

HÓZHÓ, “TO WALK IN BEAUTY AND BALANCE”: INDIGENOUS WRITERS
DECOLONIZE THEORIES OF MYTH

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ABSTRACT

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In this project, I argue for an Indigenous theory of myth in order to reconsider popular and academic paradigms about myth and its function. My goal is to articulate how Indigenous understandings might revise these paradigms by emphasizing myth as a means to foster ethical relationships of health and balance within ourselves and in the world. Inspired by the Indigenous writers Leslie Marmon Silko, Thomas King, and Gerald Vizenor, I outline how these authors think, write, and talk about the concept of myth. I explain prevailing academic paradigms, including the term’s long history of associations with old-fashioned, “primitive,” superstitious stories and thought, along with how “myth” has been used to exert and maintain power and dominance over supposedly “non-rational” cultures. My project seeks to address the lack of representations of Indigenous theoretical perspectives in academic works on myth. Ultimately, I argue, myth is best conceived as a visionary, creative storytelling potential that informs all cultural values; potential to be steered away from hegemonic social thought and, instead, towards balanced, ethical relationships.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
What to Expect.....	8
Myth as Story and Stories as “All We Have”	9
“Post-Truth” and the Rationalization of Myth.....	13
Myth as Medicine: Indigenous Revisions of Myth Paradigms.....	19
“Do you doctor or Destroy?”	25
Decolonizing Theory and Fiction as Theory	27
What I have Covered and Where I am Headed.....	29
METHODOLOGY	31
Background: How did I get here?.....	31
Studying Indigenous Religion and Literature	40
“As the Old Story Tells Us”: An Indigenous Theory of Myth through Story	43
Myth as Vision to Re-story Balance to the Sacred Hoop	45
Why Indigenous Myths Matter for Justice.....	52
Myth in the Mode of Vizenor’s Compassionate Trickster.....	55
Silko’s Webs of Myth to Reaffirm Relationships with All of Creation.....	60
“It’s Turtles All the Way Down: King’s Truth About Stories and Myth as Constitutive Co-operation.....	62
In the Beginning... Western Constructions of Myth.....	65
Etymology of Myth.....	67

The Modern Construction of Myth and Romantic Conceptions.....	70
Marx and Nietzsche: Suspicions of Romantic Myth	75
Folkloristic and Myth as Primitive Religion.....	78
Myth as Ideology	82
Myth as Necessary Fiction.....	88
Closing Thoughts on the Modern Construction of Myth and Indigenous Revisions	91
“AS LONG AS THE GRASS IS GREEN AND THE WATERS RUN”: MYTH AS AN ANTIDOTE TO AUTHORITARIANISM IN THOMAS KING’S <i>GREEN GRASS</i> , <i>RUNNING WATER</i>	95
HOLDING ALL THINGS TOGETHER IN A SINGLE THOUGHT: HEALING THROUGH MYTH IN LESLIE SILKO’S <i>CEREMONY</i>	108
A GOOD STORY TO NOT DIE OF FEAR: THE WILD, MYTHIC IMAGINATION OF GERALD VIZENOR’S <i>BEARHEART THE HEIRSHIP CHRONICLES</i>	126
CONCLUSION: “TO CREATE A CONSCIOUSNESS OF COEXISTENCE”	146
WORKS CITED	153

INTRODUCTION

No word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way.

—Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Most often a story starts with words and words carry meaning far beyond themselves. When it comes to stories about Indigenous peoples, words—especially those in non-Indigenous languages—bear a particularly burdensome representational weight, usually encrusted with hard, jagged layers of colonialist misunderstandings. So we have to start at the beginning, with terminology, and clear away some of those dead layers to find more fertile ground before we're able to continue with the rest of the story.

—Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*

This is a project concerning the word myth—what myth means, what it does, and perhaps most of all, how it can be understood and used to foster responsible, ethical health and balance in the world. In some Indigenous cosmologies,¹ the world is envisioned as a circle or a hoop, divided into equal, interrelated directions. Each direction

¹ I use Indigenous with a capital “I” following the position held by Daniel Heath Justice in his introduction to *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*: “The capital ‘I’ is important here as it affirms a distinctive political status of peoplehood, rather than describing an exploitative commodity, like an ‘indigenous plant’ or a ‘native mammal.’ The proper noun affirms the status of a subject with agency, not an object with a particular quality” (6).

often has a color, a spirit, and a teaching associated with it. Like all circles, it has no beginning and no end and is complete within itself. The circle is always moving and changing while in a relative state of balance; it is not entirely good or entirely bad, it just *is*. Within this circle is all knowledge and activity in the world and in each individual, and at the center is ourselves along with the mystery of creation. What the directions represent and teach may change and vary between tribes and stories but, like a wheel, when one spoke or one quadrant is lighter or heavier than the rest it does not spin smoothly—it may function minimally or partially, but not harmoniously. If you take away one direction it does not function at all, and if the circle is broken then connection and balance is lost between the interrelated elements. The cosmology of the circle is represented and reflected in stories and ceremony and together they inform a way of life, a way to maintain a sense of harmonious connection, balance, and survival in the world. As Henrietta Mann, Cheyenne woman and chair of the Native American Studies Department at Montana State University, says, Indigenous “origin stories—that we emerged or fell from the sky or were brought forth—connect us to this land and establish our realities, our belief systems. We have spiritual responsibilities to renew the Earth and we do this through our ceremonies” (qtd. in LaDuke 15). In this view, myth and ceremonies are primary aids for ethical *survival*; they help establish a connection and maintain a mutual relationship between the earth that sustains us, and the people, plants, and animal relatives surrounding us. Myth and ceremony are means to maintain

equilibrium within ourselves and between the various directions of the circle of the world.

I do not believe it is a stretch to claim that the circle of the world today is out of harmonious balance in many directions: many of our bodies have become sick with a deadly virus as our minds and emotions struggle to adapt to the gravity of a global pandemic; our society, speaking as someone living in the United States, is far from united as it continues to fracture along deepening political lines; and, the environment faces impending disaster as centuries of extraction and destruction take their toll. With the contemporary world out of harmonious balance, I argue that we should honor and consider Indigenous understandings of storytelling and mythmaking as a means to reconsider our relationships between people and the environment. Inspired by the Indigenous writers Leslie Marmon Silko, Thomas King, and Gerald Vizenor, in this project, I will carefully consider how these authors think, write, and talk about stories and the concept of myth because, as an unidentified speaker in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* says: "You don't have anything if you don't have the stories" (2).²

In *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* Thomas King says that even if he were to travel to the farthest reaches of the solar system, he would want to begin his life there with "a story . . . Personally, I'd want to hear a creation story, a story that recounts

² Throughout this project, I will sometimes use the words myth, story, and narrative interchangeably because these are not easily distinguishable, autonomous categories, while at other times I will deploy the term myth in technical senses that are particular to certain academic fields and subfields. I agree with what Eric Gould argues explicitly in *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*, namely: that narrative and stories are simply "myth as discourse" (88). In this view, myth is the continual attempt to give events meaning, which is expressed through discourse.

how the world was formed, how things came to be, for contained within creation stories are relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist” (10). In this spirit, I would also like to begin with a creation story. In *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, Silko recounts the Laguna Pueblo origin myth in which creation begins with a thought: “As the old story tells us, Tse’itsi’nako, Thought Woman, the spider, thought of all her three sisters, and as she thought of them they came into being . . . As Thought Woman and her sisters thought of it, the whole universe came into being” (64). Here, in this origin story, we have a woman, a *spider* woman who thinks the universe—all of its people, plants, animals, land, oceans, stars, moons, and spirits—into being. Like the silken threads of a web, it is as if her thoughts are delicately interwoven with all of her creation; pulling on one strand would send reverberations to all others, and the integrity of the web would rely on maintaining sensitive balance and relationship with everything else. This is an old story, but it is far from obsolete or trapped in a distant, literal past. This story, like all stories, is made of language, of strings and strands of words that continually construct, not as isolated incidents but as connected to growing webs of discourse or story. When we use language and tell stories, we continue, metaphorically speaking, to spin the web of Tse’itsi’nako’s creation that already sustains and surrounds us in an ongoing process of storytelling. In author N. Scott Momaday’s words, through stories “we create and we are created” (*The Man Made of Words* 169). I think this is one way of understanding what

King means when he says, the only “truth about stories is that’s all we are” (*The Truth About Stories* 92).³

Speaking is a kind of storytelling, and I argue that the way we speak about myth matters in part because, as Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor often says (echoing a poststructuralist commonplace), “the way we speak, our language and our thoughts, structure our reality.” If the way we speak and think structures our reality, then the way we speak about myth, a word often synonymous with falsehood, certainly has implications about what kind of “reality” we are structuring. As I will explain in this project, the way myth has been constructed not only speaks to current predicaments sometimes called “post-truth,” but, considering the term’s long history of associations with outmoded, “primitive,” superstitious stories and thought, has also been used to exert and maintain power and dominance over “non-rational” cultures. As critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno once argued in the opening of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters . . . Enlightenment’s program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge” (1). While their argument develops in several different directions, it is their concern with this program of “enlightenment”

³ Momaday echoes and elaborates on this same idea: “We have no being beyond our stories. Our stories explain us, justify us, sustain us, humble us, and forgive us. And sometimes they injure and destroy us. Make no mistake, we are at risk in the presence of words. Perhaps the greatest stories are those which disturb us, which shake us from our complacency, which threaten our well-being. It is better to enter into the danger of such a story than to keep safely away in a space where the imagination lies dormant” (169).

that also concerns me here, a program which still continues to obscure and discredit Indigenous understandings of myth. When discussing Eric Gould's theories of myth vs. mythicity,⁴ mythologist Willian Doty remarked that "somehow the issues [surrounding that distinction] involve the 'really real' (Doty 15). If myth is a falsehood, or fantasy to be overthrown by knowledge, what does that say about reality, and furthermore, whose reality and myths are we talking about?

I will argue that "myth" is a word that is out of balance—a word which some even claim has been rendered obsolete by its complex academic history mired in European nationalism, Romantic transcendentalism, and hyper-rationalist racism alongside its popular connotations of "misconception" or untrue story (Ellwood 2001). I argue that this is precisely why we should pay close attention to the word myth, how we construct its meaning and how we use it; as we will see it is a powerful word that acts in the world in significant, and often problematic, ways. We need to peel away the "hard, jagged layers of colonialist misunderstandings" attached to *myth*—as Cherokee writer Daniel Heath Justice implores we do with such burdensome words (6). We cannot, as USC emeritus professor of religion Robert Ellwood suggests, rename myth and "start again with what was formerly called myth" (686), because as in the tale of spider woman, the meanings and constructions of myth exist within webs of language that act on the world and continue to grow and create. As Thomas King says, "once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world" (*The Truth About Stories* 10).

⁴ A useful way to distinguish between narrative, or "myth as discourse," and mythicity, the ceaseless attempt to give events meaning and value.

Myths, like the words we use to define myth, are alive; myths are veiled behind the values that drive us and our explanations and assumptions of how things came to be the way they are now. They are evoked in the songs we can't help but sing, the books we can't put down, the political rhetoric we love or hate, and the things that make us laugh and cry. Myth is the imaginary and experiential web that we believe holds our picture of the world together and, in that sense, they are the stories that inform things as dangerous as white supremacy and as liberating as social revolution. Gerald Vizenor insists that "creation myths are not time bound, the creation takes place in the telling, in present-tense metaphors" (*Earthdivers* xii). With origin stories, perhaps we are always *myth-ing*, re-creating through language and story our relationships to each other, the earth, and all of the infinite complexity of its human, more-than-human, and spiritual inhabitants. I hope my telling in this project will reveal why myth must be spoken of in a certain way—an Indigenous way. The primary "myth" I want to revise, deconstruct, and reconstruct, is the myth of human "mastery" or domination over "other" people and the natural world or, more broadly, of humans' relationship to the planet's inhabitants and natural "resources": how would we tell a different "origin story" about that relationship if we had a different understanding of myth? How would the logic informing that particular myth, that particular story, be different? Ultimately, I argue that an alternative *logos* about *mythos*, or logic about myth, namely one educed from this particular combination of Indigenous thinkers, is needed to help address our prevailing unbalanced concept of myth because, as the famous Oglala Lakota medicine-man Black Elk put it, "the power of a

thing or an act is in the meaning and the understanding” of that thing (31-32). This is my story about why myth should be thought and spoken of in a certain way.

What to Expect

Now that I have introduced the main concerns of my project, I will continue by first discussing a study question from the textbook *The Myths that Made America* that in part prompted, and helps to frame, my project. This study question includes a quote from Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* that will lead me into a brief introduction of Indigenous conceptions of myth and the importance of myth to Indigenous cultures. Next, I will situate my discussion within the current context of “post-truth” while elaborating on how “rationalist” conceptions of myth have not only shaped contemporary understandings of the term but have often functioned to discredit Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Following this discussion, I will provide a brief outline of how the Indigenous theories I will consider speak to and might revise prevalent myth studies paradigms and what kind of social formations Indigenous theories might inspire. To conclude my introduction, I situate my project as one concerned with addressing the lack of representation of Indigenous theories in academic works on myth and decolonizing theory, and I discuss my reasoning for focusing on Indigenous fiction writers as theorists.

Myth as Story and Stories as “All We Have”

At the end of her textbook, *The Myths that Made America*, Heike Paul, chair of American studies at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, raises twenty-five study questions to investigate further. Question number nineteen is “Discuss the connection between myth and narrative (or myth as narrative), and relate your discussion to the following excerpt from Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (1977) (424).” The passage she includes from her prompt comes from the opening pages of *Ceremony*, where an unidentified speaker (whose voice recurs throughout the book) says,

I will tell you something about stories,

[he said]

They aren’t just entertainment.

Don’t be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,

All we have to fight off illness and death.

You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories. (2)

While the speaker of this passage does not invoke “myth” explicitly, they do speak to the idea that the mythologizing imagination, or the creative ability to make myths, is constitutive of human experience—that without this ability, we would have nothing. *The Myths That Made America* examines myths of American national identity, and, subsequently, considers myth primarily as a hegemonic device—as the stories of American nation-building that drive the ongoing settler-colonialism of the Americas and

continue to reinscribe a seemingly coherent American identity. Yet, the speaker from *Ceremony* invokes a different, and perhaps more fundamental, understanding of myth; myth as narrative itself and as the creative potential to make stories, in this case, to actually resist destruction or attempted cultural annihilation and to recover from the resulting mental and spiritual trauma. As Silko's fellow Laguna Pueblo author Paula Gunn Allen writes, "myth . . . is an expression of the tendency to make stories of power out of the life we live in imagination; from this faculty when it is engaged in ordinary states of consciousness come tales and stories" (*The Sacred Hoop* 105). Myth is integral to Silko's book in the sense that Allen conveys in this quote, myths are *creative* stories of *power*; myth is not only the means for Silko's protagonist Tayo to recover from trauma, but also for cultural preservation and adaptation in the face of destructive forces like colonialism and war. Yet, "myth," in the form of the myths of American exceptionalism and expansionism, is also what drives these very same destructive forces. Silko's speaker continues,

 Their evil is mighty
 but it can't stand up to our stories.
 So they try to destroy our stories
 let the stories be confused or forgotten.
 They would like that
 They would be happy
 Because we would be defenseless then. (2)

As I will argue in detail throughout this project, the “evil” forces of destruction the speaker refers to include foundationalist and authoritarian attempts to govern ways of knowing and being (notably through racist, colonial authority over Indigenous knowledge systems and attempted genocide); colonial capitalist exploitation, extraction, expansion, or domination of people and the environment; psychological conditions such as post-traumatic stress and moral injury; and the spiritual meaninglessness and fragmentation that can accompany these realities and conditions. By expanding on Paul’s prompt, I seek to consider Indigenous conceptions of myth in relationship with Western academic myth theory in order to understand the role that myth plays in, as the *Ceremony* quote puts it, fighting off the “illness and death” of the above-mentioned forces.

Contrary to “contemporary common parlance [that] speaks of a ‘myth’ as a falsehood, a belief which does not accurately reflect reality” (Vecsey, *Imagine* 1), for the Indigenous perspectives I will consider here, stories—including the ones we often call myths—are eminently *real*. Tribal chairman of the Graton Rancheria in California and author Greg Sarris puts this notion plainly and powerfully: “for my aunts and me the story about Slug Woman had significance. For us Slug Woman is alive. She is seen and talked about in the stories we tell to understand the events of our lives” (174). Indeed, in many Indigenous worldviews, myth is a living category, constantly performed and reinvented as a vital, meaningful cultural activity. Myths are not separate from everyday life, let alone mere entertainment or distraction; “myth” is the imaginative aspect—the *creative* aspect—of stories themselves. Stories, language, and imagination are powerful,

they make things happen, and myth-making is inseparable from storytelling.⁵ Myths inform and are informed by practices that are imperative to Indigenous cultures, practices like world-renewal ceremonies, ceremonial songs, dances, language preservation, food sovereignty, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge. From Ojibwe creation tales of Earthdivers who build Turtle Island to tales about how Nanabozho and Nokomis were instructed by the creator to cultivate wild rice—providing the framework for meaning that drives Winona LaDuke’s practices of Anishinaabeg food sovereignty—myths are integral for Indigenous communities to continue to thrive as they have for thousands of years, even under ongoing settler-colonialism. As I will emphasize in a longer discussion of *Ceremony* later in this project, story is not only responsible for all the evil and destruction in the world, but it is also the only means to resist this evil. Yet, Tayo must find a novel way to perform his healing ceremony, precisely because the traditional ceremonies must be adapted to the current conditions of the colonized world in which he lives. In perspectives like those in *Ceremony*, then, ceremonies and myths are not static and immutable; myth is a creative *process* that is endlessly capable of destruction or renewal. As Silko’s speaker emphasizes in the above quote: without the stories, without the myths, there could be no ceremony—ceremony here understood as an enactment and

⁵ In *The Man Made of Words*, Momaday describes a concept of language and stories from the perspective of an oral tradition: “Perhaps the most distinctive and important aspect of [oral] tradition is the way in which it reveals the singer’s and the storyteller’s respect for a belief in language. At the heart of the American Indian oral tradition is a deep and unconditional belief in the efficacy of language. Words are intrinsically powerful. They are magical. By means of words can one bring about physical change in the universe . . . To be careless in the presence of words, on the inside of language, is to violate a fundamental morality” (16).

(re)creation of myth—and without ceremony, myth is inert and unable to facilitate individual and cultural healing.

“Post-Truth” and the Rationalization of Myth

As I began developing my project, it became difficult to ignore that any discussion of “myth” exists within a context of the fraught concept of truth in contemporary United States culture. There is a widespread sense in the United States that we live within a “post-truth” era, characterized by a lack of shared objective standards for truth. It is a time where there is no clear line between fact and fiction, and most discourse is understood to be composed of competing narratives. In this era, truth is somehow everywhere and nowhere at once; truth is relative; it is socially and individually created, often through shared convictions and/or institutional power. Simply put, truth becomes a matter of preference and emotional conviction when a culture cannot successfully agree upon an objective epistemological standard. In a post-truth era, then, truth is of little help guiding decisions to foster coexistence between different people and ideologies. Meanwhile, it is truth’s implied opposite—myth—that some people might actually point to as a primary contributor to this predicament. Not only is myth commonly thought of as false, but, as its etymology suggests, it is also a type of speech in story form;⁶ a poetic performance of cultural importance capable of *compelling* regardless of the evidence.

⁶ I cover the etymology of myth in more detail in my “Methodology” chapter.

Yet, as the speaker from *Ceremony* claims, we would be defenseless without stories, without myth-making; defenseless from politics that not only continue to deepen and reify a partisan divide that feels as hopeless as ever, but that also upholds doctrines of American exceptionalism and white supremacy. In this project, I will focus my attention to review (mis)understandings of truth's perhaps most feared enemy because, although I think that "objective" or scientific understandings of truth are undoubtedly useful, necessary, and perhaps indispensable for fostering coexistence, I argue that myth-making is equally an unavoidable and necessary dimension of human experience that is currently misused in our contemporary socio-political context. And, as some post-truth anxieties might fear, I do not think myth-making is going away any time soon, or ever for that matter.

The "post-truth" era signals something of a crisis for the academic and popular conceptions of myth that were established in antiquity and are contested and performed to this day, a conversation that has long revolved around the shifting lines between truth and fiction. In *Imagine Ourselves Richly: Mythic Narratives of North American Indians*, Native American studies professor Christopher Vecsey argues that "the lines between the two—myth and reality—were strictly drawn in antiquity, and have continued to color opinion, informed and uninformed, on the subject of mythology into modern times" (5). Paula Gunn Allen adds that popularly speaking, "any attitude or idea that does not conform to contemporary Western descriptions of reality is termed myth, signifying falsehood. Labeling something a myth merely discredits the perceptual system and

worldview of those who are not in accord with the dominating paradigm” (*The Sacred Hoop* 102). Myth, that is, appears to be a construction often used to separate truth from fiction, reality from dream, primitive from civilized, history from—you guessed it—myth. This dichotomy between truth and fiction not only allows a dominant culture to discredit specific stories as false but in the Americas (and elsewhere) has contributed to a delegitimization of Indigenous knowledge systems—a key tool of Euro-American colonization and genocide. As Antoinette Burton argues in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Diana Taylor have demonstrated that histories of writing as truth have functioned as “scales of credibility and legitimacy against which societies with either oral or expressive traditions (or both) were deemed inferior. These maneuvers effectively consolidated performance and embodiment as ‘native’ and the text and especially the alphabet as European—and, by extension, civilized” (7). In many spaces of Western culture, we have yet to move beyond the positivist pitfalls that equate oral history and Indigeneity with primitivism, often by constructing myth as a perhaps fascinating but mostly obsolete species of “primitive” thought. As the nineteenth-century anthropologist Edward Tylor once put it, appallingly, in his seminal *Primitive Culture*, “A poet of our own day has still much in common with the minds of uncultured tribes in the mythologic stage of thought” (qtd. in Von Hendy 87). It would appear that myth not only fuels the “post-truth” era as culturally important and compelling speech but has been used to justify the “civilized” West’s superiority over so-called “primitive” oral cultures.

Vecsey outlines how myth was simultaneously belittled by elites while being used by them as a tool for establishing and maintaining social control. Since the time of ancient Greek culture, “it was the temper of the interpretations [of myth] . . . rather than their insights, that pressed on most vigorously through the centuries” (4). That temper was largely to belittle the stories and poetic storytelling power of the uneducated populace while harnessing that same compelling, poetic speech “for the purpose of social control” (4). It was Aristotle, says Vecsey, who “surmised that priests, politicians, and rulers fabricate and employ myths in order to socialize their followers, instilling religious belief and piety, and fostering state control over behavior and loyalty that arise also from shared belief and shared view of life” (4). Along with Aristotle, Plato theorized myth as a tool for political authority and social control—a potentially dangerous tool in the hands of the people, especially poets and artists. Many subsequent theories, knowingly or not, shared a connection with this conception of myth in the name of “rationalism,” a conception based on a desire to create a more ordered, demythologized populace where myth was solely manipulated via the hands of the state. As William Doty explains in *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, most theories throughout history rely on “rationalizing” and ridiculing myth; these early Greek theories developed into a tendency to remove the mythic, imaginative, or fanciful as a means to clear our thought from supposedly childish, primitive fallacies and sentimentalizations:

The heavy burden of our [Western] cultural background lies upon the all too frequent weighting of mythology with the sense “unreal, fictional.” Precisely such

a rationalizing approach to myths has dominated the study of mythology, even as it has excluded myth from philosophical and scientific exploration . . . most theories of myth and ritual derive ultimately from the tendency to rationalize, to substitute abstract social or philosophical-scientific meanings for the graphic imagery of narrative myths and performed rituals. (8)

Across centuries of theorizing, many influential thinkers from ancients like Plato, Aristotle, and Euhemerus,⁷ to nineteenth-century philologist Max Müller and anthropologists Edward Tylor and Sir James Frazer, have constructed myth “almost exclusively as a problem for modern rationality” (Doty 11). For example, Müller adapted Euhemerus’s approach as a means to explain away creation myths as false origin stories that concealed “natural” and rational underlying causes. This approach assumed that mythical thinking and stories muddled a more sensible way of seeing the world; myths were less sophisticated and were diseased in comparison to the clarity of rational explanations. As Andrew Von Hendy characterizes one of Müller’s theories, myth, by this way of thinking, was tantamount to “cognitive failure” (78). Such hyper-rationalization ignores how these theories—or perhaps more simply stories—might actually end up doing as much, or more, harm than good. As I argued earlier, these stories of the superiority of truth and rationality over the imagination and myth have been used

⁷ Euhemerism theorizes myth as primarily “historical, essentially positing that myths derive from distorted biographies of great persons...The claims of Euhemerus found repetition among the later Christian church fathers, including Augustine, as attacks upon pagan religions. To the Christians—whose deified object of worship best proved Euhemerus’s theory—euhemerism demonstrated that all pagan gods were false and powerless” (Vecsey, *Imagine* 4).

to legitimize authority over, and subjugation of, supposedly less rational people. “There is often a tendency to refer to ‘their’ *myth*, but to ‘our’ *theology*, or *self-evident beliefs*,” Doty points out (12)—and I would add, sometimes, *our science* or *our truth*. Moreover, these rationalizing approaches contribute to the contemporary metanarrative where the “left” sees themselves as champions of scientific truth and proper morals, and the “right” will stubbornly say and do whatever they want in the pursuit of a spurious conception of “freedom.” Additionally, as the simplistic metanarrative goes, the right sees themselves as always combating the oppression of left-wing, governmental authority, while the left sees the right as mostly racist, patriarchal, and verging on fascist. Meanwhile, mythic speech is effectively used by politicians to manipulate and control people across these partisan divides in struggles for power. Rationalizing myth does not make it go away, it makes some people’s stories true and “others” false. Ultimately, it is most important to understand how stories are utilized for social control and to learn how myth-making might instead be used to foster social, environmental, mental and spiritual health.

