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‘The last of the oral tradition in electronic word processing’: traditional material and postmodern form in Gerald Vizenor’s *Bearheart*

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**'THE LAST OF THE ORAL TRADITION IN ELECTRONIC WORD  
PROCESSING': TRADITIONAL MATERIAL AND POSTMODERN  
FORM IN GERALD VIZENOR'S *BEARHEART***

The title of this article is somewhat misleading. The caption, for one, is not from *Bearheart*, but from an as yet unpublished novel by Gerald Vizenor. Nor does either that novel or *Bearheart* qualify for what Richard Ziegfeld has decried as "interactive fiction", that is, literature as a computer game with several discourse and plot opportunities to choose from during the course of the novel.<sup>1</sup> When I first started writing this paper, however, I decided to use the title phrase nonetheless to signify an entrance into Vizenor's version of the "language games"<sup>2</sup>. According to Lyotard, every utterance in the language games is thought of as a move in a game, and "to speak is to fight [...] speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics."<sup>3</sup> In *Bearheart*, Lyotard's harmless language games develop into (Vizenor's term) "word wars" between different cultures. The survivor of such word wars is the compassionate tribal trickster.

Let me return briefly to the above passage from Vizenor's story which quoted in full reads "'Here is the first page of the novel' I said, pointing at the screen. 'The last of the oral tradition in electronic word processing.'"<sup>4</sup> The contradiction in this passage is apparent. Whatever flickers across the screen of an author's computer is no more identical with the page of a novel than what is written on the page of a novel is identical with a tale told in the oral tradition. There is, of course, a histori-

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<sup>1</sup>"Interactive Fiction: A New Literary Genre?", *New Literary History* 20/1989, pp. 341-372.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester 1986, p. 10. Lyotard himself follows Wittgenstein in his use of the term.

<sup>3</sup>P. 10.

<sup>4</sup>"Word Cinemas", *Book Forum* 5/1981, pp. 389-395, quotation on p. 391.

cal as well as technical link, but the immediate juxtaposition of the two results in an impression of incompatibility. But this is only part of the message: Rearranged, the four main elements of the above passage point at a critical content beneath the sentence surface: Screen and electronic word processing obviously come together, but how about the novel and the oral tradition?

From the dawn of modern Native American literature, that is, from Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, scholars and critics have tried to identify the oral roots for these written texts. Oral sources were generally conceived to have influenced if not determined the literary output of Native authors. Furthermore, these oral pre-texts were thought to denote and express epistemological otherness. In what really was a curious reinterpretation of colonial discourse, Native American literature was perceived as an extension or even as a successor to the oral tradition. All this notwithstanding the fact that many contemporary Native authors did not grow up in direct contact with their tribal traditions, do not speak the languages of their respective peoples, started writing in creative writing courses, and often used oral material that came from written sources - the time-stuck and questionable collections of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ethnographers.<sup>5</sup> Scholars found and praised genuine Indian oral tradition in modern and postmodern novels but hardly ever took into account the ancient role of fabricated orality as a literary device in European and American literatures, going all the way back to the days of Homer. In fact, the use of oral material by American Indian authors of the 1970s and 80s to some extent resembles forms and literary models developed by nineteenth-century British authors like Charles Dickens, George Eliot and the early Thomas Hardy. Like the British texts, in addition to a purportedly mimetic function, the Native American stories and novels are critical of the destructive

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<sup>5</sup>As Dennis Tedlock and Dell Hymes have pointed out, even the collections of concerned anthropologists like Frank Hamilton Cushing were shaped by contemporary anthropological theory and colonialist methods at least as much as by the oral tradition they were trying to preserve: Dell Hymes, *'In Vain I Tried to Tell You' Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*, Philadelphia 1981; Dennis Tedlock, "On the Translation of Style in Oral Narrative", in: B. Swann (ed.), *Smoothing the Ground Essays on Native American Oral Literature*, Berkeley 1983, pp. 57-77.

forces of progress and convey a positive image of the oral tradition in society.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the oral worlds created by Native American texts also served to 'anchor' the respective works in the author's *own* tradition - even if that meant a mixture of different tribal origins or the adoption of a cultural image rather than an experienced life-form where authors had grown up separated from their tribal background. And lastly, to use or to refer overtly to what could be read as traditional Indian oral material was obviously appealing to a multicultural but mostly white audience. Questions of authenticity and authorisation add to the problem. At best, authors like Leslie Silko manage to maintain a precarious balance, thus contributing to the creation of a literary tradition in her home community that is *complimentary* as well as *complementary* to the continuing oral tradition.

