AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE AND RESEARCH JOURNAL 26:2 (2002) 1–15

Native and Christian: Religion and Spirituality as Transcultural Negotiation in American Indian Novels of the 1990s

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When addressing the theme of religion in contemporary American Indian works of fiction, literary scholarship is often hesitant regarding its critical evaluation. Scholars frequently tackle the fictional treatment of tribal ceremonies and rituals, sacred sites, the repatriation of tribal remains and its legal implications, and Native spirituality in general. The issue of whether or not it is possible to negotiate a middle ground, a balance between traditional tribal and Christian religions, largely remains untouched by literary scholarship.[1] This comes somewhat as a surprise, since the writers themselves are continually discussing the transcultural role of religion for Native American peoples today in terms of mutual and reciprocal exchange.

This paper will demonstrate to what effect transculturation is used as a strategy for defining how religion is culturally negotiated in Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* (1990), Diane Glancy's *Pushing the Bear* (1996), and Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1995). I am using the term *transculturation* employed by Mary Louise Pratt, who understands colonial confrontation as an "encounter" in a "contact zone."[2] Pratt's basic principle is that *cultures always change*, unless they exist in a never-changing, static environment. Instead of dwelling on the frontier concept, the immigration experience, the melting pot, or various concepts of pluralism, Pratt's focus is on a "zone" which allows—even automatically produces—interaction, exchange, dialogue, and reciprocity. She claims that ethnographers have used the term *transculturation* "to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture," and she continues: "While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents

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what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for."[3] It is precisely the exchange with Christian beliefs, practices, legends, and metaphors, as well as the absorption of these components into tribal spirituality which enables the major characters and groups in contemporary Native American fiction to survive. By employing the strategy of transculturation, they are able to articulate, confront, and ultimately understand their respective situations from within a tribal perspective and thus continue as tribal members. The selected novels are significant examples of how cultural groups that define themselves as dynamic use their transcultural skills to overcome situations of historical or cultural crisis.

But not only the writers and their literary works employ transculturation as a strategy of negotiation. I believe that the *reading* of these novels is also part of the transcultural process, because the mediations that take place require active reader involvement: they drive readers to embrace these fictionally created and largely unfamiliar perspectives, which often also necessitate a certain degree of extra-textual work. Without a familiarization with these histories, cultures, and sociological and political formations, or without consulting oral, ritual, mythic, or popular tribal knowledges, these novels—or the worldviews delineated in them—would remain completely inaccessible.

"LIVING IN TWO WORLDS": LINDA HOGAN'S *MEAN SPIRIT*

Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* is a historical novel which deals with the fate of the Osage Indians in Oklahoma after the discovery of major amounts of oil on their land in the 1920s. One of the metaphors used in *Mean Spirit* to express transculturation as an approach to religion is the notion of "living in two worlds" simultaneously.

The major characters with regard to the religious theme are Reverend Joe Billy, Belle Greycloud, Michael Horse, and Stace Red Hawk. They embody the process of transculturation which permeates the religious and spiritual practices throughout the novel. Reverend Joe Billy, a Creek Indian whose father had been a medicine man before he converted to Christianity, is the chairman of the Baptist Indian Church and simultaneously the keeper of his father's powerful bat medicine. For him it is not a contradiction to be a Christian minister and a central figure in the performance of the peyote ceremony of the Native American Church. Joe Billy uses the bats to describe the phenomenon of living in two worlds. Like the Osages in the twentieth century, bats live in two worlds, as he explains to his wife Martha: "One of the best things about bats is that they are a race of people that stand in two worlds like we do. . . . And they live in the earth's ancient places."[4] Thus the bats become a major symbol for bridging the gap between an ancient tribal past and a modern tribal present. But they also serve as a link between the *spiritual* world, represented by the bat medicine, and the *real* world, in which the Watona Indians protect the bats at Sorrow Cave against the white citizens of Osage County. Moreover, they demonstrate that the spiritual and the real cannot be considered separate entities. Rather, their boundaries are fluid, thus supporting the notion of culture and cultural concepts in motion.

Belle Greycloud is a traditional healer and the people of the Watona community continually ask for her medical and spiritual advice. At the same time, she is a staunch Baptist who would never miss church on Sundays. When she prays at home, she sits "before the burning sacred heart candle, a cross, and an eagle prayer feather" (*MS* 67). The choice of items clearly symbolizes the transcultural character of Belle's religion. She is also one of the last Watona Indians to perform the corn ceremony, a traditional blessing of the crop after it has been planted. Although she and her husband are farmers, using all the conveniences of modern equipment, she "conditioned their fields with words and songs, first sprinkling sacred cornmeal that was ground from the previous year's corn to foster new life. The old corn would tell the new corn how to grow" (*MS* 209).