Nevertheless, even as modern Western culture typically relegates myth to the realm of the "primitive" and the irrational, it also seems to accord myth a certain kind of power and prestige. In 2019, the best-selling movie was Marvel’s *Avengers: Endgame*, a film rife with mythological motifs, supernatural superheroes and/or themes, which grossed somewhere around \$800,000,000 in the U.S. alone. Myth, in the West, has become commodified as pop-culture entertainment and is something audiences cannot seem to get enough of. From movies such as *Avengers: Endgame*, *Star Wars*, and *Lord of*

the Rings, to video games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Gods of War*, *The Elder Scrolls*, and books/television series such as *Game of Thrones*, *The Witcher*, and *Supernatural*, the imaginative fantasy of myth and its themes, motifs and characters capture many folks' imagination. How is it that myth is adored by "fantasy/sci-fi" movie/books/games/art fans, its relevance also exploited for commercial gain, and, simultaneously, is a word used in Western culture to debunk certain narratives as false? Such contradictions reveal a cultural predicament where definitions of myth have struggled to answer to contradictory tendencies in our ways of knowing and being and reflect the conflicting history of academic theories about myth that I will introduce in more detail later on. What is needed is not rational clarity to explain away myth, but clarity about how our *logos* of myth functions, how to best steer stories of power towards political goals that do not harm people, our minds, our spirits, and the environment.

Myth as Medicine: Indigenous Revisions of Myth Paradigms

To explore Indigenous understandings of myth, I will perform close readings of three novels—*Green Grass, Running Water* by Thomas King, *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, and *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* by Gerald Vizenor—and put those works in conversation with both "Native" and "Western" critics and theorists of myth. The theoretical frameworks for understanding story and myth offered by these three authors, and by Native critics such as Craig Womack, Paula Gunn Allen, and

Daniel Heath Justice, will inform my reading. I seek to see how such perspectives speak to Western myth and critical theory, as outlined in Andrew Von Hendy's comprehensive study *The Modern Construction of Myth*, William Doty's *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Ritual*, and Christopher Vecsey's introduction to *Imagine Ourselves Richly: Mythic Narratives of North American Indians*, in order to revise prevalent paradigms and outline an Indigenous way of constructing myth. There are paradigmatic tensions in myth studies as to whether myth is a vehicle of access to transcendent vision often separate from social realities, hegemonic social thought, the source of all cultural values, or simply interesting but useless stories and thinking of the past. The family of Indigenous myth theory I will elucidate constructs myth as all of the above—but also as a genre of sacred story *still* told in contemporary (although certainly not “primitive”) oral and written cultures. Ultimately, all of these different paradigms of conceptualizing myth are, in these Indigenous views, like “tributaries of the same river” (*The Truth About Stories* 109). But above all, I argue, myth is best conceived as a visionary, creative storytelling potential that informs all cultural values, potential to be steered away from hegemonic social thought and, instead, towards balanced, ethical relationships. In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Cherokee author Daniel Heath Justice explains how stories are “agents of both harm and healing.” They are both “bad, bitter medicine” because they can teach things like disconnection “from the plants and animals upon which our survival depends,” and yet they “can be good medicine too” (2) because they remind “of the greatness of who we’re meant to be, so that we are not determined by the colonial narrative of deficiency” (5). He notes how Indigenous stories in particular “give shape,

substance, and purpose to our existence and help us understand how to uphold responsibilities to one another and the rest of creation, especially in places and times so deeply affected by colonial fragmentation” (2). In contrast to myth studies paradigms, the emphasis here is always on how creative vision and cultural meaning told through story can be directed towards upholding responsibilities to one another and the rest of creation.

To elaborate further, as Von Hendy has outlined in *The Modern Construction of Myth*, Western myth theory generally revolves around four primary families of thought: romantic, ideological, constitutive, and folkloristic.⁸ Generally speaking, the romantic approaches regard myth positively and reverently as a source of transcendent vision; the ideological negatively and suspiciously as hegemonic social thought; the constitutive as neutral yet fundamental to all cultural constructions; and the folkloristic as a remote mode of thinking (and genre of story) consigned to the distant past. As I see it, the “fifth” family that I am proposing (and that I am calling *Myth as Medicine*) agrees with thinkers in Von Hendy’s constitutive school that stories create the world and make events understandable and meaningful; rejects aspects of the folkloristic mode insofar as it does not segregate myth as an outdated genre of oral stories fantasized on the road to scientific progress; agrees with the ideological mode that myths are undoubtedly dangerous when

⁸ These categories are meant to serve as a heuristic to help us understand the primary ways myth has been constructed throughout Western history, not as definitions to terms that have a broad range of meanings and associations. For example, the terms “ideological” and “constitutive” may have overlapping meanings in some contexts, but here they serve to differentiate diverging modes of thinking about the term myth. Von Hendy’s taxonomic goal was “to derive these broadest of categories as inductively as possible” and, even though it could have been done differently, he ultimately arrived at these four as the clearest categories he could come up with to show the main developments of the term myth (xi).

they provide the basis for oppression and domination caused by systems such capitalism, colonialism, and scientific racism; yet also holds that myth, in a romantic sense, is a primary technology to subvert such ideologies and systems of domination and help heal psycho-spiritual and cultural dis-eases caused by them.

The family of Indigenous perspectives I will consider can help revise these contradictory paradigms by integrating understandings from each of Von Hendy's categories and emphasizing that myth is to be used towards values like Hózhó. Hózhó, while difficult, if not impossible, to translate concisely, is often said to be a way of living and state of being focused on walking in this world with beauty and balance.⁹ Hózhó is a Diné word and wellness philosophy that refers to beauty as "manifested in behavior and in one's relationships with other living beings" (Silko, *Yellow Woman* 65), and as a state of harmonious balance between all life and levels of existence, including natural, political, personal, and spiritual worlds. While it refers to all that is understood to be good, Hózhó is not an attempt to get rid of all that is bad but to put oneself in harmonious movement with the ebb and flow of the shifting balances of the world. Hózhó is a moral duty to inspire beauty and balance, to perform ceremonies and tell stories responsibly and inclusively, because not to do so can cause destruction among relationships and the environment. We may not be able to rid the world of evil (or in the terms of this project,

⁹ Momaday describes this notion of beauty as "beauty in the physical world, of man in the immediate presence and full awareness of that beauty." This beauty is spoken about in songs, prayers, stories, etc, because "man has always tried to represent and even to re-create the world in words. The singer affirms that he has a whole and irrevocable investment in the world . . . he acknowledges the sacred reality of his being in the world, and to that reality he makes his prayer as an offering, a pledge of his integral involvement, commitment, and belief" (*The Man Made of Words* 17).

various forms of hegemonic social thinking) but we can steer our myth-making towards the goals of Hózhó. Politically speaking, Myth as Medicine, Myth as Hózhó, might help foster what Steven Charleston, in “From Medicine Man to Marx” (in Jace Weaver’s influential anthology *Native American Religious Identity: Unforgotten Gods*), dubs *commonality*, that is: “Native spirituality” (168). A kind of liberation theology, commonality “embodies the most traditional aspects of our culture,” including “the foundational understanding that land may not be owned,” “the communal use of land and the means of production,” “the intentional sharing of resources in an equitable manner among all those in need,” “the use of kinship modalities rather than class structure,” “the exercise of consensus in governance as a guarantee of democratic institutions,” and “the philosophical embodiment of community through individuality rather than individualism.” In short, Charleston sees in Hózhó cultural values and structures counter-hegemonic to those of colonial capitalism, and while I do not claim that theorizing Myth as Medicine would somehow guarantee the widespread acceptance of such values, or that these ideas are perfect and should be universally accepted,¹⁰ I certainly believe they offer a much-needed alternative to current US politics and narratives of “mastery” and domination. This is what I mean, in a material sense, when I say that myth has to be thought of metaphorically as medicine, because it can be *used* to help treat a variety of figurative illnesses—from colonial violence and racism to economic disparities and authoritarian politics—but also because myth can cause or exacerbate these illnesses if

¹⁰ In addition to these points, my goal is not to essentialize these cultural values as “Indigenous,” only to show that Myth as Medicine broadly embraces them.

used without care or misunderstood. Choosing a metaphor to guide the conception and potential reconstruction of social formations is an incredibly delicate choice to make. As far as a choice of metaphors goes, I believe Myth as Medicine is one step towards creating a more equitable origin story to intervene in, and potentially reconstruct, contemporary US social formations.

The main questions driving my research are: how do the Indigenous authors Leslie Marmon Silko, Thomas King, and Gerald Vizenor construct myth? And what does it mean to view myth as a tool for fighting off illness and death? Thomas King says in *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* that both he and his friend and colleague, the late Choctaw-Cherokee novelist and critic Louis Owens, “knew that stories were medicine, that a story told one way could cure, that the same story told another way could injure” (92). If this is true, then how can understanding stories as medicine help guide modern myth-making out of “post-truth” politics that stifle communication, entrench partisan divides, and empower supremacist ideologies? Can it also guide us away from dehumanizing and extractive political values and structures that govern our relationships with people and the natural world? Like King and Owens, who “wrote knowing that none of the stories we told would change the world. But we wrote in the hope that they would” (92), I write knowing that this particular project may not change the world, but I certainly still hope that, in some small way, it will.

“Do you doctor or Destroy?”

In a lecture about Native American literature, Greg Sarris relays a critical choice that the Cache Creek Pomo medicine woman Mabel McKay once expressed to him. “Do you doctor or do you destroy?” she asked him:

[W]ith all that has happened to you, you have two choices: you can become angry and hateful and let holes open in your heart where you poison yourself and then in turn poison and hate other people . . . or you can take everything that has happened to you and use that to doctor. (*Greg Sarris: Native American Literary Tradition*)

For Sarris, as for many other Indigenous thinkers, myth is essential to this choice to doctor or destroy. Stories, as Daniel Heath Justice emphasizes, can be “good medicine. They remind us about who we are and where we’re going, on our own and in relation to those with whom we share this world. They remind us about the relationships that make a good life possible” (6). The goal of my project is to reconstruct myth not as a term used to discredit alternative narratives as false or claim ideological superiority over “primitive” “others” and overthrow fantasy and superstition with “knowledge.” But, rather, I hope to reconstruct it as a term that points to our creative ability to construct and adapt stories that may foster coexistence between different people and ideologies as well as the environment. I do not seek to authoritatively determine what myth is as an ontological category of reality, or to say whose stories are true and whose are false; rather, I seek to understand how stories function, or in other words, what our stories do, and how they could function *better* than they do in the current context of post-truth, and

white nationalist, colonial-capitalist, and authoritarian politics. I strive to know how an Indigenous understanding of myth might help us not continue down a “post-truth” spiral where we have drifted so far from shared foundations that we spend a great deal of our time and energy making each other out to be enemies and/or liars.¹¹ I also want to understand how Indigenous conceptions might help us avoid perspectives that deem non-scientific standards of truth to be simple fictions, because such perspectives often play into the hands of notions and practices of superiority and exceptionalism that reinforce colonial systems of dominance. When one group uses their “truth” to dominate or discredit another, I fear we have lost sight of the value in maintaining relationships of coexistence and balance.

At the end of the day, after all the theorizing has been done, what matters is how truths or myths act in the world, or, conversely, how we, as actors, act out conceptions of truth or myth. All of this perhaps amounts to a plea to stop using compelling speech and stories for the exploitation, domination, and destruction of fellow people and the environment. This is why I look to Indigenous theories; as I will continue to argue, the theorists that I will consider steer creative stories of power—myths—towards coexistence and ethical, responsible, communal relationships of health and balance instead of

¹¹ I feel that it is necessary to be clear here that I am not anti-science or scientific truth. I only wish to argue that, while science is surely great in many ways, it should not claim a monopoly on truth or be used to denigrate people and the earth. With a background in religious studies, I argue that it is vital to also acknowledge “religious” truth and religious worldviews as valid ways of understanding truth and being because not only do billions of people believe in and/or practice various religions, but a religious literacy can help us learn about the values and worldviews of these diverse communities, as well as ourselves. Ultimately, I wish to argue that the most important matter is examining how our truths function in the world in order to avoid authoritarian, or dominating and harmful politics.

exploitation, exile, and domination. Indigenous people are the West's greatest critics because they know all too well the terrible, material, blunt end of our particularly destructive stories and how they have been used; the Indigenous myth theories I will consider are a challenge to do better, to focus on communal and environmental responsibility and coexistence. I agree with *Ceremony* that we don't have anything without the stories, and I would add that the stories we tell are inextricable from our understanding of myth, understandings that, as Horkheimer and Adorno put it, have long sought to overthrow fantasy with knowledge in the name of "Enlightenment" and "rationality." I fear that without reimagining myth towards ethical coexistence, we will be less able to stop destructive cycles of exploitation and domination that continue to harm each other, ourselves, and the world.

Decolonizing Theory and Fiction as Theory

The substantive absence of Indigenous theoretical perspectives in Western academic works on myth prompted this project. Moreover, the study of myth in Western culture often involves looking at Native American and/or Indigenous myths as objects of study but rarely focuses on Indigenous thinkers as agents of theory. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses, among many other things, the need to "decolonize" theory because theory has been used to oppress Indigenous peoples. Yet, simultaneously, theory is important for Indigenous peoples in order to develop language

to “make sense of reality,” “to deal with contradictions and uncertainties,” “for prioritizing and legitimating what we see and do,” to organize and determine action and resistance, and to “protect us because it contains within it a way of putting reality into perspective” (40). Decolonization “engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels” and, for researchers, it involves a “critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices” (21) and, I would add, language practices such as those surrounding the term “myth.” Smith asserts that “the methodologies and methods of research, the theories that inform them, the questions which they generate and the writing styles they employ, all become significant acts which need to be considered carefully and critically before being applied. In other words, they need to be ‘decolonized’” (41). My hope is that my project can contribute to this goal by divesting from cultural and linguistic paradigms of colonialism and centering Indigenous writers as agents of theory, theory that articulates a particular family of Indigenous worldviews and epistemologies concerning myth and stories.

Additionally, my project aims to support the notion that Indigenous fiction writers are theorists in their own right. To ignore imaginative writings in theoretical discourse would be to perform what Doty has warned of, namely substituting imagery and narrative with abstract reasoning. To explain what I mean, consider the advice that Navajo storyteller Sunny Dooley once explained to Christopher Vecsey “Think. Plan. Then speak. Choose the words that you are willing to commit yourself to, from here on. What you choose, will happen” (“Navajo Morals and Myths, Ethics and Ethicists” 114). In this

view, storytelling is not mere entertainment but is imbued with critical thought and planning, or as Vecsey quotes Dooley as saying, “I don’t tell stories just for the heck of it. I record the changes that take place over my lifetime. I record them in my stories.” Stories are a record of not only critical thought, but of affect, dialogue, imagery, setting, and narrative action that enriches abstract reasoning and prose with essential dimensions of the human experience. Justice explains that Indigenous literature “tell[s] the truths of our presence in the world today, in days past, and in days to come” (2). There is truth in the stories, in fiction and myth, and as we will see in my close readings, perhaps *only* in them. Although it could have been possible to complete this project by focusing only on non-fiction writing, the novels enrich the theory with Indigenous storytelling practice. This approach does not seek to separate *mythos* from *logos*, or fictional narrative from rational explanation, but to allow the two to inform and enrich one another in a relationship of balance.

What I have Covered and Where I am Headed

So far, I have introduced my project as one primarily concerned with the construction of the word myth. I have argued that the word myth is wrapped up with colonial misunderstandings that influence current predicaments about “post-truth” and continue to support metanarratives and practices of colonial “mastery” and “domination.” I have begun to outline the broad strokes of what one particular family of Indigenous myth theory, called Myth as Medicine, might look like in relation to myth studies’ main, prevailing paradigms and what kind of social formations it might help produce. Next, I

will describe my own background as a scholar in both an affective and a theoretical sense before outlining Indigenous theories of myth and prevailing myth studies paradigms in Western academia, focusing particularly on how Indigenous concepts might revise the latter. Finally, before concluding my project, I will perform three close readings of the novels *Green Grass*, *Running Water*, *Ceremony*, and *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* to synthesize and elucidate an Indigenous theory of myth.

METHODOLOGY

Background: How did I get here?

The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one . . . man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

—Clifford Geertz, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*

Imagination is a mythic place and, for many people, imagination is a sacred place, not everyone. But to dream and imagine is to restore or re-loom the unities with other life forms. It is the only way we can trust what we know, what our bodies know and what our minds and bodies have inherited from life itself about life itself, about other life forms.

—Gerald Vizenor, *Nighttimes Magazine*

I can only express my journey to this project as a kind of story. To tell this abridged story is to mythologize my own life and give my own history a trajectory, a shape, and potential meanings. This story begins with my early interest in myth, an interest that took shape from a childhood immersed in Tolkien and fantasy media culture, a passion for art and music, and eventually a world religions course I took in community college. As a musician who grew up steeped in the countercultural ideologies of the

1960s and 70s, and the often derogatorily deemed “New Age” spiritualities so prevalent throughout my experience growing up in California, my search for greater meaning and a way out of the often suffocating conformity of United States consumer culture led me to the unlikely place of religious studies. I valued (and still do) ideas of love, dreams, imagination, art, poetry, peace, music, words, pagan as well as so-called “Eastern” spiritualities, and what might be called, in Rudolph Otto’s terms, the numinous or *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.¹² I was interested in life, being and/or existence itself, and with the experiences in my life that evoked a sense of the ineffable, the mystery, the joy, the possibilities, and the wonder of being alive. The popular culture of Orange County California somehow made these interests feel more “fake,” i.e. “mythical,” than the tons of plastic products competing daily for me to swipe my plastic card, ultimately subtracting precious numbers on a computer screen or chemically inked receipt. Perhaps in accordance with the definition that myth is a falsehood, my imaginative values felt belittled and fake, while capitalist products and lifestyles constituted the supposed reality. Much like Paula Gunn Allen articulates in *The Sacred Hoop*, “current dictionary definitions of myth reinforce a bias that enables the current paradigm of our technocratic social science-biased society to prevail over tribal or poetic views just as it enables an earlier Christian biblical paradigm to prevail over the pagan one” (102).

Furthermore, I was interested in meaning-making; I wanted to better understand myself and my fellow humans in all of the world’s cultural diversity and vibrancy.

¹² This refers to the overwhelming sense of awe—of terror *and* fascination—when contemplating the mysteries of God and/or existence.

Religious studies became this outlet for me in an academic setting, something I suppose I wasn't completely aware existed in universities. I became especially intrigued by the narrative dimension of spirituality and/or religion, otherwise known as myth. The sacred stories across the world's religious traditions evoked for me a sense of wonder and were characterized by complexity with much to teach about meaning-making, identity, ineffability, and contextualized, embodied experience. More basically, they seemed to be metaphors about lived experience and everyday life as people. Perhaps most importantly, myths seemed to teach about how to navigate the complexities of life, to be more aware of the power of our words and actions, and since I was looking for it, how to be more compassionate. Myths like the *Mahabharata*, for instance, are teeming with spiritual and behavioral potentials; it teaches as much by showing how *not* to be as how *to* be.

In religious studies, I studied too many frameworks for approaching myth to adequately summarize here. For example, I was exposed to Doty's polyphasic definition (which I will note later), American studies scholar Richard Slotkin's ideas of "regenerative violence" as the primary theme of American myths,¹³ Robert Bellah's theories of "American Civil Religion," Loyal Rue's idea of myth as stories that create social coherence, Émile Durkheim's ideas in *Elementary Forms of Religion*, William James's pragmatic approach to religion, along with Clifford Geertz, Jared Diamond, and Victor Turner, among many more thinkers and works. Moreover, most of my religious

¹³ For Slotkin, "[a] myth is a narrative which concentrates in a single dramatized experience the whole history of a people in their land" by "reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors" (Heike 29).

studies education was occupied by learning from thinkers within specific religious traditions. I studied Christian ideas about stories, postmodernism, and liberation theologies alongside Islamic thinkers from Muhammed to Rumi and Farid ud-Din Attar. I was especially interested in south and east Asian spiritual traditions, and I considered myth through the lenses of texts like the Upanishads and thinkers from Shankara, Ramanuja, and Pantanjali, to Thich Nhat Hanh, Confucius, and Lao Tzu. All of these thinkers shaped the way I think about myth and storytelling. My culminating project in religious studies, which I will briefly discuss in my next paragraph, as well this current project, are probably the best indicators of some of the conclusions I came to about religion and myth from this education. To be clear, I do not claim to be an expert on these thinkers and theories—they probably raised more questions than answers in the end—but these are some of the thinkers that shaped my thought before becoming a student in English.

My religious studies education culminated in a research project entitled “The Value and Forms of Mythopoetic Understanding: A View of Mythopoetic Understanding in the *Rāmāyana*.” The central aim of my research was to investigate how stories are integral to everyday and/or spiritual life because they are vehicles for meaning-making. I primarily explored theories of myth as narrative and as a way of making sense of the world, alongside the opening *sargas* of the south-Asian Indian epic *Rāmāyana*, which, I argued, speaks to stories, myth, and/or poetry as valuable modes of understanding experience because they provide meaning to events. The opening of the *Rāmāyana* can be

understood as a metaphor for the creative process of myth-making, a process that spawns all of the ensuing drama and possibilities that are played out in the tale. Unlike a historical, scientific perspective that seeks to explain events with facts, the *Rāmāyana* reveals myth as a way to portray the many potential meanings and understandings of an event. Moreover, myths like the *Rāmāyana* stage possible meanings, philosophies, and behaviors and allow the interpreter a chance for self-reflection and change. The goal of this research was not to universally advocate a particular truth or eclipse the interpretations of the many groups that value the *Rāmāyana*, but to elucidate—from my own particular cultural positionality and frameworks often wrought with positivist assertions of truth—the potential values of understanding life through stories. This work perhaps grew out of my response to the spaces of contemporary Western culture where assertions of objectivity and the scientific method maintain a monopoly on truth. It concerned how, as Craig Womack puts it in his introduction to the anthology *Reasoning Together*, “Mythic vision itself embodies worlds of possibilities rather than reports on reality” (70). Myths and mythic thinking, I argued, are not intended to represent reality “accurately” or “objectively,” but to dramatize possible ways of being and knowing, allowing us to reflect on how we might behave and think differently.

In English studies, I wished to consider further the role of narrative in relation to meaning-making and identity—how narrative helps us construct our social realities and conceive of our relationship between the self and the world. It turned out that one of the most productive places to do that was in a proseminar on contemporary Native American

fiction, where work by authors such as Leslie Silko, Thomas King, Gerald Vizenor, Louise Erdrich, James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, and Sherman Alexie among others, consistently foregrounded what might be loosely termed “religious dimensions.” Integral to many of these stories are questions of ritual/ceremony, visions, dreams, spirits/ancestors, being, healing, and—not least of all—myth. For example, we can see religious themes in places as obvious as the title of N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, which clearly refers to “the opening of a prayer from the Navajo Night Chant, a winter healing ceremony” (vii). The novel has been characterized “as ‘a creation myth—rife with fabulous imagery’” where we see the main character Abel travel a version of what in traditional Navajo culture is sometimes called the pollen path (“About the Book: Reflections on *House Made of Dawn*”).¹⁴ This pollen path, depicted in some Navajo sand paintings, is also related to living in beauty and balance, in Hózhó, which is reflected in the repeated refrain that eventually closes the novel:

May it be beautiful before me,

May it be beautiful behind me,

May it be beautiful above me,

May it be beautiful below me,

May it be beautiful all around me.

¹⁴ Yellow corn pollen is an important element in traditional Diné religion.

In beauty it is finished. (131)

Abel's journey is fraught with the difficulties of navigating the cultural losses and violence symptomatic of colonialism, and, in the end, Abel, in the tradition of what are known as Navajo "runners," runs the ritual pollen path at dawn to enact a measure of personal healing and cultural adaptation and reinvention. Once again, like the stories I became familiar with during religious studies, here was an example of a powerful, imaginative story steeped in mythic meaning and insight into the powerful, often destructive, yet also restorative properties that can come with myth-making and ceremony.

In my graduate education, I have familiarized myself with a great deal of materialist criticism, from thinkers such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall to Michel Foucault and Terry Eagleton. However, the Indigenous literature I have read illuminates complexities regarding the intersections between the material and metaphysical that are typically not addressed by, say, some Marxist or New Historicist approaches that primarily emphasize the social construction of culture and language. Creek-Cherokee literary critic Craig Womack says, "if all language is socially mediated, as some would claim, some Native thinkers might respond, 'Yes, but it is also mediated by others besides humans'" (65), including animals, plants, and spirits. Incorporating a religious studies approach with a materialist one can help mediate the potential of "a doctrinaire materialist criticism [that] might limit reality to the tangible and or literal" (83) and

ignore people's actual lived experience of religion.¹⁵ Religion and/or spirituality is not something that can be studied objectively, and a religious studies approach seeks to understand how people experience religion, why they practice it, and what it means to them regardless of what the one observing might think the ultimate nature of reality is.¹⁶ I am sympathetic, then to Creek-Cherokee literary critic Craig Womack's claim that "[t]he . . . reason for making religious studies a cornerstone of a materialist theory is that spiritual matters are paramount for Indian people themselves, and no discussion of art or politics can proceed without referencing them" (9). In Indigenous literature (and in Indigenous criticism and theory), there is often a confluence between material, political realities—especially matters pertaining to settler colonialism—and spiritual, imaginative realities. For example, in *Green Grass Running Water* there is no clear line between reality and fiction as a mysterious narrator and the mythical Coyote, along with the four Indian elders who turn out to be the mythical figures of Thought Woman, Changing Woman, First Woman, and Old Woman, constantly interact and interfere with the “real world” plot of the novel. In *Ceremony*, all Euro-American settler colonialism is caused

¹⁵ A quick note on the word “religion.” This is a highly contested word that has been, and continues to be, used in hegemonic ways—not least of all to marginalize Indigenous cultures. When I say “religion” I tend to mean something closer to “worldview” or, as philosopher Paul Tillich put it, “ultimate concern.”

