play represented in the tribal archetypal figure of clown. Postmodernism, in one of its main functions,

deconstructs metanarrative (i.e. the grand narrative dictated by the Western civilization, that is the colonizer) and lets the margins into the center. That sounds rather promising at first glance since Native American literature, although being the oldest literature on this continent, was the last one to be recognized, and as a matter of fact is still in the process of recognition. Nevertheless, does Native American literature deny the tribal meta-narrative if it tends to borrow so much from the oral tradition that is centuries old, as well as its attempts to reflect authenticity and spiritual belief of specific tribes? Does not that deny the postmodern focus on the surface and inability to find truth? The whole purpose of Native American literature as literature of resistance (activist literature, if you will) contradicts the passive nature of postmodernism and its inability to give answers as well as its perpetuating desire to question everything.

At the same time postmodern theory has similar limitations to those of postcolonialism. The prefix “post” might simply not be there yet for Native American literature. As Womack argues, postmodernism deconstructs history and identity, and Native American history, both of Indian/Euro-American relations and literary history, is still to be constructed from the Native point of view. Womack points to the importance of recovering the literary works and attempts of Native American writers of the nineteenth century that form the basis for Native American literature today. Unfortunately, Native American literary tradition, unlike the Western one, for almost five centuries, did not have the luxury of developing on its own terms under the influence of colonialism. That is why the point that it tries to get across to its readers is that it is neither inferior nor obsolete, nor discontinuous. Thus, it also does not have a right to be exclusionist yet since



its purpose is not only to serve indigenous communities but also to be able to reach as big of an audience as it can without becoming mass culture of consumption. Postmodern theory allows for all the possible interpretations, therefore devaluing the culture itself, since it claims that there is no one point of view, and the outsider – insider notions constantly deconstruct each other. Native American Studies, especially striving for Native American national literature, will not benefit from such a point of view since there is Native identity and there is Native opinion that have been silenced for centuries, and, as Womack states, it is well worth looking for and hearing out.

Nationalism theory, which is the most widespread Native-based theory in Native American Studies nowadays calls for complete abandoning of the usage of non-Native theories since they can not accommodate for the needs of tribal communities. Nationalists are also persuaded that it is time to stop encouraging colonialism and playing by the rules of Western academia, and conduct research on Native terms. Native American literature is a representation of survival and sovereignty on its own. Womack, as a literary separatist, just like King, would prefer to see Native American literature separate from the American one. He does make a strong argument that Native American literature's roots and history are different from the Western ones. Therefore, it makes sense to argue for a different approach as well and to attempt finding the answers within the literary tradition itself. Every tribal literature is unique since it is to a great extent community based. Thus, studies of literature should be tribally specific because that is the only way to avoid perpetuating stereotypes. Nationalism seems to have a potential to offer new ways of interpretation of literature by urging to do it on Native terms and with the help of

Native epistemologies and aesthetics, rather than following new literary fads and trying to fit in. According to nationalism, Native academia should concentrate on Native experiences.

It is vital for Native American literature to break away from the colonizers practices and to regain its strength and right to represent Native communities as they perceive themselves, not as they are perceived by the oppressor. Krupat speaks of anti-colonial translation, by which he implies that Native literature should be understood (if it is in English and does not require translation literally) through its spirit, not in the language of the colonizer (or the one who is interpreting it), i.e. not through the colonizer's ideology. Therefore, he urges for the interpretation to happen through Native metaphors, tribal cultures and contexts, not the literal understanding of a non-Native who positions literary texts within the context of what he is already familiar with instead of the cultural context of the tribe under consideration. In this respect, nationalism is what opens new pathways for Native American literature and allows for the Native voice to be heard, not postmodernism, or postcolonialism. In postcolonial terms nationalism is obsolete, but native nationalism is different. It is anti-colonial nationalism of nations-peoples, the priority of which is sovereignty through privileging Native cultures and traditions and continuity.

Thus, although postmodernism on the surface seems to be beneficial to Native American literature, if one looks deeper, the situation might not appear to be easy. And, although completely denying the influence of postmodern theory and rejecting it as a

whole might not be reasonable, nationalism at the given times and conditions might serve the purpose of Native American literatures to a greater extent.

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