Michael Horse is a "water diviner" and dreamer, for more than sixty years the keeper of the sacred Osage fire and the last person in Indian Territory to live in a tipi. He also drives a gold Cadillac convertible that corresponds to his gold teeth, has "translated three languages back and forth during the Boxer Rebellion in China" (*MS* 60), and is now rewriting the Bible on a typewriter. In addition, he is a tribal historian—"diviner, translator, and keeper of accounts" (*MS* 63)—and writes in a journal everything that happens in the Watona community.

Traditionally rooted like Michael Horse within a tribal community is Stace Red Hawk, a Lakota who has left his reservation for a job with the FBI in Washington, D.C., to help Indian people. He is "a keeper of tradition, and a carrier of the sacred pipe of his people . . ." (*MS* 50), and "like Crazy Horse [wears] a sacred stone in his armpit, close to his heart" (*MS* 249). For all these characters the fact of leading a largely modern way of life does not on principle interfere with their traditional values or positions.

A further example of the negotiation between Western and traditional religions occurs during a spiritual ceremony. Keto, one of the members of the Native American Church, expresses his experiences with the so-called Competency Commission in a prayer during a peyote ceremony:

> Now I'm a good Indian, and the best true American on earth. I salute the flag. And I was in the world war. . . . But what happened here, I want to know. The judge asks me if I'm happy with my marriage and I tell him I am. He says do I know the difference between a five dollar bill and a twenty. I say I do. Then they tell me I'm feeble. I can't handle my own money, they say. They assign me a guardian. . . . But this lawyer buys me a big house. I don't want a big house. I tell him I want to stay in my home where I was born and where my sons were born. . . . So this lawyer moves his own things in that house, even his wife. Well, holy spirit, please look into this for me. It's just not right. And forgive me for speaking in English, but like I said, I'm a true American. I went to their war. I fought in it. (MS 74)

Culturally and spiritually, Keto is drawn toward his tribal community and tradition, while nationally he seems to feel rather like an American citizen

(although it was "their" war in which he fought). He participates as an active member in his tribal community on the reservation, which is underscored by his membership in the Native American Church, his participation in the peyote ritual, and his prayer to the holy spirit during the ceremony. At the same time, he considers himself "the best true American on earth," which he has proven with his service in World War I. He salutes the American flag and even avoids speaking his tribal language because he fears that it could undermine his loyalty to America. However, for Keto this is no contradiction; he believes both in Christian and tribal values and does not give up one for the other. This resolute undermining of the more widely held opinion that Christian and Native beliefs are opposing binary categories is a fundamental aspect of transculturation.

As John Stink's funeral ceremony shows, transcultural elements also pervade Osage burial customs:

> In the old days, people were buried seated, facing east, with stones piled over them. An opening was left, like a window, in front of the dead person's face. It allowed the travelers in death's world to see the dark road they had to follow. By 1922 that tradition was forbidden by American law; the Americans were afraid of the invisible lives of germs and bacteria that claimed human flesh as their own territory. But *the Indians found ways to combine the old customs with the new,* and that evening the men dug a deep, narrow hole that would allow the casket to stand on end. Then, they removed the coffin lid, tied Stink in with a rope, and slid the casket so that John Stink was standing and facing east. (*MS* 101–102, emphasis added)

Supporting this notion of balancing different cultural customs, Reverend Billy, during the burial ceremony, prays both in Creek and English wearing a traditional headdress.

Along similar lines, the paraphernalia at the wedding of Nola Blanket and Will Forrest are signs of how both modern and traditional ways of life are absorbed and often redefined as something new. The guests at the wedding wear broadcloth dresses, leggings, and otter fur hats, but also silk-lined suits, and two girls have their hair dyed blond like angels. During the ceremony the drummers play first, then the organist. Some people walk down the church aisle, while "Belle walked like she was dancing an old dance, each step a heartbeat . . ." (*MS* 181). The merging of traditional and modern items is particularly obvious in Nola's case:

> Nola, to appease the traditional people, *had woven the old ways into the new,* so immediately after the ceremony, she removed the long white dress, and changed into the long-tailed red military bridal coat that had been worn by Osage women ever since an Osage elder had visited the White House in Washington, D.C., admired the coat of a dignitary, and received it as a gift from the president. (*MS* 180–181, emphasis added)

The "weaving of old ways into the new" serves as another metaphor for transculturation. It is interesting to note here that the military bridal coat had once belonged to a Washington dignitary and had already been completely appropriated into Osage customs and integrated into Osage wedding ceremonies to the point that its integration into the ceremony even served "to appease the traditional people." Similarly, the old medicine bag—one of the most precious and holy items in many American Indian cultures—which Michael Horse discovers in Sorrow Cave, "had an American flag beaded on one side of it" (*MS* 241), without in any way minimizing the spiritual and cultural value of this sacred item.