¹⁶ This approach to studying religion is informed by thinkers such as William James in works like *The Varieties of Religious Experience* where one's experiential understanding of the metaphysical is emphasized as a primary consideration. Some religious studies scholars refer to this as “phenomenology,” although not to be conflated with the philosophical school of the same name. In religious studies, phenomenology could be described as “the attempt through informed empathy to present others' experience and beliefs from their points of view, and involving the suspension of one's own values” (*Dimensions of the Sacred* Smart xxiii). This methodology does not pretend that one can transcend their own values and positionality, only that to understand religion it is vital to consider religious experience from the point of view of those experiencing it, as best as one can.

by a contest of witches and the ongoing metaphysical power of their storytelling, and in *Bearheart*, the main character, through the power of vision, shapeshifts into a bear to transcend a post-apocalyptic, colonized world. Given examples like these, I believe that a religious studies approach and a materialist criticism are equally important lenses to consider when studying Indigenous literature.

Through my education in religious studies and now in English, I have come more than ever to value the importance of integrating materialist and spiritual approaches, not only with respect to the study of literature *per se* but in trying to influence ethical change in the world. Too much emphasis on the “material-social” runs the risk of ignoring (often intentionally) or reducing “spiritual” things, like vision, imagination, dreams, and spirits—“irrational” things that often defy clear meaning or obvious relationship to social reality. “[A]n ethical [sociological] theory,” says Womack, “has to be built on dreams as much as realities” (9). Womack is speaking to the role of vision and dreams in not only dreaming new possibilities for a more just and equitable society but in providing hope, inspiration, and meaning to material realities and possible futures. I believe a mythic inquiry is as good a place as any to explore and inhabit the spaces of such dreams—of the visions of an artful, mythologizing imagination—to outshine oppressive ideologies and rules and to act in this world in Hózhó. I hope that *Myth as Medicine* outlines a framework that integrates storytelling’s material, political, spiritual, and imaginative aspects.

Studying Indigenous Religion and Literature

Considering my background, I acknowledge that I am certainly biased towards the importance of spirituality and “myth” as salient topics of study and as beneficial and necessary to living a fulfilling life. I cannot know all of the ways my positionality informs my work, but I can say that I grew up as a musician and my love for art, stories, and myth continues to aid and inspire me through the most difficult times of my life. Perhaps this is why I tend towards a hopeful optimism, towards “a hermeneutics that searches everywhere—in literature, folklore, myth, architecture, nursery rhymes, popular culture, music, of all ages and places—for the hope of a better world” (Boer 40). In the words of Roland Barthes, “is there a mythology of the mythologist? No doubt, and the reader will easily see where I stand . . . What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth” (*Mythologies* 12).

Additionally, I am aware that, as a white male descendent of settlers (of Irish, British and German ancestry), there are asymmetrical power dynamics at play in my act of interpreting Indigenous literature and putting it into dialogue with Western myth/critical theory, and I note that my work is far from being perfect or complete. I align myself with the idea Greg Sarris puts forth in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* that understanding people and cultures “is ongoing,” it is a process “aimed not at a final transparent understanding of the Other or of the self, but at a continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both” (6). This project is not objective, universal, authoritative or omnipotent; it is a work of literary/myth criticism authored by a particular white Californian/American who sees value in Indigenous literature/scholarship and hopes to

bring respect and awareness to Indigenous perspectives. Womack comments that “There could be—and we assumed would continue to be—a valuable critical response written by non-Indians that would contribute to the discussion of Native Literature” (95). I sincerely hope this falls within the scope of a valuable critical response written by a non-Indian. I would like to contribute to the discussion of Native Literature by revising prevalent myth paradigms in light of the specific Indigenous thinkers I will be looking at. Ultimately, I come to this research from the perspective that I am, as according to Maxine Greene as quoted by Krista Ratcliffe, a “fallible, searching human being” (137).

While I have never pursued a formal course of study dedicated to Indigenous religions, I did have some important learning experiences as an undergraduate. In a class about living myths with an emphasis on war and domination, we spent a great deal of the semester covering Native American genocide. For example, we learned about local California history and read and discussed writings from the mid to late 1800s that detailed the terrible massacres and government-sanctioned genocide that took place throughout the state. Additionally, through a religious studies “experiential weekend” class, where the department collaborates with local communities to provide students the opportunity to experience those communities first hand, I spent a weekend learning from, and participating in activities with, the Wiyot tribe. We visited Tuluwat Island with tribe members, listened to speakers provide personal stories, and attended lectures where tribe members shared religious beliefs and sacred regalia. We also participated in the annual Wiyot day at the Table Bluff reservation where we helped with set-up, ate traditional

food, watched the Brush Dance demonstration, and conversed with tribe members and elders. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to hear first-hand from the tribe not only about their experiences and beliefs but to get a sense of their community-defined needs. I am thankful for the tribe's wonderful hospitality and will always remember the experience.

In religious studies, I developed substantial experience reading and studying myths and familiarizing myself with the theories and practices of a diversity of communities and worldviews. This background seemed to complement a project that would examine how language, particularly the construction of the term myth, acts in the world and how some Indigenous literature and authors speak to this construction. Like my culminating project in religious studies, this is a project about stories, how we think about them, and how this thinking and subsequent use of language affects the world. How we think about stories and how words and stories affect the world are central concerns of the Indigenous literature covered in this project and throughout my scholarly endeavors in religious studies and English. Myth, as I have argued in my introduction, is a construction that acts on the world in conflicting and often problematic ways; ultimately, much like the feminist speculative fiction discussed by Sophie Toupin and Spideralex in their introduction to a special issue of *Ada* on feminism, technology, and speculative storytelling, I hope that decolonizing myth theory through Indigenous perspectives can function as “a methodology for reappropriating healing and turning a problem into a potential solution.”

“As the Old Story Tells Us”: An Indigenous Theory of Myth through Story

The old folks said the stories themselves had the power to protect us and even heal us because the stories are alive; the stories are our ancestors. In the very telling of the stories, the spirits of our beloved ancestors and family become present with us . . . We are all part of the old stories; whether we know the stories or not, the old stories know about us. From time immemorial, the old stories encompass all events, past and future.

—Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*

Why does [Navajo storyteller] Sunny Dooley tell stories? ‘To produce beauty’ she says.

—Christopher Vecsey, “Navajo Morals and Myths, Ethics and Ethicists”

In the pages that follow, I would like to outline the theoretical orientations that will guide my close readings and help to elucidate an Indigenous theory of myth. I begin with selected critical work by Paula Gunn Allen, Daniel Heath Justice, Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Silko, and Thomas King, seeking to elucidate their conceptions of myth and how such understandings emphasize establishing and maintaining healthy relationships among and between humans and the planet’s more-than-human inhabitants and natural

resources. Following this, I turn to a brief history of popular understanding of myth, followed by a longer review of myth studies paradigms that have prevailed in academia. From this foundation, I will consider how Indigenous perspectives might revise the way we conceive of myth, both popularly and academically. I have chosen to begin with Indigenous theories because, not only are they the primary interest and orientation of this project, they provide the thread that I wish to weave throughout the vast realm of myth studies paradigms. In other words, I hope that starting with Indigenous theories will clarify what I have chosen to focus on within the larger conversation of myth studies paradigms that have prevailed in academia. Finally, I will turn my focus to three particular works—Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (King), *Ceremony* (Silko), and *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (Vizenor)—in which myth plays a vital thematic role. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, for example, King emphasizes humor and play as critical to myth-making and myth interpretation. This playfulness prevents the ossification of stories into foundationalist philosophies and authoritarian politics often associated with colonialism. King also does not overly rationalize myth but retains its sense of mystery, refusing to allow its meaning to become static. His focus on playfulness and creative meaning-making vs. “Christian rules” constructs a theory of myth that stresses its importance as an antidote to oppressive restrictions. In *Ceremony*, Silko emphasizes myth as a means to heal her main character Tayo’s mental and spiritual illness and as an antidote to exploitative and violent ideologies. For Silko, myth is an ongoing performance or process capable of creative adaptation or oppressive destruction.

Ceremony constructs myth as the stories that teach right relationships and as imagination that allows access to ancestral knowledge and metaphysical experiences that facilitate a sense of wholeness integral to healing. In *Bearheart*, myth is constructed as untamed, wild esoteric vision that enables liberation from “terminal creeds” and “word wars,” or, in other words, static ideas and dominating, conflicting language. Myth is deconstructive here because it is used to circumvent foundationalism, but it is also a reconstructive, liberating wellspring of vision to return to as the source of identity and creativity. This deconstruction and renewing, esoteric vision are tools with which to create new stories that may bring people together and aid in survival during, as Vizenor himself puts it in “Mythic Rage and Laughter: An Interview with Gerald Vizenor,” “extreme environmental circumstances” (80). I chose to focus on these authors in part because of my previous familiarity with some of their work, and because of the usual constraints of time and space (Momaday and Erdrich, for instance, are other obvious choices who could easily fit into this project). It's worth noting, however, that all three novelists also have long resumes as essayists, academics, and critics, and much of their non-fiction likewise theorizes the function of stories and storytelling in Native contexts and in the world at large. In that regard, as I hope to show, their fiction and nonfiction are in interesting conversations with each other.

Myth as Vision to Re-story Balance to the Sacred Hoop

To begin outlining the family of theory I am calling Myth as Medicine, I have chosen to look at Laguna Pueblo author Paula Gunn Allen first because, in a foundational

text of Native literary criticism, she offers what is perhaps the most explicit theory of myth out of my chosen thinkers. In *Narrative Chance*, Gerald Vizenor aptly sums up the character and purpose of Allen's *The Sacred Hoop* as "a mythic meditation on the renaissance of the feminine in tribal cultures" (xi). The book is the first book-length work of literary criticism published by an American Indian author that argues from Allen's Laguna Pueblo perspective for a spiritual, anti-colonial, feminist way of reading Native American literature. Allen begins her discussion of myth in her chapter "Something Sacred Going on Out There: Myth and Vision in American Indian Literature," by asserting that, although myth is almost an incoherent term, "*no discussion of American Indian literature is complete without an examination of what mythic narrative and the concept of myth itself mean in a tribal context*" (102, emphasis added). Popular definitions of myth are allied in her view with "ignorance, backwardness, and foolishness" (102), which has allowed Western people to dismiss any story deemed myth. This allows those who deem some stories as myths to obscure their own "fictional" assumptions, "all parts of the definition indicate a prevailing belief in the fictitiousness of myth . . . this meta-myth is deceptive, for it imputes factualness to certain assumptions that form the basis of western perceptions without acknowledging that it does so" (103). She argues that this "meta-myth" is a product of myth becoming synonymous with "belief," which differs from its earlier Greek association with fable, connoting a moral story. This meaning developed out of the "Greek terms . . . [that] meant 'one who is initiated' and a 'mystery, secret (thing muttered) respectively, and are based on the Indo

Germanic root, MU” (103). Instead of “fable,” she contends, myth “is more accurately translated as ‘ritual,’ that is, as a language construct that contains the power to transform something (or someone) from one state or condition to another . . . it is at base a vehicle, a means of transmitting paranormal power” (103). Whether this is a more accurate translation or not, the meta-story of constructing myth as (false) belief allows it to potentially function as a term to discredit particular, often Indigenous, ways of knowing and being. But, Allen offers a useful alternative; myth as ritual (instead of belief) makes it a process or vehicle, a sort of technology to create change. Allen begins here to reject the contrived barriers between ritual and myth, ceremony and story, “stories are themselves ritual events” (96), while also highlighting the reality of the religious, paranormal, imaginative, supernatural, visionary—i.e. mythical—to Native cultures. Allen ultimately advocates for a functional view of myth as ceremony, which as we will see with Silko’s novel of the same name, is about a process that integrates. Ceremony properly conducted integrates a fractured psyche, an individual to a community, a community to their surrounding communities and environment, and individuals and communities to spiritual realities.

Allen is articulating a theory of myth that, while it has resonances and tensions with Western theories (she references Rollo May, Thomas Mann, Carlos Castaneda, Sir James Frazer and psychoanalysis more generally), is Indigenous in its theorization of myth through Native American literature, spirituality, and experiential understanding:

An alternate explanation to those popularly held is possible, based on an examination of actual contemporary Native American practices. This explanation coincides, in some significant ways, with contemporary psychoanalytic observation. Its ultimate proof, of course, lies *in the actual practice* among mythopoeic peoples around the world . . . Briefly stated, *myth and ritual are based on visionary experience*. This simple observation has apparently escaped notice because generally neither mythologists nor social scientists credit visionary experience with the same validity given them by visionary people, including some artists and poets. Yet a careful look at Native American cultures reveals evidence of direct vision as central to religious practice, ritual, and literature. In most Indian societies, the vision is actively pursued and brought back to the people as a gift of power and guidance. (emphasis added 107)¹⁷

Vision is central to Allen's theory but not as some abstract, transcendental retreat from the world; vision is to be directed towards the world, towards communal health, and I do not mean community in an insular sense disconnected from surrounding communities. In this worldview, like Spider Woman's web of words and thought, every community is connected to everything else in an ongoing dynamic relationship where one's health and stability depends on the entire web and all those within it. Vision is not opposed to some tangible "reality" but is a powerful, experiential knowledge to be used to help guide

¹⁷ "To persons in a society where myths are very much alive and strongly determinative of everyday actions, myths, rituals, and sacred images are never devices of conscious deceit. They are considered *to be true experientially*" (Doty 40).

action, decision, and belonging within an interconnected, world-wide web. She goes on, for the majority of the chapter, to explicate the vision of Black Elk and how his vision is related to myth and cultural and individual healing in Indigenous cultures. This approach values and centers its theoretical constructions on the lived experience of Native peoples, re-appropriating myth not as fake but as a necessary component of understanding and articulating Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. Central to this articulation of Indigenous-ness is creative, adaptive vision, which provides possibilities of renewal—for new meaning and new ways of relating to one another and the environment, for change and chance instead of stagnation and control.

For Allen, myth—which is inseparable from ritual/ceremony and vision—is central to the recovery of both “the feminine” and American Indian epistemologies and healing. “Her chapter ‘Something Sacred Going on Out There: Myth and Vision in American Indian Literature’ is a brilliant tour de force analysis of Black Elk’s vision arguing for its materiality” (Womack 24), and I would add arguing for myth as inseparable from that vision and as constitutive of culture and human expression. “The mythic narrative . . . must be seen as a necessary dimension of human expression” (103), Allen claims. Even though her argument is sometimes taken in an overly essentialized and anti-material direction, it is ultimately in service of dissolving barriers between myth and the material. Allen’s argument helps us see how such barriers allow for discrediting Indigenous worldviews and prevent us from harnessing stories and visions of power for the benefit of our relationships. For Allen, myth may involve paranormal, spiritual, and

non-ordinary states of reality, consciousness and/or experience, but myth and the material are in a practical sense inseparable. If anti-materialism is flirted with in her work, it is there, ironically, to argue for the vitality of metaphysics in Indigenous material experience: “vision is a way of becoming whole, of affirming one's special place in the universe, and myth, song, and ceremony are ways of affirming vision's place in the life of all the people . . . myth is the story of a vision . . . it is a vehicle of transmission, of sharing, of renewal, and as such plays an integral part in the ongoing psychic life of a people” (117). Allen’s work allows us to not only connect Indigenous ideas specifically to the construction of myth in academia and popular culture, but to acknowledge and begin to detail how changing the prevailing *logos* of myth might help us change our approach to mythmaking. This approach seeks to tell stories that, instead of resulting in the domination and exploitation of people and the environment, would shift our focus to maintaining balance and health among these relationships. Through her theory of myth, humans are not separate from each “other” and from the environment; it is a theory that seeks to weave our mutual strands and interdependencies into a more coherent whole—not to erase differences but to connect each individual strand in a web as no longer isolated and alone. It is a relational theory of myth, “for in relating our separate experiences to one another, in weaving them into coherence and therefore significance, a sense of wholeness arises, a totality which, through our active participation, constitutes direct and immediate comprehension of ourselves and the universe of which we are integral parts” (117).

In *Reasoning Together*, Cherokee/Creek author Craig Womack offers a sustained historical and critical analysis of Allen's book/epistemologies and some of its surrounding criticism. For instance, *The Sacred Hoop* has been criticized for universalist and essentialist tendencies, a critique that Womack agrees with at times but also questions. Indeed, despite her generally inclusive view of relationships, Allen, at times, constructs a rigid opposition between all things Indian and all things European (although in her introduction she also explicitly states that there are similarities between American Indian ritual ways and that of Northern and Southern European, Tibetan, South-East Asian, and African cultures). Additionally, she often generalizes about a pan-tribal consciousness even though she writes from a specifically Laguna Pueblo perspective. In short, she contradicts herself at times, although I would argue she does so with awareness. Even when Womack points out the book's shortcomings, he argues for its value and significance in many ways, stating that "Allen's book recognized that religious issues could not be left out of theoretical discussions, since they are central to the ways we construct reality" (24). And, although "there is something of an anti-materialist bias in Allen" (24), "I have yet to hear a critic say, in relation to Allen, how can one separate spirituality from governance?" (25). These critiques are central to my project, as myth often is in spiritual/religious and political considerations: I am considering not only the political nature of myth but the mythic nature of the political and how myth is constructed in Indigenous perspectives towards a politics that includes spirituality and

seeks healthy relationships with human and more-than-human worlds. As Allen concludes, “The mythic heals, it makes us whole” (117).

Why Indigenous Myths Matter for Justice

While Allen's book is a foundational text in Native American literary criticism, Daniel Heath Justice's *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, though less well established, has become equally influential. Daniel Heath Justice offers a theory of story in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* that is important to include here because, as I hope to show, it helps to establish how stories can be dangerous *and* beneficial. As Justice puts it, stories, and sometimes stories that are not our own, form us and “that’s part of the beauty and frightening power of story: sometimes the shaping stories are an empowering blessing, sometimes they’re a disfiguring curse, sometimes they offer a bit of both shadow and light. But they’re always part of who we know ourselves to be” (35). What he refers to as shaping stories, I refer to here as myths.¹⁸ Myths, and the underlying logic that informs their telling, can determine who counts as “human”—like the “myth” that the word myth should refer to all things false and irrational, particularly the stories and worldviews of non-dominant cultures. This definition is itself a story, a teaching, and “it’s our teachings—and our stories—that make us human” (33). Additionally, Justice

¹⁸I understand that the term “myth” is not always a preferable term for Indigenous people, which is a primary reason why I want to distance the term from its colonial misunderstandings. Vecsey says, “When addressing the people whose mythology we study—American Indians, for example—we find that they have heard the term used disparagingly for so long, by so many people, that the very use of it rankles and insults them. They prefer the terms ‘traditions’ or ‘stories’ or ‘sacred narratives,’ rather than the opprobrious term ‘mythology’” (2).

likens storytelling, like Allen before him, to “a process of becoming” (33). The process of becoming must be accompanied by a praxis of kinship, which is an “active network of connections, a process of continual acknowledgement and enactment. To be human is to practice humanness” (42). This process of storytelling, for Justice, is to be approached responsibly because it is storytelling or myth-making that determines and maintains our relationships “to the land, to human community, to self, to the other than-human world, to the ancestors and our descendants, to our histories and our futures, as well as to colonizers and their literal and ideological heirs” (xix). Justice’s work can help us understand how the ways we think about myth can influence the stories we tell and how the stories that guide and shape our world can be adjusted towards the greater health of the above-mentioned relationships.

Since myth is a term that can commonly refer to traditional cultural stories—often non-Christian, pre-Age-of-Enlightenment and/or Tribal stories—it is dangerous and powerful for it to be so wrapped up with notions of truth and reality. Myth is a language construction that mediates our understanding of what and who counts as “truly” rational, or who believes in “real” things. Christopher Vecsey elaborates on the popular usage of myth that reflects this meaning: “a person may believe a ‘myth’ but when in proper possession of the facts, one *knows* reality, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. To most of us, ‘myth’ is a matter of fallacious belief” (1). The act of defining myth as false belief is a meta-story about myth, a story about stories that wields incredible power over what a culture’s stories may mean—how “true” they are, how “civilized” they are, and how

“valid” they are. Discussing Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s notion of “The Danger of a Single Story,” Justice warns about the power of a single story to articulate the notion of the human, or humanity itself—and pointedly refuses to exclude Indigenous stories from his warning. Adichie, he emphasizes, refuses to privilege an

‘authentically African’ story that presumes that there’s only one narrative that represents thousands of cultures and millions of people over one of the largest land masses on Earth. And she makes the point that the expression of the single story is inherently an expression of power: ‘Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.’ (37)

Through Adichie’s insights, Justice seeks to articulate an anti-authoritarian position that exposes the power in defining people through a single story, but it also implies that there is power in the ability to tell one’s *own* story. As we will see in more detail in all three of my close readings, this power of self-determination is vital towards shaping an origin story not of domination and exploitation, but of liberation and balance.

Daniel Heath Justice opens his first chapter in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* with a quote from Sto:Lo author and poet Lee Maracle: “Raven shaped us; we are built for transformation. Our stories prepare us for it. Find freedom in the context you inherit—every context is different: discover consequences and change from within, that is the challenge. Still, there is horror at having change foisted upon you from outside” (33). Maracle is making many points at once, but what she is saying above all is that Indigenous literatures matter because Indigenous *myths* matter. “*Raven* shaped us,” she

says, indicating how this mythological, trickster character is central to adaptation; a doing, a way of finding meaning and freedom in a particular context. In many ways, it is less the *what* about myth that matters from Indigenous perspectives than the *how* of approaching stories like myths. As Gerald Vizenor says, “walking is a song and its visionary” (Vizenor, “Sakahàn); through these perspectives myth is vision and vision is motion, adaptation and/or transformation. This is an approach to myth that keeps its meaning moving, changing and adapting. In “Native American Scholarship and the Transnational Turn,” Osage scholar Robert Warrior says Indigenous peoples have survived the horrors of colonialism through this kind of ungovernable motion: “Native nations and indigenous peoples have persisted, succeeding in the long outwaiting that Momaday describes by being ungovernable, unpredictable and obdurate” (127). These Indigenous thinkers approach myth and imagination in a way that does not seek to govern relationships with control but allows for disobedience and unpredictability because these are necessary characteristics for individual and cultural adaptation and renewal.

Myth in the Mode of Vizenor’s Compassionate Trickster

There are perhaps few theorists who elaborate on ungovernable motion and trickster methodologies more than Gerald Vizenor. For Vizenor, myths, imagination, metaphors and humor are of the utmost importance towards survivance, resistance, or “opposition [to] colonial ideas about savagism and civilization” (*Earthdivers* xi) that are often characterized by rigid epistemologies, compartmentalization, and sterile, unimaginative “research words and elitist templates” (xviii). Vizenor’s *Narrative Chance*

is an important work in Native literary criticism; its preface and introduction, especially, offer great insight into the theoretical frameworks that inform Gerald Vizenor's vast body of work. Of particular interest to me is his signature devotion to the trickster figure, as well as his idea of "mythic verism":

The trickster, a semiotic sign in a third-person narrative, is never tragic or *hypotragic*, never the whole truth or even part truth. Social science on the other hand, is never comic, never a chance and never tragic in the end. Casual research strains to discover the 'whole truth' or the invented truth in theories and models; these 'whole truth' models imposed on tribal experiences are *hypotradgedies*, 'abnormal tragedies in this instance. They have no comic imagination, no artistic intent, no communal signification of *mythic verism*. (emphasis added 11)

Vizenor is critiquing social science epistemologies that have imposed "truths" on Native American communities, namely stereotypes such as the "brutish" and "noble" "savage." He is speaking of theories and research that claim dehumanizing truths and in the process often obscure that these truths are themselves invented. For Vizenor, a key element here is that these theories are not like his trickster; they have no myth, no play, or little room for imagination and fantasy—they strive to be anti-mythical in order to establish objective truths instead of being mythical to avoid objective truths. Vizenor claims that "social science theories," like the ones I mentioned in my introduction that have hyper-rationalized myth, "are 'bleak' reminders of the *hypotragic* intrusion and postcolonial domination of tribal cultures and literature" (11). Even in what might be considered his

more formal scholarship, Vizenor plays with words in a self-consciously quasi-mythical way—with artistic intent, comic imagination, communal significance, and mythic truth. His way of word-play has been labeled as potential “gobbledygook” at times (*Reasoning Together* 72), but his phrase mythic verism, or mythic truth, is a telling sign of his larger theoretical concerns. Myth, like the trickster who inhabits tribal myth, is a semiotic sign, never whole or part truth but always mythic truth; in other words, never “objectively” true, never a rationalistic, authoritarian truth to be imposed on subjective experience. Mythic verism is not a monologue to Vizenor, it has “communal signification.” Myths outlive each of our human lives, like a snowball collecting individual voices along the way and compacting them into its totality, our individual lives end but the ball keeps rolling, myths keep being told and gather new meanings and tellings over time. “Metaphors alone can’t encompass what it is to be human, nor can lived experience. For that, we need stories” (*Justice* 34). This is what I think Vizenor means about “communal signification”—myths are composed of communal meaning accrued over time. Far from intolerant one-way speech, mythic truth for Vizenor is *dialogue*, it is a communally compelling truth that requires communal consensus but not as an implied fact, or a “whole truth” that imposes an identity or ceases meaning-making. Mythic truth, like the trickster, can avoid tragedy because it can always move, change, adapt, and be reimagined.