In the following I want to concentrate on the use of oral tribal languages and traditions in Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart*<sup>7</sup>.

The plot is set sometime in the not too far future when the energy supply system of the United States has broken down, taking with it most of the legal system and the administration. Proud Cedarfair IV, an Anishinabe shaman, and his wife Rosina are forced by corrupt tribal bureaucrats to leave their family habitat of cedar trees in Minnesota. They are joined on their way by a motley crowd of weird and freakish yet generally likeable characters of mixed descent, but only few of them actually arrive at their destination in Chaco Canyon where they walk through the solstice window in Pueblo Bonito and, transformed into mythical bears, walk backwards out of this collapsing world into the next. This story is embedded in a metafictional frame, a manuscript given to a young female American Indian Movement-activist by Saint Louis Bearheart, an employee of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, during the occupation of the Bureau in 1972. The novel draws on several literary pre-texts such as the picaresque novel, the allegorical satire, and the travel-

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. Paul Goetsch, "Fingiertes mündliches Erzählen in den Wessex-Romanen Thomas Hardys", in: Richard Matthews/Joachim Schmale-Rostosky (eds.), *Papers on Language and Medieval Studies Presented to Alfred Schopf*, Frankfurt 1988, pp. 89-112; Renate Mace, *Funktionen des Dialekts im regionalen Roman von Gaskell bis Lawrence*, Tübingen 1987.

<sup>7</sup>First published 1978 as *Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart*, republished by University of Minnesota Press as *Bearheart The Heirship Chronicles*, Minneapolis 1990.

logue.<sup>8</sup> It also seems to partake of all the formal qualities Ihab Hassan saw as characteristic of postmodern fiction in his 1980 article on the question of postmodernism,<sup>9</sup> and Vizenor took care that the carnivalesque element would be noticed by repeatedly attributing to the travelling group the label of "circus pilgrims" or even "circus clowns". The novel has a number of intertextual relations as well: Critics have called attention to similarities and overt links with works by Chaucer, Bunyan, Rabelais and Gascoigne,<sup>10</sup> Swift, Vonnegut, Momaday, Pynchon, Barthelme<sup>11</sup> and others, but also with "an Anishinabe storyteller respected for his knowledge of traditional tales and contemporary reservation and urban stories."<sup>12</sup>

Time and space do not allow me to trace any of these literary storylines in detail. The oral tradition, it should be noted however, is but one of the contributors, an important one for sure, but only one of many. Some episodes on the journey and the stories told by individual characters can somehow be related to some oral tradition, as A. La Vonne Brown Ruoff has pointed out.<sup>13</sup> What is more interesting is the way they are told.

No other contemporary Native American novel contains so much violence, sexuality, bestiality and horror. Similar stories occur from time to time particularly in traditional American trickster cycles, but the occurrence of wanton violence and sodomy in *Bearheart* is less an homage to the tribal oral tradition than the readers' expectations of a romantic 'Indian' novel deliberately and completely blown out

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Gudrun Schindler, "Der indianische Roman", in: Gerhard Hoffmann (ed.), *Der zeitgenössische amerikanische Roman*, München 1988, 3 vols., vol. 2, pp. 258-345, quotation on p. 271.

<sup>9</sup>"Die Frage des Postmodernismus", in: Hoffmann (ed.), *Der zeitgenössische amerikanische Roman*, München 1988, vol. 3, pp. 355-364, quotation on p. 361f. (orig. in Bucknell Review 1980).

<sup>10</sup>Alan R. Velhe, *Four American Indian Literary Masters*, Norman, Okla. 1982, p. 135: "Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and Gascoigne's *Adventures of Master F J* that mix sex and violence with fantasy in comic fictions."

<sup>11</sup>Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, *Tradition und Moderne in der zeitgenössischen indianischen Literatur der USA*, Köln 1986, p. 288.

<sup>12</sup>Kenneth Roemer, "Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart", *AICR* 4/1980, pp. 187-189, quotation on p. 187.