The most obvious combination of essential Native and Western Christian materials, however, is Michael Horse's project of "fixing the Bible" by including in his transcultural version what he thinks is missing from its pages. He calls his project "Book of Horse," on which he has been working for many years. Talking to Father Dunne, a Catholic priest, Horse explains the motivation for his project: "[He] felt . . . as if he could write away the appearances of things and take them all the way back down to the bare truth" (*MS* 341). When Father Dunne remarks that the Bible is God's and not man's business, Horse replies: "Well it has men's names in it. Like the Gospel of John, for instance. Why not the Gospel of Horse" (*MS* 273)? This clearly reflects the mixing of the *spiritual* with the *ordinary*, which is typical of the holistic worldview of tribal cultures. Trying to discover a non-Eurocentric truth which would integrate Native American historical perceptions and worldviews, Michael Horse intends to *add*—not to *substitute* for something else—his Book of Horse to the Bible. What turns this act of rewriting the Bible into an essentially transcultural operation is the notion that the cultural technique of writing does not contradict the traditional oral way of keeping stories and history; it is not a corruption of genuinely Native culture, but an expansion and addition: "He was writing for those who would come later . . . , as if the act of writing was itself part of divination and prophecy, an act of deliverance" (*MS* 341). Thus the originally culturally alien technique of writing even assumes the potential of liberation. Horse also wants to convey his message by means of writing because generally members of the Anglo-American society "don't believe anything is true unless they see it in writing" (*MS* 361). This not only reflects Horse's understanding of the Euro-American culture, but it also reveals his belief that this dominant culture would be able to understand the Osage history and worldview, if it could only see it in a familiar form. Horse's stance does not imply an unbridgeable gap along the lines of *us versus them,* but the potential for a reciprocal influence. Michael Horse's modified version of the Holy Book ends as follows:

> the people will go out of their land. They, like the land, are wounded and hurt. They will go into the rocks and bluffs, the cities, and into the caves of the torn apart land. There will be fires. Some of them will be restored to the earth. Others will journey to another land and merge with other people. Some will learn a new way to live, the good way of

> the red path. But a time will come again when all the people return and revere the earth and sing its praises. (*MS* 362)

Michael Horse's act of fixing the Bible documents the general process of selectively incorporating elements from the dominant culture into a Native perspective. As Andrea Musher points out, "[w]ith his writing he translates between the worlds, preserving a record of the destruction of Indian people and Indian ways while also creating a legacy that can reconstruct Indian identity in the future."[5] Through the "return of all the people" in the end, the emphasis is put on the cyclic nature of life and its restorative function.

With regard to religion and spirituality *Mean Spirit* suggests that Native and white peoples live in the same world but see it with different eyes and different worldviews. For the Native people the strategy of transculturation makes it possible to negotiate a position within this field of tension, a position which enables the Osages to survive as a culture through times of cruel and drastic changes.

"SLIPPING BETWEEN BOTH WORLDS": DIANE GLANCY'S *PUSHING THE BEAR*

Diane Glancy's historical novel deals with the painful experience of the Cherokee Trail of Tears in the winter of 1838 and '39 and with the reflection of this enforced migration in Cherokee and Christian "stories."[6] Religious commitment and renewal are at the heart of the Cherokee experience and constitute a major strategy of transculturation in *Pushing the Bear*. Although never explained, the title *Pushing the Bear* seems to represent the achievement of the impossible, something the Cherokee ultimately succeed in.

Although a good number of tribal members in Glancy's novel are baptized, attend church, and accept the white clergyman, Reverend Mackenzie, they also retain their traditional beliefs. The Cherokee selectively choose from what Christianity has to offer, as long as they can interpret it within the larger scheme of their traditional beliefs. As Lacey Woodard, one of the minor characters, puts it:

> The wind had a moan to it. It was like the stories of the old ones. The voice carried power. What was spoken came into being. Even Reverend Mackenzie talked of the Great Spirit creating the world with his voice. Was the white man just now finding that out? Hadn't the Cherokee always known the power of the word? The white man only got it out to read on Sunday. The Cherokee thought about it every day. Our church was not a house. It had no walls.[7]