Mythic truth, in the absence of what Vizenor calls the “compassionate trickster,” is neither good nor bad, necessarily, but both/and. Myth is constitutive; it can be both

tragic and comic or tragedy and comedy in relationship. Like performance, as outlined by Randall Hill in “Methodological Approaches to Native American Narrative and the Role of Performance,” mythic truth can both generate and destroy. In *Narrative Chance*, Vizenor chooses to focus on the liberatory potential (often, but not exclusively, a metaphysical liberation) involved in a postmodern approach to fiction, narrative, and language because these approaches are a means to avoid “whole truth” models via methods of deconstruction—and, equally so, through reconstruction. Adaptation for Vizenor is often found in the ability to deconstruct oppressive metaphors and stories but also in the ability to create more compassionate ones. For example, in the introduction to his book *Earthdivers*, Vizenor advocates for conceptualizing the tribal creation myth motif of “Earthdivers”—the animals and humans in Ojibwe creation tales who, after a great flood, dive beneath the waters to gather mud that enables the building of Turtle Island, i.e. the Earth and/or North America—“as an imaginative metaphor” to “create a new consciousness of coexistence” (ix). Vizenor advocates for using this creation story motif to *reimagine* metaphors and stories towards goals of coexistence.

In *Earthdivers*, Vizenor quotes Donald Davidson from his essay “What Metaphors Mean” to support his notion of the role that metaphor plays in language and stories:

metaphor is the dreamwork of language and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator. The interpretation of dreams requires collaboration between a dreamer and a waker, even if they be the

same person; and the act of interpretation is itself a work of the imagination. So too understanding a metaphor is as much a creative endeavor as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules . . . The idea, then, is that in metaphor certain words take on new, or what are often called 'extended,' meaning . . .

Perhaps, then, we can explain metaphor as a kind of ambiguity. (xvi-xvii)

For Vizenor, storytelling, like the ambiguity of metaphor, is a *chance* to create coexistence. Metaphors, language, and stories are not fixed but are open to interpretation and renewal. Furthermore, metaphors and language act upon reality in very real ways, and, for Vizenor, the dream-work of myth and metaphor is actually where liberation is perhaps most possible. In an interview in *Nighttimes Magazine* Vizenor declares “we are what we imagine. Our very existence exists in our imagination, the worst that can befall us is to go unimagined.” Imagination, like myth, is not composed of facts or “whole truths” and should not be opposed to reality because it is an experiential dimension of existence capable of creating change. This valuing of imagination and myth is not a romantic escape from the world of politics, but a reappropriation of the false and fictitious as identity and as a moral calling. This moral calling is, again, an opportunity to act like “the compassionate trickster, not the trickster in the word constructions of the anthropologist Paul Radin, the one who ‘possesses no values, moral or social . . . knows neither good nor evil yet is responsible for both,’ but the imaginative trickster, the one who cares to balance the world between terminal creeds and humor with unusual manners and ecstatic strategies (*Earthdivers* xii). Like Allen in *The Sacred Hoop*, with Vizenor we

see a tension between fiction and non-fiction, or myth and reality that is to be integrated or made whole—in order to foster action that creates and maintains balance. In the words of author N. Scott Momaday, as quoted by Elaine Jahner in the chapter “Metalanguages,” “It is a whole journey, intricate with motion and meaning; and it is made with the whole memory, the experience of the mind, which is legendary as well as historical, personal as well as cultural . . . the imaginative experience and the historical express equally the traditions of man’s reality” (*Narrative Chance* 159).

Silko’s Webs of Myth to Reaffirm Relationships with All of Creation

Like we saw with Allen, Leslie Marmon Silko develops Pueblo ideas that reveal myth as integral to language and storytelling, constitutive of culture and identity, and to be used to build relationships of balance. In Silko’s view, myth, like a spider’s web, is interwoven with identity, place, and imagination. In *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*, Silko offers a series of prose pieces, both expository and creative non-fiction, that outline her Laguna Pueblo epistemologies. “This book of essays is structured like a spider’s web. It begins with the land; think of the land, the earth, as the center of a spider’s web. Human identity, imagination and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as the strands of the spider’s web radiate from the center of the web (21). Storytelling and myth are not only central to this metaphor (it echoes the imagery and importance of Tse’itsi’nako to Pueblo culture) but to Silko’s epistemological, ontological, and/or theoretical frameworks more generally. “Language *is* story” (50) she says. Silko goes on to describe how when one

tells a story one uses words, and then more words and stories to explain those words, and basically, our lives are constructed of these “elaborate structures” (50); our lives are webs of stories within stories. She then turns to creation stories in particular,

Basically, the origin story constructs our identity—with this story, we know who we are. We are the Lagunas. This is where we come from. We came this way. We came by this place. And so from the time we are very young, we hear these stories, so that when we go out into the world, when one asks who we are or where we are from, we immediately know: we are the people who came from the north. We are the people of these stories. (50-51)

As we can see from this perspective, mythic creation stories are central to identity and cultural and cosmic significance. Here we can see that what we often call myths or traditional stories are not simply fictional untruths or a “narratable lie, a convenient tool, insofar as it survives in the modern world, for reinforcing ideology” (Von Hendy 285). To conflate the term myth with false things is to denigrate perspectives that orient their lives around myths, and to potentially obscure the fictions, narratives, and assumptions that may guide one’s own. As Silko articulates through such chapters as “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Perspective,” “Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit,” and “Notes on *Almanac of the Dead*,” stories, and mythic stories if the distinction is to be made, are again constitutive of cultural and individual experience. Justice echoes this, “they’re still our good stories—not always happy, not always gentle, but good ones nonetheless, because they tell the truths of our presence in the world today, in days past,

and in days to come” (Justice 2). The logic here is that our lives are made of stories, and stories create identity and a sense of belonging; what is crucial here is that belonging and identity are accompanied by particular moral values like those of Hózhó. Hózhó can be understood as a moral code concerned with creating and maintaining “relationships of harmony” (Vecsey “Navajo” 91). With Hózhó, beauty is cultivated in maintaining balance and harmony across differences because “differences were celebrated” and the “survival of the group means everyone has to cooperate” (*Yellow Woman* 67); “every impulse is to reaffirm the urgent relationships that human beings have with the plant and animal world” and across individuals and communities of people (69).

“It’s Turtles All the Way Down: King’s Truth About Stories and Myth as Constitutive Co-operation

Thomas King’s theoretical perspective in *The Truth About Stories* is also coming from a place that views stories, again, as constitutive and as central to creating and upholding relationships. “The truth about stories is that’s all we are,” says Thomas King—just before echoing the adage from Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* in my introduction: “You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories” (*The Truth About Stories* 92). King goes on to discuss the idea that all personal and cultural memory, whether it be via imagination, history, written or oral literature, is made up of stories. This speaks to King’s guiding theoretical framework: stories, such as the “back of the

turtle” myth¹⁹ that opens each of his chapters in *The Truth About Stories*, make things happen and are vehicles for giving meaning to and understanding events and our lives as people. But, it is also more than this, more than the idea that stories are constitutive. “The magic of Native literature—as with other literatures . . . is in the way meaning is refracted by cosmology, the way understanding is shaped by cultural paradigms” (112). What is unique about these theories is that they are refracted by various Indigenous cultural paradigms that regard myth not through “basic Christian oppositions” (110) but as “other ways of imagining the world, ways that do not depend so much on oppositions as they do on co-operations” (110). The place that King identifies where these values of co-operation are most apparent is in Indigenous relationships with the land—and not, as he stresses, in an overly romantic, abstract sense. What he refers to is a spiritual and “a practical matter that balances respect with survival” (113). Myth-making, in this view, is something that acts directly on “the webs of responsibilities that bind all things” (114) and is to be approached with “an ethic that can be seen in the decisions and actions of a community and that is contained in the songs that Native people sing and the stories that they tell about the nature of the world and their place in it” (113-114). Storytelling and myth-making is not simply, as Silko reiterates, “something that is done at bedtime” (50), but is something that continues through generations and is done *constantly, perpetually,*

¹⁹ “There is a story I know. It’s about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle” (King, 1). King goes on to explain how the story changes with each telling via the storyteller, the words, the audience etc, but the earth never leaves the turtle’s back. Most importantly, in one iteration, a girl asks, how many turtles are there? If the earth rests on a turtle then what does the turtle rest on? More turtles, of course, the story goes. “No one knows for sure...but it’s turtles all the way down” (King, 2).

and always in relationship with the surrounding world. Stories are seen as significant and constantly capable of creating beauty in relationships, stories are rituals and “restoring Hózhó is the task of ritual” (Vecsey, “Navajo” 91). Hózhó is not an abstract philosophy but is a moral code for storytelling, and like we will see perhaps in *Bearheart* especially, storytelling is about survival. Telling stories and myth-making are not trivial and fake but are at the heart of Indigenous understandings of human and planetary health and survival.

Daniel Heath Justice elaborates on King's ideas of story as constitutive; for him, stories are integral to our *existence* and a life without stories is almost too much, existentially speaking, to comprehend:

That’s the role of experience, of teaching, and of story—to help us find ways of meaningful being in whatever worlds we inhabit, whatever contexts we’ve inherited. This is what I take Thomas King’s oft-quoted words to mean: ‘The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.’ Our lives are incarnations of the stories we tell, the stories told about us, and the stories we inherit. They are both the process and the consequence of the transformations into the fullness of our humanity. Indeed, without those stories, without the teachings about the who, how, and why of us, something is profoundly, almost existentially amiss. We don’t need to speak them to live them; even those not given voice are inextricably embraided in our sense of self. We know ourselves only through stories. The unstoried life is a terrible thing to comprehend, a soul-deep desolation. (34)

While King and Justice, like Silko, mostly speak of stories instead of using the term “myth,” I believe the distinction between the two is part of what their theoretical approaches critique; myth is not simply one type of story, often untrue or to be outgrown in favor of more scientific perspectives, but is perhaps, as we saw with Allen and Vizenor, the “fictional” or rather imaginative/visionary aspect to stories themselves. These perspectives do not use the term myth to delineate “other” stories as false while obscuring their own potential fictions, on the contrary, imagination/vision is an integral element of shaping stories, origin stories that no individual or culture could be without. Vision is to be cultivated as a source of creative, compassionate adaptation, without which myth can become static, imposing, and intolerant. Considering all of the aforementioned perspectives, this family of thinkers conceptualize myth as imagination/vision that produces stories—a myth-making *process* that is an opportunity to create individual and socio-cultural, ethical transformation and renewal. Perhaps myth is best understood as stories capable of functioning as social, cultural, and personal medicine to be applied with care, attention, and responsibility, in order to create and maintain ethical relationships of balance.

In the Beginning... Western Constructions of Myth

There are many competing accounts of the etymology and development of the term myth. I can't hope to offer a comprehensive review, but I hope my survey here can

offer insight into how Indigenous theories can speak to and revise scholarly paradigms. I have chosen to work most closely with three prominent surveys of (Western) myth criticism and theory including Willian Doty's *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (2d ed.), Andrew Von Hendy's *The Modern Construction of Myth*, and Christopher Vecsey's chapter "Mythography" from *Imagine Ourselves Richly: Mythic Narratives of North American Indians* to review some of the historical development, and major axes of argument, surrounding the term. Doty's monograph is not solely a historical overview; it also outlines and critiques the separation of *myth* from *truth* in the rationalist worldview that has dominated myth studies, a binary opposition which has direct implications for Indigenous theories. Doty also offers the most comprehensive definition of myth I have found, and openly characterizes his work as concerned with questioning and reforming myth studies with the aim of promoting a more complex framework for understanding myth. At the end of his chapter on "Mythlitterit and Cultural Studies" he argues that "education in the liberal arts ought to be liberating in social terms," and that "mythography properly practiced does not support the status quo . . . it opens new containers hardly dreamt of within the canonical containers of 'decent' forays into the unknown" (265). Doty wants readers to develop a disruptive, anti-traditional, and anti-disciplinary mythography to allow for unseen possibilities, insights, and ways of knowing and being not traditionally supported by patriarchal power structures.

Von Hendy, on the other hand, seems much more concerned with offering a more detached historical overview aimed at clearly outlining the major modes of thought

surrounding myth.²⁰ In short, Doty offers my project the most useful critical lens, and Von Hendy offers the most useful heuristic to frame our understanding of the history of myth studies in the West. Although I will not outline Vecsey's historical account in detail (because I will do plenty of that with Von Hendy), I will continue to draw on his work intermittently because it offers what is perhaps the most relevant critical lens for my project, namely: "the means by which Indians have traditionally examined their lives—their own stories" (xi). Indeed, Vecsey's overview of the development of the term myth serves as a convenient introduction to various accounts and discussions of Native American mythology. Moreover, his introduction offers insight into how myth theories have influenced some of the dominant views in academia concerning Indigenous values of storytelling and myth.

Etymology of Myth

In *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, William Doty begins his account of two Proto-Indo-European roots, *ma* and *mu*; the first, which is the root for "mother," and the latter, which became *my* in Greek (pronounced muh or moo), were combined into the Greek *mythos*, "the term for what was made as a sound from the mouth . . . for 'word'" —a term, says Doty, that "came to designate a particular organization of words in story form" (6). Soon enough, however, *mythos* came to signify "ornamental," and "fictional" stories, words organized for specifically aesthetic rather than pragmatic

²⁰Robert Segal's *Theorizing About Myth* has similar ambitions, but I find Von Hendy's more detailed and nuanced schematization of myth studies more satisfying.

purposes. Doty discusses Plato, who notoriously designated the poet-artist as dangerous to the state, and notes that, even though Plato recognized mythos as a powerful mode of expression that needed to be regulated, he himself “shifted from to the mythic or legendary mode, or at least to extended metaphors, just at those points where his ‘rational’ discourse needed to be amplified emotionally or aesthetically—that is to say, at those points where the logical mode exhausted rather than elucidated the subject.” A bit later in Greek culture, *mythos* became separated from another noun for word, *logos*, which acquired “the sense of referring to words comprising doctrine or theory, as opposed to *mythos* for words having an ornamental or fictional, narrative function.” Early on in Western culture the idea of words themselves were separated into the two words *mythos* and *logos*, and, as we will see in detail with Von Hendy’s account, much of the disagreement about myth relates to the significance given to either “theory” (*logos*) or “fiction” (*mythos*).

Doty notes that mythology as something designating “*the imaginative rather than the historical* results from this course of linguistic development.” In his telling, as Greek culture was adopted by the Romans, *mythos* came into Latin as *fabula*, the basis for both “fable” and “fabulous” (7). From this point forward in Western thought, the mythological became associated with creativity and fiction, especially as science developed and became a dominant mode of thought in the European Renaissance. Echoing distinctions between *mythos* and *logos*, science (“from scire, Proto-Indo-European *skei*, to know by *separating* things rather than showing their commonalities; cf. *scission*, *scissors* from the

same root” (7)) became antithetical to mythology, and myth acquired its modern sense of a fantastical legend or tale. One of Doty’s goals is to foreground and trouble these myth/science and *mythos/logos* divisions—divisions that exist to this day in separating science and rationality from art, religion and imagination. “The closer students of myth examine the originative scene,” says Doty, “the more artificial the *mythos-to-logos* pattern, [which] has held sway as part of the attitude which, within our own experience, the materialist, natural sciences emphasis upon mathematics and abstract rationality came to be thought ‘naturally’ *more sophisticated* than attention to narrative or idea” (9). Offering hints to the theoretical framework that will guide his extensive investigation into the concept along with his “polyphasic definition” of myth,²¹ Doty states that “myths are fictional, to be sure, but that fictional need not mean unreal and certainly not non-empirical.” By the same token, he says, “myths are *mysterious* (another side formation from the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European stem **mu*),²² but they are not incomprehensible, and the most statistically driven science is shaped by the values of the

²¹ Although subject to critique, of course, Willian Doty offers perhaps the most comprehensive definition of myth available. “A mythological corpus consists of a usually complex network of myths that are culturally important, imaginal stories, conveying by means of metaphoric and symbolic diction, graphic imagery, and emotional conviction and participation the primal, foundational accounts of aspects of the real, experienced world and humankind's roles and relative statuses within it. Mythologies may convey the political and moral values of a culture and provide systems of interpreting individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in rituals, ceremonies, and dramas, and they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent mythemes (mythic units) having become merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folktale, historical legend, novella or prophecy” (33-34).

²² Notably, maintaining a sense of the mysterious is an important aspect in Native American religious identity, some would say perhaps even pan-tribally. In the chapter “The European Concept of *Usen*: An American Aboriginal Text,” Viola Cordova explains, “the Native American’s response to the terror and awe inspired by the universe is to call it (the universe and the terror) sacred. Its mysterious qualities are maintained. It is sacred precisely because it is beyond reification” (*Native American Religious Identity* 29).

underlying mythical orientations of cultures” (7). Doty’s points here, particularly that myths are empirical, mysterious, and that even science is shaped by the values of mythical orientations, are important points that I will return to throughout my project.

The Modern Construction of Myth and Romantic Conceptions

In the following sections, I will trace a simplified version of Von Hendy’s genealogy of the primary ways myth has historically been approached in Western academia. I will begin with his account leading up to the romantic, transcendentalist conception of myth, which Von Hendy claims becomes the basis from which all subsequent conceptions derive and/or diverge. Next, I will cover the first contrary theories to Romantic conceptions, namely those embodied most notably by Marx and Nietzsche who reject myth as transcendental and construct it as either “false consciousness” (Marx) or a necessary, yet ultimately “fictional,” social construction (Nietzsche). Following this, I will outline the folkloristic conceptions of myth that have had perhaps the greatest impact on perceptions of Indigenous cultures as outmoded “primitive” thinking and religion. Finally, I will end by discussing both the ideological conception, which primarily views myth suspiciously as hegemonic thinking, and the constitutive conception, which views myth neutrally, and sometimes positively, as inextricable from cultural values and meaning-making.

In contrast to Doty, Von Hendy paints a slightly different picture of the development of myth and its related terms. His book is based on the premise that the term “myth,” in particular, underwent a reinvention in the eighteenth century. What he defines

as the primary contemporary categories of thought about myth, which he groups into families he names romantic, folkloristic, ideological, and constitutive, all stem from the Romantic reinvention of the term. To back up this claim, however, he, like Doty, also ventures back to ancient Greek culture, acknowledging that Greeks such as Aristotle and Socrates, when referencing *mythoi*, were alluding to stories grown out of “a very rich tradition of oral story” that goes back hundreds of years before Homer, long before written accounts of these stories and poems (1). His focus, however, is on a contradictory tendency of thinkers such as Socrates and Plato to denigrate the traditional stories as “lies” even as they constructed and relied on these same types of stories in their own philosophizing. Expanding on Plato’s ideas of *mythos* also discussed by Doty, Von Hendy points out that “in *The Republic*, for example, Socrates not only recommends the exclusion of poets from the commonwealth, but considers just as notoriously the positive advantages to the state of fostering deliberately in its citizens’ certain foundational *mythoi* of a sort we would call ideological” (1-2). Following in this vein, these traditional stories became, in the cultural imagination of the Hellenistic period, allegorical, moral guides articulated by wise sages “concealed under a bait of fantasy” (2).

Eventually, however, the seeds of the Romantic construction of myth are sown by 1760, when early Romantic thinkers began to reject the idea that myths are to be thought of as moral guides. This is where Von Hendy signals what he deems as perhaps the most important claim of his book—that “myth,” despite all of this history, is primarily a modern, Romantic invention. “The concept of ‘myth’ that emerges by the end of the . . .

romantic movement,” he says, “is so radical a departure” from what came before, “and so plainly a major move in the self-legitimation of modernity, that it seems appropriate to speak of the modern construction of myth as a fresh invention” (3). The Romantics, he explains, begin to construct myth as narratives that provide access to inexhaustible transcendent truths, or an unmediated religious experience of the ultimate reality of nature—experiences that they saw as becoming irrelevant and ignored amongst the growing ubiquity of a scientific worldview and industrialization.²³ He traces the seeds of this conception as beginning with thinkers like the French author Fontenelle, who theorizes myth as narratives from “primitives” trying to make sense of the world around them. This idea is then taken further by influential “Counter-Enlightenment” thinker Giambattista Vico, who noted “the profound cultural significance” of the “fabling” of Native Americans and imputed a continuity between “savage” and “civilized” storytelling practices, “under whatever laws govern the fabular productions of humanity” (16-17).²⁴ Vico, however, does not quite imply that everyone has access to the same power of imaginative storytelling as the idyllic Native Americans, and, similarly, the poets Schiller, Wordsworth, and Hölderlin lament the loss of this storytelling ability as it has become obscured by the modern, scientific era. Whereas pagans supposedly had access to a well of mythopoetic (or myth-making) ability and imagination connecting them to a transcendent, unmediated reality, people of the modern European world, steeped in so-

²³ As Von Hendy reiterates towards the end of his study, “the modern invention of ‘myth’ is a reaction to the development of the scientific worldview” (320).

²⁴ This awareness also eventually initiates an interest, taken up later in folkloristic thinkers, in “oral traditions.”

called progress, abstract reasoning, and rationalization, had supposedly lost access to a more original nature embodied by “primitives.” As Von Hendy puts it in one of his subheadings, the “The Vine of Fable [was] Discovered,” and while some thinkers lamented the loss of the imaginative power of myth-making as irretrievable, there are also poets, such as William Blake, who “affirms the power of the contemporary artist to create [a visionary renewal of humanity]” (28). Even while Blake constructs storytelling and mythopoetic vision as subversive because he believes tyranny cannot completely repress the possibility of a renewing vision, (which as we will see more certainly resonates with thinkers such as Silko and Vizenor), his work, when viewed alongside others such as Novalis, “bespeak[s] the climax of romantic confidence in the autonomy of the ego, the power of the imagination to transcend its historical circumstances, the authority of the aesthetic” (30). With Romanticism, Von Hendy claims, myth was constructed out of a need for certain poets and thinkers to “legitimize” the values of “belief” vs “unbelief,” or to work out their anxieties within, as Hegel eventually puts it, “the struggle between enlightenment and superstition.” This basic struggle between enlightenment and superstition becomes the binary foundation that myth is constructed upon throughout centuries of theorizing and even into the present day.

With these Romantic ideas, we are confronted with one of the primary paradoxes of this project, namely: myth has been constructed as both the inexhaustible source of imaginative renewal, and even subversion, and it has also been used to legitimize what later thinkers (like Marx) ultimately see as a destructive ideology—in this case as a

conviction in a transcendent aestheticism that ignores political realities. This isolating aestheticism misses what the Indigenous theorists I have covered acknowledge as a relational approach to myth-making; through the justification of “myth,” Romantics often ignored how their “beliefs” might manifest as social practices, while for Indigenous approaches, myth is a means for vision to inform social formations and practices for the benefit of our interconnected communities. In other words, while these Romantic theories might be useful in affirming the role and power of vision and myth-making, they often lose sight of salient political goals and allow myth to become allied with an a-historical, or “transcendental” authority. This trans-historicism eventually allowed myth to become used to justify stories of power and domination, which were ultimately critical to the rise of European nationalisms and colonialism. However “noble” their original intentions, they also construct the idea of a “noble savage” separate from the contemporary world that we will see play out in Von Hendy’s folkloristic category in even more extreme and racist ways. Moreover, this escape of political realities through imagination and myth has led to a further denigration of myth still relevant today, as Vecsey explains, “many think of ‘myth’ as an escape from the reality of life, a delusion which people dwell upon in order to avoid the inescapable facts of existence . . . the makers of ‘myth,’ the believers in ‘myth,’ and the students of ‘myth,’ are escapist from the powerhouse of history and contemporary politics; romantics who want to recline in the passivity and unverifiable falsity of mythopoeic thought” (*Imagine* 1). For the Indigenous thinkers I have covered, vision and myth-making should empower, and “myth” should be *thought of as*

empowering, our individual and cultural ability to practice politics of relationship and commonality. In other words, our stories, that are produced and can be renewed and adapted through vision, should function to produce equitable power relations and social formations; social formations that do not control and commoditize people and the land as resources but that maintain equitable kinship among people, communities, and the environment.

Marx and Nietzsche: Suspicions of Romantic Myth

Von Hendy then turns to a group of thinkers whose suspicions of the Romantics prefigured the “ideological” approaches that occupy the third quadrant of his four-part taxonomy. These thinkers began to mark an essential shift away from the Romantic retreat from material, political realities (as Marx put it, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world . . . the point, however, is to change it”) but they simultaneously help to inscribe a faith in an Enlightenment rationalism as superior to mythical thinking. Von Hendy begins this section with the German philosopher Hegel, whose ideas about art and religion as being ultimately inferior to philosophy in apprehending the “Absolute” go on to inspire early ideas about “false consciousness” embodied in thinkers like theologian D.F. Strauss and anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach. “Where Strauss still advocates a Hegelianized theology, Feuerbach rejects all systematic idealism in the name of what he calls ‘materialism.’ His use of the term is very loose but obviously makes the sort of gruff appeal to pragmatic empiricism still current in ordinary language” (53). What is important here is the general turn that begins to happen from idealism to materialism and

where “myth” hangs in the balance between these two poles. This directly leads to one of the most influential thinkers regarding the construction of myth, Karl Marx, who, by articulating a philosophy antithetical to German idealism, essentially manages to turn the construction of myth upside down, or as he might have had it, right-side up.²⁵ Marx effectively came to see what the Romantics valorized as the liberatory power of the imagination as, on the contrary, a tool for the manufacture of ideology. The significance of thinking like this regarding the construction of myth is manifold; on one hand it marks a general shift of attitude toward situating consciousness not as isolated but as always within a context of social relations whereas the Romantics often lost sight of the social consequences of their thought. On the other hand, it also borders on an essentializing rationalism where rationality could be considered superior and, as Doty warns, more *sophisticated* than its implied opposites like imagination—which are often synonymous with myth. Although much of Steven Charleston’s previously mentioned chapter from *Native American Religious Identity: Unforgotten Gods* is spent to show the commonalities between Marxism and Native American thought, as he puts it, “it is also true that Engel’s approach is flawed by the inherent racism of European-Native relations, which dictated that indigenous cultures must be viewed as ‘primitive’; therefore, ironically, even nascent Marxism participated in the colonial paradigms of Europe by its continuing denigration of Native peoples” (166). In regard to the construction of myth,

²⁵ Early on in his career Marx identifies myth with philosophies of transcendence, “positive representation of the Absolute with its mythico-allegorical garb is the fountainhead and heartbeat of the philosophy of transcendence” (qtd in Von Hendy 55).

for Von Hendy, with Marx we begin to see myth as synonymous with the kind of ideology that “prevents us from seeing the world the way it is” (57), and in some lines of thinking that descend from Marx’s wide-ranging influence, myth becomes synonymous with idealistic superstition or ideology to be stripped away in order to make social revolution possible.