<sup>13</sup>"Woodland Word Warrior: An Introduction to the Works of Gerald Vizenor", *MELUS* 13/1986, pp. 24-33

of proportion. Small wonder that Vizenor recalled how *Bearheart* scared whites and Indians alike", and Louis Owens mentions in the afterword to the 1990 edition how he was reported to the dean for including this novel in the syllabus. Several of his students who claimed an Indian heredity were certain that "Native people could never be like that."<sup>14</sup> Not only did these students misread a postmodern and post-mimetic piece of science fiction for a realistic novel, they also failed to recognize that Vizenor does not replace the monological form of colonial discourse with an equally monological romantic myth about what is or what is not Indian. The influence of the oral tradition is unmistakably present, but the use that Vizenor makes of it differs from that of the other contemporary authors of Native American descent. There is no coherent ideal cultural backdrop against which present conditions are measured, nor is there any lament for lost oral-culture-based identities. Instead, the tradition has for the most part become one of many bits and pieces in a postmodern language game. For example, the 'animal husband'-myth, which is part of Anishinabe oral tradition, appears in several different versions (including sodomistic perversions) in *Bearheart*, once told (by Inawa Biwide) and twice acted out (by 'Abita Animosh' [Ojibwe: the one who loves dogs] Lilith Mae Ferrier and in the characters of Pure Gumption and Private Jones, two transmogrified reservation mongrels). Each time, another story aspect is foregrounded; each version of the story echoes and parodies the others - and, of course, its source. Adapting traditional material, Vizenor's *Bearheart* surpasses the boundaries of Native American literary convention much in the way that recent collections of oral narratives like Anthony Mattina's edition of *The Golden Woman* and Larry Evers' and Felipe Molina's *Yaqui Deer Songs* surpass turn-of-the-century ethnographical collections - away from "ideal cultural completion in narratives"<sup>15</sup> toward the ambiguous, fragmentary and multifaceted.

Vizenor also makes use of the trickster, the only Native American cultural symbol which has made it onto the contemporary pan-American cultural scene, for example as Ken Kesey's Randle Patrick McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's*

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<sup>14</sup>"Afterword", in: Vizenor, *Bearheart*, pp. 247-254, quotation on p. 247.

<sup>15</sup>Gerald Vizenor, "Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games", in: G.V. (ed.), *Narrative Chance. Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, Albuquerque 1989, pp. 187-211, quotation on p. 192.

*Nest* or, in a primitive version, as Wiley Coyote in *Roadrunner*-Cartoons. The quality of the trickster in Vizenor's own terms, however, is a metaphor, or, as he puts it, a *holotrope*: "Naanabozho, the woodland tribal trickster, is a *holotrope*, a comic holotrope, and a *sign* in a language game; a communal sign shared between listeners, readers and four points of view in third person narratives."<sup>16</sup>

To be certain, there are several obvious parallels between Proude Cedarfair, the tribal leader with shaman qualities, and the traditional Anishinabe trickster and culture hero Nanabush, for example his role in defeating the "evil gambler [...] and monarch of unleaded gasoline" (*Bearheart*, p. 102f.), Sir Cecil Staples. Also, one of the other circus pilgrims, Benito Saint Plumero, with his oversized nose, penis and feet certainly has features of a trickster (or a clown, rather). Definitely, he and another figure, Zebulon Machi Makwa, have the sexual appetite of the trickster. To have several trickster figures of different sorts in one and the same text seemed to create a problem for some critics. Alan Velie's solution was a dual interpretation of the trickster, claiming that Vizenor split the qualities of the trickster and divided them between Proude and Bigfoot Plumero, apologetically adding that "splitting the trickster figure is not without precedent in myth and literature."<sup>17</sup>

As a matter of fact, most if not all of the characters in *Bearheart* in one way or another have some features of the trickster, but only *some*, and in my opinion this is the crucial point. There are no benevolent demigods in the fictional world of *Bearheart*, no Prometheus or even Nanabush. The characters are survivors, they survive by their capacity to live and act as tricksters. Their survival capacity, however, is limited by their ability to transcend their own terminal creeds and to be compassionate. To quote Robert Silberman: "Vizenor's determination that the trickster be defined as compassionate rather than amoral and asocial, as Paul Radin described him, suggests a kind of necessary fiction."<sup>18</sup>

The trickster in traditional society is a token of disorder and a survivor who outlives his own failures. He represents, as Barbara Babcock has pointed out, a "tolerated margin of mess", but in *Bearheart*, the tricksters who succumb to their

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<sup>16</sup>p. 187.