Thus, in the holistic worldview of the Cherokee, as represented in *Pushing the Bear*, there is no clear dividing line between the ordinary and the religious, the spoken and the written, the invented and the real. Frequently, biblical stories and knowledge are utilized to explain the present situation. One such example is the rendering of the story of Jesus Christ. Lacey Woodard com-

pares the Cherokee destiny with that of Jesus and explains to Maritole, the central character of the novel, that "Jesus knew all his life he would push the bear because of us" and that "he was the man . . . who pushed the bear" (*PB* 220). Thus, the Christian Cherokee interpret Jesus Christ's predicament as the anticipated consequence of their own suffering. Since oral cultures preserve worldview and tradition through stories, which teach through example rather than by catechism, the *reading* of the Bible in Glancy's novel becomes a *storying* from the Cherokee perspective.

Some of the white characters also stand for the strategy of transcultural negotiation. For example, Reverend Mackenzie, who voluntarily walks the trail with the members of his former parish, is careful not to ignore traditional Cherokee beliefs. In general, missionaries had a relatively strong foothold in the Cherokee Nation and tried hard to support their anti-removal cause. One of the missionaries, Samuel Austin Worcester, had even "been convicted and sentenced to prison under a Georgia statute which required all white men living in the Cherokee Nation to take an oath of allegiance to the state."[8] Worcester refused to take the oath to the state of Georgia, thus acknowledging the sovereignty of the Cherokee Nation. With the 1832 Supreme Court decision *Worcester v. Georgia*, Worcester was set free. Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that the Cherokee, who had their own constitution and government, were a "domestic dependent nation" and thus entitled to federal protection of their lands against Georgia's claims and concluded that Georgia laws were not valid in Cherokee territory.[9] In the novel, Reverend Worcester is frequently mentioned positively, as in the following example: "But Reverend Worcester had argued for the Cherokee keeping our language. He said our speech had meanings and sounds not found in English. We said things in our own way in Cherokee. We had our own ideas and feelings and relationships between our words" (*PB* 137). The example of Reverend Worcester shows that transculturation can work both ways. Similarly, Reverend Mackenzie includes elements of Christian beliefs *and* Cherokee mythology into his sermons. Another white character who does not ignore Cherokee customs is Sergeant Williams, who—among other things—has voluntarily taken Cherokee language classes before the removal. Thus, the fictional construction of these white characters reinforces the concept of a transcultural dialogue.

The persona of Reverend Bushyhead is another example of the Cherokee successfully negotiating a way to merge Christian and Cherokee beliefs. Reverend Bushyhead, a Cherokee man converted to Christianity, preaches from the Bible but frequently includes tribal stories. At one point Maritole thinks about how Reverend Bushyhead "preached Christ as a corn god, the giver of life, along with Selu. I thought that if any of us made it to the new land, then it must be true. Both Christ and myth. It would take both" (*PB* 112).[10] Later, when it comes to a kind of competition between the traditional conjurers and the Christian Cherokee, Maritole admits to herself: "I heard the conjurers. I heard the Christians. I believed them both. I heard the humming of the ancestors and the words of the living . . ." (*PB* 215). This tension between the conjurors and the Christian Cherokee is symbolic of the delicate balancing act

which is necessary in order to negotiate a middle ground between the two religions, because in isolation neither seems to offer guidance. Rather, Maritole decides to "believe in both" and by doing so reconnects with the spirit of the mythic figure Selu and her balancing strategy.[11] In the Cherokee worldview depicted in *Pushing the Bear* it is thus unnecessary to reject one religion to embrace another. Rather, the drawing from—and blending of—different cultural and spiritual sources represents an essential part of the contact zone of cultural encounters.

In one sequence Reverend Bushyhead's strategy of negotiation collapses. He is unable to finish his sermon, breaks up in mid-sentence, and falls to the ground in desperation in the face of all the dying and suffering. One of the traditional Holy Men, upon witnessing Bushyhead's breakdown, explains to the reverend that he should try to "slip between the worlds" in order to interpret the inexplicable:

> He had tried to make sense of everything, but the trail we marched didn't make sense. It didn't fit into an understanding of the Christian God. "Slip between both worlds," I told him, "like our feet slip over the snow." (*PB* 128)

Like Maritole, who acts out of "a knowledge beyond feeling" (*PB* 215), the Holy Man suggests using explanations from both cultures and worldviews to grasp what is happening to the Cherokee. Obviously, Reverend Bushyhead understands the Holy Man's message. In the following sermon he compares the plight of the Cherokee to "the year of Jubilee in Israel when everything returned to its owner" (*PB* 134).[12] He tells his parish that the Cherokee are giving "our land, which wasn't really ours, back to God" (*PB* 134). At the same time, he is aware that his people also need to learn from their ancient stories: "I would not be one of those ministers who tried to rid the Cherokee of their stories. It would take everything we could muster to start again" (*PB* 186). The migration to and the new beginning in Indian Territory represent such great challenges that it needs all the strength and qualities acquired in the long process of transculturation.