Despite such critiques of myth in Western thought—so well-established now as to seem almost endemic—there are other ways in which “myth” was becoming even more popular in European bourgeois culture. One of the most important of these developments for this project is the work of Jacob Grimm, as it helped establish myth as a particular genre of story. Grimm’s “*Deutsche Mythologie*” for example “is the fourth and last in a sequence of productions by the Brothers Grimm that are of unrivaled importance in concretizing the European conception of ‘myth’ as a distinct narrative genre” (62).²⁶ This comes to be a widely assumed idea that is subsequently implemented by folklorists, ethnologists, and some Romantic revivalists who recruit myth to the causes of European nationalisms and colonial ideologies. Aside from Grimm, the most important further development is the work and thought of Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s thinking lays some groundwork for later “constitutive” theories because he conceives of myth as a necessary, socially constructed illusion or fiction that might actually constitute *all* cultural

²⁶ Grimm writes, “Looser, less fettered than legend, the Fairy-tale lacks that local habitation, which hampers legend, but makes it more home-like. The Fairy-tale flies, the legend walks; the one can draw freely out of the fullness of poetry, the other has almost the authority of history. . . The ancient mythus, however, combines to some extent the qualities of fairy-tale and legend; untrammelled in its flight, it can yet settle down to a local home” qtd in Von Hendy 63).

constructions. For Von Hendy, Nietzsche, along with Marx, is one of the single most influential thinkers on the construction of myth. Although his work adds important nuance to binaries of truth vs fiction by asserting it does not matter if an opinion is false as long as it is “life-enhancing,” it still maintains that myth is wrapped up in the supposed “struggle between ‘superstition and enlightenment’” (76) by constructing myth as fictional. In summary, this line of thinking contributes to constructing myth in multiple ways: (1) myth is false thinking that obscures economic and political realities, (2) myth is a distinct narrative genre that comes to be essential to European nationalism and colonialism, (3) myth may be false or an ideological illusion but it is perhaps at the root of all social constructions.

Folkloristic and Myth as Primitive Religion

In the later part of the nineteenth century, the romantic transcendentalist conception of myth becomes overshadowed in the popular imagination with one of Von Hendy’s primary categories, namely the folkloristic. “This may be described provisionally as the conception of myth as a kind of narrative that *others*, ancient or ‘primitive,’ remote in time or in space, have regarded as sacred” (77). Myth is no longer seen as being of much contemporary importance but is rather an interesting but primitive thing of the past. Von Hendy notes that this conception, in contrast with the Romantic, is primarily situated within Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism. “Where the romantic construction is primarily the work of philosophers and poets in rebellion against Enlightenment rationalism, the folkloristic version is primarily that of students of

archaeology, law, history, sociology, psychology, and anthropology proper—thinkers who accept in principle the Enlightenment aspiration toward the empirical investigation of civil institutions” (77). Yet, interestingly, the folkloristic movement may not have come about without Romanticism’s fascination with traditional sacred stories, and it accepts the Romantic idea that myth contains a culture's values without reservation.

Some of these are the most appalling of all myth theories covered in Von Hendy’s book and, unfortunately, their appalling aspects were quite influential. Max Müller, who I mentioned in my introduction, develops the idea of myth as diseased language and cognitive failure due to forgotten etymologies and taking metaphors literally. For French philosopher Auguste Comte, mythopoeia is savage and childish, “like all religion . . . [myth] is outmoded superstition” (84). According to Comte, “surviving human groups dominated by religion and myth, namely the ‘savage’ or ‘primitive,’ are stuck in childhood” (84). Next is Tylor, also mentioned in my introduction, who is heavily influenced by Müller and Comte. Tylor’s “mythic faculty” is a type of mental error that personifies and/or animates nature, exaggerates facts, turns myths into moral examples, and turns fictive stories into believed history. While these theories go on to inspire arguably less problematic variants, to various degrees, in thinkers like Durkheim, Levy Bruhl, Levi Strauss and others, the legacy and rhetoric of this theorizing no doubt continues to influence harmful stereotypes of Indigenous people and contribute to erasure and deficiency narratives. According to a deficiency narrative, as Justice discusses them, “Indigenous peoples are in a state of constant lack: in morals, laws, culture, restraint,

language, ambition, hygiene, desire, love . . . It insists that we have a lack of responsibility, lack of self-control, lack of dignity . . . In this poisonous story . . . even our strengths are presented as evidence of our inadequacy (3). One of these strengths, as I argue, is an understanding of myth that knows all too well how stories, called theories, like those that define myth as primitive, can cause great harm. Moreover, Indigenous myths teach values that consider such things as the “complex subjectivities of our other-than-human neighbors” (8), the follies of poisoning the environment “that we all depend on for survival” (40), and the responsibilities that come along with seeing the world as a mutual network of kinship—the only “mental error” I see is naming these “mythic faculties” as errors and missing the life-affirming, egalitarian values they can teach. In his chapter “How Do We Learn to be Human?” Justice continues:

In the dominant Abrahamic stories, there is a fiercely maintained boundary between human and nonhuman, and even in the former category, there is a clear hierarchy: men are more human than women, European colonizers are more human than Indigenous and other colonized peoples, the rich and titled are more human than the poor and oppressed, Christian capitalists are more human than animist traditionalists, and so on. While the Enlightenment wrested much of the West’s interpretive authority away from Christianity, its fundamental structure didn’t change; European philosophical and scientific traditions remain heavily invested in an ethos of human exclusivity. (38)

While Justice locates this as stemming from the “dominant Abrahamic stories,” with Von Hendy we can see just how much of myth as primitive ethos is wrapped up in Enlightenment rationalist philosophies that recruit myth to the cause of rational superiority. Justice also recognizes the harm of such a hyper-rational ethos, “Many of the mainstream settler culture’s assumptions about which qualities are entirely unique to humans—language, a moral sense, rationality, tool use, etc.—have little purchase in cultures where untold generations of close observation and abiding relationship have given ample evidence otherwise” (38). Here we see what Doty recognized earlier; a myth, or “fictive” story, can be considered empirical and based on generations of close observation of relationships of all kinds.

It must be said that the folkloristic conception, as a whole, is not always this problematic and there are worthwhile and influential theories that I, unfortunately, will not cover here. Additionally, there are many influential thinkers and important turns of thought covered in chapters 5-11 of Von Hendy’s book, including the role of depth psychology (including psychologists Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung); modernist literature (including James Joyce, WB Yeats, TS Eliot); and social anthropologists (including Bronisław Malinowski and Levi Strauss) among many other thinkers like Northrop Frye, Joseph Campbell, and Mircea Eliade; but in the interest of space and scope, I will not be discussing them here. I realize that many of these theories and theorists may be certainly relevant to the work of Silko, King, and Vizenor and the themes of this project, but chapters 5-11 of Von Hendy’s book mostly cover developments and reiterations of the

more fundamental categories I have covered, developments that are also often encompassed by the following two, and final, of Von Hendy's categories.

Myth as Ideology

In his chapter "Myth as Ideology," Von Hendy begins by explaining how the terms "myth" and "ideology" have often been linked in the history of Western thought. In particular, the conflation of these two terms in Marxist and post-Marxist thinking "indicates the rise of widespread suspicion of officially sanctioned social and cultural norms, and the consequent need for terms to articulate [such] skepticism" (301). In other words, myth became another term, alongside ideology, to identify and critique the officially sanctioned, social "lies" of bourgeois culture. As Von Hendy tells it: as Marx's ideas about ideology are developed and critiqued in the decades after his death—by such thinkers as Lukacs, Gramsci, Mannheim, and others—the word "ideology" begins to take on a broader meaning. In Marx, the word appears as "a particular kind of bourgeois lie: deliberate, cognitive, conscious, and personal. By the end of the process (if it can be said to have ended yet), ideology is inadvertent, affective, unconscious, and structural. In this condition, its distinction from 'myth'" is negligible (280).²⁷

²⁷ During Von Hendy's account of the development of ideology from a conscious bourgeois "lie" to a structural one, he notes influential sociologist Karl Mannheim's work *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), wherein myth, "in various contexts it appears to signify 'foolish traditional story,' in others 'fiction invented to manipulate the masses'" (285). Von Hendy observes that French philosopher Althusser "employs 'myth' and its adjective 'mythical' dozens of times in his essays, though never as a 'marked' term. This means in practice that he never defines it" (289). Although Althusser uses the term in multiple senses, perhaps mostly as synonymous with his ideas of ideology, with Althusser "we witness, for the first time in our sequence of thinkers, an intellectual wielding the term in the same attenuated sense of 'widely propagated lie' that is current in everyday speech" (290).

For Von Hendy, the thinker that conflates ideology and myth perhaps the most is Roland Barthes. For Barthes, in his work *Mythologies*, myths are bourgeois ideology, which Barthes demonstrates by way of the popular-culture examples of “television wrestling, a guidebook to Spain, soap-powder and detergent ads, the language of judge and prosecution in a sensational murder trial, movie travelogues, a ballyhooed exhibition of photographs, and so forth” (290). Heavily influenced by Saussurean linguistics, for Barthes, myth is a metalanguage, a second-order semiological system whose function is to distort the signifier, to turn history into nature. Reminiscent of the early Greek thinkers, the task of the mythologist is to unmask, but in Barthes’ case, it is not the stories of the uneducated populace that need demythologizing, but those of bourgeois culture, a culture which, in order to maintain its hegemony, does not want to be seen and uses myth to stay invisible. In one chapter, Barthes effectively shows how French colonialism manages to seem like the natural state of affairs through mythic representations. Theories like those of Barthes can help us understand the dangers of myth-making, but they also obscure myth’s revolutionary and liberating potential. This is because Barthes understands “myth” as the province of bourgeois culture and largely ignores the question of how an ideological understanding of the term “myth” might relate to non-bourgeois culture—to Indigenous cultures, for example—and serve as the basis for the generation of anti-bourgeois “counter-narratives.” For Barthes, in *Mythologies*, the language of revolution “cannot be mythical” and could never be a means to resist hegemony (293).²⁸

²⁸ As an example of a social theorist who does acknowledge myth's potential for counter-hegemony purposes, Von Hendy cites the nineteenth-century French socialist historian Georges Sorel. For George

Approaches like Barthes' take a similar shape in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Derrida's "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy." In Von Hendy's view, Horkheimer and Adorno proceed from where Nietzsche left off, namely with the dialectic or "perpetual duel between the urge to construct life-enhancing lies and the urge to shatter them" (294), which they frame as operating between the poles of Myth and Enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno implicitly construct myth as "approximately, any form of oppressive belief or cultural standard that creates a despairing sense of fatality" (294). In other words, myth, as they construct it, is once again synonymous with hegemony; it a-politicizes and makes things appear as natural or inevitable, as "part of an unchanging order of things" (294). Even so, Horkheimer and Adorno identify and articulate a dialectical process that is central to the concerns of this project, only they construct "myth" as the negative side of this ever-swinging pendulum of oppressive thought vs liberating critical thought. Their overriding concern, moreover, is with how reason reverts to (or worse, is perverted by) myth, which is then used for the purposes of domination, both of other people and of ourselves (through Freudian repression, for example). "Myth" is the enemy of "enlightenment" because it defers the utopian possibility of an ultimate triumph of reason or critical thinking.

Sorel myth is constructed from intuitive sentiments, "imagistic incitements to revolution . . . historically particularized manifestations" (282) without which people may talk about concepts of revolution but never instigate an actual revolutionary movement. "Sorel was opposed to abstract thinking; he was concerned with what drove revolutionary action and change. For Sorel, the fundamental revolution was that of the oppressed against the oppressor; he made this conflict antirational, mythic, apocalyptic, and so religious in the functional sense of the word" (Ellwood 684).

Horkheimer and Adorno seem ultimately preoccupied with what sometimes sounds remarkably like their own eschatological myth, where the dueling abstractions of myth and enlightenment are held at bay by an endless critique; critical thinking and critics like themselves are what maintain a cosmic balance and keep enlightenment from reverting to myth and enacting worldwide domination. There is an interesting tension, however, between Horkheimer and Adorno's construction of the term myth in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Indigenous theorists. While both seek to counter the forces of hegemony and entropy, for Indigenous thinkers myth is no impediment to that goal. On the contrary, myth is the means to constantly adapt, and to create equitable social systems and, ultimately, to live a good life. Conversely, "Myth, as Horkheimer and Adorno conceive it, is procrustean, totalitarian; it is hegemonic identity-thinking that will tolerate no thinking-otherwise. Horkheimer and Adorno seldom employ the term 'ideology' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but when they do they seem to have in mind a specifically political application of this broader 'myth'" (297).

Derrida's influential critique that utilizes the term "myth" falls along very similar lines of concern as Horkheimer and Adorno. Derrida is concerned with how metaphors have been used in Western philosophy to fake the appearance of a supposedly coherent ontology, and it is the critic's role to unmask and expose this process and prevent thought from "ossifying." "When we create metaphysical abstractions from 'a mobile army of metaphors,'" Derrida says, "we 'act mythologically,'" which is to say: we act in a way that tries to naturalize what is historically contingent (300). Derrida is dedicated to

exposing this “rigidified identity-thinking” to show “the structure of how we think now” (300). With Derrida, myth is a kind of “disease” of language because, as with Barthes, it makes bourgeois cultural hegemony invisible—like a white ink. Given the general orientation of the above perspectives, Myth as Ideology constructs myth as a “widely disseminated lie” that must be perpetually deconstructed so as to avoid hegemonic thinking and practices. What all of the Myth as Ideology theorists have in common, then, is that they all, broadly speaking, construct myth as the negative potential of social thought to enact hegemony.

Von Hendy notes how linking myth and ideology as equally suspect has functioned in a way that sometimes helps to deconstruct hegemonic social thinking. And yet he emphasizes that under such an approach, myth “is limited by its purely antithetical status; it is locked in an endless dialectical struggle with its mortal enemy” (338). In the Indigenous thinking I have covered, meanwhile, one of the antidotes to forms of hegemonic social thinking is ceremony, a healing and creative re-enactment of myth. Myth thought of purely as a dominant ideology to be deconstructed is certainly useful in critiquing bourgeois narratives of power. But it’s not necessary to conflate myth solely with hegemonic thought. Few ideas capture this as well as Thomas King’s phrase “it’s turtles all the way down”²⁹: the adage means not that the physical Earth is resting on the backs of endless turtles,²⁹ but rather that a given “fiction” can’t be fully deconstructed because one only has more fictions to replace it. That is, King’s story is a parable of anti-

²⁹ Although I certainly won’t rule out the possibility.

foundationalism, of the infinite, inescapability of myth and the imagination. Additionally, King's parable is not an endless deconstruction, because it transparently relies on myth to begin with—the parable is itself a myth and a valuable one which teaches that, as A.J. Grant says in “Vico and Bultmann on Myth: The Problem with Demythologizing,” “peel as one may, it's myth all the way down” (63). In other words, King's parable doesn't fully deconstruct anything, let alone lead to some bedrock of truth or expose hegemonic thinking. When discussing Jacques Derrida as he relates to Horkheimer and Adorno's construction of myth, Von Hendy observes that “Derrida and the Frankfurters are at one in recognizing that this systematic critique must extend to their own thinking, which is why they strive programmatically to confine themselves to non-dogmatic counter-punching. To clear away transcendental pretensions only in order to make room for their own would be to replace one set of idols with another” (300). In accordance with creation myths like the Pueblo Thought Woman, Vizenor's “Earthdivers,” and the “back of the turtle” myth told by King, *creation and existence itself* begins with thought, imagination, and co-operative relationships with animals and the earth. Indeed, the attempt to fully deconstruct myth as “harmful thinking” recalls, for me, King's reading of *House Made of Dawn*. When discussing the novel, he argues it is based in Pueblo cosmology that does not see good and evil (or myth and reason) as opposites but as interconnected and inextricable, and he concludes that “Native writers aren't arguing that evil isn't evil or that it doesn't exist. They're suggesting that trying to destroy it is misguided, even foolish. That the attempt risks disaster” (111). King asks, “So just how would we manage

a universe in which the attempt to destroy evil is seen as a form of insanity?” (110). The answer, I would argue, is in particular Indigenous perspectives that guide ceremony and myth-making with values like Hózhó. In other words, there is little reason to try to escape myth or to endlessly “demythologize” (since there is no end to myth), but there is ample reason to make myth meaningful and healing, to guide its potential towards creating relationships of health, balance and beauty among the interdependent relationships of the earth—including more-than-human and spiritual beings and worlds.

Myth as Necessary Fiction

Finally, we arrive at Von Hendy’s last family of thinking, the “constitutive,” which “differs from its romantic parent and agrees with its ideological sibling in assuming that such fictions are without transcendental sanction” (304). In other words, this family of thinking avoids the trap of a Romantic retreat into transcendence and views myth as a “fictional” social construction, “but it differs from its [ideological] sibling in viewing neutrally, or even positively, their necessary fictivity” (304-305). This family ultimately affirms the idea that we use language, discourse, and/or narrative to “constitute” or construct the realities we inhabit. Von Hendy begins by talking about poets such as WB Yeats, who develop a “proto-constitutive” theory of myth that expresses a willing commitment to ideas and construction that they know are not objectively true. After moving through the ideas of influential French philosopher Paul Ricoeur and Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, Von Hendy arrives at who is, for me, the most characteristic “constitutive” theorist of his study, Eric Gould. Eric Gould

views myth semiotically as “the product of our experiencing ‘an ontological gap between event and meaning,’ which we try to fill with endless interpretation” (316). Gould points out that even as myth engages a “persistent existential crisis and the allegorical neatness of the solution” it is also endlessly suggestive: “‘the power of a myth,’ he says, “is expressed not in any literal reference . . . but in the open-ended repetitiveness of the relationships it creates between items”” (319). In other words, through myth, the gap between event and meaning is endlessly able to be filled with more meaning, more story, in a process that Gould calls “mythic.” Indeed, says Von Hendy: “The intention to go on in the business of making the world transform into further meaning . . . may well be all that we can understand by ‘mythic thought’” (180). “In this wider sense,” he asks, “what cultural achievement of our species is not an attempt to fill with signs the gap between event and meaning?” (320). Myth (and mythicity), here, becomes a general theory not only of fiction, but also of the constitutive use of language to provide value and meaning to phenomena or events.

Such a theory is elaborated by Hans Blumenberg, for whom “the entire shelter of culture is built up from work *on* myth” (322). Myths, for Blumenberg, are stories that are retold time and again across time and place but that share a common “core” beneath all the different variations. These stories are motivated by an existential need to make the unfamiliar familiar, to attempt to explain the inexplicable, and give names to that which seems unnameable—a need that Blumenberg calls “Angst.” Accordingly, societies continue to work *on*, or work with and work *out*, the stories that they have committed to

in the past, that they already find to be significant. For Blumenberg, this results in an *intertextual* view of myth where “the more intensively a tale has been worked into the fabric of a culture, the more likely it is to be worked further. On this showing, ‘work on’ myth in the modern West is a matter of nothing more mysterious than intertextual allusion inspired by the cultural prestige of the stories already most impressively entrenched” (326). In other words, myth does not provide access to transcendent truths but regrounds us in a network of stories that are compelling because of shared cultural meanings and historically repeated motifs that are creatively varied over time.

The final thinker in Von Hendy’s constitutive category is Hazard Adams, who seeks to articulate a theory of myth centered on “the radically creative power of language” (qtd. 327). Adams begins with Blake’s idea of the symbolic, in which language “anthropomorphizes” objects, creates them and their meaning, and calls that “myth. “Myth” for Adams is a vehicle for the “constitutive power of language” to “create” objects, which he sees as a rejection of the positivism of the Western scientific worldview that attempts to “fix” reality outside of language.³⁰ Language, for Adams, is “continually regenerated by radical creation” (332) and he differs from the ideologists who mostly want to endlessly expose or critique myth because “the human mind will always be busy constructing a significant world, in spite of the power of skepticism . . . to cast doubt upon its constructions” (328). Adams dubs the positivism he is reacting to as

³⁰ This theory is perhaps closest to what Momaday describes in *The Man Made of Words*: “‘words are returned upon themselves in a notable and meaningful way. They transcend their merely symbolic value and become one with the idea they express . . . they are at once the names of things and the things named’ (emphasis added 18).

“antimyth,” a positivism that does not recognize its own created fictions or that tries to positively identify a reality outside of human meaning-making. This makes his theory contrary to Horkheimer and Adorno because Adams is optimistic about the need for humans to “create” a world and imbue it with significance through myth. For him, moreover, this world is inextricable from what we construct as “reality”; myth reflects an unavoidable, human need/condition to make life meaningful through language and values.

Closing Thoughts on the Modern Construction of Myth and Indigenous Revisions

Von Hendy boils the conversation between “Myth as Ideology” and “Myth as Constitutive” down to the conclusion that “‘Myth’ is the socially significant product of humanity’s irrepressible urge to construct meanings. The two parties are at odds only in their moral assessment of this product” (334). The ideologists view mythmaking as a morally flawed enterprise that can, among other things, reinforce hegemony, but for constitutive thinkers, myth is whatever people have constructed to value and believe in, good or bad. Indigenous theories address this dilemma directly by always accompanying mythmaking with a moral code that directs the construction of meaning towards socio-cultural and environmental balance and cooperation. One of my arguments is that “myth,” when viewed “ideologically” as regression into dogma, fundamentalism, foundationalism, etc. still shares pejorative connotations with the “folkloristic” view of myth as “primitive” and outmoded—which, as I have outlined already, is especially harmful to Indigenous communities. Myth as Medicine, as storytelling potential to be

used with a doctor's sense of responsibility and care, avoids the connotation of myth as regression even as it acknowledges myth's potential to ossify into dangerous social ideology, but directs myth-making potential towards enacting particular political values of relationship and commonality. Myth as Medicine is perhaps most fundamentally a shift in the *logos* that guides our conceptions of myth, a shift in our ways "of imagining the world, ways that do not depend so much on oppositions as they do on co-operations" (*The Truth About Stories* 110). Stories are simply what we are, and what we are is something equally material and metaphysical, semiotic and physical, individual and social, imaginative and real. Instead of myth and its opposite in an endless struggle, myth, as Gerald Vizenor defines it, is a chance—an opportunity to create more equitable futures, not an ontological category to be defined and argued over endlessly.

At the end of his study, Von Hendy returns to his families of myth thinking in a manner that I hope will help reveal the potential for Myth as Medicine to offer a way around the myth studies conundrums I have pointed to above:

The romantic mode assumes the capacity for transcendental mythopoeia to be a permanent possession of humanity. The ideological agrees about the permanent possession but adopts a negative stance of suspicion toward its products. The constitutive . . . accepts this mythopoeia, true or false, as a constant of consciousness. Only the folkloristic mode can be understood to imply that myth is solely or nearly always a thing of remote times or exotic cultures. (303)

The Indigenous approach detailed here sees mythopoeia as a constitutive, human constant, and it certainly doesn't relegate myth to an exotic remote past. In other words, it sees myth-making as the result of what Adams calls "the radically creative power of language" (qtd. 327) and acknowledges the risk that such power can certainly be put to hegemonic ends. But it also insists that as long as it is informed by an Indigenous "moral assessment" of "humanity's irrepressible urge to construct meanings," myth can be directed towards counter-hegemonic values of Hózhó and commonality. Myth, according to the family of Indigenous thought covered in this project, is not obsolete, inimical to reason, evasively aesthetic, or devoid of meaning; rather myth is a potential social, psychological, and spiritual medicine, it is something to be *careful* about and *responsible* with. Myth should always be used to restore—or re-story—Hózhó.

The novels I turn to in the final section of this project serve as three complementary examples of a theory of Myth as Hózhó. In Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, I'm interested in tracing the idea of myth as constitutive, intertextual/relational, creative, anti-authoritarian, and necessary for cultural and environmental renewal. In short, myth in *GGRW* is a medicine for the authority and exploitation of colonialist ideologies and practices because it helps to create and maintain harmonious balance between "rules" and creativity. Following that I will explore how *Ceremony* constructs myth as a creative performance capable of restoring harmonious balance to an individual and to resist colonial destruction and dominance. The novel stresses the role that metaphysical experiences play in healing trauma and in relating to

the world with values of Hózhó, i.e., a relationship of harmony and kinship. Finally, I will consider how, in *Bearheart*, myth is perhaps primarily about survival; survival *through* creative, adaptive vision and survival *from* an increasingly violent, exploitative world stuck in “word wars” and reliant on “terminal creeds.” Here we will see that myth, in the sense of creative adaptive vision and the stories that come from vision, is a chance to foster relationships of compassionate balance

“AS LONG AS THE GRASS IS GREEN AND THE WATERS RUN”: MYTH AS AN
 ANTIDOTE TO AUTHORITARIANISM IN THOMAS KING'S *GREEN GRASS*,
RUNNING WATER

We all like to draw a line between fiction and nonfiction but the truth of the matter is there is no line.

—Thomas King, “Thomas King Master Storyteller”

There are no truths, Coyote,” I says. “Only stories.