<sup>17</sup>"Trickster", in: Vizenor, *Narrative Chance*, pp. 121-139, quotation on p. 133.

<sup>18</sup>"Gerald Vizenor and *Harold of Orange*: From Word Cinemas to Real Cinema", *American Indian Quarterly* 9/1985, pp. 5-21, quotation on p. 15.

sexual appetite (like Zebulon Matchi Makwa and Bigfoot Saint Plumero) are killed brutally and not resurrected. Those who fail, despair, or cling to their terminal beliefs also get killed. Only the ones who manage to change form, appearance, or even gender, survive. This pattern of survival does not conform to the irrational and erratic which signifies the trickster in the oral tradition. Vizenor's survivors are also representatives of a new order of things.

An underlying pattern of order also seems to pervade Vizenor's use of oral language. *Bearheart* is in a not necessarily Bakhtinian sense polyphonous in that many voices and many different languages are heard throughout the novel. It is dialogic in that these languages often represent ambiguous sentiments and controversial ideologies.

Vizenor shows American English as a 'parole' on the brink of collapse. It is turned in on itself in an effort to expose the lifelessness of scientific and bureaucratic jargon.

The government discovered that 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 [...]. This caused our elected officials to create this word hospital. (*Bearheart*, p. 166)

The deconstruction of public discourse is comically turned into the image of 'word wars' fought at the 'Bioavaricious Regional Word Hospital' (*Bearheart*, p. 165) where texts and speeches are run through 'bioaudience synthesizers' (here, finally, we get around to electronic word processing after all):

When Belladonna asked what a dianoetic chromatic encoder was it took the combined explanations of three word hospital officials to explain that the encoder machine was used to code and then reassemble the unit values of meaning in a spoken sentence [...]. For example, we have studied the possessive nouns and shifting verbs of Dennis Banks from the old American Indian Movement [...]. (*Bearheart*, p. 167)

Contained in this passage is a critique of common beliefs in computer capacity, the scientology church, modern linguistics, Vizenor's best-hated AIM-activist Dennis Banks, research in the effectivity of political rhetoric, and the jargon of scientific research in general. Machines, though, are shown as capable of more than just decoding: Two of the pilgrims are invited to a test in a conversation stimulator. All they say inside the machine is manipulated from the outside in a condensed image of the modern world of electronics and advertisement. Vizenor widens the scope of



criticism: He does not stop at parody and exposure of overused language and governmental gobbledegook, but in comical turns uncovers the dangers in the real "word wars" that are fought over the control of words and the powers of imagination.

The usual antithesis to the oppressive forms of governmental master discourse in contemporary American Indian literature is the telling of Indian stories. Not so in *Bearheart*. To tell 'Indian' stories (and this is definitely 'Indian' in quotation marks here) in what commonly is conceived to be part of the tribal tradition does not escape criticism either. The stories that Bigfoot Saint Plumero, Lilith Mae Farrier, and the Lakota mixedblood Belladonna Darwin-Winter Catcher tell are stories about contemporary reservation existence, about alcoholism and petty delinquency, about deferred idealism and reservation mongrels. However, in a critical turn on the Indian-indulgent reader, this level of everyday language and stories is matched even by the cruel and wicked characters met on the road. For example, not all of what the evil gambler has to say leaves a negative impression; the story of his boyhood as an abandoned child even arouses sympathy.

A simple belief in the essential goodness of all things Indian does not suffice either. When Belladonna starts reciting a translated speech of tribal hero chief Ten Bears, she is silenced by Matchi Makwa who calls it "Superserious crap". (*Bearheart*, p. 113) Later on she is depicted as literally clinging to her romantic notion that Indian blood is different from other peoples' and falls victim to this terminal creed in an encounter with an assemblage of hunters and breeders. A brutish redneck voices the antithesis to Belladonna's romantic notions:

'Indians are an invention', said the hunter with the beard. 'You tell me that the invention is different than the rest of the world when it was the rest of the world that invented the Indian [...]. An Indian is an Indian because he speaks and thinks and believes he is an Indian, but an Indian is nothing more than an invention [...]. Are you speaking as an invention?' (*Bearheart*, p. 195).