Right after the arrival in the new territory, the Trail of Tears is integrated into the Cherokee stories by Maritole. She tells two orphans, whom she and her husband Knobowtee adopt, the story of the Trickster Turtle: "There was a Turtle at the starting line in the old territory. There was a turtle at the finish line in the new. Our Cherokee nation had become two to survive" (*PB* 233).[13] The Cherokee nation has survived and the oral tradition has absorbed Cherokee history and Christianity into its stories.

Diane Glancy's account of the nine-hundred-mile migration of the Cherokee and their relocation in Indian Territory articulates the incomprehensible from a postcolonial perspective. Although this historical moment represents a drastic rupture with their former way of life, the Cherokee in *Pushing the Bear* are able to cope with their dilemma by positioning it within their own dynamic cultural and religious view of the world. It is this worldview—characterized by the ability to negotiate between seemingly opposing

concepts—which helps this ancient tribe endure and which conditions the new beginning in the unknown territory. The author refuses to relegate the migratory experience of the Cherokee exclusively to a history of suffering—and thus the Cherokee nation to the position of historical victims—and stresses the notion of Native peoples as dynamic agents of history. This dynamic quality is an essential part of the strategy of transculturation and appears most symbolically in the Cherokee concept of religion.

The function of religion exemplifies how a tribal culture succeeds in negotiating a fragile balance between cherishing old stories, beliefs, and practices and absorbing new ones. Glancy's novel stands for an innovative and dynamic version of historical representation and reappropriation, describing the transculturative relationship between American Indian historical reflections and mainstream American historiography.

"MAKING CHOICES": SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *RESERVATION BLUES*

In probably no other contemporary American Indian novel of the 1990s do religion and faith play such an important role as in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues.* In the beginning of the 1930s, the black blues musician Robert Johnson allegedly sold his soul to the devil, receiving legendary blues skills in return. He died a couple of years later, only to return to the Spokane Indian Reservation in the state of Washington in 1992, where he—and particularly his magical blues guitar—inspires the all-Indian Catholic rock-and-roll band Coyote Springs to attempt a professional career in music. Religion and faith, or rather the effect of Christianity on Native American people at the end of the twentieth century on a day-to-day basis, are the most important themes tackled in the novel. In *Reservation Blues* the strategy of transculturation is best illustrated by the opportunity to choose from both available religions—a traditional Indian one *and* a Christian one—which in their combination may hold the potential to provide Native American people with a firm religious footing in the contemporary world.

Robert Johnson and the blues are metaphors for the syncretism of religion in Alexie's novel: "Evolving from African chants and rhythms and the field shouts and gospel choruses of the nineteenth-century plantations of the South, with hints of ragtime, minstrelsy, vaudeville and other commercial sounds,"[14] the blues is a similarly hybrid mixture as is Native American religion at the end of the twentieth century. With regard to the rhythmic vocal quality and the spiritual connotations there exists a connection between the blues and religion. In *Urban Blues,* Charles Keil has made a comparison between bluesmen and preachers, proposing that both serve as models providing directions: both publicly articulate deeply felt private sentiments and both advocate catharses by increasing feelings of solidarity and morals.[15]

The different members of Coyote Springs have had very divergent personal experiences with the Catholic Church, which are transmitted through memories. For Chess and Checkers Warm Water, Flathead sisters from the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana, the church always meant protection, belonging, and direction, particularly after their father turned to alco-

hol. In their childhood they always found it comforting to help with Communion and to sing in the church choir. Attending church services, Checkers feels "like home"; she is also convinced that her belief in God once saved her from burning to death in a fire.[16]

The attitude toward Christianity of two of the three male members of the band, Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor Joseph, who are from the Spokane Reservation, is less favorable. Thomas, the lead singer, considers himself a "recovering Catholic" who turned away from the church when he was nine years old after finding the members of his church burning those records and books which the priest regarded as the devil's tools. However, when Thomas attends a church service for the first time after more than twenty years, he has a dream or vision in which he meets all his relations in a sweatlodge. Obviously, the service has initiated an important spiritual experience. Victor, the lead guitarist, by comparison, remembers the Mission School he attended as a rigid institution where the "black robes" shaved their pupils' heads bald and burnt their long black hair and where he was sexually abused by one of the priests.