—Thomas King, *Green Grass, Running Water*

In the opening of *Green Grass, Running Water* (*GGRW*), the reader is immediately confronted with logical contradictions that are often characteristic of mythology. “So. In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water” (1). How can there be nothing *and* water? What happened before “the beginning”? *GGRW* begins with humor and myth; the world presented is one with clear allusions to creation myths (biblical and Indigenous) and, like the myths of oral storytelling traditions, it isn't a world overly concerned with flawless logic, rationality, and capital “T,” or objective, truth. King’s next line complicates this further, “Coyote was there, but Coyote was asleep” (1). How is there nothing, water, *and* Coyote? Coyote sleeps by the water that apparently exists within nothing and he dreams; as I will explain further, the dream Coyote dreams

takes on a life of its own, wants to be in control of the world, gets upset about all the water that has no apparent explanation, and becomes G O D. Coyote's dream near the inexplicable waters amidst nothingness, allows the story a place to begin. For this reading, I will focus primarily on the opening scene of the novel, the significance of Coyote, the symbolism of water, and the dam around whose removal the book's plot revolves because, together, they help outline King's implicit theory that myth is an antidote to oppressive restrictions or hegemonic thinking. My aim here is not to perform detailed, comprehensive close readings of these novels, but rather to focus on aspects that help to elucidate an Indigenous theory of myth. As I will argue, one of the major concerns of King's story is an often playful take on the conundrum of Western understandings of myth when confronted with Indigenous understandings.

Fiction, myths, and contradictions like those that open the novel are not a problem for King, as he remarks in *The Truth About Stories*, "don't you love cryptic stories? I certainly do" (11). There are few lines in *GGRW* between fiction and non-fiction, author and audience, Western and Indigenous cultures, reality and myth, which gives the novel an ambiguity that at times can certainly be described as "cryptic." The novel consists of multiple story lines that alternate between mythical worlds and a "real world" plot of characters living in what is now known as Canada, mostly centered around Indigenous characters. As the novel progresses, it becomes less clear just how separate these worlds are. *GGRW* is structured in four parts, each part beginning with a creation story narrated by the mythical Indigenous figures First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman,

and Old Woman. Those stories are mash-ups that draw from a variety of sources, including Indigenous creation stories, biblical stories, and the canons of Western pop and high culture. As the mythical characters tell their stories, they appear to change their names (and genders) to the Western frontier figures Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye. These characters cross between the mythical world to also feature heavily throughout the “real world” plot of the novel, namely as the mysterious Indian elders who go missing from the mental hospital at the beginning of the novel, travelling around in their attempt to “fix the world.” This cross-cultural host of characters, signs, symbols, people, stories and myths, weave together constantly, to the point that it is hard to see where myth begins and reality ends. King braids all these threads into a single, intertextual story—like a medicine wheel that retains individual directions but is all a part of the same circle. “‘Of course,’ I says. It’s all the same story.’ ‘That makes sense,’ says Coyote” (163). In other words, the novel is full of complex, cross-cultural representations that go well beyond binaries including Indianness and Westernness, fiction and nonfiction, truth and myth. For King, it would appear that the contradictions here are just different stories interacting with one another; they are a source of humor, play and possibility, as Coyote at one point exclaims, “‘A canoe! says Coyote. ‘Where did a canoe come from?’” The narrator responds, “‘Use your imagination,’ I says” (113). In the imaginative world of *GGRW*, boundaries and contradictions of all sorts are made open to play and tricksterism.³¹

³¹ “Tricksters do *not* originate in Native American cultures. The word ‘trickster’ is not a term indigenous to an Indian language; it is an ethnographic one. While many Native American cultures, as well as many

As I alluded to earlier, King's sense of play with the line between fiction and non-fiction or myth and reality is evident from the opening scene where Coyotes dreams a dream that takes on a life of its own and wants to be in control of the world. With a story's beginning comes possibility, and often what comes out of that possibility creates circumstances beyond anyone—including the creator's—control. So, when Coyote dreams his dream, it becomes “noisy,” “silly,” “gets loose and runs around,” waking Coyote up from his peaceful slumber (1). The dream thinks it is in charge of the world, sees the unexplainable water and gets upset, lamenting the situation to the mysterious “Dream eyes,” who are also apparently there without explanation, perhaps hinting at the reader to be aware of their own eyes as they read the page. Coyote wakes up from the ruckus of this noisy dream that he dreamed, and starts up a conversation with *another* mysterious presence that pervades the whole novel, namely “I.”³² “‘It’s that noisy dream of yours,’ I says. ‘It thinks it is in charge of the world.’ ‘I *am* in charge of the world, says that silly Dream’” (2). After some more humorous exchanges between Coyote and the Dream, they decide that the Dream can be called *dog* (rather than *Coyote* as Dream wanted), but the dog/Dream gets confused, mixes up his name and calls himself god.

European, American, African American and Asian cultures, have story characters that resemble what we often call tricksters, it is a mistake to assume that tricksters originate in Indian stories” (Womack 70). My claim is certainly not that tricksters are Native American in origin but characters that we often call tricksters are very important to the authors and works detailed in this project.

³² “I” is likely King’s cameo of sorts, directly interjecting his voice in the text as the author. This interjection as the “author” or “authority” of the text creates an interesting dynamic; King is aware of his power as author but with this awareness he makes himself another presence, like the mythical Indian elders, who straddles the line between narrator and character as “I” talks to Coyote throughout the novel. The use of “I” as a narrator/character heightens the sense of playfulness that pervades the novel and indicates, to me, an awareness of the power of words, thought and authorship.

Eventually, after some shouting about wanting to be a big god instead of a little one, the dog/god Dream decides he actually wants to be called G O D.³³ Despite worries expressed by “I,” Coyote assures “I” that he has everything under control (spoiler: control is not Coyote’s strong suit). Ultimately, G O D wants to be in charge, he wants authority, and, instead of resting in ambiguity and irrationality, G O D is disturbed by the mystery of where the water came from and wants some answers. Much like King’s turtle parable where the world rests on endless turtles (discussed earlier in this project), there are layers of fiction upon fiction, myth upon myth, dreams upon dreams, and eyes upon eyes that intersect in this opening scene. There is little stability to rest on, to the point that the phrase that opens the novel, “in the beginning,” seems less and less like a definitive beginning and more simply like a useful phrase so a story can at least start *somewhere*. In *GGRW*, there is no attempt to demythologize endlessly or find a core of historical or literal truth here because in a universe with no beginnings and endings, dream, myth and/or imagination is where creation must always begin. The subtext, in my reading of the opening scene, is that in untruth, fiction, dream, and myth there is meaning and possibility because “when that Coyote dreams, anything can happen. I can tell you that” (1). Lastly, in this scene, King reveals an anti-colonial critique of the dangers of reacting to dreams, fiction, myth and possibility with rules, fear, and authority. Dreams, thoughts,

³³ The confusing nature of this interaction all seems to support not only values of humor but of irrationality and mystery. There is no attempt to make this scene make perfect, logical sense because that would not reflect Indigenous understandings of myth that do not make hyper-rationality a priority. In other words, it is less important to explain something with extreme rational clarity but more important to focus on how a story functions, i.e. what it teaches and what kind of meaning and behavior it fosters.

and “fictional” stories and characters make things happen and can be used to control or, as we will see later, to maintain balance.

The idea of control is an important one throughout the book, and it is made quite visible in this interaction between G O D and Coyote. Coyote is playful, creative, even chaotic at times, and G O D is controlling and authoritative, seeking order and truth.³⁴ Here we can see a clear critique of the power and authority invoked in the name of Western religion and, more generally, in the dichotomization of truth versus myth. Drawing a line between fiction and non-fiction, like we see with G O D, is a way to declare “Truth” and build authority, to make “our” stories true and “other” stories false. Once again, I am reminded of Paula Gunn Allen from *The Sacred Hoop*, “current dictionary definitions of myth reinforce a bias that enables the current paradigm of our technocratic social science-biased society to prevail over tribal or poetic views just as it enables an earlier Christian biblical paradigm to prevail over the pagan one” (102). In *GGRW*, there is an absurdity in asking the question asked in this scene by G O D that becomes a refrain throughout the book, namely “where did all the water come from?” (3). This question implies a search for a definite truth, a foundation, but King’s Coyote trickster responds, “‘take it easy’ . . . ‘Sit down. Relax. Watch some television.’ ‘But there is water everywhere, says that G O D.’ ‘Hmmm,’ says Coyote. ‘So there is’” (3).

³⁴The many contradictions in the novel, including the opposing approaches of G O D and Coyote are, as Vizenor puts it, “contradictions but [they are] not antithetical” (*Narrative Chance* 12). It was Coyote who initially dreamed this G O D, and the oppositions they represent are in an inextricable relationship with one another; one is a drive to find truth and declare authority and one is anarchistic, and concerned not with objectivity but with function. Coyote functions to balance an overly forceful declaration of Truth and authority.

King is presenting an oral storytelling epistemology less concerned with definitive truth as it is with, as Lee Maracle puts it, “‘finding freedom in the context you inherit’” (qtd. in Justice 33). King’s introduction to *GGRW* embodies Vizenor’s notion that “freedom is a sign, and the trickster is a chance and freedom in a comic sign; comic freedom is a ‘doing,’ not an essence, not a museum being, not an aesthetic presence” (*Narrative Chance* 13). With definition, with the fixing of meaning, comes authority, rules and control, but King’s novel is, after all, simply words on a page, or as Vizenor again puts it, “narrative chance in a language game” (ix-x). Through Vizenor’s framework, Coyote represents this chance to use language not to close meaning but to allow for new beginnings. Like the water that appears so often throughout the novel, the possibility of new meaning must always be in motion; the water must run if freedom and healing is to be found in this context. In other words, it doesn’t really matter where the water came from “as long as the grass is green and the waters run” (234).

The symbol of running water perhaps best reveals King’s conception of Myth as Medicine. Water must be in motion to foster life and health, connecting, seeping into, and nourishing the land with its essential life-giving properties. Yet, in *GGRW*, one of the main conflicts is the dam that is constructed on Indigenous land. The ideology behind the creation of the dam is the same one that we see with G O D in the opening scene; instead of letting the water flow naturally, there is a need to control its flow, to create stasis, definition, and separation where there should be motion, mystery and interconnection. King is all too aware of the material effects this authoritarian thinking has had on

Indigenous communities across the world and the power of a story to mobilize colonialism. The dam in the novel tells us that fixing meaning and creating dichotomies between truth and myth is a social construction, a tool of colonialism, impermanent and inevitably broken. For King, our lives are made of myth, and putting a clear line in the middle of our stories to delineate truth from fiction obscures how everything is myth to begin with. The dam is the ultimate symbol of rigid rules in the novel, and, in the end, it is destroyed by an earthquake—a natural disaster beyond anyone’s control. Interestingly, in *GGRW*, there is a sense that mystery and irrationality, i.e., the realm of myth, is what destroys not only colonial ideologies but their material realities as well. The dam’s destruction lets the waters run, to feed the grass and make it green again; fixed and immutable constructions like the dam will always break because there are always inexplicable happenings beyond what can be controlled by rules, or told in one version of a story. This to me sums up the role of the trickster perfectly. As Vizenor puts it, this return to balance is the role of “the imaginative trickster, the one who cares to balance the world between terminal creeds and humor with unusual manners and ecstatic strategies” (*Earthdivers* xii). When meaning becomes terminal (fixed, limited, or closed) like the dam, it will eventually need to be destroyed for the world to return to a physical and mythic homeostasis, allowing for new beginnings. Even the most seemingly immutable stories—creation myths, and perhaps Christian ones in particular for King—are ongoing and open to be retold and reinterpreted. Ultimately, King locates the source, or major tool, of oppression (including colonialism) in rigidity and rules and the antidote in the

mystery, irrationality, and the playful, imaginative nature of myth. Myth, in *GGRW*, is not synonymous with falsity, hegemonic thinking, Romantic aestheticism, or “primitive” thinking, it is an opportunity to utilize the freedom of imagination to avoid foundationalist hegemony and bring balance to the earth.

The centrality of the trickster figure Coyote in the novel reveals a functional understanding of myth as able to poke holes in any apologetic defense of rules or of any single telling of a story. “You are one silly coyote,” I says. “No wonder this world is a mess” (262). The emphasis here with Coyote is *play*. King’s Coyote is not a return to an authentic past but a playful disruption of the course of events that, if unimpeded, may end up only re-enacting the same old story; the emphasis is on telling new stories, new possible futures in the present moment. In one part of the novel focused on the mythical characters, Changing Woman is telling their creation story and has an encounter with the Noah of the biblical Genesis story that highlights this. Noah says, “This is a Christian ship . . . I am a Christian man. This is a Christian journey. And if you can’t follow our Christian rules, then you’re not wanted on the voyage” (163). Coyotes then asks the narrator, “‘is that the end of the story?’ ‘Silly Coyote,’ I says. ‘This story is just beginning’” (163). Although Christianity is often at the receiving end of the pejorative use of “rules” throughout the novel, there is certainly the sense that almost any and every epistemology is open to tricksterism, critique, humor, and (re)interpretation. “‘We got to get rid of those rules,’ says Changing Woman” (162), whose name, like Thought Woman, is very clear about what is being valued through these mythical Indigenous characters.

This trickier rule-breaking, like breaking the dam, is about survival, or in Vizenor's terms "survivance."³⁵ In "Native American Literary Criticism in Global Context" Arnold Krupat quotes Vizenor, "'The sovereignty of motion is mythic, material, and visionary, not mere territoriality.' Thus transmotion is also a function of or imbricated with the oral tradition. 'Native stories of survivance,' Vizenor states, 'are the creases of transmotion and sovereignty'" (51). By championing Indigenous understandings of myth, King is highlighting this vision of sovereignty that is ungovernable and based in what N. Scott Momaday calls "secret souls" affirmed in Native tradition and myth in figures such as Coyote (*House Made of Dawn* 52). Coyote comes from the Indigenous mythic imagination and represents an ungovernable force that defies the rules and limitations so characteristic of colonialism and must be free, or transmotional, in a spiritual, semiotic and material sense. Although potentially chaotic at times, this rule-breaking is seen as being in the service of balance and fostering healthy relationships. Indeed, *relationship*, Daniel Heath Justice asserts,

is the driving impetus behind the vast majority of texts by Indigenous writers—relationship to the land, to human community, to self, to the other than-human world, to the ancestors and our descendants, to our histories and our futures, as well as to colonizers and their literal and ideological heirs and that these literary

³⁵ This term, first employed in the context of Native American literary studies by Vizenor, is deliberately imprecise to allow its meaning more flexibility. For Vizenor, it generally refers to the survival, resistance, and presence achieved through the continuance of Native stories.

works offer us insight and sometimes helpful pathways for maintaining, rebuilding, or even simply establishing these meaningful connections. (xix)

The refrain “as long as the grass is green and the waters run” (an ironic allusion to the language of early treaties between Indigenous nations and settler-colonial North American governments) could be seen to be about undamming the restrictions that govern the relationships that Daniel Heath Justice so usefully points out: the land, the community, the self, the other than human world, the ancestors, the descendants, histories and futures. For me, the novel is ultimately about an Indigenous epistemology that values maintaining a mythic, trans-motional freedom from “rules” or, as we will see with *Bearheart*, “terminal creeds.” In this way, the novel theorizes myth as a kind of medicine for the authority and rules of authoritarianism and colonialism.

Towards the end of the novel, in a humorous conversation with the mysterious narrator, Coyote ponders, “‘all this floating imagery must mean something’ ‘That’s the way it happens in oral stories.’ I says” (391). For me, the water and floating imagery, while mysterious, represents renewal or the beginning or restart of the story, which as in the Bible, the Anishinaabe creation myth, and other flood myths around the world, is to begin the creation of the earth. The water gives the storyteller a place to start and, like a circle, this new start always follows destruction. As we have seen, in the end of the novel the dam is made obsolete or absurd and its destruction opens the possibility of a re-telling of the story(ies). There isn’t one way to tell a story, stories are never done being told because they are always being retold. The refrain, “as long as the grass is green and the

waters run,” becomes about the consistent renewal of stories as life-giving but also life taking, as one of the main characters Eli dies in the ensuing flood after the destruction of the dam. Explaining Pueblo cosmology, Leslie Silko tells us:

In this universe, there is no absolute good and absolute bad; there are only balances and harmonies that ebb and flow. Some years the desert receives rain, other years there is too little rain, and sometimes there is so much rain that floods cause destruction. But rain itself is neither innocent nor guilty. The rain is simply itself. (*Yellow Woman* 64)

As I will explore more in the next chapter on *Ceremony*, stories can bring disparate, separated elements into balance, perhaps because they can create a new perceived order where there was chaos, providing safety and comfort in a bewildering world. But, eventually, reified order needs chaos and transgression; too much order and there is no balance, and the rain will come and will be destructive and out of the destruction new balances will emerge. So much of *GGRW* is a struggle with and against rules and control, but I get the sense that, for King, this struggle is perhaps more humorous than anything because balance will happen no matter how much one tries to control things. The novel is constructed around continually trying to get the story “right,” perhaps because, as we see on page 11, “everybody makes mistakes,” said the Lone Ranger. ‘Best not to make them with stories.’” Yet, Coyote and the four mythical-yet-real Indian elders keep making mistakes throughout, always followed by the return to humor. “Oh boy,” I says. “It looks like we got to do this all over again” (250). So, even though it can be humorous to try to

maintain harmonious balance and “fix the world,” trying to do so is still the best thing to do and something people and myths should, and will inevitably, return to. Like the cosmological circle described in the opening paragraph of this project, there is a sense of responsibility in maintaining harmonious balance among the various directions of the world and of the self and spirit. Also like the circle, the attempt to balance the world is always cyclical, with no beginning and no end, and, with King, the attempt is to be done with humor and compassion along the way. As King shows, the attempt to balance the world begins with myth, and a logic that myth should be thought of as “play,” creative, relational, and necessary for cultural and environmental renewal. Ultimately, it is not just stories that are championed but a *mythos* and a worldview not of rules and limitations but, as symbolized by the Blackfoot Sundance ceremony that takes place in the novel, of life-affirming/renewing dancing, singing, ritual, storytelling etc. Stories, imagination, and myth should keep the grass green and the waters running and if rules get in the way too much then the irrational, inexplicable nature of myth and trickster will likely poke holes and flood the world again, prompting the question that initiates the next retelling, “where did all the water come from?” (*GGRW* 469).

HOLDING ALL THINGS TOGETHER IN A SINGLE THOUGHT: HEALING
THROUGH MYTH IN LESLIE SILKO'S *CEREMONY*

Mysticism among American Indian peoples is fundamentally based on a sense of propriety, an active respect for these Natural Powers; on a ritual comprehension of universal orderliness and balance; and on a belief that a person's every action, thought, relationship, and feeling contributes to the greater good of the Universe or its suffering. Human beings are required to live in such a way that balance is maintained and furthered, and disorder (also perceived as disease) is kept within bounds. Through active efforts in every area of private and communal life, one is responsible for maintaining equilibrium—that is, the proper activity of human beings . . . Only if each species occupies itself with the tasks proper to its being, can the Universe function in life-enhancing ways. When any species fails to meet its obligations to the All-That-Is, everyone suffers—human, animal, plant, and non-mortal kingdoms alike.

— Paula Gunn Allen, *Off the Reservation*

The mythic heals, it makes us whole.

—Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*

While all of the books discussed in this project deal with healing as a central concern, *Ceremony* is perhaps the most explicit about this. *Ceremony* is about healing in the etymological sense of the word, namely “to make whole.” Paula Gunn Allen argues for the importance of ritual/ceremony to American Indian literature, claiming not that Native American novels are “rituals,” but rather that “they derive many of their structural and symbolic elements from certain rituals and the myths that are allied with those rituals” (*The Sacred Hoop* 79). While *Ceremony* certainly derives structural and symbolic elements from myths and rituals, if any novel comes close to actually mimicking or becoming a ritual, it is *Ceremony*. *Ceremony* is a story about a Native American WWII veteran named Tayo who learns to heal his trauma and bring rain to his community through ceremony and myth. The narrative flow and structure of the novel mirrors Tayo’s journey from fragmentation to wholeness. As Tayo becomes steadily more whole, the narrative of the novel becomes clearer, more settled into a unified chronology; as Tayo comes to know himself and his right-relationships to people, the narrative—from the Latin root *narros* which means “to know”—achieves a relative stillness, like sediment settling in agitated water. The narrative of *Ceremony* is how Tayo comes to know healing, and how the reader knows Tayo. The novel portrays the importance of myth and story in (re)orienting our lives, our commitments towards others and natural and supernatural worlds, in establishing a connection with ancestors and time immemorial, and in making sense of an experience of oneness that dissolves boundaries and oppositions that uphold destructive forces like colonialism—all “in order to become

whole again” (157). In this reading, I will primarily focus on Tayo’s ceremonial journey, the guidance given him by old Betonie (a medicine man), and on the novel’s metanarrative of witchery—all in order to help elucidate how the book argues for an understanding of Myth as Medicine.

In the introduction to the Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition of *Ceremony*, Larry McMurtry states what is perhaps obvious at this point in my project: “The importance of faithful storytelling is a strong theme in all of Leslie Marmon Silko’s writing” (xxii). But to set the stage for my discussion, I might revise McMurtry’s remark slightly. While storytelling is undoubtedly one of Silko’s primary concerns in her writing, “faithful” might be a misleading word here. For stories to heal they may require a type of faith, yet, importantly, in *Ceremony*, it isn’t faithfulness to a static tradition but in the ceaseless creativity of, and infinite ancestral memory accessed through, what might be called the mythologizing imagination.³⁶ In this chapter, I will stress the importance of *creative*, *imaginative*, or *mythical* storytelling to Silko’s work like *Ceremony*, because it seems to me to be at the heart of the novel. Following in the image of “Thought-Woman, the spider” (2), who opens the novel, thinks of her sisters, and creates the five worlds of the universe, Silko weaves a story where myth is an essential, indispensable strand in the web of creation.

³⁶ On one occasion, this ancestral memory is referred to as “blood memory” (*Ceremony* 204). “The damage that had been done had never reached this feeling. This feeling was their life, vitality locked deep in blood memory, and the people were strong, and the fifth world endured, and nothing was ever lost as the remained” (204).

Furthermore, to expand on how this novel is situated within the context of Pueblo and Diné spirituality, another way of specifying the type of storytelling Silko is concerned with might be *sacred*, *powerful*, or *medicinal* storytelling. Paula Gunn Allen, who like Silko is of Laguna Pueblo descent, explains that “*sacred*, like the words *power* and *medicine*, has a very different meaning to tribal people than to members of technological societies . . . [the *sacred* is] something that is filled with an intangible but very real power or force, for good or bad” (*The Sacred Hoop* 72; *emph. in original*). She goes on to explain that from an American Indian spiritual perspective, as articulated by Sioux medicine man Lame Deer, “the Great Spirit pours a great unimaginable force into all things—pebbles, ants, leaves, whirlwinds—whatever you will” (72). Allen says that this force is real and having power and medicine is the ability to harness this force “without being harmed by it” (72). Silko’s novel is constructed in accordance with these metaphysical principles. In *Ceremony*, and in other works like *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko “sees ritual as having dual faces, one evil, one good . . . Silko’s protagonist [Tayo] is required to choose between good and bad, and the survival of his people rests on that decision” (97). This choice between the dual faces of good and bad is, more specifically, about a transformation from living and acting in loss, destruction and separation, to supporting life, creation, and integration, or “the ability of all creatures to share in the process of ongoing creation which makes all things sacred” (57). As we will see, Tayo is able to recognize this sacred power and guide it in a medicinal way through ceremony and myth. By the end of the book, Tayo realizes that the post-traumatic-stress-like

dreams he'd struggled with at its start "had been a terror at loss, at something lost forever; but nothing was lost; all was retained between the sky and the earth, and within himself" (*Ceremony* 204). Tayo's healing is inextricable from a medicinal mythopoeia, or the creation of stories, which, in the epistemology of *Ceremony*, is always able to be accessed from the earth and within the individual.

When discussing the novel in relationship to myth, it is vital to discuss ceremonies as understood, generally speaking, in Indigenous terms. As Allen puts it: "The purpose of a ceremony is to integrate: to fuse the individual with his or her fellows, the community of people with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger communal group with the worlds beyond this one" (*The Sacred Hoop* 62), in order to guide the person and the world back to health. Silko consciously constructed her novel with this understanding in mind: that the stories we often call myths, as well as ceremonies—"that produce mythic (metaphysical) states of consciousness and/or conditions" (72)—are central to healing or integration on the level of the individual, society, between societies, and people with the earth. In the preface Silko explains that

[t]he title of the novel, *Ceremony*, refers to the healing ceremonies based on the ancient stories of the Diné and Pueblo people. The two years I lived and taught for Diné College were important to my understanding of the healing ceremony's relationship to storytelling. I was conscious of constructing the novel out of the many different kinds of narratives or stories to celebrate storytelling with the spoken as well as the written word. I indulged myself with the old-time stories

because they evoked a feeling of comfort I remembered from my childhood at

Laguna. (xv)

The comfort of these myths is one that provides a deep sense of belonging and interrelationship with all life and the land, or as Tayo expresses “the comfort of belonging with the land, and the peace of being with these hills” (108). This Indigenous conception of myth is, again, about orienting the mythmaking potential of people and cultures towards fostering relationships of health, balance, and beauty between all human and more-than-human life. Instead of a reference to all belief that is false and irrational, “myth stands as an expression of human need for coherence and integration and as the mode whereby human beings might actively fill that need” (*The Sacred Hoop* 104). Far from the scholarly conversation detailed in my Methodology that has largely rendered myth as obsolete, whether because it is a dead thing of the past, Romantic aestheticism, solely rigid thinking that survives into contemporary life to uphold power structures, or false yet entertaining stories etc., in *Ceremony*, myth is medicine for the forces of destruction and isolation (including war, colonialism, and environmental extraction), and the physical, mental, and spiritual anguish they bring about.