Explicitly because she voices a 'terminal creed', Belladonna is treated to a poisoned cookie, and even Proude, the shaman healer, cannot save her. In fact, all those characters who believe in what Vizenor calls "terminal creeds" eventually fall victim to their shortsighted beliefs. The homosexual lovers Doctor Wilde Coxswain and Justice Pardone Cozener are fascinated by and stay at the Bioavaricious word hospitals; the sodomist Lilith Mae Farrier overidentifies with her own image of

herself as a victim, loses in a game of skill to the evil gambler and commits suicide; the seven-foot Sun Bear Sun gets stuck on an interrogation that is beyond his comprehension. In his effort to explain himself he is "[...] locked in the past without visions answering questions in the legislative hall. [...] The universal victim is the honest fool answering unanswerable questions." (*Bearheart*, p. 234) The demise of a pilgrim is not always immediately linked to failing language or mode of expression, but such figures have usually been characterized during the course of the novel through distorted ways of expression in other contexts and are therefore or therewith marked for failure. Zebulon Matchi Makwa not only stinks physically but also uses foul and repugnant language; or, another example, the echolaliac trine word habit in speech of Bishop Omax Parasimo mocks church discourse: "Get those black devils out of the chapel before they drink the holy water and shit all over the high altar altar altar [...]." (*Bearheart*, p. 76) For all of these pilgrims their own words turn against them because they do not heed Proude's warning:

'We become our memories and what we believe,' said Proude in a deep voice. 'We become the terminal creeds we speak. Our words limit the animals we would become [...] soaring through words from memories and visions. (*Bearheart*, p. 147)

In the end, only the speakers of a tribal language in a positive oral tradition survive: Proude and Rosina, Inawa Biwide and Pio Wissakodewinini. The last two names are Anishinabe, meaning 'I resemble a stranger' and 'Half-burnt-wood-man', denoting their bearers as something special. It is true that Zebulon Matchi Makwa's name is an Anishinabe term as well, but significantly it means 'Bad Bear' or 'Wicked Bear' which puts him in contrast to the mythical vision bear Proude. Bigfoot Plumero also speaks the tribal language - as becomes apparent from his story of his eternal love to ikwe kitchibiwabik osidaman, a bronze woman statue with big feet (*Bearheart*, pp. 82-87) - but he is not a carrier of traditional knowledge as are the others. Also, he does not understand the paraverbal languages in the text: the languages of bears and birds, particularly crows, and the language of trees. Instead, he and Matchi Makwa are killers of people (Bigfoot) and of birds (Makwa) which also seems to forbid their entry into the fourth world. On the other hand, Proude and the other survivors are often depicted as conversing with the bird and animal members of the circus, whereas for example Lilith Mae Farrier never calls her two boxers anything but "dumb bastards". The importance of animals and animal languages in *Bearheart* has - surprisingly enough - not been noted by critics so far; an

anthropocentric world view seems to prevent recognition of the fact that among the survivors are not only four people but also a swarm of seven shaman crows and one dog, Pure Gumption. This dog is usually described as radiating an aura but silent, and the language of silence is also one that ensures survival in *Bearheart*. Particularly Proude and Inawa, who turn into bears walking through the solstice window at Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, are remarkably often depicted as reacting to the senseless outrage around them with silence, a device which reminds of Ihab Hassan's description, of the postmodern as a "literature of silence"<sup>19</sup>.

Whenever Proude is not silent, he roars like a bear, and when he speaks his narrative voice is interspersed with occasional terms, phrases, or passages in Anishinabemowin, the tribal language of the Anishinabe or Ojibwe. On one occasion when the Lakota-mixedblood Belladonna dies he also speaks Lakota, but throughout the novel Ojibwe dominates the discourse. What is important in the context of this paper is that the like terms and phrases in Ojibwe occur also in the general narrative voice of the novel. In all, there are 69 different Ojibwe phrases and expressions plus one verse from a hymn, and they usually but not always come with translations. They hem the flow of reading and, supported by subjective neologisms and contractions, succeed in creating an impression of linguistic otherness.