Big Mom, the spiritual leader of the traditional Spokane Indian people who serves as spiritual, musical, and practical adviser to Coyote Springs and who does not belong to any official church, later suggests to Victor that he should forgive that priest who hurt him when he was a boy: "That will give you power over him, you know. Forgiveness is magic, too" (*RB* 203). According to Big Mom's explanation it is not necessarily religion which is corrupted but more likely the people who represent it and misuse the power granted to them.

This theme is picked up again in an important controversy between Thomas and his girlfriend Chess. In this dispute over the role of the church Thomas argues that he cannot understand Chess's attending a church in whose name so many Indians were killed.[17] Deeply moved and in tears, Chess replies that the soldiers, not Jesus, did the killing: "Those soldiers made a choice. The government made a choice" (*RB* 167). She even goes on to argue that God allowed Native Americans to survive: "how do you think Indians survived all the shit if there wasn't a God who loved us" (*RB* 169)? Here God clearly stands for the faith in survival as opposed to resignation, and the message seems to be that what to make of Him is really a question of choice. Thus Chess introduces the major guiding principle of the novel: choice, or the choices individuals and groups make or fail to make in their lives. In other words, notwithstanding the individual or historical situation, even if it is one of oppression and suffering, people always have a certain flexibility to choose. The issue of choice is frequently picked up by Big Mom, and it is she who ultimately turns it into a principle of the novel.

The transcultural relationship between Native and Christian religions is represented primarily by the two religious leaders, the Catholic priest Father Arnold on the one hand and Big Mom, the practitioner of traditional Spokane religion, on the other. Father Arnold heads a conservative Catholic community that hates Coyote Springs for their nonreligious and nontraditional music (although this is not Father Arnold's opinion), whereas Big Mom

functions as Coyote Springs' musical teacher and believes that their kind of music has healing potential. Upon closer examination, however, these religious directions do not exclude each other. Father Arnold himself, who "was twenty-eight, buying a Big Mac at a McDonald's, when the call came to him" (*RB* 34), has his doubts about Catholic religious practice, because it is often based on fear rather than faith. He is trying to close the gap between the two religions. When Checkers confesses to him that as a child she wanted to be white because "Jesus was white and blond in all pictures I ever saw of him" (*RB* 141), Father Arnold replies that Jesus was Jewish and had probably had dark skin and hair. Thus he shows his willingness to deconstruct some of the images Christianity has invented (and believed in) from a solely Western and one-dimensional perspective. Also, when he plans to leave the Spokane Reservation because he has fallen in love with Checkers, which he considers absolutely inappropriate for a Catholic priest, he hopes that his dreamcatcher works for him and prays "that his dreams of Checkers would be trapped in the dreamcatcher's web" (*RB* 254). Where his Catholic faith fails, Father Arnold is not ashamed to borrow from tribal spiritual faith. Quite symbolically, the dreamcatcher, once given to him by the oldest Indian Catholic on the reservation, is decorated with rosary beads, once again demonstrating that Christian and Native religions are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

A longer entry into Checkers's journal comparing the two religions of Big Mom and Father Arnold further stresses the transcultural quality of American Indian spirituality:

> Big Mom felt like she came from a whole different part of God than Father Arnold did. Is that possible? Can God be broken into pieces like a jigsaw puzzle? What if it's like one of those puzzles that Indian kids buy at secondhand stores? You put it together and find out one or two pieces are missing.
>
> I looked at Big Mom and thought that God must be made up mostly of Indian and woman pieces. Then I looked at Father Arnold and thought that God must be made up of white and man pieces. I don't know what's true. (*RB* 205)

In a cultural and spiritual strategy similar to Maritole's in Glancy's *Pushing the Bear*—"to believe in both," that is, to consider neither the ancient conjurors nor the Christian Cherokee as ultimate source for spiritual renewal and thus to negotiate an in-between position—Alexie (through Checkers) offers the interpretation of God/religion as a "puzzle." On the one hand the term *puzzle* stands for the enigmatic quality of modern Native religion; on the other hand it symbolizes that the puzzle of modern Native religion is held together by these very pieces, however enigmatic they may be. Big Mom and Father Arnold, or Native and Christian religions, are simply reciprocal and balancing parts in the larger spiritual make-up. Since for Checkers, the most devoted Catholic of Coyote Springs, it is impossible to completely separate the Christian God from Native American religious beliefs, her concept of God is a rather complementary one and the notion of "truth" does not help her find answers to her questions about God and

religion. She does not want to be the one to find out that "one or two pieces are missing" from the whole concept of God/religion because she is exclusive rather than inclusive in her religious beliefs.