Interestingly, *Ceremony* has its own creation mythology or metanarrative where the destructive forces of the world, including the violence of colonialism and white dominant culture, are based in a primordial act of witchery. The entire cosmology that undergirds the world of *Ceremony* is based on the power of story to create destruction or healing, like Greg Sarris says, “to doctor or destroy” (*Greg Sarris: Native American*

Literary Tradition). So, just as “the only cure/ I know/ is a good ceremony” (*Ceremony* 3), in Silko’s mythos all destruction and chaos began with a story told in a kind of ceremonial contest of witches, far back in time immemorial, to see who could come up with the scariest thing. At this contest, these witches gather from all over the world to try and impress one another with disgusting and horrific acts until, eventually, one mysterious witch “just told them to listen/ ‘What I have is a story’” (124). After some incredulous laughter, the witch begins to tell a story of white folks who will “grow away from the earth” and “see no life/ When they look/ They see only objects/ The world is a dead thing for them . . . they fear the world/ they destroy what they fear/ they fear themselves” (125). The mysterious witch details all the ways these people will foster destruction and death, by poisoning and stealing the earth, killing people, even turning on themselves until eventually turning the rocks of the earth itself into weapons of mass destruction. All of this is “set in motion now/ set in motion by our witchery/ set in motion/ to work for us” (127). The other witches agree that this story wins the contest and beg the witch to take it all back, “but, of course, it was too late. For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world” (*The Truth About Stories* 10).

Given the history and changes brought about by these forces of destruction initiated by witchery, according to the novel, the way ceremonies are performed and conceptualized must change and adapt. The medicine man Betonie reflects that “‘She taught me this above all else: things which don’t shift and grow are dead things . . .

Witchery works to scare people, to make them fear growth . . . That’s what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more” (116-117). For Betonie, although the face of the world has changed dramatically since the old times, what still exists is the power to perform ceremonies in new ways, and the power of ceremonies to influence positive change in the face of witchery that wants ossification and stagnation. Much as in *GGRW*, where rules are tools of colonialism that limit meaning and freedom, there is no return to a stable past here but a poetics of the present and the future; an assertion that Indigenous folks are agents of their own lives with unmediated access to an embodied ancestral past to help guide them in the future. Mythmaking in *Ceremony* is an ongoing, imaginative construction of signs, symbols and narrative to represent experience and events and steer creation away from “witchery.” Tayo’s life and identity is being defined from the outside, “They are trying to describe who you are” (217), “The end of the story. They want to change it. They want it to end here, the way all their stories end, encircling slowly to choke the life away” (215), and, without mythmaking and ceremony, he wouldn’t be able to change, make his own meaning, or find freedom within the context he has inherited by writing his own story, so to speak. In *Ceremony*, mythmaking is the means to create a sense of knowing and meaning that is in responsible accord with the ongoing creation of the world.

Since ceremonies must change and the world Tayo lives in is fragmented and lacking strong traditional guidance, a single night of ritual is not enough for the lengthy

ceremony Tayo must undergo. Although his ceremonial journey becomes a long, drawn out affair, it does begin with a night of ritual with Betonie and his helper. In this “Scalp Ceremony,” (156) they sit Tayo in the center of a white corn sand painting—with the center representing balance in all directions. While he sits in this sand painting, much like the ones traditionally used in Navajo healing rituals, they perform words, make sounds, dance, cut Tayo's skin with a piece of flint, lift Tayo and guide him along bear footprints painted blue yellow and white, as well as through five hoops along a painted mountain range. All of the elements of this ceremony have traditional symbolic significance, but perhaps most importantly as Allen explains,

A hypnotic state of consciousness is the aim of the ceremony . . . the distractions of ordinary life must be put to rest and emotions redirected and integrated into a ceremonial context so that the greater awareness can come into full consciousness and functioning. In this way the participants become literally one with the universe, for they lose consciousness of mere individuality and share the consciousness that characterizes most orders of being. (*The Sacred Hoop* 133)

For Tayo, despite the success of this ritual with Betonie, his larger ceremony isn't yet complete. Betonie explains that, considering the state of the colonized, witchery influenced world they live in, it can't be done in a single or even multiple nights. Betonie prophesies that there is more to come for Tayo, more “transitions that had to be made in order to be whole again” (*Ceremony* 156), and even though he feels partially cured from this ritual, his ensuing adventures until the end of the novel must become a part of

finishing the ceremony. This goal of shifting consciousness in a ceremonial setting becomes a symbol for what Tayo must do with the rest of his life; he must learn from this experience in order to transform his consciousness from its fragmented state to one of wholeness that is in accordance with all life in this world and worlds beyond.

Even though his ceremony must continue in some way that he doesn't quite know yet, this ritual with Betonie plants the seed for various "mythic (metaphysical) states of consciousness" (*The Sacred Hoop* 72), which must occur in order for Tayo to heal mentally, spiritually and physically. In *Ceremony*, like *GGRW*, there is no rigid line between myth and reality. The two are in a constant, inextricable relationship with one another; the metaphysical and the physical, or the mythical and the real, are integrated as part of the same unified totality. William Doty explains:

We are convinced by the mythic story, and recognize our participation within it, when we feel its claim to unite rather than to separate aspects of our existence, when it both explains and honors the inexplicable, accepting rather than denying that what cannot be examined and demonstrated mathematically may have a very powerful reality indeed. (56)

Tayo, then, becomes convinced by his own mythic story and his participation within it when he feels its claim to unite his existence ("His cure would be found in something great and inclusive of everything" [*Ceremony* 116]) through the recognition of a powerful, inexplicable reality, expressed through story—"that reality where thought and feeling are one, where objective and subjective are one, where speaker and listener are

one, where sound and sense are one” (*The Sacred Hoop* 71). Towards the end of the novel just before the final events, Tayo experiences multiple moments of wholeness and balance:

At that moment in the sunrise, it was all so beautiful, everything from all directions, evenly, perfectly, balancing day with night, summer months with winter. The valley was enclosing this totality, like the mind holding all thoughts together in a single moment. The strength came from here, from this feeling. It had always been there. (*Ceremony* 221)

Tayo’s story is slowly coming together in his mind and being, and stories have this totalizing, organizing force that harmonizes, and distills complex, ineffable phenomena and feelings into a digestible discourse for ourselves and others to engage with. Tayo’s healing ceremony coincides with the end of a major drought and when it begins to rain again, he knows the ceremony is complete. After Tayo feels his healing is complete, in the kiva with old man Ku’oosh, Tayo is finally able to articulate his story and share it with others—his own story, not the one the witchery wanted.

Another one of Tayo’s most significant healing moments comes when he stumbles across a mine shaft a couple hundred miles away from where the first atomic bomb was detonated in White Sands, New Mexico. Tayo has a vision here where he realizes the way this sacred land had been exploited and manipulated by witchery. Like a destructive ceremonial sand painting, people had “taken these beautiful rocks from deep within earth and they had laid them in a monstrous design” (229), turning uranium into

the atom bomb. He finds himself at the center of everything, “the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid” (228) and realizes his solidarity with life instead of forces of destruction that have no boundaries. I think we can see in this scene how ceremony and story are the processes that allow Tayo to make limitless destructive and creative potential meaningful towards maintaining harmonious balance of himself and the planet. It is a realization of limitless potential and the necessity to make this infinity not only meaningful, but to direct it towards life instead of mass destruction and suffering. This is not only good for the world and all life in it, but for Tayo’s fractured psyche:

He cried the relief at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distance and time. (229)

The fact that the strength to accomplish this “had always been there” for Tayo is a metaphysical claim to an unmediated connection with an ancestral, mythic imagination of time immemorial, connecting past and present into a harmonious totality. Like the structure of the novel that interweaves myths in poetry form with the primary plot of the novel, time immemorial is connected with the present. In a sense, through this poetry, myth is always there for the reader as well, its meaning accessible yet mysterious, simultaneously outside of time but connected to the more ordinary events of the plot.

This is what *Ceremony* does; it coheres Tayo's experience, past and present, and myth and reality, like the dawn does for the earth, "Feeling the instant of the dawn was an event which in a single moment gathered all things together" (169). This totalizing force paradoxically brings the eternal into contact with the liminal, the mythical into the everyday, and fragmentation into wholeness. Tayo's realizations of "the present moment: the only certainty" and "this night is a single night; and there has never been any other" (179) tell the reader that despite needing to recognize change/impermanence as essential to survival and adaptation, there is something outside of time that must be known through experience, an experience which helps one connect more deeply and responsibly with the physical world.

In contrast, the witchery and war experienced by Tayo are a part of "the attempt to separate essentially unified phenomena [which] results in distortion" (*The Sacred Hoop* 62). As the novel progresses, Tayo slowly begins to not only intellectualize everything as interconnected but to experientially know it as part of his personal history, the broader, present-day social conditions, and the reality of the world. As he was taught as a child, myth is what makes the world: "everywhere he looked he saw a world full of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories as old Grandma called them. It was a world alive, always changing and moving; and if you knew where to look, you could see it, sometimes almost imperceptible, like the motion of stars across the sky" (*Ceremony* 88). The significance of the world being full of stories is that the world becomes one full of meaning and life—the opposite of the novel's hyper-rational, materialist witchery that

sees the world as dead objects and exploits it through things like rampant logging, hunting for sport, and extractive mining used to build weapons of mass destruction. The witchery reduces spirit to a cold clay without the wholesome, everyday breath and vitality of living and being and countering this witchery is to acknowledge people and things as enlivened by story; as interconnected and alive and therefore vulnerable to suffering. This countering of witchery requires myths to provide frameworks of potential meanings, and an agentive, mythic imagination that rejects the world and life in it as simple abstract material, as dull, secular matter. The witchery not only wants to desacralize the earth, animals, and people so they can be exploited, but to foster the illusion that myth and stories are static—connecting myth with ceremony tells us that stories are always in motion. For Allen, and I believe Silko as well, myth *is* a ceremony or ritual, it is “a means of transmitting paranormal power,” “a language construct that contains the power to transform something (or someone) from one state or condition to another” (*The Sacred Hoop* 103). This is a material concern to be sure but one that highlights language as “paranormally,” not merely materially-socially, mediated. In other words, instead of separating myth and the material, this view that I have traced throughout *Ceremony* acknowledges spiritual power in the shaping of material realities and highlights myth and ritual as unique and necessary in providing adaptive meaning and creating harmony and healing.

Ceremony puts forth an Indigenous theory of myth that does not separate the world into simple, clear-cut categories of real and unreal, material and metaphysical, and

good and bad, strict categories that can be used to exploit people and environmental resources. Betonie warns Tayo, ““don’t be so quick to call something good or bad. There are balances and harmonies always shifting, always necessary to maintain . . . it is a matter of transitions, you see; the changing, the becoming must be cared for closely”” (120). In this view, myth is what teaches this responsible caring for the ever-shifting balance of things. At one point, Tayo shares a memory of proudly pointing out to his uncle Josiah that he had killed a bunch of flies because his teacher said they were bad and carried diseases. Josiah responds,

Well I didn’t go to school much, so I don’t know about that but you see, long time ago, way back in the time immemorial, the mother of the people got angry at them for the way they were behaving. For all she cared, they could all go to hell—starve to death. The animals disappeared, the plants disappeared, and no rain came for a long time. It was the greenbottle fly who went to her, asking for forgiveness for the people. Since that time the people have been grateful for what the fly did for us. (93)

This myth is about right-relationships with the world because all life relies on even the most seemingly small or insignificant things like a fly or a hummingbird. “As long as the hummingbird had not abandoned the land, somewhere there were still flowers, and they could all go on” (88). Ceremonies help establish a connection with the mythic, metaphysical, time immemorial sense of oneness immanent within ordinary reality, which inspires actions that support the flourishing of interconnected life in the physical

world. In ceremonies, “a raising of individual consciousness naturally accompanies this process. The person sheds the isolated, individual personality and is restored to conscious harmony with the universe” (*The Sacred Hoop* 62). Tayo’s fragmented state while at war inspired hatred and rage instead of living in accordance with the myth, told by Josiah, that fosters unity with all life. At war Tayo “had cursed [the flies’] sticky feet and wet mouths, and when he could reach them he had smashed them between his hands” (*Ceremony* 94). Fortunately, as Josiah had assured Tayo in the past, “people make mistakes. The flies know that” (94). This is a worldview where nature forgives because this allows us, through ceremony, to change our behavior towards life-affirming, right-relationships with all of existence supported by mythic narrative and mythic experience. Here we can clearly see an understanding of myth not as neither false assumption, hegemonic ideology, Romantic escapism, or constitutive fabrication, but as a process of storymaking guided by an epistemology that “perceives things not as inert but as viable and alive . . . that living things are subject to processes of growth and change as a necessary component of their aliveness” (*The Sacred Hoop* 69). This is a *mythos* where the world is viewed as growing, changing, alive, and conscious, and it is our responsibility as humans to maintain a harmonious relationship with all life on earth.

Ultimately, I get the strong sense from *Ceremony* that Silko not only wanted to teach about the power of stories to heal, but that she *had* to. In the preface to the novel, Silko expresses how creating this story helped to save her from her own illnesses. (She’d begun, she says, in a state of depression.)

Once I started writing the novel, the depression lifted, but then came the terrible migraine headaches, worse than any I'd had since the tenth grade. I stayed in a darkened bedroom for eight hours at a time while the vertigo spun the bed.

Fortunately, as the main character, Tayo, began to recover from his illness, I too began to feel better, and had fewer headaches. By this time, the novel was my refuge, my magic vehicle back to the Southwest land of sandstone mesas, blue sky, and sun. As I described the sandstone spring, the spiders, water bugs, swallows, and rattlesnakes, I remade the place in words; I was no longer on a dark rainy island thousands of miles away. I was home, from time immemorial, as the old ones liked to say to us children long ago. (xv)

To me, it is as if Silko embodied this story and did not create it in an abstract sense or simply to entertain; rather, its creation *was* a ceremony—for her as for her protagonist. Like Thought Woman who opens the novel, “sitting in her room/ thinking of a story now” (1), Silko writes the story to us and whatever she thinks about and names appears on the page, “I’m telling you the story/ she is thinking” (1). Like the ceremonies that must be recreated through unmediated access to an ancestral mythopoetic imagination, Thought Woman is a metaphor—in the sense that Thought-Woman *is* this creative power in Silko and in all of us. This mythic figure symbolizes an *actual* “power” that we all have and use every day to create, name, and give meaning with thoughts, language, and story. I would argue that the story of *Ceremony* came from Silko’s gut feeling, like the mysterious “he” on page 2 who keeps stories in his belly: “He rubbed his belly/ I keep

them here/ [he said]/ here, put your hand on it/ see, it is moving/ there is life here/ for the people” (2). For Silko the story, and the embodied power to create stories, is for the people, for Indigenous people and all people fragmented by the witchery let loose upon the world long ago, whose “evil is mighty” but “can’t stand up to our stories” (2). Here the imagery and creative imagination of myth is embodied and immanent, at our disposal to heal and guide us towards a more interconnected world of health and balance, because there is life here:

“And in the belly of this story
the rituals and the ceremony
are still growing.” (2)

A GOOD STORY TO NOT DIE OF FEAR: THE WILD, MYTHIC IMAGINATION OF
 GERALD VIZENOR'S *BEARHEART THE HEIRSHIP CHRONICLES*

It seems to me you need some good stories not to go crazy, not to die of fear. Trickster stories are terrific. And in those circumstances of extreme environmental circumstances I refer to these stories as a liberation of the mind. You can travel great distances with these fantastic and wonderful trickster stories. And transform yourself. They're not "true." What I mean is people don't look upon them as "fact" and play that stupid game that modern critics play of, you know, is this true or not. I argue that Native American storytellers are very sophisticated literary artists in these terms. They clearly recognize in literature the difference between what is imagination and what is a tree. And they don't have to [laughs] constantly jump around about what's true and what isn't.

—Gerald Vizenor, "Mythic Rage and Laughter: An Interview with Gerald Vizenor"

I don't see a great distinction between history and fiction.

—Gerald Vizenor, "Mythic Rage and Laughter: An Interview with Gerald Vizenor"

Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart: the Heirship Chronicles* deals with many of the same themes we have seen so far, including myth vs. reality, ceremony and healing, rigid

rules and playful imagination, and more. But this novel is the most radical and potentially upsetting. Perhaps, however, “a little upsetting is necessary,” as Craig Womack titles a discussion of Vizenor’s work (*Reasoning Together* 63), and as I will also argue, this upsetting is coming from a place ultimately concerned with creating a new consciousness directed towards compassionate balance. From the opening, we are told that the book is about “Sex and violence” (xiii), including cannibalism, bestiality, rape, dismemberment, and other graphic imagery. Driven by various “terminal creeds,”³⁷ many of the characters meet violent and horrible deaths. Yet, like in the Native American mythologies that inform *Bearheart*, this out-of-balance-state and violent destruction is followed by creation and renewal, and the whole ordeal often involves learning how to either survive in creative, collaborative ways or else meet death because of dedication to some terminal creed. Once again, this is a story that begins with and even mirrors Indigenous mythology; it is framed around a disillusionment with the “third” world and a movement into the fourth world, both of which are references to cosmological understandings found in Native American creation/emergence mythologies, such as the those of the Navajo tribe for example. As in *Bearheart*, these myths typically deal with a world that has fallen into chaos, division, and/or violence that must be transcended for life to flourish. Indeed, two of the main characters in *Bearheart* ultimately achieve liberation from that fallen world through vision at a winter solstice healing ceremony on sacred Pueblo land. In this

³⁷ Kimberley Blaeser summarizes Vizenor’s “terminal creeds” as “a closed and limited view, static ideas,” importantly adding that, “whether sacred or secular, tribal or nontribal, terminal creeds destroy” (*Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* 49).

section, by drawing on Vizenor's own scholarship, interviews, and sources previously discussed in this project, I will explore *Bearheart's* construction of myth primarily through its plot structure, the protagonist Fourth Proude Cedarfair, and the novel's ubiquitous themes of "word wars," terminal creeds, sovereignty and vision.

As our "frame" narrator St. Louis Bearheart explains in the opening preface entitled "Letter to the Reader," "Not since the darkness at the federal boarding school and the writing of this book, the heirship chronicles on the wicked road to the fourth world, has the blood and deep voice of the bear moved in me with such power" (vii). This movement on the road to the fourth world becomes the main plot of the novel where a group of pilgrims adventure across a post-apocalyptic landscape "seeking nothing more than a place to dream again" (210). This migration begins with the characters Fourth Proude Cedarfair and Rosina. Proude is the fourth person so named (perhaps representing this migration to the fourth world) in a line of shamans presiding over a place known as the cedar nation at the headwaters of the Mississippi. Along with his wife Rosina, Fourth Proude refuses to sell the trees of the cedar nation to help fuel the energy issues of dominant society.³⁸ "These trees were the first to grow here, the first to speak of living on this earth," he tells two federal officers who had come with an executive order for half

³⁸ When the federal officials arrive to claim the timber of the cedar nation, the narrator explains, "through political and executive nonfeasance the national supplies of crude oil had dribbled to nothing. Paralyzed by its own political quarrels, the executive and legislative branches of government were not capable of negotiating trades or developing alternative fuels. The nation ran out of gasoline and fuel oil. Electrical power generating plants closed down. Cities were gasless and dark. Economic power had become the religion of the nation: when it failed people turned to their own violence and bizarre terminal creeds for comfort and meaning" (23).

of the reservation's timber: "these trees are sovereign. We are cedar and we are not your citizens" (26). Their refusal eventually leads to the burning of their house, but Proude and Rosina deceive the federal officials by safely leaving in the dark of the early morning. It is also here that we are introduced to the idea of "word wars" when Fourth Proude seeks to protect the sacredness of their dreams and visions from external definitions, demands, and "imposed identities" (*Interior Landscapes* 262)—visions that we are shown he experiences when he swims in a lake and embodies the spirit of the bear. "We will not bring harm to our visions and dreams with your word wars" (*Bearheart* 26), Proude declares.

Bearheart is not what might be considered light reading, although plenty of humor is found throughout. This novel is written in the spirit of the trickster figure that Vizenor has written and spoken so often about and, furthermore, it is written in the spirit of a sovereign mythic imagination that aims to evade or transcend what he dubs "terminality" in its many forms. It is a novel about survival, and as Vizenor says in a passage from his memoir *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*, "my survival is mythic, an imaginative transition, an intellectual predation, deconstructed as masks and metaphors at the water holes in autobiography" (265). One might wonder at the esoteric meanings of this quote and perhaps ask, among other things, why autobiography? Autobiography is of vital importance to Vizenor because it is myth in motion, or myth in creative action, and myth creates truth and/or meaning.

"Autobiographies are imaginative histories 'myth makes truth, in historical as well as

literary autobiography' wrote Avron Fleishman...myth makes love, noise, war, blue chicken, and crossbloods too" (262). As I will argue, autobiography is important because, as we saw with Tayo's healing in *Ceremony*, in *Bearheart* the ability to reimagine and tell one's own story and truth is paramount to sovereignty, balance, and healing.

Bearheart tells a wild story of the world in a state of post-apocalyptic ruin, ruin brought about by rampant materialism, colonialism, violence, and perhaps primarily by what *Bearheart* calls "word wars." Words and language are deemed a major cause of the post-apocalyptic situation: "there was something wrong with our language. The breakdown in law and order, the desecration of institutions, the hardhearted investigations, but most of all the breakdown in traditional families was a breakdown in communication" (*Bearheart* 166), says a woman at the "word hospital" that the "pilgrims" visit midway through their journey. One of the conundrums expressed by the book is how the words we speak and the stories we tell matter, yet, as we will see in more detail, words cannot capture the wild, free, inner mythic imagination of our spirits. "My memories and interior landscapes are untamed," says Vizenor (*Interior Landscapes* 263); to have a "bearheart" is to have and accept our spirits/interior landscapes as wild, free from authority, and even potentially dangerous. There is sovereignty and truth in this anti-authoritarian, mythic imagination, and this sovereignty and truth comes with an *opportunity* to wield language and story towards compassionate balance and healing. I will argue that the novel is about finding a sacred place to dream again, "places of peace and personal power" envied by destructive oppressors (*Bearheart* 10)—places that foster connections to a wild mythic

imagination away from word wars, “terminal creeds,” and external, static definitions—in order to create a new consciousness that is one step closer to a state of balance.

In *Bearheart*, the third world suffers from the wrong *logos* of myth, much like the theories that frame this project, i.e., the world has lost an appreciation and understanding of the importance and reality of vision and creativity. “Tribal religions were becoming more ritualistic but without visions,” the narrator tells us. “The crazed and alienated were desperate for terminal creeds to give their vacuous lives meaning” (16). It is in this world that hundreds of urban tribal people “lacking inner discipline, dreams, and personal responsibilities, moved on to find new word wars and new ideas to fill their pantribal urban emptiness” (16). Perhaps most notably, like the warning from *Ceremony* that stories are not merely entertainment, “pantribal people were less drawn to visions than to ceremonial entertainment” (16). This is a world that requires a return to myth; not as static, entertaining narratives but as a ceaseless creative wellspring of mythopoetic imagination, or in other words as vision and dreams—in order to help compassionately balance the world. Like we see with Rosina, whose “life was visual and personal [and who] did not see herself in the abstract as a series of changing ideologies” (39), *Bearheart* questions “most theories of myth and ritual [that] derive ultimately from the tendency to rationalize, to substitute abstract social or philosophical-scientific meanings for the graphic imagery of narrative myths and performed rituals (Doty 8). *Bearheart* represents a return to such a graphic mythic imagery where “bears see memories, not our bodies tuned to concepts” (*Bearheart* xiii). As we will see in more detail, in *Bearheart*

myth is to be considered as embodied and in a constant state of recreation out of memory. Much like we saw with *Ceremony* and the work of Paula Gunn Allen, *Bearheart* moves deeply into the world of metaphysics, but ultimately in order to dissolve the perceived barriers between the metaphysical and physical, or mythic and material. The first words of *Bearheart* are “the bear is in me now,” a formula repeated later on the same page as “bears are in our hearts” (vii). Immediately the reader is presented with a metaphysical consciousness or mythic space of animal power, one that is required to survive the physical and mythological move from chaos, violence and destruction into a world of renewal and healing.

In an interview entitled “Mythic Rage and Laughter,” we can see how Vizenor’s epistemological concerns often revolve around the relationship between Western and Indigenous conceptions of myth, and how these concerns inform works like *Bearheart*. Like in the wasteland of *Bearheart* discussed in the previous paragraph, where people have lost sight of the importance of vision and are “lacking inner discipline, dreams, and personal responsibilities” (16), Vizenor discusses his sense that American youth do not have the framework to channel vision responsibly in service to a community. Vizenor argues, “what we have in contemporary America is the illusion of independence, a high degree of dependency, enormous isolation and loneliness and a vision that serves nothing because you might be judged crazy and unproductive” (*Mythic Rage and Laughter* 87). This speaks to the “rationalization” of myth that I covered in my introduction; rationalizing the origins and functions of mythology makes myth and vision obsolete or

superfluous in society, unless they serve some sort of scientific, materialist, or capitalist end. From a hyper-rationalist perspective, vision and the stories that come from vision are often considered at best interesting and entertaining, yet mostly irrational and ultimately superfluous, and at worst crazy, hallucinatory, and primitive. The extreme emphasis on vision, humor, and obscenity in *Bearheart* serves to subvert these expectations and conceptions; in the process “enriching . . . expanding, [and] liberating” (80) the mind from these terminal definitions of, and dichotomies between, a rationalist concept of reality and a visionary/mythical one. A story need not read like a newspaper of physical events for it to have impact and meaning in the so called “real world.” “A character isn't a real person, you know. Or that you can't transform gender or physical form into animals and birds. I mean Western readers still have real difficulty with that. That's not a real story to them” (81), reflects Vizenor. Vizenor clearly rejects the falsification of myth by rationalist standards; for Vizenor, this closure of meaning through rationalist/materialist definitions of reality is an ossification of language, and myth, and the trickster in particular, is the way out. Much like King's reading of *House Made of Dawn* that I discussed in my section of “Myth as Ideology,” Vizenor's goal is not to demythologize but to steer myth and vision towards compassionate balance and communal responsibility. Third Proude passed down the knowledge to ““outwit but never kill evil . . . the tricksters and warrior clowns have stopped more evil with their wit than have lovers with their lust and fools with the power and rage...”” (*Bearheart* 15). The trickster symbolizes an opportunity to guide the creative potential of vision through language and

stories towards communal balance. In *Narrative Chance* Vizenor emphasizes that “tribal narratives are *creative productions* rather than social science monologues; the trickster is a comic trope, *chance* in a narrative wisp” (9) and that “the trickster is agonistic imagination and aggressive liberation, a ‘doing’ in narrative points of view and outside the imposed structures” (13). Tricksters don’t fit into the “imposed structure” of what is “real” as defined by whoever wields that powerful term in a particular context; the purpose of myth and vision for Vizenor is to transcend imposed structures (like materialist conceptions of reality that make vision obsolete) and to foster communal health. Through his literature, Vizenor dreams and laughs his way beyond these conundrums “in a secret language over human word wars into the fourth world” (*Bearheart* xii), in order to, compassionately, help set the world into harmonious balance.