In using the languages of tribes, trees and bears, Vizenor introduces a subjective "heteroglossia"<sup>20</sup> or carnivalesque discourse which - to quote Julia Kristeva - "breaks out of the rules of a language censored by grammar and semantics and thereby acts as a social and political contradiction."<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the same subjective use of the English as well as the tribal and natural languages by both characters and omniscient narrator provides a metaphysical basis in a Derridaean sense, an unassailable ground upon which the storyline rests.

<sup>19</sup>*The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 1971, p. 13f., quoted after Gerhard Hoffman/Alfred Hornung/Rüdiger Kunow, "'Modern', 'Postmodern' und 'Contemporary': Zur Klassifizierung der amerikanischen Erzählliteratur des 20. Jahrhunderts", in: Hoffmann (ed.), *Der zeitgenössische amerikanische Roman*, München 1988, vol. 1, pp. 7-43, quotation on p. 23.

<sup>20</sup>Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Columbus, Oh. 1987, p. 171.

<sup>21</sup>"Bachtin, das Wort, der Dialog und der Roman", in: Jens Ihwe (ed.), *Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik Ergebnisse und Perspektiven*, Frankfurt 1972, 3 vols., vol. 3, pp. 345-375, quotation on p. 346.

Tribal and animal voices are part of the "word wars", and if they are not the winning they are at least the surviving side. This fact alone does not imply order. It is the additional narrative range as voice of the omniscient narrator as well which makes them an epic voice in the text as a whole. This epic tone is quite in keeping with the tribal oral tradition, and it mirrors an attempt "to make English speak for us".<sup>22</sup> Similar attempts to convey an impression of linguistic otherness are typical for many post-colonial texts e.g. in Africa<sup>23</sup> and in other literatures from the 'Fourth World'<sup>24</sup>. The official discourse of the state, the school, the legal system, and the church are all ironically subverted but they are also contrasted with a new ideal plane of tribal and animal languages and silence. The fact that old word orders are connected with failure and death whereas tribal and natural languages signify transformation to a higher consciousness and life-form establishes a hierarchy in *Bearheart* which arguably would not comply with Bakhtin's ideal of a dialogic or polyphone text. It even repeats romantic theory of languages in that the natural 'wild' languages are depicted as of supreme value. Although it is still far from the idealized romantic image of a perfect oral culture, at this point Vizenor's postmodern novel suddenly exposes an open flank to a possible romantic reading of the whole story as an escape and (re-)creation myth. For a moment we are reminded of Ihab Hassan's view that modern and postmodern do not necessarily follow each other but actually may coexist<sup>25</sup> - and sometimes, it seems, in one and the same text.

To return to the beginning: As far as *Bearheart* is concerned, the impact and importance of the oral traditions and of the oral tribal languages is visible, even

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<sup>22</sup>Leslie Silko, "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective", in: Leslie A. Fiedler/Houston A. Baker (eds.), *English Literature. Opening Up the Canon*, Baltimore 1981, pp. 54-72, quotation on p. 61.

<sup>23</sup>Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, "Darstellungsmodi von Sprachgebrauch und Übersetzungsvorgängen in der westafrikanischen Literatur der Gegenwart (am Beispiel von Texten aus Mali und dem Senegal)", in: Paul Goetsch (ed.), *Dialekte und Fremdsprachen in der Literatur*, Tübingen 1987, pp. 94-113.

<sup>24</sup>I am using the term 'Fourth World' here with reference not to the mythical world that the survivors in *Bearheart* escape to but to the 'real' Fourth World, a term used by human rights groups to describe colonized minorities in first and second world countries, like the aboriginal inhabitants of North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

<sup>25</sup>Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, p. 33.

though the oral tradition as it was for the Anishinabeg is neither responsible for the present literary work, nor should the connection be overestimated. Its relation to the postmodern text is intertextual and ambiguous. Throughout the novel the semiotic field in which the indigene exists in colonial discourse is ironically subverted. The subversion extends to aspects of violence, sex, mystification and to the common stereotypical notion of 'Indian' orality. Instead, Vizenor creates counterimages that controvert romantic notions in a postmodern language game. At the same time, the creation of an aboriginal and natural sense of order in the treatment of language and of elements from the oral tradition are typical of postcolonial literatures. *Bearheart*, then, could justifiably be called a postmodern postcolonial novel from the 'Fourth World'.