That Native American religion requires a transcultural approach is likewise represented during Junior's burial scene. For the funeral ceremony Big Mom and Father Arnold take turns leading the service the way Big Mom suggests to the priest prior to the ceremony: "you cover all the Christian stuff; I'll do the traditional Indian stuff. We'll make a great team" (*RB* 280). As indicated by the earlier use of the term *puzzle*, the image of Big Mom and Father Arnold operating as "team" once again evokes the complementary make-up of contemporary Native American religion.

The message of *Reservation Blues* is the same with regard to religion as with regard to the question of how to cope with life in general. When the members of Coyote Springs want Big Mom to tell them about their future as a band after practicing under her instructions for one week without interruption and to the point of complete physical exhaustion, Big Mom again answers: "It's up to you. You make your choices" (*RB* 216). Being active agents who hold their destinies in their own hands, and making independent choices and decisions is the strategy of survival throughout the novel. When, in the final dream sequence, Chess, Checkers, and Thomas, already on their way to the city, join Big Mom playing the drum at a Spokane powwow, it is clear that they have understood her message and will continue to make their choices in the future, no matter where they are going: "They were alive; they'd keep living. . . . Songs were waiting for them up there in the dark. Songs were waiting for them in the city" (*RB* 306).

CONCLUSION

The writers considered in this essay mediate religion at the interfaces between Native and Christian practices and beliefs. They construct Native religions always as a network of rather complex negotiations. What James Treat says about contemporary Native Christians holds true for the depiction of American Indian religions in Native American novels of the 1990s:

> They are relying on foundational native values such as holism, equality, respect, harmony, and balance in articulating native Christian perspectives on important theological doctrines including creation, God, humanity, Jesus Christ, salvation, and scripture. They are also employing methodological techniques that demonstrate the centrality of oral tradition, story, and visionary experience in native Christian narrative discourse.[18]

Without the ability and flexibility of cultural negotiation in the form of transculturation—in life as well as in literature—the survival of Native American cultures would not have been possible. American Indian writers move freely within the contact zones to develop a dialogic relationship between tribal and modern perspectives, values, and cultural techniques. Religion plays a crucial

role in these negotiations. Just as there is no monopoly on definitions of history and culture, there is none in the interpretation of religion. "[T]he result of any conflict," as Lynn Domina points out in her analysis of the role of religion and spirituality in Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, "is likely to be interpenetration or co-assimilation rather than the triumph of one form of spirituality over another."[19]

It is important to note that transculturation always operates as a relational cultural model. In the case of American Indian writers, who live and work from within the contact zone, transculturation takes various shapes, always creating cultures and historiographies which exist parallel to Western meaning-making processes. Simultaneously, the readers' dialogues with these texts and their complex negotiations turn the act of reading itself into a highly transcultural performance,[20] a performance which requires the adoption of a multiple religious perspective and the genuine participation in—and sharing of—cultural diversity.

Linda Hogan, Diane Glancy, and Sherman Alexie do not simply correct existing cultural stereotypes and clichés, but from modern dynamic tribal perspectives engage in the creation of cultural and religious concepts, which have often been defined only from the outside. They demonstrate that cultural purity and religious monopolies are constructs by emphasizing the existence of diverse hybrid and dynamic cultures and religions. Native American writers are trying to position themselves between different forms of religion and thus between different cultural and historical identities. They are modern storytellers in that they interpret the concepts of tradition, culture, religion, and tribe in terms of process. The conditions of reciprocity, hybridity, and exchange, which have always existed in the contact zones of cultural encounters, foster, perpetuate, and multiply this dynamic quality. Thus, these writers are entering the discourse on religion on their own terms, even if this means negotiating various compromises.

The contact zone is, more than anything else, an area of oscillation between cultures. It is here where we can locate the productivity of boundary crossings, contradictions, and conflicts between cultures rather than their respective exclusion. As has been shown with regard to the function of religion, the strategy of transculturation in the contact zone of cultural encounters makes room for cultural syncretism: it creates a space for the ongoing negotiations of cultural differences in all fields of life. It is exactly in the in-between space of the contact zone—where cultures overlap—that cultural translations and transformations take place; this is the space of consciousness where cultural meaning is continuously in motion. In this new space in which heterogeneous processes of cultural exchange take place, cultural identities, including religious definitions, constantly shift and in their most extreme cases completely dissolve: clear-cut demarcations of differences and hierarchies with regard to culture and religion simply do not work. Cultural meaning is continuously defined through transcultural negotiations and is thus continuously in motion. Only if this ambivalence of cultural space is acknowledged are we able to get closer to an awareness of how culture works as category and how culture and spirituality are produced in literature and other realms of life.