There are those who worry that Vizenor's interest in “liberating fiction from social realism, freeing it up for the world of imagination,” means that he has abandoned the so-called “real world—that he has traded tropes for reality” (Womack 68). But, works like *Bearheart* provide an alternative logic for conceiving of myth and reality. *Bearheart* can help us to see that language, including the term myth, shapes reality, and reality is not confined to the physical:

This power of language to transform has religious implications as well. Such a statement underscores an issue that needs further exploration in Native literary studies: how a materialist approach to culture can include Native religious perspectives regarding the effects of spirits on physical existence. Much of

materialist criticism—in this regard true to its Marxist roots—has a strong rationalist bias. Critics have yet to show how epistemic categories such as race, gender and class are mediated by spiritual forces. Materialist critics have been resistant to definitions of religion in any other terms besides human mediation and the social construction of religious beliefs. Native critics may very well want to consider revisionist strategies in relation to materialist criticism. (84)

Vizenor's work, I would argue, implores that people *do* pay attention to the effects of visions, spirits, and ancestral memory on physical existence, or more broadly, of myth in relation to the material. The epistemology of a work like *Bearheart* recognizes that both the terms reality *and* fiction are tropes. This epistemology is one ultimately concerned with dissolving these barriers and showing not only how language is fictional/mythical, but how "reality" —including social formations, politics, and historical events—is mythically mediated. Myth and fiction, or reality for that matter, is not some abstraction to Vizenor—myth is not a signifier for a signified denoting all things false—like St. Louis Bearheart's bear spirit, myth is here, *right now*, real, active within our bodies, spirits, and the world around us. Again, myth is not a retreat from the world but a chance to recognize and utilize imagination and creativity in the process of shaping reality through language. In *Bearheart*, as explained at the "word hospital" mentioned earlier, it is precisely when communication fails, when words and hearts become so serious, rigid and hardened that collaboration is no longer possible and the world then falls into destruction and death.

Clearly, Vizenor's trickster politics could be deemed radical; they are about opening the "language game" as wide as possible because real and fictional "are contradictions but not antithetical; social science is a limited language game" (*Narrative Chance* 12). The "social science" Vizenor is referring to here, as discussed earlier in my methodology, are epistemologies and research that seek objective "truths," especially those that impose concepts of "reality" on Indigenous communities (often by separating truth from myth). Indigenous tricksters and myth avoid the question of what is *essentially* "real," they are fictional *doings* that allow liberation from authorities and governance around what might in fact constitute the supposed "real." Yet, Womack mentions how skeptics might worry about the efficacy of Vizenor's work "toward intervening in the real world, where every year Native people face issues of land loss, threats to jurisdiction, new calls from redneck politicians for the federal government to end the trust relationship with tribes, and so on" (*Reasoning Together* 72). However, Vizenor's work does not prevent people from intervening in the "real" world, it shows that what constitutes the supposed real world has been historically much too limited by recognizing how myth is not separate from reality. It is not an either/or with Vizenor's work like *Bearheart*, "Sun bear said that knowing things 'changes nothing. Singing is what changes the world, singing not knowing . . . mother earth feels the rattle and our feet and voices upon her with the eagles and bears. The heart changes the world not the mouth . . . our hearts will show us freedom" (*Bearheart* 230). But, Inawa Biwide interjects that, "'even the heart has prisons'" (230) because as Proude says, "'we become our memories and what we

believe” (147). These interactions portray an ongoing dialogue between various possibilities of knowing and being, all with material consequences. There is an endless tension here between essentializing what is politically vital and necessary and creative play to achieve the ungovernability that Robert Warrior says has allowed Indigenous peoples to survive the horrors of colonialism. Ultimately, for Vizenor, his trickster style is about survivance, about balancing the world, often in ways that are utterly transgressive, off-limits, heretical, sacrilegious; again, it is a methodology of “the imaginative trickster, the one who cares to balance the world between terminal creeds and humor with unusual manners and ecstatic strategies” (*Earthdivers* xii). Dreams, imagination and spirit are unavoidable, ungovernable, and resistant, and only limited by the cages of definitions people and/or dominant cultures convince ourselves to be all important and real; ignoring, deconstructing, or rationalizing the mythic does not make it go away, instead, Vizenor wants to *integrate* myth into a way of living in the real world that allows for creative adaptation and a more compassionate, balanced world.

Womack worries further about potential “incompatibilities” between Vizenor's embrace of poststructuralist ideas about language—specifically, about the broken link between sign and referent—and Native perspectives on the material effects of language:

One might also worry, however, about some of poststructuralism's incompatibilities with oral traditions . . . Some might wonder how to reconcile notions of non-representation with certain ceremonial settings, where spoken works are sometimes seen as having a physical component or a physical effect on

the world: *words* cause *things* to happen, a very special relationship between signifier and signified. Often the very things words represent come to be, and the happenings are not exclusively the domain of human efforts, influences and mediations. These are complicated matters. (65)

As I have argued, Vizenor's poststructuralist views on language are directly informed by Native oral tradition/myth and the belief that metaphysical realities influence physical ones. Vizenor has addressed exactly what worries Womack here, namely that, in his own words, "the way we speak, our language and our thoughts, structure our reality" ("*Sakahàn*"). My take on these "complicated matters," as Vizenor constructs them, is two-fold: (1) part of the reality we structure through language/story is *internal* and metaphysical and not only external or social, and (2) the trickster, who often assumes a "poststructuralist" role in relation to language, functions to help balance the world—certainly not to create a new static, terminal creed that language use must *always* disrupt the connection between signifier and signified. We see this demonstrated in *Bearheart* with the hunters at Orion who poison and kill Belladonna for her essentialisms and dedication to terminal creeds about what constitutes the identity of all things "Indian." Although the hunters appear to share many of Vizenor's views, they take their deconstructions too far, and their own creeds become literally terminal for Belladonna. Vizenor's heterodox trickster consciousness is about a constant give and take, or ebb and flow between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, between different and right belief; it is an *orthopraxy* of language and story, of myth, that values motion and change and an

awareness of when creeds become terminal and dangerous. When creeds become terminal, we run the risk of falling into Silko's witchery where "things that don't shift and grow are dead things" (*Ceremony* 116), but this must always include heterodoxy itself, otherwise that may become terminal as well.

Womack later adds, "many readers would defend the wisdom of the neologisms in more obtuse passages, seeing much more than gobbledygook, noting, in fact, the power of Vizenor's playfulness to open up a dialogue between theory and Indian studies" (72). While I agree with this and consider myself one of these readers, for myself, and I believe Vizenor as well, it is about much more than opening a dialogue between theory and Indian studies. It is again about survival, and survival and healing must take place spiritually and mentally as well as physically. Vizenor is wary about writing stories of being the victim, his focus is on realizing the potential to be what he calls a "word warrior" with the creative power to tell one's own story despite dominant, colonial narratives. As he articulates in an interview, "I show how around the world people who survive the worst possible circumstances, concentration camps, threat of death, don't write victimry, they write survivance" (*Postindian Warrior: Creating a New Consciousness in Native America*). Words matter because they make things happen and *Bearheart* vitally recognizes that taking words too seriously can become its own problem. The novel warns of becoming overly stuck to meaning and identity because that can transfer over to the uncontrollable, "animal" inner world of dreams, memories and visions in the form of suspicion. *Bearheart* is not suspicious of myth, the novel finds

freedom in it. “Inside is no place to be suspicious about the meaning of statements and action” (192). *Bearheart* warns of the danger in taking words too seriously because they limit spiritual potentialities, they limit the ineffable range of emotions, sensations, images and worlds of being that are possible internally, in dreams and visions, “we become the terminal creeds we speak. Our words limit the animals we would become . . . soaring through words from memories and visions” (147).

Much like *Ceremony*, all of this requires access to an ancestral mythopoetic imagination, or “the tribes and our memories and visions of birds and animals” (*Bearheart* viii). For Vizenor, the imagination and memory connect one to ancestors and nature, and are central to how one constructs reality, “I must imagine my time. I must imagine this, these sounds I hear and practice the silences that give them more power. I can imagine a greater power in nature than nature can, not because I'm separated but because I am of nature” (*Myth Rage and Laughter* 77). Since in *Bearheart* “words are dead, tribal imagination and our trickeries to heal are in ruins” (ix) then the novel is not about simply returning to a static tribal identity but, as Louis Owens recognizes in the afterword, oral tradition and “to trick and shock us into *self*-recognition and knowledge” (*Bearheart* 247 emphasis added). It is one's conscious experience of life, the awareness that observes all of life's changing complexities, which the novel points to as the source of sovereign identity, identity that is in constant redefinition and recreation through storytelling/myth-making. At the end of the day one's psyche is what one must answer to, come to grips with in all of its paradoxical, outrageous, obscene, ugly, horrible, beautiful

and wild—beyond definition—complexity and depth; not the idealized, sliver of an image we have of who and what we are. The hunters at Orion ask, “will you choose the questions and hard words of your collapse, or will the precious words choose you from the burden of a revised past” (199), indicating that, to an extent, we have freedom to create new meaning, resist domination, and not have meaning dictated to us from an external authority. In other words, Vizenor is advocating for mythmaking as the ability to create a new consciousness, a new story, but as he mentioned earlier, a consciousness that is a part of nature. This is what trickster stories can do; they liberate the mind so we can go on another day of living, breathing and being closer to nature, beauty and balance. This is what it means to need a good story to not die of fear.

The antidote to a terminal creed in this novel is a type of individuality, or sovereignty—the novel evinces the value that, instead of telling the story of the victim, even if one is truly a victim, it is more important to find inner sovereignty as an alternative of survival through visions, not empty ritualistic, or even obsessive, behavior. Despite his critiques and misgivings, Womack recognizes the value of Vizenor’s work in myriad ways, including this point about victimization: “Native people might want more agency than this; they might want the freedom to imagine themselves anew, to act in ways that intervene in their destinies, to view themselves as more than the victims of Western dystopias or the happy inhabitants of a communal lark” (66). Vizenor says, “I don’t want to idealize, but I just want to say that a successful healing vision is in service to a community. And yet at the same time it is the most extraordinary individualistic act”

(*Mythic Rage and Laughter* 87). Claims such as Louis Owen's that "Vizenor's novel also reinforces the crucial Native American emphasis upon community rather than individuality" (*Bearheart* 249) miss the mark—as the above quote clearly details—because *Bearheart* certainly emphasizes community but not at the expense of individuality. Fourth Proude's father taught him that "“You will learn not to measure yourself through others”" (17). Individuality doesn't have to refer to static, autonomous, Cartesian selves but can be about sovereignty more generally—in this case a sovereignty where in one's mind and heart, their inner experiences, is where they are free, and words, categories and definitions can limit this freedom. "Fourth Proude saw his cedar nation existing in the minds and hearts of the living, he did not feel he needed to prove the endurance of sovereignty" (15). Inner experience can certainly be said to be interconnected not only with waking, everyday outer experience but with tradition, culture, ancestral memory, genetics, generational trauma and knowledge—individuality doesn't need to refer to the misguided notion that someone, or anything for that matter, can exist apart from everything else. Vizenor clearly supports this idea:

I'm going to argue that Native Americans are more highly individualistic, more brilliantly individualistic than contemporary Americans. I'm going to argue that contemporary Americans are communally-dependent, pretend to be individualistic, but are weakened as individuals by consumer interests, and the values of social organization . . . Well, we [Native Americans] have a really interesting sophisticated system of individualism and communal responsibility.

What we have is a high degree of individual identification within the support of community . . . can you find anywhere in the world something more individualistic than the experience of a shaman? This is such an extraordinary journey. (*Mythic Rage and Laughter* 86)

Vizenor explains how the simple idea that Euro-Americans are individualistic and Native Americans are communal supports a construction of racial and cultural difference, one that I think is related to the equation of myth with indigeneity and primitivism, and rationality and materialism with the West's supposed superiority. To not measure oneself through others, as Proude was taught by his father, is to let the wild, inner world be free, and as we will see in the end, this sovereignty is in service of creating a new consciousness, and to restore balance both individually and communally.

In the end of the novel, some of the pilgrims escape a perilous train-ride bound with a promise of freedom to a new society in Santa Fe, when they discover the passengers are becoming prisoners under a new authority.³⁹ The surviving pilgrims make it to New Mexico near Chaco canyon, a traditional sacred site of Pueblo culture, during the time of the winter solstice healing ceremony:

It was the last morning of a ceremonial chant to balance the world with humor and spiritual harmonies. Evil had been turned under with the sunrise and their sacred voices. The good power of the dawn was attracted to their rituals. The first

³⁹ It is difficult to determine exactly how they escape, in my interpretation it appears to be via a plant-medicine induced communal vision. The often obscure writing style found in this scene is part of what I consider to be a charm of Vizenor's writing—it doesn't need to conform to linearity or flawless logic.

breath of dawn was inhaled to balance the world . . . Changing Woman was coming over the desert with the sun. (*Bearheart* 243)

Winter solstice is the shortest day of the year, after which the days become longer again; death and darkness is ending and light is reemerging, change is in season towards health and balance. The extreme circumstances of winter are ending, laughter and stories about change and visions are needed to carry the people forward out of the darkness and into spring with meaning and purpose. The final sentence of the novel tells us that “during the winter the old men laughed and laughed and told stories about changing woman and vision bears” (245); all of the wild action of the novel is now contained in story, it has passed for now like winter’s hardships, and the story, like the creation myth that the novel mirrors, is there to bring people together and provide meaning to the peoples’ lives moving forward.⁴⁰ Proude’s shaman uncle, who gave him his sacred name and guided him through his first visions, at one point whispers to him in a vision, “return to secret energies when sacred places are lost in the lives of others . . . Return to inner animal voices and motions in the morning breath” (143). For all of Vizenor’s trickster/postmodern deconstruction, there is ultimately a vital re-turn, and/or reconstruction that must take place for healing and life-enhancing transformation to occur. This reconstruction comes from individuals who are inextricable from community and ancestral memory, individuals who must experience vision to transform self and

⁴⁰ “I argue that humor is natural, and it's healing. And it also brings people together. They trust each other more. And it's healing. And you have to know each other really well to laugh” (*Mythic Rage and Laughter*, 80).

society, connecting with time immemorial and “imagining it all over again. Bringing it alive in new imaginative form” (*Mythic Rage and Laughter* 81). And this is what Proude, and Inawa, do at the end of the novel. They “flew with vision bears ha ha ha haaa from the window on the perfect light into the fourth world” (*Bearheart* 243), “the bears were over time in the four directions” (244). The creation/emergence myth of migrating between worlds has been reenacted and life continues with a new consciousness with perhaps a little less fear. Humor, ineffable spirit, visions, myth, reimagining one’s story, and ceaseless change become paradoxically the ultimate truths in a world of no ultimate truths. Finally, a semblance of balance is restored/re-storied as Proude and Inawa escape into timeless, mythic, wild, animalistic visions—laughing with the voice of the bear at the rest of the world caught in static meaning and terminal creeds.

“Listen, ha ha ha haaaa.” (vii)

CONCLUSION: “TO CREATE A CONSCIOUSNESS OF COEXISTENCE”

Tribal ideas and sources of consciousness, and earthdiver metaphors, demand some privities on tribal world views: time is circular and creation takes place in ceremonies and between tellers and listeners; sacred names, dreams, and visions are images that connect the bearer to the earth; shamans and other tribal healers and visionaries speak the various languages of plants and animals and feel the special dream power to travel backward from familiar times and place.

—Gerald Vizenor, *Earthdivers*

Indigenous myth theory presents an opportunity, in the words of Vizenor, for a less limited language game; one where myth is less wrapped up in oppositions that have the potential to foster hegemonic social thought and action, and more concerned with creating cooperation, mutual health and balance. Whether it is Allen’s visionary myth to transform self and society, Silko’s ceremonial spider webs of creation and relation, Vizenor’s narrative chance and trickster anarchism, King’s truth about stories, or Justice’s praxis of responsibility in relationships,⁴¹ with these thinkers there is consensus

⁴¹ Justice describes a Cherokee myth and the lessons it teaches about co-existence and relationships with the earth: “Indigenous traditions are well stocked with warnings against human destructiveness and lessons for more respectful co-existence with our other-than-human relatives. In Cherokee tradition, for example, it is humanity’s mindless cruelty that leads to the presence of disease and suffering in the world; as a result of widespread slaughter of our beast-kin, the chiefs of the various Animal and Bird peoples cursed us with every imaginable disease and debilitating ailment. It’s only due to the generosity of the Plant peoples that we’ve managed to survive to this point, as they each provided a cure to one of the Animal-inflicted maladies. And although some cultures and many individuals have worked to act more responsibly in our relationships with these other-than human peoples, as a species we’ve repaid their generosity with wide

according to how language and stories affect social, mental and spiritual realities: stories are always to be accompanied by a moral commitment to maintaining relationships of balance and cooperation. Myth is medicine, an *opportunity* to support Hózhó, to walk, to move and change in beauty and balance. In “Theorizing American Indian Literature: Applying Oral Concepts to Written Traditions,” Cherokee scholar Christopher Teuton insists that “the Cherokee creation story . . . reminds me what stories and criticism should do: enable us to create our worlds . . . If there is a story that lives in me, it surely is this one. I never tire of its beauty and its meanings; it is both a story and a constant source of reflection on the responsibilities of being. These two aspects of its reality are inextricable” (194). Myths are renewable, visionary stories that are not only a means for reflection on relationships—relationships between forces within ourselves and between people, non-humans, spirits and the earth—but they enable creativity to change, adapt and (re)shape these realities. Myth is visionary imagination and creative stories of power in motion and relationship with *all* of existence, to be responsibly and medicinally shared towards socio-cultural, and psycho-spiritual harmony and healing.

Before I conclude my project, I would like to retell a “traditional theme in tribal creation myths” (ix), one told by Vizenor in his book *Earthdivers*. It is a story about building Turtle Island, i.e., the world and/or what is now known as “America.” As I mentioned earlier, Vizenor tells the story of this mythic motif, of “Earthdivers,” “as an

scale extinction, deforestation, climate catastrophe, and poisoning of the earth, air, and waters” (*Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* 39).

imaginative metaphor” to “create a new consciousness of coexistence” (ix), and it is in that spirit that I retell it here. I tell a condensed version of this story in search of “a few honest words upon which to build a new urban turtle island” (x-xi), and strongly encourage readers to explore Gerald Vizenor’s telling in *Earthdivers* to hear the story from an Indigenous voice.

The story begins differently in various tellings but here it begins with a world of peace and harmony that has evolved into chaos, division, argument and fighting; where people have turned against each other and the earth. This is a world where a respect for all living things has vanished, reminiscent of what Silko describes in *Almanac of the Dead* as the era of Death-eye dog, where “human beings, especially the alien invaders, would become obsessed with hungers and impulses commonly found in wild dogs” (251). Eventually, the Creator decides to unleash a great flood, or torrential rains, to end this disarray, and it is after this flood that we find our heroes/heroines—Nanabozho and some animals—floating among the wreckage of the Earth. After some deliberation, Nanabozho decides that perhaps the thing to do is to dive deep beneath the waters, now covering the face of the Earth, to find some mud that may be useful in building land again. One by one, the best diving animals such as Beaver, Otter and Loon, confidently, and perhaps arrogantly, dive deep but return empty handed and near death from drowning. The situation is becoming desperate when, finally, Muskrat decides to offer to dive. This causes some hearty laughter since Muskrat is not a respected swimmer; Nanabozho and the others “didn't think much about the muskrat, since he was so small;

but after a while [Nanabozho] said to him, ‘Why don't you try and go after some of that dirt too?’” (xii). The tension builds as Muskrat is gone a long, long time, longer than the other brave divers, but he eventually surfaces unconscious. When Nanabozho and the other animals wake Muskrat, he opens his mouth and his paws, revealing a couple grains of mud. After drying them out, Nanabozho throws them around (in some tellings on the back of a turtle) and these grains, with the help of winds from the four directions (or in other tellings Nanabozho’s breath) create land again, giving a new chance for coexistence to thrive, manifested from the fruits of collaboration, cooperation, trust, and sacrifice.

This is a story concerned with survival through creativity, cooperation, and sacrifice—it is about taking a chance to collaborate across differences, to defy expectations in order to create a world together. Moreover, it is a vision of the world as literally supported by nature, by the Turtle who carries the world on its back. The story begins with heightened, “terminal” oppositions and, like the dam that breaks and the flood that ensues in *GGRW*, the creator floods the world offering a *chance* for renewal. In the wake of this destruction, the easy thing to do would be to drown in despair, to simply give up. Yet, in this story, social regeneration is incumbent upon radical creation and cooperation; to not (re)create would be to die in a deconstructed world, and Nanabozho and the animals still have a story to tell. Recreation, however, does not come easy, and it apparently does not come through egotistical displays of talent and virtue. In a last-ditch effort, they turn to the least qualified diver: Muskrat. Muskrat could have been dismayed by his fellow animals’ ridicule and shied away from action, but Muskrat is a visionary

who sees potential that no one else, besides Nanabozho perhaps, is able to see. Moreover, Muskrat is committed to guiding his vision towards helping the community, proving that a wider notion of cooperation is not only possible but is what will enable the recreation of their world with greater inclusivity, greater chances of survival, and greater chances of becoming a harmonious whole. This process of communal healing involves an affirmation of oppositions; Muskrat is not like the respected swimmers but they must cooperate across—and *honor*—their differences to enable the healing of their world.

In *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border Crossing Loose Cannons*, Paula Gunn Allen reflects on what it means, in some Indigenous contexts, to heal the self:

The mortal body is a tree; it is holy in whatever condition; it is truth and myth because it has so many potential conditions; because of its possibilities, it is sacred and profane . . . Healing the self means honoring and recognizing the body, accepting rather than denying all the turmoil its existence brings, welcoming the woes and anguish flesh is subject to, cherishing its multitudinous forms and seasons, its unfailing ability to know and be, to grow and wither, to live and die, to mutate, to change. Healing the self means committing ourselves to a wholehearted willingness to be what and how we are—beings frail and fragile, strong and passionate, neurotic and balanced, diseased and whole, partial and complete, stingy and generous, safe and dangerous, twisted and straight, storm-tossed and quiescent, bound and free. (123)

Healing a world like Turtle Island is like healing the self as described by Allen; it is about creating and maintaining a harmonious balance, an affirmation and cooperation between oppositions and among the many directions of the world. This perspective resembles Indigenous cosmologies of the circle or medicine wheel where the world and ourselves are composed of shifting balances, transitions, that as *Ceremony* says, “must be cared for closely” (120). Allen asserts that “the body is not the dwelling place of the spirit—it is the spirit” (122), and accordingly, the earth is not separate from us, our spirits—the circle of the world is like our bodies/spirits, it requires honor and recognition of its oppositions in order to be cared for closely, in order to thrive and support life like the Turtle who supports the world. Myth needs to be understood as a chance to dedicate our language, our stories of power, towards healing the earth and all of its inhabitants because “it is our obligation” to “live each day, each event . . . with whatever balance and immediacy we are capable of” (57).

Myth as a chance to create cooperation and balance begins with values of Hózhó; values that recognize and affirm the shifting ebbs and flows of the world and seek to attend to these changes with care and responsibility. This care might take the form of humor, play, compassion, equitable sharing of resources, political structures of kinship and democracy that do not impose “terminal creeds” on individuals and groups, economies not based on extraction and exploitation, or all the above and more. Indigenous theories urge that we orient our lives according to a *mythos* like Earthdivers where, here, on Turtle Island, we are still on the back of the Turtle and have the

“narrative chance” to learn to work together to re-create and re-turn to the earth, to each other, to inhabit the ways of the imaginative trickster “who cares to balance the world between terminal creeds and humor with unusual manners and ecstatic strategies” (xii). It is mis-communication and word wars over rigid terminal creeds that call down the destructive flood, and, conversely, communal collaboration, creativity, trust, and compassion that enables the re-creation of the earth and a re-turn to living in harmony and coexistence. As previously stated, Vizenor says creation is not time-bound “Turtle island is an imaginative place; not a formula, but a metaphor which connects dreams to the earth” (xv). In other words, Turtle Island, like myth in general, isn’t fixed; like a circle, as we see in the Turtle Island story, the end is really a beginning, Nanabozho and the animals have managed to create land again but now they must continue to build their world, reminded by the lessons of their origin story. Eventually, when the new creation story comes full circle and chaos and destruction threaten the world again, creativity will be required to foster further collaboration and coexistence. The logic behind Vizenor’s telling teaches us myth is ongoing, not located in some distant, literal past; myth exists *always* as a call to compassionate imagination and flexible, communicative coexistence in each moment and into the future.

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