NOTES

1. The critical work on this subject focuses almost exclusively on the two "classics" of Native American literature: N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1969) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). An exceptional and important contribution has been the special issue of *Religion & Literature,* Dancing at the Altar: American Indian Literature and Spirituality, 26 (Spring 1994).

2. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

3. Ibid., 6–7.

4. Linda Hogan, *Mean Spirit* (New York: Ivy Books, 1990), 257. Subsequent citations will appear in the text as *MS.*

5. Andrea Musher, "Showdown at Sorrow Cave: Bat Medicine and the Spirit of Resistance in *Mean Spirit,*" *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 6, number 3 (1994): 29.

6. The term *story* is used here in the wider sense of the word's meaning, including tribal myths and narratives as well as biblical legends.

7. Diane Glancy, *Pushing the Bear: A Novel of the Trail of Tears* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), 95. Subsequent citations will appear in the text as *PB.*

8. Theda Purdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540–1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), 63.

9. See Eric Foner and John A Garraty, eds., *The Reader's Companion to American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 160.

10. The story of Selu in Cherokee mythology is related by William Baldridge (Cherokee) as follows:

> Before the Europeans came the Cherokee were taught the following story as spiritual truth. The Daughter of God [Selu] loved her children. Loving them, she provided food so that they never knew hunger. The day came when her children realized that their mother fed them without labor; it was miraculous. Human nature being what it is, the children developed an insistent need to know the source of the food that sustained them. When their mother retreated to the private place from which she brought them food, they followed her and from their hiding place they witnessed the miracle that gave them life. The food came from their mother's body: "She is a witch!" they whispered to each other. "She is evil! We must kill her! Kill her!" Their mother knew their thoughts and said to them, "When you kill me, take my body and place it in the ground. I will rise from the dead and you will be given life and never hunger." So the children killed their mother and placed her in the ground and in the fullness of time, corn, the source of bread for the Cherokee, rose from the grave. (William Baldridge, "Reclaiming Our Histories," in *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religion and Identity in the United States and Canada,* ed. James Treat [London: Routledge, 1996], 87)

11. Ojilaka Zicahota stresses this balancing principle as embodied in the mythic figure of Selu at the beginning of her version of the Selu myth:

> The story of Selu the Corn Mother and the Deer as the Animal representative of her are told to help us learn and personalize many of the facts in the sharings of her stories. Give and take is the principle point that it all comes to. The perfect balance and harmony. We need to see the generosity in the stories of the Deer and Selu. We need to be aware of the manner of man and how we continue to try and avoid this principal. Our generation is put to the task of dealing with all the generations of greed and insensitivity that man has evolved to. The story of Selu and the Deer help us as a people to keep our perspectives clear on the matter. Giving back is the natural order of balance; to consciously know that it works and must be maintained and no one is exempt from the principle. (Ojilaka Zicahota, "Selu and the Deer," [http://www.zicahota.com/maxpages/Selu_and_the_Deer], February 2002)

12. The year of Jubilee is recorded in the Old Testament. It describes "a year that was to be observed every 50th year, during which Hebrew slaves were to be liberated, alienated property was to be returned, etc." (*Collins English Dictionary,* 3rd ed. [Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991]).

13. Maritole uses the phrase *two nations* because some of the Cherokee, including her brother Thomas, escaped into the woods when the American army arrived in order to enforce the Removal Act. Thus, a minority stayed in the old territory. Even today the Cherokee are divided: the majority of the tribe lives in Oklahoma while a small number still lives on the Cherokee Indian Reservation in North Carolina.

14. Gary W. McDonogh, Robert Gregg, and Cindy H Wong, eds., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

15. Cf., Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 164.

16. Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1995), 137. Subsequent citations will appear in the text as *RB*.

17. Thomas takes the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 as an example, arguing that "All those soldiers killed us in the name of God, enit? They shouted 'Jesus Christ' as they ran swords through our bellies. Can you feel the pain still . . . when you're praying to a God whose name was used to justify the slaughter" (*RB* 167)?

18. James Treat, "Introduction," in *Native and Christian Indigenous Voices on Religion and Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (London: Routledge, 1996), 20.

19. Lynn Domina, "Liturgies, Rituals, Ceremonies: The Conjunction of Roman Catholic and Native American Religious Traditions in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*," *Paintbrush: A Journal of Contemporary Multicultural Literature* 21 (1994): 7.

20. I am using the term *performance* here to emphasize that readers are not merely passively accepting cultural diversity along the lines of a politically determined multiculturalism, but that they get actively involved in the transcultural process as such.